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## ANGLO-SAXON EAGLES

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with an Appendix by DAVID MILES

Names of birds, animals and insects occur frequently in English place-names, but this information has not been systematically evaluated by environmentalists. Some recent works are dismissive about its potential. Oliver Rackham, in his 1986 book *The History of the Countryside*, complains on p.8 of "the tradition among place-name scholars of not admitting ignorance, clutching at straws, and reading into place-names more than they say". His discussions of specific animals and birds contain other dismissive remarks, such as (p.33):

There are not only actual beasts but beasts heraldic and metaphorical: anyone wishing to infer bears from *Barham* (Kent) should ask himself whether he would likewise infer lions from *Lyonshall* (Herefordshire);

and:

The Anglo-Saxons knew about it [the aurochs] and called the runic letter ur . . . after it, but there is no reason to suppose that they were more directly familiar with it than they were with lions.

There is no coherent attitude or method to be discerned in Dr Rackham's treatment of place-name evidence; it is necessary to contest his scattered observations one at a time. *Lyonshall* means "nook in the district called Lene"; no scholar has ever suggested that it contains the word *lion*, so it is totally irrelevant to any discussion of animals in place-names. Old English *ūr* occurs in *Urpeth* in Durham, an equivalent name to *Horspath* in Oxfordshire, and is likely to refer to a path frequented by an actual animal, not a heraldic or metaphorical one, though the creatures may have been wild cattle rather than aurochs. When discussing beavers (p.34), Dr Rackham instances *Beverley* as showing that "beavers survived into Anglo-Saxon times in east Yorkshire", but he ignores other "beaver" names (such as *Barbourne* and *Bevere*, Worcs; *Bevercotes*, Notts; *Beverbrook*, Wilts; *Bewerley*, Yorks) which point to a much more widespread survival.

Information about fauna and flora has to be assembled with some effort from the English Place-Name Society's county surveys and from E. Ekwall's *Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names* (4th ed., Oxford, 1960). Even in an alphabetical list such

as this last work, relevant names may be scattered owing to the diverse development of the vowels of the various bird-, animal- and plant-names. There are other pitfalls, too, such as the appearance under Iw- and Ew- of names referring to yew trees; failure to perceive this has unfortunately led Dr Rackham to declare (p.209) that the tree is not mentioned in place-names. All the relevant words are listed and discussed in the two volumes of A.H. Smith's *English Place-Name Elements* (English Place-Name Society 25-6 [Cambridge, 1956]) but with randomly-selected examples of names which contain each word, seldom a complete corpus. Nevertheless, it is a comparatively simple, if time-consuming, task to assemble a corpus of place-names referring to wolves, cats, birds of prey, or whatever the enquirer is concerned about. In the interpretation of such a corpus, the enquirer need not concern himself much about Dr Rackham's "beasts heraldic and metaphorical". Only dragons (Old English *draca*, as in Drakelow) are likely to come wholly under that heading, though ravens may be symbolic when associated with hill-forts, as in the name Ramsbury (see my *Signposts to the Past* [London, 1978] p.145). The enquirer should, however, concern himself about the well-attested use of animal- and bird-names for naming people in the Anglo-Saxon period, and this is the main caveat to the use of place-name evidence by the environmentalist. Use of the animal-name for a personal name is the probable explanation of the "bear" in Barham.

If an animal- or bird-name which forms the first element of a compound place-name has the genitive singular inflection, there is a considerable possibility that it is a personal name. For a "strong" noun or name the genitive inflection is -es, and this is found in Beversbrook, quoted above as a "beaver" name. Beversbrook could mean "brook belonging to a man named Beaver", but it seems fair to assume a collective use of the singular noun, since the main element of the place-name is appropriate to this. A reasonable general principle is to translate (e.g.) Old English *hræfn* as "raven" when it is combined with a suitable topographical term, as in Ravensdale, Derbyshire, but to regard it as a personal name when it is combined in the genitive singular with a word for a settlement, as in Ravenstone, Bucks and Leics, Ravenscroft, Ches. Use of the genitive singular of an animal-name with a word for a headland always presents the likelihood of a reference to the shape of the natural feature, as in Orm's Head and Worms Head, on the Welsh coast. Swineshead is a recurrent name of this type, and Gateshead and Shepshed are also examples.

A reasonably reliable corpus of material bearing on the presence of a particular creature in the Anglo-Saxon countryside can be assembled by including all the names in which there is no grammatical inflection (e.g. Horspath and Urpeth) and all those in which the early spellings suggest that the creature's name is in the genitive plural. Most of the "eagle" names discussed in this paper have pre-Conquest or Middle English spellings showing either that the Old English word *earn* was uninflected (e.g. *Earnlege*, A.D. 1001, for Arley, Worcs) or that it was in the genitive plural, *earna* (e.g. *Earnaieach*, A.D. 780, for Earnley, Sussex). Four Devon

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names (Ernsborough, Easdon, Yes Tor and Yarnscombe) have been included in spite of the genitive singular inflection, but Earnstrey, Shrops ("Earn's tree"), has been omitted because there is an exceptionally high incidence in the whole corpus of names containing *trēow* of personal names as first element.

All the names noted in which *earn* is the first element have as second element a topographical term. Some of the second elements are words for hills, cliffs and valleys, which are natural habitats or hunting grounds for the golden eagle, the commonest type of eagle in present-day Britain. But there is an interesting group in which the second element is a woodland term. The best place-name indicator of ancient woodland is the word *lēah*, and among recurrent compounds in which a *lēah* is characterised by reference to a living creature, the compound with *earn* is numerically second only to those in which the first element refers to one of the various types of deer. There are also three compounds of *earn* with *wudu*, and one with *sceaga* "shaw".

The dichotomy between names which refer to open country and those which refer to woodland suggests that, although the Anglo-Saxons used the word *earn* indiscriminately, the eagles which appear in ancient place-names were of two different types. The woodland birds were surely fish or sea eagles. In their latest appearances (from the eighteenth to early twentieth centuries) in northern Britain, sea eagles have been coastal birds, nesting on cliffs. But a description of their habits in Europe says:

. . . further south Sea Eagles are to be found nesting inland where lakes and rivers prove ideal alternative habitats. Rarely do the birds nest far from water, be it salt or fresh. In East Germany, 75% of Sea Eagle eyries were situated within 3 km of a lake . . . Eighty per cent of these eyries were in forests, but the eagles exhibited a distinct preference for nesting on wooded islands or promontories, and nests were usually towards the edge of an open space - a clearing, marshy ground or even agricultural land. The few eyries in open habitat were never more than 150m from forest. (J.A. Love, *The Return of the Sea Eagle* [1983] p.47.)

This account, together with other details of nesting habits given in David Miles's Appendix *infra*, provides a perfect explanation of the place-names derived from OE *earn(a)lēah*.

The sea eagle which occurs in Europe has, when mature, a white tail, and this is the "eagle white behind" which appears as a battlefield scavenger in the tenth-century poem celebrating the Battle of *Brunanburh*, recorded in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, sub anno 937. In the poem the bird could, perhaps, be suspected of being a traditional component of such scenes, but in its appearance in place-names it is likely to be a contemporary reality. It was therefore extremely gratifying to learn that David Miles (whose note is appended to this paper) had found the bones of a white-tailed

eagle in a fifth-century context at Barton Court, some twenty miles from Earley near Reading, which is the only place-name of this kind in a wide area. The two pieces of evidence prove the presence of this bird along the middle Thames in the Anglo-Saxon period. The place-name Earley is not likely to date from the fifth century, as *lĕah* did not become a commonly-used place-name-forming term till after A.D. 700. It would be reasonable to assume that the eagles persisted longer in the less heavily cultivated area on the fringe of Windsor Forest than they did higher up the Thames.

This paper offers a list and two maps of place-names containing *earn*. They are grouped in the list according to the nature of the second element of the compound, and each group has a different symbol on the maps. I am indebted to Ann Cole for an initial mapping of this material.

Apart from two conjunctions (on the Derbys/Yorks and Sussex/Kent boundaries), names which refer to open country and those which refer to woodland have a complementary distribution, which suggests that, if they are indeed referring to different kinds of eagle, one type inhibited the presence of the other. Both are absent from a large area of eastern England, and this was perhaps a consequence of denser population.

Most of the names referring to woodland eagles occur near major rivers: the Thames (Earley, Berks), Severn (Ayleford, Glos; Areley and Arley, Worcs; Earnwood, Shrops), Mersey (Arley, Ches), Ribble (Arley N.W. of Blackburn, Lancs), Don (Earnshaw in Bradfield, Yorks). Some relate to lesser rivers: Arley N. of Wigan, Lancs, is near the source of the R. Douglas; Arley, Warw, is between the R. Anker and the R. Tame; and Early Fm in Wadhurst, Sussex, is between the R. Teise and the R. Rother. Earnley, Sussex, and Arnewood, Hants, are near the sea.

References in place-names to creatures such as wolves, cats, beavers, eagles and ravens deserve to be taken seriously by historians of the countryside and its inhabitants. It is certainly worth-while to assemble the material and to map it. If references to beavers, wolves and cats show a firm correlation with ancient woodland, and if they regularly occur in place-name compounds which reflect the likely habitats of such beasts, the literal interpretation of the place-names is by far the likeliest.

It is probable that in order to be mentioned in a place-name a creature would be relatively rare and of outstanding importance to the Anglo-Saxons of the neighbourhood, either as food, or as a threat to the food supply. The geese of Goosey, Berks, which were presumably wild, must have been an important item of diet to be mentioned in a settlement-name. Goosey is not far from Barton Court, and David Miles notes that wild geese were also represented in the bones from that site.

*Eagles*

*Place-Names Containing OE earn*

1. Associated with woodland (◆ on Map I).
  - a) With OE *lēah*
    - Arley Ches, Lancs (2), Warw, Worcs
    - Areley Worcs
    - Earley Berks
    - Early Fm (in Wadhurst) Sussex
    - Earnley Sussex
    - Ayleford (in East Dean) Glos (OE *earnlēah-ford*)
  - b) With OE *wudu*
    - Arnewood Hants
    - Earnwood Shrops
    - Yarwoodheath (in Rostherne) Ches
  - c) With OE *sceaga*
    - Earnshaw (in Bradfield) WYorks
  
2. Associated with high places (● on Map II)
  - a) With OE *beorg*
    - Ernsborough (in Swimbridge) Devon
    - Yarneford (in Ipplepen) Devon
  - b) With OE *clif*
    - Arncliffe WYorks
    - (Ingleby) Arncliffe NYorks
    - Arnecliff (in Egton) NYorks
    - Yarncliffe (in Ecclesall) WYorks
  - c) With OE *cnoll*
    - Yarninknowle Wood (in Holbeton) Devon
  - d) With ME *cragge*
    - Erne Cragg (in Rydal) Westmorland
  - e) With OE *dūn*
    - Easdon (in Manaton) Devon
  - f) With OE *hrycg*
    - Eridge (in Frant) Sussex
  - g) With OE *ofer*
    - Yarner (in Bovey Tracey) Devon
  - h) With OE *ōra*
    - Yarner (in Dartington) Devon
  - i) With OE *setl*
    - Ernesettle (in St Budeaux) Devon
  - j) With OE *tor*
    - Yes Tor (in Okehampton) Devon

3. Associated with valleys (▲ on Map II)
  - a) With OE *cumb*
    - Yarnscombe Devon
    - Yarnicombe (in Modbury) Devon
    - Yarnacombe Cross (in W. Alvington) Devon
  - b) With OE *halh*
    - Arnold EYorks, Notts
  
4. Associated with open land (■ on Map II)
  - a) With OE *feld*
    - Yarnfield Staffs

Pre-1974 counties are cited in this list, and are shown on Maps I and II.

APPENDIX

by David Miles

*A White-tailed Eagle (Haliaetus abicilla) from an early Anglo-Saxon settlement in the Thames Valley.*

During the excavation of a Saxon sunken-featured structure at Barton Court Farm, Abingdon, by the author, two bones of the white-tailed eagle (*Haliaetus abicilla*) were found (identified by Graham Cowles of the British Museum (Natural History) Tring).<sup>1</sup>

The Saxon sunken-featured structure (1023), one of seven on the site, is dated to the second half of the fifth century AD. It was situated immediately south-east of an abandoned Romano-British farmhouse, within a paddock which in the fourth century AD had been used as a sheep pen.<sup>2</sup>

The Saxon buildings were strung along the edge of the Second (Summertown/Radley) Gravel Terrace, at about 60m. above sea-level and 8m. above the level of the River Thames which ran 700m. to the south. Hut 1023 was infilled with large quantities of occupation debris including, in addition to animal bones, textile equipment: clay and lead loom weights, a spindle whorl and several bone needles. Sheep played a major part in the economy of the Saxon site, along with cereal and flax cultivation.

The landscape around the Saxon settlement was essentially an open cultivated one with a limited amount of woodland including oak (*Quercus*), hazel (*Corylus*), birch (*Betula*) and perhaps more distantly, pine (*Pinus*) on the basis of pollen evidence.<sup>3</sup> The marshy riverside margins also offered good opportunities for hunting

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and the Saxon settlement produced the bones of wild geese, duck and golden plover as well as a female sparrowhawk (possibly a falconer's bird). Eel predominated among the fish bones along with pike, perch, bleak, roach and rudd.

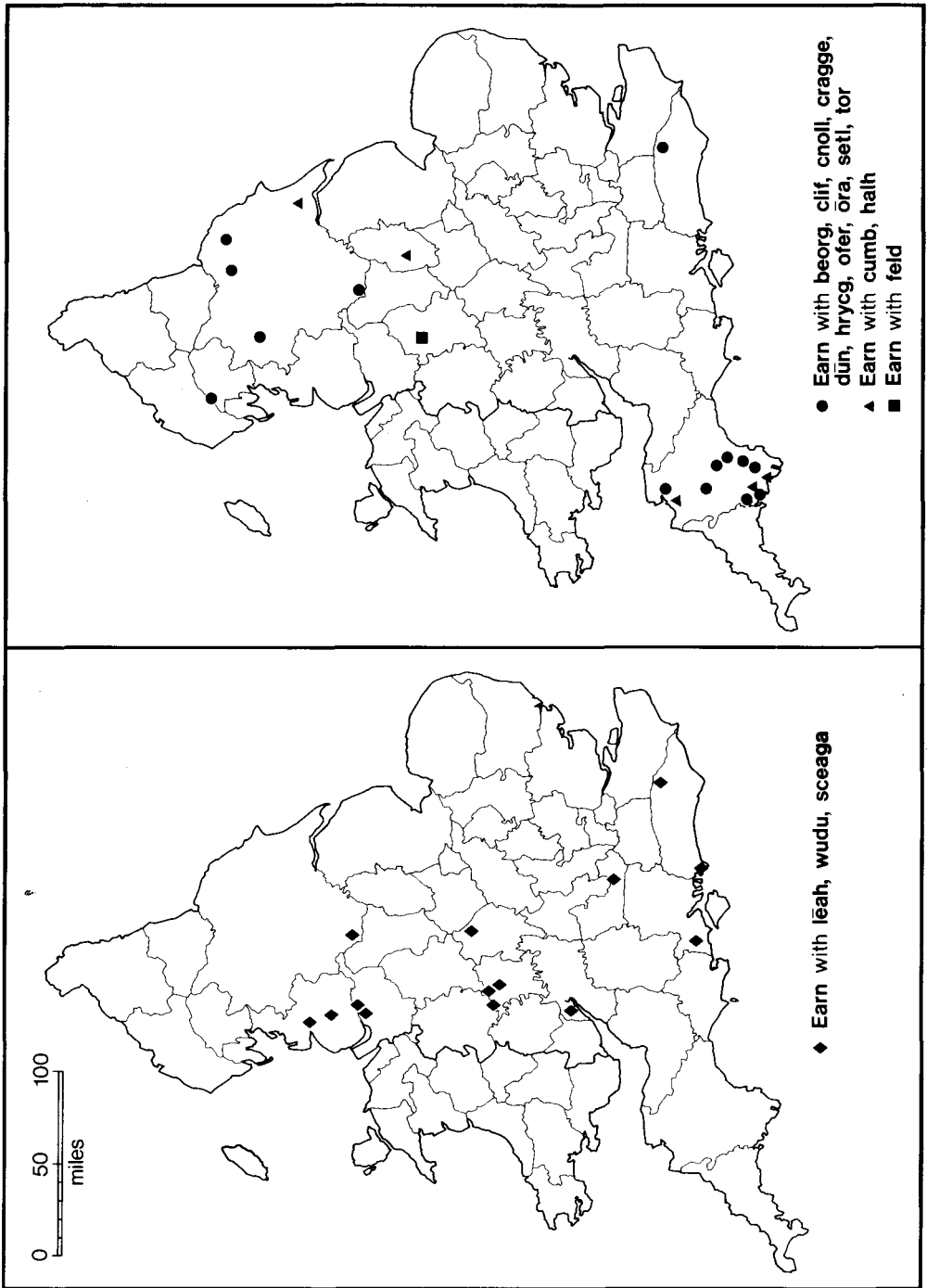
This rich riverine environment must have provided a suitable habitat for the white-tailed eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*). Today the white-tailed eagle is most often associated with remote sea cliffs<sup>4</sup> but it can occupy a wide range of habitats - coasts, lake shores, islands and wide river valleys.<sup>5</sup> The diet of the white-tailed eagle consists of fish (for example eel, perch and pike), birds, small mammals and carrion. Whenever they live alongside sheep they feed off the carcasses and will sometimes take live lambs.<sup>6</sup> Partly for this reason the birds have often been persecuted by man and became extinct in Ireland and Scotland by the early 20th century and in England probably in the 19th century.<sup>7</sup> White-tailed eagles may also have been killed for their feathers. Coy<sup>8</sup> suggests that these were used as quills and arrow flights.

It is not surprising that the white-tailed eagle should feature among early English place-names. They are a highly visible bird: large and vulture-like with a massive silhouette and broad, deeply fingered wings. They are also fairly noisy, cackling and emitting short yaps like a puppy which can be heard up to 2km. away. Of particular relevance for the establishment of place-names is the fact that these eagles are very territorial and conservative in their nesting habits. Inland they prefer the crowns of large trees such as pine, beech or oak. Once established, eyries may be occupied for many decades and by several generations of birds. From the eyrie the eagles will travel up to 10km. for the wide variety of prey which they can exploit. Normally these monogamous birds live in pairs or alone, but where stands of suitable trees are rare in open terrain, or there is a favoured food source, they will flock and roost communally. White-tailed eagles will tolerate human settlement to a certain extent, and are more adaptable than most fish-eagles. Unfortunately, as the Barton Court Farm bones suggest, persecution and disturbance by an increasingly large and intrusive human population is likely to have led to their extinction in the Thames Valley.



NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> D. Bramwell, G. Cowles and R. Wilson, "The Bird Bones", in Miles 1986 (see n.2), microfiche 8:C5.
- <sup>2</sup> *Archaeology at Barton Court Farm, Abingdon*, ed. D. Miles, Council for British Archaeology Research Report 50, 1986.
- <sup>3</sup> J.R.A. Greig, "The Pollen Report", in Miles 1986, microfiche 9:C0.
- <sup>4</sup> J. Love, M. Ball and I. Newton, "Sea Eagles in Britain and Norway", *British Birds* 71 (1978) pp.475-81.
- <sup>5</sup> I. Newton, *Population Ecology of Raptors* (Berkhamsted, 1979).
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.226.
- <sup>7</sup> *Handbook of the Birds of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa: The Birds of the Western Palearctic, Vol.2: Hawks to Bustards*, ed. S. Cramp (Oxford, 1980) p.54.
- <sup>8</sup> J. Coy, "Birds as food in prehistoric and historic Wessex", in *Animals in Archaeology*, ed. C. Grigson and J. Clutton-Brock, British Archaeological Reports International Series 183 (1983) pp.181-95.
- <sup>9</sup> Newton, *op.cit.*, p.52.



Map drawn by Harry Buglass, Department of Ancient History and Archaeology, University of Birmingham