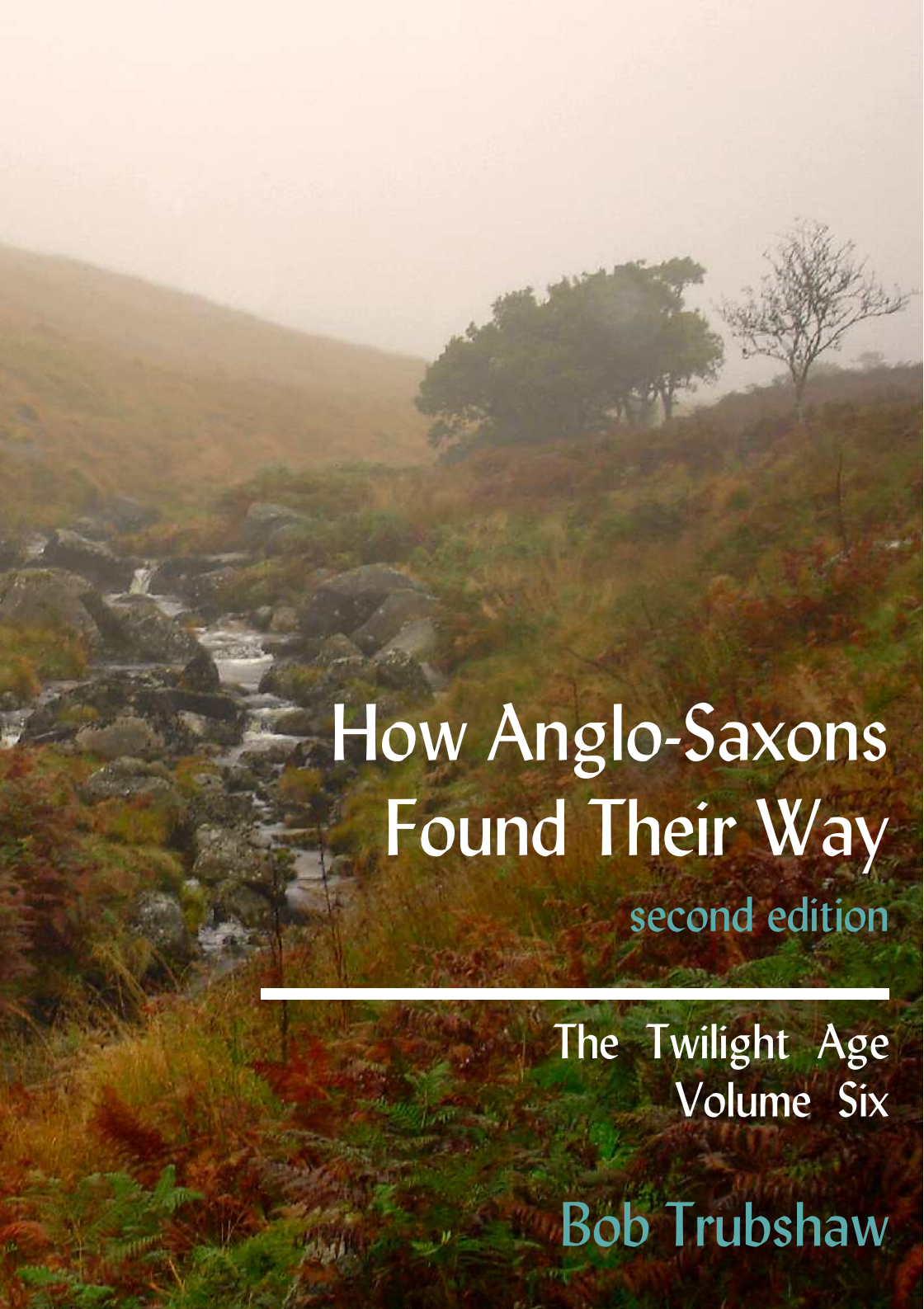

How Anglo-Saxons Found Their Way

second edition

The Twilight Age
Volume Six

Bob Trubshaw

Before maps were commonplace people had been getting from place to place successfully for many millennia. How did they find their way?

In this innovative study Bob Trubshaw looks at how place-names may have sufficiently descriptive to have acted as route markers. He then looks at how legends could be used to create mnemonics to remember places in the correct order. Perhaps not too surprisingly there is direct evidence for such 'narrative cartography' in the records of Anglo-Saxon England.

How the Anglo-Saxons Fouind Their Way develops some ideas first published in Bob Trubshaw's book *Singing Up the Country.*

About The Twilight Age series

Not that many decades ago English history between the fifth and eleventh centuries was deemed the 'Dark Ages', largely because of the lack of evidence. Much has changed, and scholarship has shed considerable light on the later centuries. However by then many parts of Britain were evolving into Anglo-Scandinavian culture.

Evidence for the Anglo-Germanic fifth and sixth centuries is still scarce and difficult to interpret, so the epithet 'Dark Ages' is still apt. The years in between occupy a comparative 'twilight zone', fascinating because of numerous social changes, not least the various cultural transitions which ultimately led to Christianity being the dominant religion.

The period spanning the seventh and eighth centuries and, sometimes, the decades either side can be thought of as the 'Twilight Age'. This series of publications combines available evidence from archaeologists, historians and place-name scholars. This evidence is combined with a broader mix of paradigms than those usually adopted by early medievalists, including topography, cosmology, iconography and ethnography – especially current approaches to comparative religion.

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How Anglo-Saxons Found Their Way

second edition

Bob Trubshaw

with an appendix by Wade Tarzia

Heart of Albion

How Anglo-Saxons Found Their Way

second edition

Bob Trubshaw

Cover: *Dartmoor – a place where walkers regularly lose their way in the mist. Photograph taken* én route *to Wistman's Wood, October 2005.*

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Preface

This study of Anglo-Saxon place-names as 'narrative maps' is an expanded version of Chapter 6 of *Singing Up the Country* (Trubshaw 2011a). While providing support for the broader ideas in that book, this earlier 'incarnation' was somewhat out of place in a work mostly about the upper Kennet valley in the early Neolithic, so I have opted to give it an independent existence.

More importantly, several months after publishing *Singing Up the Country* I came across Nicholas Howe's posthumously-published book *Writing the Map of Anglo-Saxon England* (Howe 2008). Howe's scholarship provides some much-needed underpinning of my more speculative thoughts.

The key idea explored in this essay – that at least some Anglo-Saxon place-names served as route markers – comes from the late Margaret Gelling. While Gelling seemingly never published her ideas (although she did outline them as part of her lectures) she did collaborate extensively with Ann Cole, who made the study of place-name elements associated with Roman roads the basis of her DPhil thesis.

Inevitably the less speculative parts of this essay owe a great debt to Cole, Gelling and Howe. So far as I can discern Howe was not aware of the work of Gelling and Cole, even though his subject matter so clearly overlaps theirs.

I am grateful to Jill Bourn for helping me understand place-names over the last twenty-or-so years, detailed discussions about Leicestershire and Rutland toponyms and sharing her PhD research into Kingstons. My thanks also to Heather Smith for bringing my attention to the Pearl poet. As will be clear from the relevant section, I have drawn extensively from Alan Garner's published research about Alderley Edge. And special thanks to Alby Stone for offering very helpful advice about a passing remark with which he does not agree!

Bob Trubshaw

Avebury

February 2012

Preface to amended edition

There are at least two differences between PDF 'booklets' such as this and traditional printed texts. First is the speed at which the PDF file can be disseminated to a fairly large number of interested readers. Second is the ease with which the publication can be updated in the light of comments from these readers!

So, in less than a month from initial publication I had received suggestions for a number of minor corrections (none of which affect 'the facts'). Much more importantly, I also received an email from Wade Tarzia with a chapter from his PhD thesis about early Irish heroic tales written in 1993.

Although I was aware that Irish heroic tales contained place-related legends such as *dindsenchas*, I have a poor understanding of this literature and so chose to omit any reference to such Irish place legends in this study of Anglo-Saxon England. However the Irish material, not surprisingly, offers some close parallels to the ideas I develop and I am very pleased that Wade has allowed me to include a slightly edited version of his work as an appendix.

I hope that readers will readily spot the overlaps between the Irish lore and various sections of my discussion. There is no single place where I could easily have added a summary of Wade's research so it makes much more sense to leave it as a self-contained appendix. However this is at the risk of seemingly giving these ideas less importance than is actually my intention.

Bob Trubshaw

Avebury

March 2012

Preface to 2025 edition

Since 2012 when this PDF first appeared I have given a talk based on the main ideas to nearly twenty different audiences, mostly under the title 'How Anglo-Saxons Survived Without Sat-Navs.' I have also continued to collect examples and improve the illustrations. This edition includes all such new information, maps and other images. As a result the page numbers no longer match the previous edition.

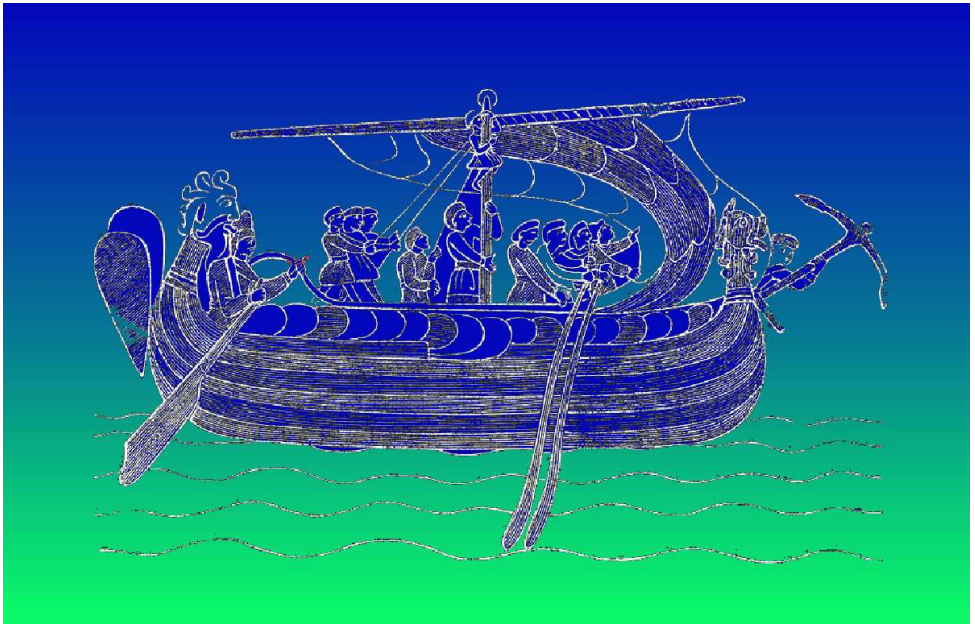
My underlying remarks remain unchanged – a combination of an introduction to a selection of place-name elements as understood by relevant academics plus much more speculative about how place-related folklore could be the remains of larger narratives which acted as mnemonics.

One welcome change has been to delete references to place-name books and instead provide a link to the English Place-Name Society's superb online database called the 'Survey of English Place-Names' (https://epns.nottingham.ac.uk/).

Bob Trubshaw

Orston

February 2025



Let us… think how we might go there

> *Uton we hycgan hwaer we ham agen,*
> *ond þonne geþencan hu we þider cumen…*
>
> (Let us consider where we have a home and then think how we might go there…)
>
> From the concluding section of *The Seafarer*, translated by Nicholas Howe (Howe 2008: 60).

Indeed, let us consider not just how we might get home but how we might get anywhere in an era before maps. These considerations will focus on place-names – not simply as all-but arbitrary 'labels' but instead looking at their origins as literal or figurative descriptions, and also consider how place-names can be linked together into 'cartographic narratives' and mnemonics.

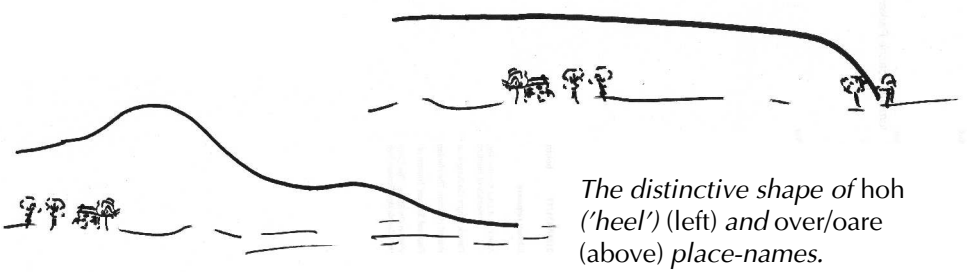
While a modern nickname such as 'Spaghetti Junction' might just make a hungry driver think of a plate of pasta, few people who turn off near there for Aston will think of a farmstead notable for its ash trees. Likewise, a curious

motorist might wonder if Swindon was once the hill with pigs – indeed it was – but they would have to be both curious and something of an expert in Old English and place-names to recognise Chisledon to the south as not the hill where chisels were once made but, instead, the gravely valley (from *dene*, not *don* 'rounded hill' as current spelling suggests). The Old English word *cisel*, 'gravel or sand', also gives the famously long and pebbly Chesil Beach on the Dorset coast its name.

Many English settlement names end in *–ton, -ham* or *–ingham*. In the former Danelaw area they also end in *–by*. All these endings denote some sort of settlement – probably more of a farmstead, even though Old English *tun* eventually evolves into modern English 'town', and the Scandinavian *–by* retains some of its sense in the word 'bylaws', the regulations specific to a place. *Ham* is the antecedent to the modern word 'home' but meant something more physical and akin to 'house' to the Anglo-Saxons. Many, but by no means all, these endings are compounded with someone's name. Indeed X–*ingham* denotes the home of the people of X. Every English county has numerous examples of these place-names derived from someone's name – if you are not already familiar with some of them in your area then do a little homework using the online 'Survey of English Place-Names' (https://epns.nottingham.ac.uk/).

However my interest in this essay has little to do with these places which take their name from one-time residents. Instead I want to look at the others – the ones which *describe* the place, such as Swindon, Chisledon or even Spaghetti Junction. Yes, even though Anglo-Saxons were undoubtedly ignorant of pasta, they too used metaphorical references when naming places, as we shall see when we discuss Hoton/Houghton names.

Before I begin a closer examination of Anglo-Saxon descriptive place perhaps I should give you some indication of this discussion's destination – how did we know how to get to far-away places before maps? If you knew that you had to go over the Green Hill (modern Grendon) to the Broad Ford (modern Bradford), then temporarily join another path (Anstey) before branching off to the settlement in the dead-end valley (Compton) and so on, then the journey would be almost as easy as following a printed map. Clearly the longer the journey the greater the difficulty memorising all the names in the correct order. That little problem I consider too in due course.



The distinctive shape of hoh *('heel')* (left) *and* over/oare (above) *place-names.*

Pay attention to the detail

Modern development often hides the feature which gave such places their distinctive names. But even before such changes, did people really navigate this way? The honest answer is that we do not know for certain. But the research of place-name experts Margaret Gelling and Ann Cole in recent years have been broadly accepted by their academic counterparts. More work is needed to sort out the finer details but there is a clear association between certain place-names (notably Stretton, Moreton, Drayton, Grafton, Caldecot, Kingston) and known roads, while Eaton names link with waterways (Cole 2011a).

Anglo-Saxons had over twenty different names for hill. That's more words than Inuits reputedly have for snow. Words commonly used by Anglo-Saxons for hills are *hyll, don* and *down, cliff, shelf, ridge, edge, side, ness* (headland), *hoh* (heel-shaped hill), *over/ora, tor, knoll, cop* and *low.* Less common are *peak, upp, heafod* (head), *bile* (beak), *heap, hat, hlith, hrycg, hyrst* (wooded hill). What is striking about this list is that none of these words are exact synonyms – in other words, a *hyll* is not the same shape as a *don*, and a

The distinctive 'upturned canoe' shape of Overton Hill beyond the West Kennett Avenue, Avebury, Wiltshire.

cliff is distinct from both a *shelf* or *ridge*, and so forth (Gelling 1984; Gelling and Cole 2000).

An *over* is a long ridge which drops down with the sort of shape of an upturned canoe. Overton Hill to the south-east of Avebury is an excellent example, with the distinct curve descending steeply to the Kennet valley – a path at the side of the Sanctuary allows you to follow exactly down this slope. The word *over* was used mostly in the midlands, Sussex and Somerset. In southern England the Latin loan word *ora* was more common. One such place, Oare, is a few miles to the east of Overton Hill near Avebury, on the main road running south from Marlborough towards Pewsey.

A *hoh* – heel-shaped hill – needs a little explanation. Imagine a giant lying face down, then look at his feet. His heel forms a distinctive shape as it emerges from the ankle and descends to his sole and toes. It's that shape which the 'ho' of Houghton and Hoton place-names describes – as well as places which are not settlements, like Plymouth Ho! If there is more than one *hoh* then the plural is *hohs* – which is how the north Leicestershire village of Hose got its name.

Anglo-Saxons also had several different words for valleys – *dene, dale, coomb* (short, broad, sometimes 'blocked' valleys), *hope* (secluded valley), *glen* (shallow valley), *gil / gryfja* (deep, ravine-like valley), *gnipa* (steep hillside – for example Knipton in Leicestershire), *snoc* (projection), *vale, bottom, clough, chine.* Once more these are not synonyms – rather they are nuanced descriptions which nevertheless would be meaningful to someone new to the area. By paying attention to the detail of the landscape then these place-names would – at least when they were coined – accurately describe their specific location.

Similarly there are about a dozen distinct ways of referring to woodland and clearings: *bearu, denn, graf, holt* (usually a single-species wood), *hyrst, sceaga/shaw, skogr, wald, wudu, frith* and *lundr.* Similarly *leah, roth* and *thveit* describe different clearings. Watery places and sources of water too have various different names: *bourne/burn, brooke, well, mere, moss, marsh, waesse, fleet, funta/font, pool, pyll* and *seath.*

Furthermore certain types of settlement has specialist functions – these include those already noted as especially prevalent on known roads: Stretton, Moreton, Drayton, Grafton, Caldecot and Kingston. To this list we can add places which are where they are for other reasons but are distinctive, such as Burtons (small 'garrisons' established by King Alfred in the ninth century to defend important towns and river crossings from Viking attacks).

Anywhere called Chester or ending in *–cester* would also have been distinctive, at least in the earlier part of the Anglo-Saxon era, as here the walls and ruins

*The biggest surviving part of the Roman town of Wroxeter. The –*cester *ending has been disguised by modern spelling.*

of major Roman towns were still standing. Later generations of Anglo-Saxons would rob the stone and subsequent generations would rebuild towns and modern cities over the site. But some of these towns – such as Cunetio near Marlborough and Vernemetum near Willoughby on the Wolds – never did get rebuilt. There the traces of centuries of domestic rubbish – organic matter and ash – made the soil distinctively dark. Some of these places, and Cunetio is no exception, left a record in the field names. The site of Cunetio is known as Black Field. While not all black place-names denote Roman sites (a black hill is more likely to be a former beacon site) this appellation too would have been informative for Anglo-Saxon navigation.

Vegetation can provide landmarks. Roman towns left their traces in the vegetation too – both thistles and nettles grow best in the nitrogen-rich disturbed soils associated with settlements. And both Thistleton (Rutland) and Nettleton (Wiltshire) were Roman small towns with their own temples.

Around the country are several Gartree Hundreds. At one time these were thought to be are named after either a 'spear-shaped tree' or, more probably, a distinctively damaged tree – the 'goitre tree'. But more recent scholarship holds that these were landmark trees in distinctive triangles of land. Except there is no word for 'triangle' in Old English so the metaphor of 'spear-(shaped) was used to refer to the land. (See Trubshaw 2022 for details.)

Also Old English are 'shire oaks' (likewise meeting places, this time for the later shires) and variants on 'speech oak' 'and 'speech mound' (*spellhow*) which were also meeting places. In post-Reformation times Gospel Oaks would adopt a similar role.

A suitably-distinctive tree in about the right place will become a landmark. But most landmark trees have been deliberately planted at some time – or at least an old tree 'resurrected' by a young sapling nearby which then itself becomes a venerable landmark over the decades.

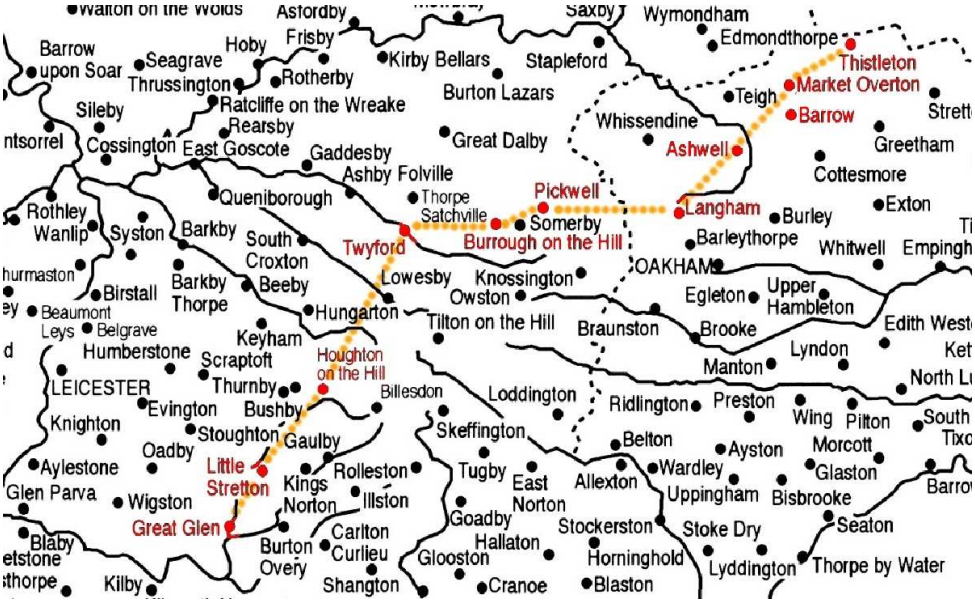
A solitary Scots Pine on a prospect mound originally over-looking now-lost formal gardens. Kirby Bellars, Leicestershire.

One species of native tree which has always been distinctive when planted away from its native, northerly habit is the Scots Pine. It is one of the few native evergreen trees and, even in summer, has a distinctive appearance recognisable at a distance. Nigel Pennick has established that, from at least the eighteenth century, drovers deliberately planted Scots Pines at places where they could stop overnight. Clearly a large herd of cattle or flocks of sheep or geese would be unwelcome to many of the farmers and landowners alongside drovers routes. The sight of a Scots Pine in the distance would provide confirmation that a 'safe' stop for the night was within reach (Pennick 2010; 2011: 22–3). Scots Pines have not left their names on the landscape in the same was as the ashes, oaks and elms of Anglo-Saxon England – but they do confirm that landmarks can take many forms and continued to be important into recent times.

Join me on a journey in east Leicestershire

So far lots of words which reveal the way Anglo-Saxons observed their world in intimate detail . But could they really act as 'maps'? While still living in Leicestershire I took a map of Leicestershire and Rutland and ringed all the village names which were descriptive – several Hoton/Houghtons, a pair of Overtons, and so forth. I also marked Sharnford (the dirty ford) and Thistleton. All parts of these two counties had a sprinkling of names, usually separated by several villages. But the south-east had many more. Curiously this is the one part of the area where there are fewer known Roman roads (although the Gartree Road from Leicester to Medbourne and beyond does run through). If in other parts of the county one could follow the well-rutted former Roman roads, was there a greater need for descriptive place-names in this part?

Whatever the reason, I realised that I could join the dots – so to speak – and make my way from Great Glen (to the south of Leicester), head approximately north around the east of Leicester then turn east and head towards Thistleton near the Lincolnshire boundary on the far side of Rutland. By linking these



The descriptive place-names which form a continuous route in Leicestershire:

Great Glen (an important Anglo-Saxon royal estate centre in its shallow glen)

Stretton (the settlement on the Roman road)

Houghton on the Hill (the settlement on the *hoh*, or heel-shaped promontory)

Newton (the new farm)

Twyford (two fords)

Burrough (the fortified place - a dramatically-situated Iron Age hill fort)

Pickwell (the well on the peak)

Cold Overton (a *tun* on an 'over'-shaped ridge)

Langham (long settlement)

Barleythorpe ('daughter' settlement where barley grown)

Ashwell

Barrow (named after several burial mounds on a ridge)

Market Overton (another *tun* on an 'over'-shaped ridge)

Thistleton (Roman town with temple and iron working)

descriptive names together I could follow this route almost *without any other village names in between*. Grab a road atlas or its online counterpart and join me on this trail.

We will go from Great Glen, (an important Anglo-Saxon Royal estate centre in its shallow glen) through Stretton (the settlement on the Roman road) to Houghton on the Hill (the settlement on the *hoh*, or heel-shaped promontory), past Newton (the new farm), cross over the two fords at Twyford, go past Burrough (the fortified place, actually a dramatically-situated Iron Age hill fort), pause at Pickwell to take a refreshing drink at its eponymous well on the peak, then head to the settlement on the windy and chilly *over* (Cold Overton), through the long settlement (Langham), detouring a little to check out the new settlement where they grow barley (Barleythorpe), then to the well with an ash tree (Ashwell), before heading to the place with old burial mounds or barrows (known just as Barrow to this day), to another overton known as Market Overton (remember *overs* are especially common on routeways so distinguishing prefixes such as 'Cold' and 'Market' are to be expected), and finally to the settlement where a remarkable number of thistles grow.

Whether or not any Anglo-Saxon ever felt the need to get from Great Glen to Thistleton by this route is a moot point – I'll accept that the odds are probably fairly long. But this perambulation along *surviving* village place-names – which ignores minor place-names, such as those for specific hills, and cannot consider names which have changed and been lost – shows that at least some routes can be described in this way.

If you have a guide to the place-names of your own county and a map with most or all village names on it then an evening or two of research using the Survey of English Place-Names (https://epns.nottingham.ac.uk/) should reveal the extent to which your area could also have once been traversed by following such descriptive names.

Not knots in a hankie

However, as already noted, we would need something more than a few knots in a hankie to remember all these places in the right sequence. For nearly two hundred years most people in Britain have been able to read and write. If we need to remember something we write it down – and then merely have to remember where we put the piece of paper! However, until less than six generations ago most people would have relied on their memories.

Without the 'distraction' of writing the day-to-day reliance on memory means that complex shopping lists and such likes can be recalled accurately – up to and including the words of lengthy epic ballads. Indeed, any actor today must convert complex scripts into infallible memories. People in such oral societies develop their skills at such recall as a natural part of their lives. They also use

Looking towards Birstall and Belgrave from the summit of Castle Hill, Mountsorrel.

various mnemonics – early Greek orators famously imagined a temple and linked each of the columns with the key words of their speeches. Anglo-Saxon poets used alliteration to aid their recall, and later bards shifted this to the more familiar rhyming endings as extensively used by rap musicians.

All these tricks help our memories to work better. And they can of course be brought to the aid of recollecting place-names in their rightful sequence. I'm back in Leicestershire, this time about seven miles north of Leicester itself in a place now called Mountsorrel – the sorrel-coloured 'mount' (the attentive will spot that this is a Norman French word rather than the Old English typical of place-names) where there is indeed an inlier of pinkish grano-diorite rock. I want to get to Leicester but I've missed the last bus. I'll need to go through the villages of Rothley, Wanlip, Birstall and Belgrave to get there. Or at least I *think* that's the right order. Certainly someone in about the eighteenth century wanted to remember them in sequence. To help he came up with a bit of a story and some doggerel verse.

Imagine you're an old god called Bel and you're riding an incredibly powerful – magically powerful – sorrel-coloured horse. You make a bet that you can

get all the way from Mountsorrel to Leicester – about seven miles, remember – in just five leaps. So:

> Mountsorrel he mounted at
> Rothley he rode by
> Wanlip he leaped o'er
> At Birstall he burst his gall
> At Belgrave he was buried at.

OK, it will never make any anthologies of great verse. But that little narrative – spurious as it so obviously is – makes the recollection of these five place-names much easier to work out. As I will show later in this chapter, other parts of the country were able to come up with much better stories linking distinctive places together.

Ekstasis in Scottish Travellers' tales and Old English poetry

While it does not prove anything about Anglo-Saxon culture, traditional cultures as far apart as Papua New Guinea, Navaho Indians and the Saami all use place-names as 'narratives' along journeys (Ingold 2007: 89). Closer to home, the Scottish Traveller tradition conveyed by Stanley Robertson also sees the landscape through the eyes of storyteller:

> Ma mither used to say that this particular land [here] between the river Dee and the river Don - and they used to say lang ago that the Don wis the warlock and the river Dee wis the witch. And this land between it wis for her bairns. This land wis oors aa richt because there's only twa hooses. But this road has been known for many, many supernatural happenings ... there's a lot o happiness on this auld road. And every time I ging up it I could aye sort o feel the spirits o the past…
> (Robertson 1988: 128–9)

At first impression this seems fairly standard folklore. But for Robertson repeatedly-visited places do not simply resound with legends and stories, but they are the 'containers' for the collective memories of his Traveller culture. 'As a child Stanley remembers passing milestones on the road. At these places his father would review a learning principle, asking questions to make sure that he had been understood.' (Reith 2008: 87–8) If Robertson had difficulty remembering a tale, he would imagine himself back at the place where he heard it told.

Stanley Robertson.

> First of all I try to remember the actual place where I heard the story, maybe Lumphanan or someplace camping. I try to remember the setting, everything, even the smells, everything to do with the senses.
> (cited Reith 2008: 91)

Robertson's way of remembering – and retelling – tales is deeply immersive. As a child of about five or six he and his great aunt passed a dead animal. She asked him to describe the world through the eyes of the skull (Robertson 2009: 107), a 'metaphysical relocation of self' that Robertson later extended to seeing the world from the point of view of landmark trees and other aspects of the landscape. And that fits neatly with the original sense of the Greek word *ekstasis* – 'to stand outside oneself' (although the modern English word ecstatic has a different usage).

Such a sense of *ekstasis* can be recognised among the small amount of Old English poetry that has come down to us. One is a work known as *The Dream of the Rood*, in which the crucifixion of Christ is seen from the point of view of the cross – and this poem may, in part, be a christianised version of a much older myth which sees the world from the perspective of the world tree (North 1997: 275). The opening verses of *The Dream of the Rood* read like a riddle as the identity of the 'I' is not revealed until line 44. Indeed such first-person viewpoints are used in several surviving Old English riddles, for example:

> I am a wondrous creature: to women a thing of joyful expectation, to close-lying companions serviceable. I harm no city-dweller excepting my slayer alone. My stem is erect and

> tall – I stand up in bed – and whiskery somewhere down below. Sometimes a countryman's quite comely daughter will venture, bumptious girl, to get a grip on me. She assaults my red self and seizes my head and clenches me in a cramped place. She will soon feel the effect of her encounter with me, this curl-locked woman who squeezes me. Her eye will be wet.*

With this in mind we can also reinterpret the fragmentary Old English poem known to scholars as *The Wife's Lament*, and conventionally thought to be the autobiographical perspective of an exiled noblewoman. However the text can also be read as the first-person viewpoint of a dead woman in a burial mound. If so, this may be christian euhemerising of legends regarding the goddess Hos sitting on the 'sorrow mound' (Semple 1998: 110–11; 121–2). In other words, the poem is a first-person viewpoint of a pagan deity 'exiled' by the christianisation of late Anglo-Saxon culture.

Consistent with these first-person viewpoints, although perhaps even more strange to modern minds, are the inscriptions on weapons and scabbards written in the first person – the most famous of these is the one on Alfred's Jewel, with reads 'Alfred had me made'. All these examples strongly suggest that Anglo-Saxon culture was familiar with such *ekstasis* relocations of self as looking 'through the eye of the skull', and the singular survival into twentieth century Scottish Traveller culture has much more extensive origins with the British Isles.

You didn't need a didgeridoo to sail to Newcastle

But what happens when oral traditions fail to be remembered? What if only fragments of an overall narrative come down to us? And only some of those mini-narratives about specific places were brought to the attention of early folklorists? We would be left with something that is a close approximation of the sort of place-related lore that is typical of county folklore collections and which was subsequent trawled through by the likes of Janet and Colin Bord or Leslie Grinsell (Bord and Bord 1972; Grinsell 1976). The most thorough compilation of such legends, at least for England, which also traces the oldest surviving versions, was published as *The Lore of the Land* (Westwood and Simpson 2005)

When the folk singer Chris Wood was interviewed by Nathaniel Handy in 2010 he had this to say:

* An onion

> When the songlines thing came out that wound me up! [Chris Wood] fumes. 'People freaking out at this amazing Australian Aboriginal thing where they don't have a map, they just sing a song and then they know where they are. Norfolk fishermen have been doing the same thing for generations. There's a song that tells you all the compass bearings and the landmarks that you would need to navigate from Yarmouth to Newcastle. It's no different, but because the songlines happened in Australia, everyone is into it. The concept of anything so beautiful and rich and wonderful and canny happening here in our own country is just too much for people to get their heads around.
> (Handy 2010)

The correct name for ancient poems – spoken or sung – which contain instructions for sailors to learn by heart was 'ruttiers'. They were recited from memory while at sea. Sadly there seem to be few published examples.

From the dyke to the second dyke

How far back can we pick up descriptions of journeys? Despite one of the surviving Old English poems being called *The Wanderer* we do not have any explicit descriptions of Anglo-Saxon journeys. Even the legendary accounts of Welsh and Cornish saints – which give the impression that their lives were spent on seemingly-endless sacred journeys – do not amount to travel diaries.

What we do have are a large number of surviving Anglo-Saxon charters which define boundaries by 'chaining together' a series of instructions – from here go to that landmark over there, from that landmark go to the next landmark, and so on. The famous treaty signed by King Alfred in 878 which created the Danelaw defines a much larger area of land than the charters in exactly this way:

> Where the dyke runs into Watling Street, along Watling Street to the ford, then along the brook to the other ford, then from that ford up to the spring, and thence into the valley, thence from the valley to the dyke, from the dyke to the second dyke, then from that dyke to the brook, then from the brook to Kimberwell, then along the dyke to Eastcote, then thence to the old brook, up from the old brook parallel with the little stream, then straight up to the highway, along the highway to the dyke, along the dyke to Watling Street.
> (Howe 2008: 41)

The statue of King Alfred the Great by Hamo Thornycroft in Winchester. This was unveiled in 1899 to commemorate one thousand years since Alfred's death.

In his posthumously-published book *Writing the Map of Anglo-Saxon England*, Nicholas Howe notes that two things are implicit in this description. Firstly, despite the apparent detail of specific landmarks, this description only 'works' when combined with local knowledge of the relevant dykes and brooks. So the written document is only a mnemonic for what is a shared knowledge and experience of the locality. Secondly, this manner of writing is almost certainly based on a prevalent oral counterpart – and such a way of describing a sequence of landmarks suits both the recounting boundaries in a pre-literate society and the giving of directions. While direct evidence is lacking, the manner in which lists of landmarks are written down in charters and treaties

must almost certainly be closely based on the spoken language used to give directions.

Howe also suggests that the more educated Anglo-Saxons capable of reading Latin would be aware of Pliny's descriptions of places. These are not cartographic but begin at a well-known place (such as Rome) and move out to more 'peripheral' regions. Bede, the early eighth century cleric living at Jarrow (very much at the periphery of Pliny's worldview), implicitly follows this convention when he describes the British Isles as being north-west of Rome – rather than thinking of Rome as being south-east of Britain. Clearly he identified more closely with the Holy Roman Empire than he did with any nascent nationalism.

While our map-based thinking relates places on a planar surface which can defined according to co-ordinates of latitude and longitude, in such a 'narrative cartography' places exist in a much more linear and sequential relationship. The *Antonini Itinerarium* listing all the roads throughout the Roman empire may not have been known to Anglo-Saxons (even though it was compiled before AD 305) but is a key example of this 'narrative cartography'.

Bede was also aware of another precedent for such narratives. In a letter to Bishop Acca of Hexham written about 716 he discusses the resting places occupied by the Israelites as they made their way from Egypt to the promised land:

> And departing from Abronah they encamped at Ezion-geber. Going on from there, they came into the desert of Zin (that is, Kadesh). Departing from Kadesh, they encamped at Mount Hor.

In total forty-two resting places are listed (Numbers 33:1–49). These seem to be – metaphorically or literally – linked to the forty-two years spent journeying in exile. In other words, this is journey-as-history. Bede explicitly draws attention to this when he suggests Acca should consider carefully why Moses created this narrative. But Bede leaves unstated whether or not he thought that the Israelites' migration offered a parallel to the migration of the Anglo-Saxons from northern Europe to the British Isles.

Many years after Bede, in the final decade of the tenth century, another cleric, Sigeric, follows the well-travelled route from Britain to Rome. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records this journey, listing seventy-nine stopping places between Rome and the Channel. They are about twelve miles apart, giving a good idea of the distance travelled each day. Such lists of locations would recur, albeit in a slightly more visual form, as the strip-maps of eighteenth century turnpikes. With the advent of the motor car both the Royal Automobile Club and the Automobile Association would produce similar lists of directions for members. The same service is now available to anyone who clicks on the relevant links

One of Britain's most distinctive landmarks – Glastonbury Tor, Somerset.

for directions which are integral to online mapping services – even though most users will simply print off the map. And when we chose instead to simply turn on the sat-nav then we come full-circle to 'oral narratives' as the device automatically intones such instructions as 'Roundabout in two hundred yards. (…) Roundabout ahead. Take the second exit. (…) Take the exit.' While such computerised voices may seem as far removed from the dykes and brooks of Alfredian treaties as modern day roundabouts are from Viking-era England, we should perhaps think instead of both being fairly stripped-down examples of 'narrative cartographies'.

The biggest difference between modern and Anglo-Saxon mental maps is that we have become so used to seeing the landscape from maps or aerial photographs that we forget that the landscape also has a vertical aspect too.

St Winifred's Well, Holywell.

The *experience* of moving through a landscape is one where hills act as landmarks because they 'stand out' and where valleys and woodland obscure the view of distant features. Many modern people are so accustomed to moving in urban environments, where buildings obscure the views in most directions, that they fail to 'open their eyes' to the entirely different perceptions possible in more rural areas.

Keep to the right at Anglesey

However such narratives do not have to be stripped down. When Middle English emerges out of the oral realm and begins to be written down in the second half of the fourteenth century then three of the greatest works are precursors to road movies. One is Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales,* where the whole framing story is about a pilgrimage. The second is William Langland's *The Vision of Piers Plowman,* inspired by a journey from Shropshire to London. While resting on the Malvern Hills Langland visualised the kingdom as 'a field full of folk'. The third is an alliterative poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* written in Cheshire dialect by an author whose name is not known but referred to by scholars as the 'Pearl Poet' after the name of one of his other works. That three of the few surviving works of early Middle English literature feature journeys suggest that there was an oral tradition (maintained while Norman French and Latin were the only languages being written) in which journeys were a common trope.

While *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is not about a journey, the Pearl Poet starts his poem by describing how Sir Gawain sets off from Camelot 'in the fictional kingdom of Logres, the poetical name for Britain used in much medieval Arthurian literature.' (Twomey 2004) We have to assume that the Pearl Poet believed Camelot to be somewhere in or near Snowdonia as Sir Gawain firstly 'keeps all the isles of Anglesey on his left', then crosses by ford at 'the Holy Head' (this is not Holyhead on Anglesey but maybe either Holywell near Flint or Pulford, site of Poulton Abbey) to the Wirral, to arrive at the liminal time between Christmas and New Year at Bertilak's castle Hautdesert (which might have been where Staffordshire, Derbyshire and Cheshire come together – more liminality – close to the River Dane, an area now known as Swythamley Park).

The Green Chapel which features in the legend is often thought to be Lud's Church near Swythamley, but more probably near Wetton Mill, east of Leek, on land that was either a hermitage or grange of Poulton Abbey. (See Twomey 2004 for a detailed account of visiting all these places, together with translations of the relevant lines of the poem.)

The Pearl Poet's mention of fording at 'The Holy Head' fits well with Holywell, where the decapitated St Winefrid was, and still is, venerated. She was beheaded by a local chieftain named Caradoc when she spurned a request to satisfy his lust, and then became one of the rather numerous saints who make miraculous journeys with their heads tucked under their arm. Her head was restored to its rightful place by her uncle, St Beuno, but a white scar remained for the rest of her life. Given the prominence which decapitation – or at least its threat – plays in the later stages of the Sir Gawain poem, it would seem a fitting preliminary allusion. And the 'nick' on the neck which Sir Gawain receives from the Green Knight was presumably severe enough to leave a permanent scar, recalling St Winefrid's miraculous recovery. Another parallel is that both St Winefride and Sir Gawain refuse sexual advances from noble persons. Such subtle weaving of ideas is entirely consistent with the Pearl Poet's erudition and style.

Whatever the exact details of this journey, it is a realistic route and not merely poetic licence. His distinctive regional dialect affirms that the Pearl Poet was local to Cheshire and could well have travelled this route into north Wales himself, perhaps on a number of occasions. His skill at transferring his interest in the landscape extends to lively descriptions of such courtly activities as conversation, wooing and hunting. His knowledge of 'technical' hunting terminology suggests this was also from personal experience. But *Sir Gawain* shares with the three other poems attributed to this author a recurrent interest in setting out a 'chivalrous' lifestyle where patience and humility are contrasted with pride, courtesy is a noble virtue, and purity must be paramount. The latter

is denoted by pearls, which the poet introduces into each of his works – hence his nickname.

The sleeping knights of Alderley Edge

We must transfer our attention from the anonymous fourteenth century author of *Sir Gawain* to a nameless late eighteenth century storyteller for perhaps the best surviving example of place-names and place-related lore linking together into a journey. The 'Legend of Alderley Edge' was first published in a letter to the *Manchester Mail* in 1805. This was followed by an anonymous poem called 'The Iron Gates: A legend of Alderley' which was published in the February 1839 edition of *Blackwood's Magazine*, and another account by the Hon. Miss Letitia D. Stanley in her book *Alderley Edge and Its Neighbourhood* which appeared in 1843.

The 1805 account is said to be based 'chiefly from the report of a very old man, commonly known among his junior brethren by the familiar appellation of "Old Daddy" and who has spent the major part of his life in the service of T. Stanley, Esq.' Quite who T. Stanley Esq. might have been we can leave open – it is sort of detail which storytellers introduce to give a sense of veracity to timeless legends. Similarly the author of the 1839 account claims to have first heard the legend when a child from his 'grandame'. The most recently published retelling of this legend is by Alan Garner – yes, the author of such fantasy fiction as *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen, The Owl Service, The Moon of Gomrath* and *Thursbitch* – who, following this tradition closely, claims to have learnt the tale from his grandfather in the once-liminal space of a smithy, or by flickering firelight:

> My grandfather told me a story. He told it in the dark of his forge, and beside his hearth, and in his garden as we pulled rhubarb. It was his truth, a part of him, which he passed on. (Garner 2010: 5).

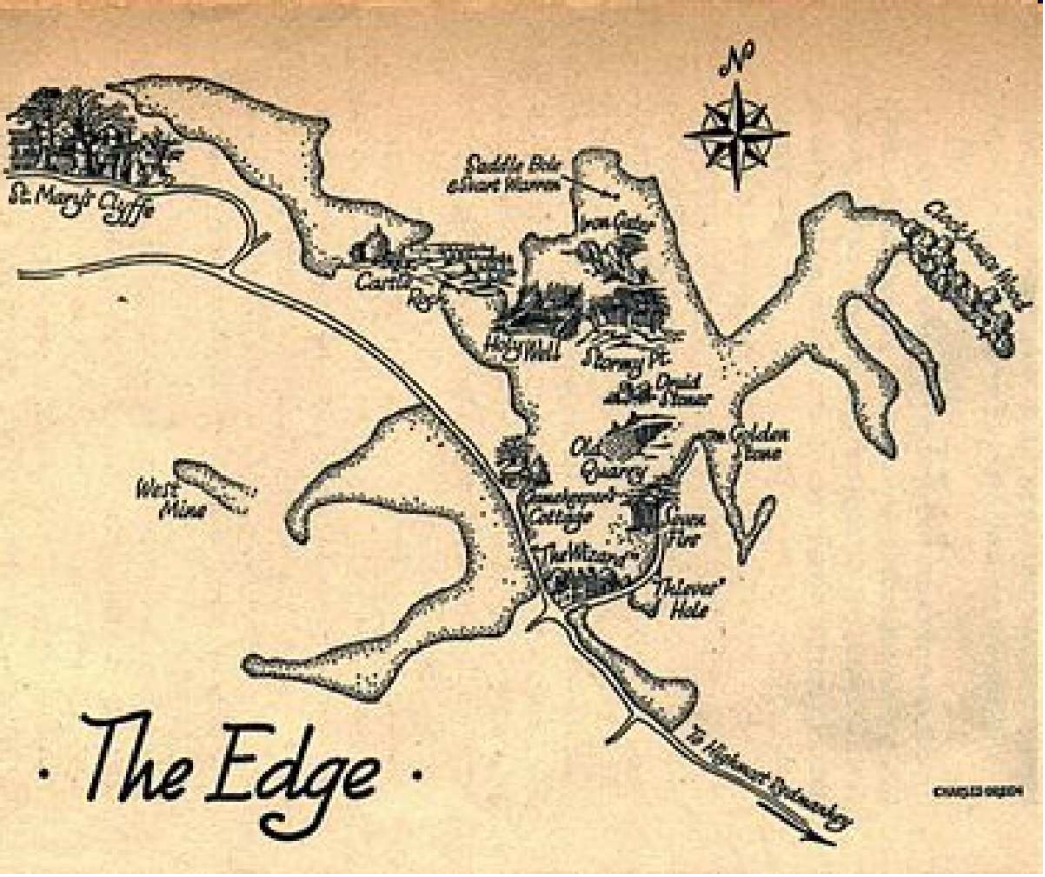
Alan Garner was born in Congleton, not that far from Alderley Edge, and clearly has a detailed knowledge of the land and its history acquired not only from his grandfather but also by living there for a long time. He retold the legend at the start of the first novel, *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* (published in 1960) and revisited it in 2010 with the fruits of considerable local research.

However before we look in more detail at Garner's insights, here is my retelling of the legend, drawing upon the previously-published versions. As with *Sir Gawain* the time is a liminal one – this time Hallowe'en. For reasons unknown a farmer living at Mobberley decides to sell a white mare at Macclesfield market. This itself is rather odd as the journey will take him at least twelve miles and the terrain is difficult, including a scarp slope well over

Alderley Edge, Cheshire.

a hundred metres high. By waiting a week he could have gone over level ground to Knutsford horse fair, just three miles away. But this is not as odd as Garner thinks – farmers only ever buy from certain markets and only sell at others – and which markets these are follow precedents set by their fathers. Quite how many generations have maintained these traditions is unknown but, given the generally conservative nature of farmers, we should assume that this is a long-established way of avoiding in-bred livestock.

Back to the legend. The Mobberley farmer sets off before daybreak and rides the horse up the steep slope to a place known as Thieves' Hole. This is not a hole in the way you or I think but a 'hollow way' – a linear earthwork that is simultaneously a boundary, a one-time line of defence, and a routeway. Indeed, Alan Garner establishes that Thieves' Hole was once a crossroads (Garner 2010: 14). It took its name because, in Old English, it was where *ða ðeofes licgað* – where 'the thieves lie'. This is not where they lay in wait. That sense of 'to lie' was still in the future. These thieves lie in the earth, in death, after their execution at such a liminal location. Later generations of thieves would not lie at rest but rather their corpses would be hung in gibbets at just such execution sites.



As if subliminally aware of the preternatural power of the place, the mare locks herself rigid. No matter what oaths the farmer utters, she moves not an inch. Then he too freezes, at least for a moment. A tall old man, not much more to him than a ghost but carrying a hefty staff in his hand, has appeared as if out of nowhere. Without a word of greeting he speaks: 'She is just the mare I am after. How much will you sell her for?'

'I'll not sell to the likes of you,' retorts the farmer, 'I'll get a better price at the market.' 'Be on your way then,' the old man replies, with a harshness to his voice. 'Mark my words, she'll not be sold this day. But when you come back this way tonight, I'll be here waiting for you.'

With that the mare moves forward and continues on her way to Mobberley and they stand at the fair. Despite the farmer being told many times what a fine animal she is, no one offers to buy her. Not one. Far from having some money to celebrate with a few drinks in the local inn, and take some ribbons back for his wife as she asked, he faces a long and difficult journey home in the gathering dark, with no doubt some harsh words from his missus when he

Alderley Edge, Cheshire.

does arrive. Not to mention the risk of again meeting that strange old man at Thieves' Hole.

He sets off as soon as he can but by the time he arrives at Thieves Hole the sun has just slipped below the horizon.

'Now will you sell her?' the familiar voice challenges. The farmer turns towards where the voice came from. Knowing that the old man knows he has little by way of bargaining power, he can only ask: 'How much are you offering?'

'Enough,' comes the enigmatic reply. 'Follow me.' As if this was already an agreed deal, the old man sets off. As if entranced, the farmer and the mare follow into the growing dark. The route was not direct but zigzagged between some curiously-named local landmarks on the high ground near Alderley Edge. First to Seven Firs, then to Goldenstone, detouring to Stormy Point before climbing up to Saddlebole. On Saddlebole is a massive boulder, not much smaller than the farmer's house. The old man strikes this rock with his staff

and, with a clatter, the rock splits open to reveal a pair of iron gates beyond. A slightly more gentle touch from the staff and these too open, and the old man, the farmer and the mare walk through, into a cave in the hillside. Except that, as the farmer's eyes become accustomed to the dark, he sees the cave opens out into a massive cavern and from that cavern other caves lead off.

Fearing that he is being led into the land of faery, a hollow hill from which he may escape, if at all, only a hundred or more years in the future, he cries to the old man 'Let me go! Just keep the horse, I'll take no money from you if you let me leave this place right now!'

'No harm will come to you, if you stay,' reassures the old man. 'Continue to follow me, you'll come to no harm at all.' And when they have crossed the cavern and approach one of the caves beyond he hears the sound of snoring. Not of one man but of many. And as he enters the cave the limited light reveals that each of these snoring men is dressed in armour. How many men he cannot count in the gloom. But each one rests his head against the side of a white horse. Except one… One has no horse.

'This,' announces the old man, 'this is the sleeping army. These knights are resting, and will continue to rest until the day of the world's final battle. When that day comes I must awaken them. But, as you noticed, one is without a horse. Yours is the horse I want. Leave her here and come with me.'

The farmer follows to another cave and is bewildered by the sight of so much gold, silver and other treasure. Some of it is stored neatly and some has spilled onto the floor. Just a handful would make the farmer a rich man. Were he to take his hat off and fill it to the brim he would be rich beyond his wildest dreams.

'Have as much as you can carry,' says the old man. 'That's your rightful payment.' Without so much as a thought of shaking hands to agree the deal, the farmer fills the pockets in his britches with the brightest and shiniest of the golden coins. He indeed takes his hat off and empties a large pot of coins into it, not bothering that a good many spill over onto the floor. More coins he slides between his riding boots and his legs. Yet still there seems to be as much treasure as when he first set eyes in the cave. He takes off his jacket and uses it to wrap around jewellery and other bigger pieces of treasure.

He can barely walk under the weight of what he has taken in exchange for the mare but the old man simply nods and once more says 'Follow me.' They go back out through the iron gates and the rock, which clatters again before shutting with a resounding bang. The night is as dark as if a bag were over the farmer's head.

Eventually he arrives home. He cannot hide his new-found wealth from his friends and they demand to know how he came by it. He tells them the tale

Alan Garner.

of the old man and the circuitous route to the iron gates. They tell their friends the tale too and soon a large number of men make their way up to Saddlebole. But the rock resolutely remains in one piece and neither the iron gates, the sleeping knights or the hidden treasure have ever been seen since.

The power of names

The modern Ordnance Survey map for the Alderley Edge area does not show Thieves' Hole, Seven Firs, Goldenstone, Stormy Point or Saddlebole. But Alan Garner established where they were and also researched the origins of the places' names. I have already included his research into Thieves' Hole as part of my scene-setting. Goldenstone is a landmark on the boundary of Over Alderley and Nether Alderley parishes. It is a sandstone conglomerate which, far from being golden, looks from a distance as grey. But close up a remarkable number of quartz pebbles can be seen, making it distinctive from locally-outcropping rocks.

In place-names not everything called 'gold' is necessarily golden. The Old English word *gylden* can indeed mean 'gold-coloured'. But it also has the broader sense of 'splendid, wealthy, treasure'. It can also mean 'sacrifice'. This is because another layer of meaning is 'tax, tribute'; this evolves into 'geld' (in the sense of money and payment). So the Goldenstone was the place to pay your 'geld', your taxes – yield (another cognate word) your valuables. Sometimes it may well have felt like a sacrifice. Indeed before coins perhaps your 'geld' was your best horse, who was indeed sacrificed…

Stormy Point is near the Devils' Grave and Pikelow, and near these are two of six surviving flat-topped artificial mounds in this area. They are about a metre high and four metres across. Their age or purpose has never been established. Best guess is that there are eighteenth century landscaping, presumably intended to have one or more trees on them. Indeed only one of them has a name and that is Seven Firs, one of the landmarks on the farmer's journey.

The Devil's Grave is perhaps an Otherworldly trench (from Old English *graef*), with the devil appearing in the place-name (but presumably not in person) around the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries (Harte 2010: 26). Pikelow is from the Old English *piced hlaw*, the pointed ('peaked') burial mound. Pikelow

is indeed a landmark – the boundaries of three parish meet there. Stormy Point would, in Old English, have the sense of a 'stormy place'.

Like Pikelow, Saddlebole is a boundary landmark. It is a distinctive spur-like promontory of Stormy Point with a dip in the middle that makes it appear saddle-shaped. In Old English *bol* was a smooth, rounded hill. But Old English *bolla* is our words 'bowl' and 'hollow', with the additional meaning of a smelter's crucible – and copper and lead deposits were extracted from this part of Alderley Edge. Bearing in mind that early metalworkers were regarded as almost Otherworldly – magical 'achemists' who could transform dull ores into shiny metal – then perhaps their workings with considered akin to Otherwordly trenches too.

The rock which opened to reveal the iron gates is now known as Iron Gate. And this name is not a result of the legend. It predates the legend, probably by many centuries. Indeed, the more cold-blooded folklorist will consider the legend to be a 'back-formation' – the adaptation of a well-known tale (and the sleeping knights are indeed known from a great many other places) to 'explain' a curious place-name. Just as gold is not, in place-names, always gold, so too iron isn't to be trusted to be what it seems – although Garner reads rather too much into the Peterborough lapidary of about 1500 which states that 'Iren is a stone'. Gate is from the Scandinavian *gata* for 'road' or 'way'. So Iron Gate implies, at least to Garner, a stone road. And, indeed, archaeological investigation in 1999 revealed just such a structure running to on Stormy Point (Garner 2010: 13).

But maybe there was a gate. With its Otherworld guardian. Although not named in the legends, old documents refer to Avardeshache as being near Iron Gate. Garner derives this from Aelfweardhoec (Garner 2010: 15). In this case we are dealing the modern sense of the word 'gate' (Old English *hoec*) guarded (Old English *weard* – from which modern 'warden' or 'warder') and the Old English *aelf* which is exactly as it sounds – 'elf'. So 'the elf-guarded gate' or 'the gate of the elf-guard'. Isn't that an excellent description of the old man and the iron gates? Don't worry that the old man is described as being tall – elves were as big as humans until the late medieval era when (at least according to legends since then) they diminished to being rather more wee and twee and generally less bothersome than hitherto. And anyway, in the worldview of Anglo-Saxons, the sleeping knights would also inhabit the world of the elves – they, not the old man, were the *aelf weard*. So perhaps this story is not so much a back-formation of Iron Gate as a derivation and embellishment of a tale associated with Avardeshache?

Even Mobberley deserves more attention – this derives from *motburlege* ('moot mound') so would have been a regional meeting place. And it is during the

return to Mobberley that the most interesting part of this tale takes place – the outward trek is little more than 'prequel' to the main tale.

And, as Garner so wonderfully realises, why did the sleeping knights need a mare? The weight of their armour meant they rode specially-bred stallions not some farmer's mare. Legend does however tell us why a king needed a white mare, as medieval Irish mythology does reveal they were needed for the inauguration of kings (see summary in Trubshaw 2011a: Ch. 4).

Legends as big as a country

I have recounted and discussed the legend of Alderley in some detail because, thanks to Alan Garner's knowledge and research, it is so far the best-constructed example of how the names and legends of individual places form part of a greater narrative. But, in the final analysis, it is only a construction – not a 'genuine relic'. Garner was told the tale by his grandfather, but his grandfather got to know – directly or otherwise – the tale from the mid-nineteenth century literary versions. And that tale shares too much with Scottish tales of Thomas the Rhymer for it not to be yet another example of a well-known legend which is relocated to a new locality (the proliferation of candidates for King Arthur's Camelot are perhaps the best examples). Despite Garner's pronouncements about Old English place-names, this tale is a back formation – albeit a seductively clever one – that dates back little, if at all, before its first appearance in print (See Harte 2011 for a more extended critique of Garner's account.).

Whatever the age and origins of the expedition around Alderley Edge, Garner shows us now readily specific places in the landscape can be woven into a memorable narrative. The Cheshire mare has much more going for her than the Leicestershire ditty about the supernatural leaps that took a different horse, Bel, to his supposed grave.

The authors of both these tales have much in common with A.A. Milne when he transformed the physical landscape of Posingford Wood and the Ashdown Forest into Pooh Corner and invented an expotition – also involving the equine character, Eyore – to somewhere as 'other' as the North Pole. Such expeditions as metaphors for 'otherwordly' journeys involve horses and their ilk to a greater extent than is necessary for functional reasons.

In partial contrast, the poem about *Sir Gawain* is a remarkable work of literature, in which the supernatural aspects – splendid as they are – are secondary to setting expectations of chivalrous conduct. That Sir Gawain was travelling by horse is implicit for someone of his social status – it would be only remarkable if he were not. The place-related lore in *Sir Gawain*, although

of specific interest to me, is just another level of meaning within the author's complex interweaving of ideas.

But there is one other work which weaves its hero into the landscape, and which seemingly dates to before the era when horses were inevitable companions. In this case the landscape is as big as a kingdom – at least the north Wales kingdom of Gwynedd at its greatest extent. And its hero is not merely supernatural but god-like – although some would say that his shape-shifting skills were as much shamanic as divine. To do justice to the complexities of Taliesin's mythical travels would, however, be difficult to summarise within a few pages. It needs a whole book to itself. Thankfully Michael Dames has already done just that, in his book *Taliesin's Travels: A demi-god at large* (Dames 2006).

Dames' *Taliesin's Travels* is a complex work that draws together both evidence and ideas from different time-spans to show how, at least from a modern perspective, key stages in Taliesin's life are intimately linked to specific places in the north Wales landscape. His approach succeeds in bringing the landscape back to life, mythologically speaking, even though the surviving sources for the tales of Taliesin have lost such intimate links with places.

Thirty years before publishing *Taliesin's Travels* Dames had established himself as a writer with two books which similarly re-mythologise the Avebury

Next page: *Llyn Geirionydd, the place of Talisin's magical transformation. Michael Dames wrote in* Taliesin's Travels *that:*

> Whenever the demi-god Taliesin arrives at Llyn Geirionydd, he sits by the shore and listens to what the *llyn* has to say. On windless occasions, when not the faintest lapping sounds come to his ears, he is puzzled by the lake's silence, thinking: 'Have I come all this way, and endured so much, for no response? Lake Disappointment, you are cruel!' Sulkily he stares at the glass-smooth surface and sees his image, floating there. His inverted self lies captured by the lake in a companionable quiescence. Geirionydd is sharing a pause, as she mimes the positive value of absolute stillness and calm. So, at the core of his febrile travels Taliesin discovers a sublime repose lying beyond words. After that, the faintest ripples appear on the lake, as if from a submerged oracle, whispering the coalescence of every possible sound, making the chord that may underlie all languages, but audible only to itself. Putting an ear to the water, Taliesin hopes to catch something of that proto-Esperanto, but hears nothing.

landscape (Dames 1976, 1977). Subsequently he had looked at *Mythic Ireland* (Dames 1992) and situated the myths of Merlin securely in the Welsh landscape (*Merlin and Wales*; Dames 2002). Both place-names and place-specific legends are a key parts of Dames' approach. Above all his puts the myths back into the landscape and, in doing this, links places together as part of the narrative sequence in the myth. While experts can debate – as they always do – about the accuracy or otherwise of specific suggestions, such critiques fail to to recognise that these five books by Michael Dames are, collectively, one of the most comprehensive 'mytho-poetic' projects undertaken by anyone writing about the British Isles since Gildas or Geoffrey of Monmouth. (Although a completist might want to think of Dames as following on from a list of precedents that would also include William of Malmesbury, Simeon of Durham, Gervase of Tilbury, Thomas Malory, Raphael Holinshed and perhaps William Camden and Michael Drayton.)

Dames' approach has not found the same fame as authors who have adopted or subverted the word 'psychogeography' although this too encompasses approaches to landscape – albeit urban rather than rural – in which the meaning and significance of places can become entangled into 'cartographical narratives'. (For a useful introduction to psychogeography see Coverley 2006; I have discussed the limitations of the use of the term 'psychogeography' in Trubshaw 2009 and Trubshaw 2011b.)

Legends as big as a galaxy

Myths did not only provide ways of memorising the landmarks for terrestrial journeys. We still find our way around the night sky by giving mythic names to the constellations; most of our Greek and Roman myths can be 'decoded' as originally starting out as narratives that 'explained' the relative position of these star formations. Behind the surviving myths are fragments of the myths of earlier societies and their star lore (see Trubshaw 2011a: Ch.9 for a brief discussion of some aspects of this).

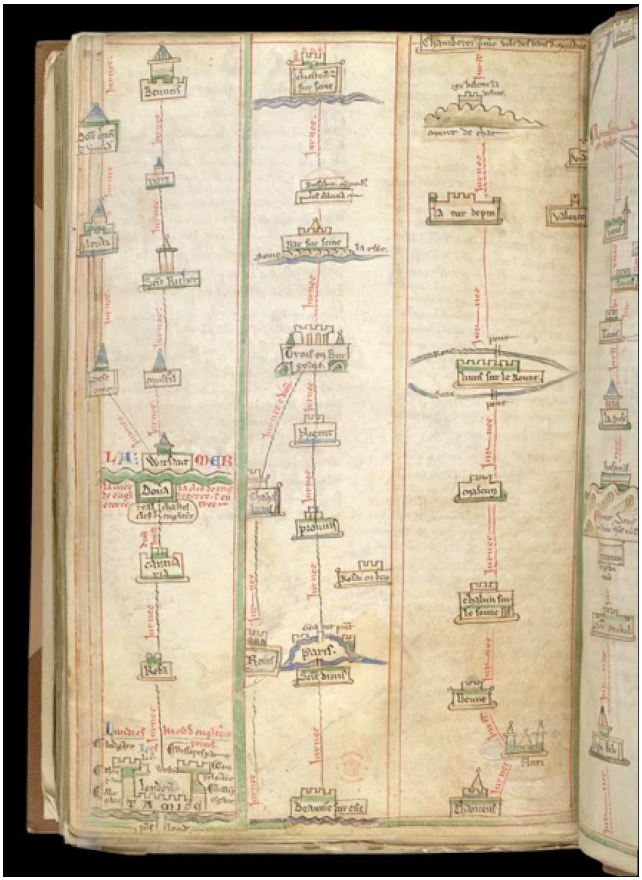
Stories in the stars. Constellations had their origins in legends which acted as mnemonics. Nowadays we struggle to remember the constellations because we have not grown up with the legends which link them together.

After the Anglo-Saxons

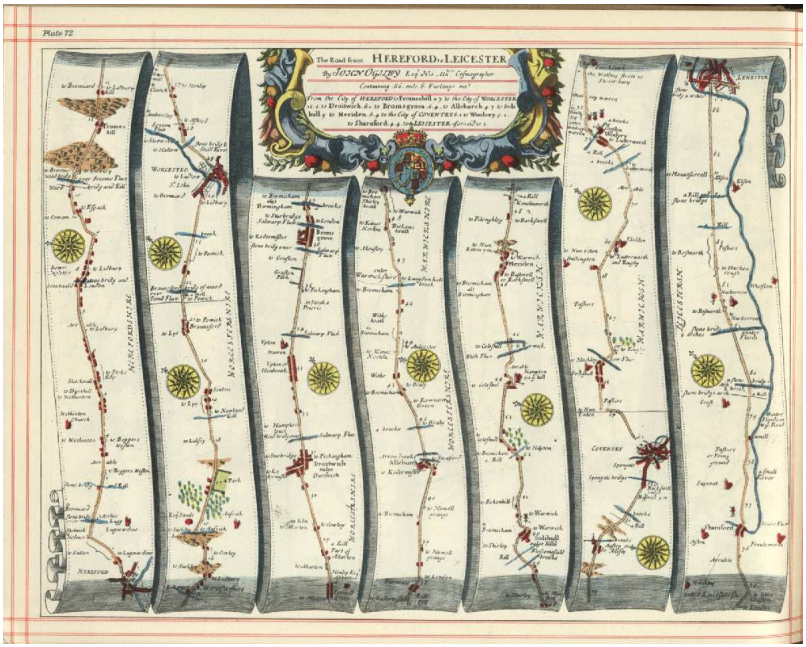
Anglo-Saxon charters listed landmarks in a linear order. These written documents were clearly influenced by oral traditions of recording boundary landmarks or 'sea songs' which listed navigation aids. The same linear approach was retained for early maps – such as the strip map compiled by Matthew Paris *circa* 1250 to guide pilgrims from London to Paris.

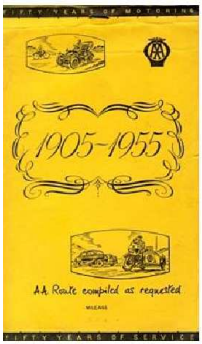
By the seventeenth century similar strip maps were being printed in colour. The example on the next page was produced by John Ogilby in 1675 and shows the route from Hereford to Leicester via such places as Stratford upon Avon.

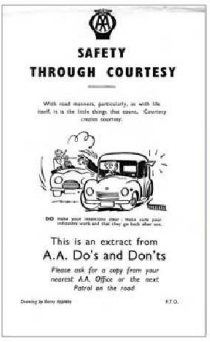
In the mid-twentieth century motoring organisations produced strip maps for their members. The example on the next page is from *circa* 1955 and shows the route from Cambridge to Litttlehampton.

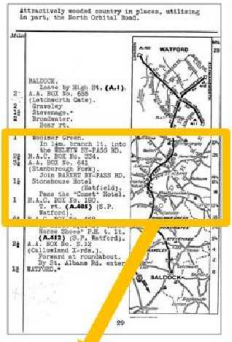


Part of Matthew Paris' strip map showing towns, cities and river crossings from London to Jerusalem.

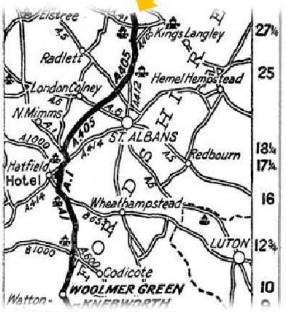








Woolmer Green.
In 1¼m. branch lt. into
the WELWYN BY-PASS RD.
R.A.C. BOX No. 334.
A.A. BOX No. 641
(Stanborough Fork).
Join BARNET BY-PASS RD.
Stonehouse Hotel
(Hatfield).
Pass the "Comet" Hotel.
R.A.C. BOX No. 180.
T. rt. **(A.405)** (S.P.
Watford).
R.A.C. BOX No. 468.



AA strip map of the route from Cambridge to Littlehampton (Sussex)
prepared individually at the request of an AA member, c1955

Conclusion

The more educated Anglo-Saxons would have been familiar with the 'narrative cartography' of the Bible and Pliny. Many more Anglo-Saxons would have been used to describing boundaries and giving directions by similarly formulaic lists. Because place-names had yet to become 'fossilised' and so still retained any literal and figurative descriptions then giving directions based on lists of such names would have provided reliable route maps. Inventing a legendary tale to link the names together would provide an effective mnemonic. As either the routes fell into disuse or other ways of mapping them took over then fragments of such legends might evolve into the place-related lore collected by folklorists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

I am sure that a number of readers will have spotted the parallels to similar practices among Australian Aborigines, who both find their way around the Outback and simultaneously re-affirm tribal 'ownership' of the trails by retelling the Dreamtime legends associated with specific landmarks. These have been popularised in the West as 'song lines' although this is not a phrase used by the Aborigines themselves. Similar place-related narratives are known from other traditional cultures. Indeed it would be more surprising if people had *not* developed this way of helping to remember places and routes.

Perhaps what is most amazing is that no one has previously put together the evidence that in England too, in not-so-distant times, we seem to have been doing exactly the same sort of thing (although Ann Cole, Margaret Gelling and Nicholas Howe have all provided some clear signposts).

Sadly few of the legends which once linked places together can now be reconstructed and, more typically, at best only the place-specific fragments have been recorded.

While I am sure few people today would want to turn their sat-navs off and rely instead on a song or legend to guide them we are now entering a era when smartphones and iPads offer location-tracking apps which provide information about businesses in the immediate vicinity. Such information can span both the practical (where to find hotels, restaurants, petrol stations, public transport, and such like) and information about the local heritage. Given how much information about local legends and the like is already on the Internet then suitable map-based 'mash ups' could bring local legends back into the experience of anyone travelling around with such gadgets.

Ignoring the obvious differences, I wonder what *The Seafarer* would have made of the similarities to his worldview...

The 'dreamtime' of J.L. Carr (1912–94). This map of Leicestershire is typical of the eccentric compilation of historical information Carr brought together in a visual but non-cartographic manner. Photographed by kind permission of Richard Balme.

Appendix

Place-Lore: The mental map

Wade Tarzia

This appendix is a slightly edited version of the fifth chapter, 'Border defense in Irish Saga', of Wade Tarzia's PhD thesis *Models of Ritual in Old English and Early Irish Heroic Tales* (Tarzia 1993a).

The first line of border information is contained in place-lore. The lore of place-names is probably of general use to people who often travel across the landscape, as may be indicated by modern nomads like the Saami reindeer herders of Lapland, who retell the names of old landmarks during migrations and shorter excursions (Anderson 1985, 529). But to my knowledge the lore of landmarks finds no greater development than in early Irish tradition. We cannot turn a page without seeing a reference to a place-name and how the feature came to be named. The main source is the Táin Bó Cúailnge, usually translated as 'The Cattle-raid of Cooley' and hereafter *TBC* (page references to the 1969 reprint of Cross and Slover 1936). The oldest extant version of *TBC*, Recension I, is preserved in various manuscripts of later age but its language has been dated to the eighth or ninth centuries. This earliest version comprises doublets (repeated episodes), contradictions, and other issues of rough editing (to our twenty-first century eyes) that testifies to complex manuscript history and scribal editing. Of course, some of these tendencies, as irritating as they are to reading pleasure, are valuable evidence that this version of *TBC* was compiled from an oral tradition in which variant performances may

have found their way into the compilation. As with other versions, notably the later Recension II, Recension I contains material of varying date. The second recension (*TBC*-II) was compiled around 1160. This version seems to be a literary reworking of the first recension, but I add that the concept of 'unity' is a relatively late notion in Western society and not necessarily a 'truth' elsewhere. Additionally, there is some evidence that the redactor of Recension II was acquainted with classical and neoclassical literature whose influence may be seen in this later edition.

Landmarks appear in many places in the saga literature. In *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel*, a road is mentioned as a boundary (Cross and Slover 1936 (1969: 101)). In *TBC* we note a pillar-stone on a boundary (*TBC*-II 207); Cú Chulainn is shown slaying a warrior who is standing on a mound (*TBC*-I, 150; *TBC*-II, 172); mounds and stones are associated with Cú Chulainn's earliest defining deed, the day he had to slay Culann's hound and take its place as a guardian (*TBC*-I, 142; *TBC*-II, 162; a hound is a guardian creature, as are warriors: McCone equates the two (1984: 10)). Early Irish tradition as a whole associates guardianship and single combat (itself often a defensive behavior to stall invaders, among other functions). Additionally, stones, man-made features, and natural features such as rivers were boundary markers in Ireland, delimited in commentary on an ancient law tract (O'Riain 1972: 17). The traditional connection between borders, warriors, and some of the saga themes is apparent since many of the battles in *TBC* occur near rivers, hills, large stones, etc., all of which are traditional boundary zones, according to O'Riain.

If Cú Chulainn's 'Boyhood Deeds' (an episode of *TBC*, possibly once a separate saga) is a trustworthy indicator, then instruction in pertinent place-lore may have formed part of the initiation rite of a warrior or of some other stage of a youth's training. When young Cú Chulainn rides in Conchobor's chariot after taking his first arms, the charioteer instructs the boy after bringing him to the border. They go to a summit of a hill to see the sights (to which even the modern country person may take a foreign visitor — a kind of initiate? — to be instructed in place-lore, as I discovered during 1980 and 1988 fieldwork in central Ireland):

***TBC*-I Episode**

The charioteer told Cú Chulainn that they should go to Emain to be in time for the feasting there.

''No' said Cú Chulainn. 'What mountain is that over there?'

''Slíab Monduirnd,' said the charioteer.

''Let us go to it,' said Cú Chulainn.

'Then they went to it, and when they had reached the mountain, Cú Chulainn asked:

''What white cairn is that over over there on the mountain-top?'

''Finncharn,' said the charioteer.

''What plain is that yonder?' asked Cú Chulainn.

''Mag mBreg,' said the charioteer.

'So he told him the name of every chief fort between Temair and Cennannas. He named, moreover, their meadowlands and their fords, their renowned places and their dwellings, their forts and their fortified heights. (TBC-I, 144)

***TBC*-II Episode**

'Well now, Ibar,' said the boy, 'teach me (all the places of) Ulster on every side for I do not know my way at all about the territory of Conchobor.' The driver pointed out to him all the places of Ulster all around him. He told him the names of the hills and plains and mounds of the province on every side. He pointed out the plains and strongholds and renowned places of the province. (*TBC*-II 167).

Note how specific is this catalogue of places; proper names, topographical points, monuments, and places at which history ('renowned places') is connected to locale. These specific concerns suggest how important place-lore was in everyday life. Note also that the earliest recension is the more specific.

Often a place-lore episode supplies a short story of the feature's history. One citation suffices to exemplify many of these instances:

> ***TBC*-I Episode**
>
> Then Medb sent out a hundred men of her household to kill Cú Chulainn but he slew them all at Ath Chéit Chúile.
>
> Whereupon Medb said:'Indeed we deem it a crime that our people should be slain!'
>
> Whence the place-names Glais Chró *[river of gore]* and Cuillenn Cind Dúin *[holly-wood of the crime of the people? Liberally: forest of the crime against the people?]* and Ath Céit Chúle *[ford of the meeting place/deeds of the back/rear?; liberally: 'ford of the attack from the rear?]*. (*TBC*-I, 182)

> ***TBC*-II Episode**
>
> Then Medb sent a hundred men together to assail Cú Chulainn. Cú Chulainn attacked them all and they fell by his hand. 'It is a hateful thing for us that our people should be slaughtered thus,' said Medb. 'That was not the first hateful thing that came to us from that man,' said Ailill. Hence Cuillend Cind Dune is still the name of the place where they were then, and Ath Cró is the name of the ford by which they were, and rightly so because of the great amount of their blood and gore which flowed with the current of the river (*TBC*-II, 197).

Such place-lore was a helpful device for defining the territorial markers, perhaps because the action that explains the place-name is often unusual and gory like the example above, making the association of place and narrative memorable. Also, each place has its own explanation, which aids recollection. (However, in this traditional system, different regions might well have similar place-names and tale-types to explain them. For example, during fieldwork in Ireland I collected two different explanations and names for a dyke in

Carrickaboy, Co. Cavan (Tarzia 1993a). Another dyke in Northern Ireland shares one of the same names, 'The Black Pig's Dyke,' but with a different and possibly more ancient story attached (see Williams 1987).)

In another example Cú Chulainn uses his sling stone to kill Medb's small hound (*TBC*-I, 149; not in *TBC*-II). Gore running in rivers and super-heroes killing innocent puppies may offend modern tastes, but these interludes in the narrative may have been ways to help the audience remember them and, in turn, memorize place-lore to form a mental map of territory. Gory and ludicrous tales are noticeable above much of the other ordinary information that arises in a story and can be more easily ingrained into the individual and community memory. The communal nature of this body of information becomes evident when we realize that the stories were possibly part of an oral tradition that would have been spread widely by poets performing before audiences and traveling widely with their tales (unlike others, poets had rights outside of their home tribe and could travel safely between tribes (Kelly 1988: 46)). Thus in place-lore we see the generation and perpetuation of a mental-map of landmarks.

A place-lore of territorial landmarks would have been important to all members of the society, not just to the warrior class. In a semi-pastoral culture that was mostly non-literate, everyone would have needed to know when they were passing near a rival's territory, within or without the tribe — this is an important concern for people herding their cattle in distant pastures, away from the safety of protected farmsteads, forts, and friends. In non-literate society there are no 'private property' signs except for generic markers such as cairns, trees, and hills! These markers must be defined as border signs by fabulous and memorable stories.

In closing this subject I might cite a reverse example from a later part of Irish history. When seasonal pastoralism was altered to a more sedentary farming life by social changes begun by English occupation, place-lore became far less important to people who did not move so much across the landscape, as is suggested by the relatively low occurrence of place-lore in more recent folktales. The laws and law-enforcement of a state-level government reduce the legal and physcial penalties for trespassing. Also, the circumscription of legally noted (and,

one might add, scientifically surveyed) boundaries, and the more sedentary settlement pattern of the modern Irish farmer, reduce the need for a widely known, land-defining place-lore.

Place-name lore can be thought of as the beginning of border ritual. In a preliterate society, only when the key places are delineated in broadly accepted tradition can there be a mental map of territory and the capability for disputes about transgressions. Then the named places become border demarcators that can be honored or ignored. *TBC* is indeed a tale of rules and transgressions, both of land and ritual. Medb sets the tone for the destruction of society's rituals in this saga; apparently she purposely insults Ulster's territorial integrity and ignores traditional borders by having her army cross a mountain at Bernas Bó Cúailnge rather than go by another route:

> ***TBC*-I Episode**
>
> She preferred that they should go across the mountain so that the track they made might remain there for ever as an insult to the men of Ulster. (*TBC*-I, 153).

> ***TBC*-II Episode**
>
> If they wished, they could have gone between the Glaise and the mountain, but Medb did not permit it but (ordered them) to dig and hack a path for her through the mountain, so that it might be a reproach and disgrace to the Ulstermen.
> (*TBC*-II, 176).

Medb's action has, in effect, ignored the primacy of place-lore because as she hacks her own path, she creates her own place-name (*Bernas Bó Cúailnge* being the place where she hacked her way through the border), a blatant insult to accepted tradition as well as tribal politics. Early in the invasion, Medb's untraditional and pragmatic personality sets the tone for her kind of war. Perhaps an all-encompassing theme of *TBC* is to contrast the acceptable tradition of conduct and the unacceptable approach of an individualist such as Medb.

The Ritual of Warfare

Place-lore and its role in defining tribal territory lead to the way in which those borders were protected: once you know where you are, you must use that knowledge. A significant part of the *Táin* concerns the actions that were required to hold the borders against invaders or the campaign you must mount if you wish to violate them. While we need not believe that the society depicted in the stories is an exact picture of early Irish life, we can see the tales as society's ideals, which would have been on the minds of the people as they left the story-teller's presence to go on to real-life situations.

> [Wade Tarzia's thesis continues with a detailed examination of the rituals of early medieval Irish warfare; online at www.wtarzia.com/files/chap_5.rtf]

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