TOPOGRAPHY, TOPONYMY AND TOPOGRAPHICAL TOPONYMS*

It is the aim of this paper to present a review of the use that has been made 1) of topography as the handmaid of toponymy, 2) of toponymy as the handmaid of topography, and 3) of topography and toponymy in the service of settlement history.

1. When Henry Cecil Wyld published *The Place-Names of Lancashire* in 1911, he stated categorically in the Preface 'that place names are here considered as elements of language, and their development as a purely linguistic problem', adding that the book was 'not concerned with the question whether the names fit the places to which they are attached, nor whether they ever did so'.[1] Eleven years later Eilert Ekwall published his book on *The Place-names of Lancashire*, justifying the apparent duplication by a discussion of some of the failings of the earlier work. One of Ekwall's chief criticisms was of Wyld's omission 'to make sure the etymologies suggested suit the topographical conditions of the places they designate', an omission that had resulted in such infelicities as the interpretation of Mythop as 'the middle valley', in spite of the fact that the place stands on a slight elevation in flat, marshy country.[2]

Even though it was Ekwall's own study of the Lancashire names that was taken as the model for the early publications of the English Place-Name Society (EPNS) he nevertheless felt called in 1947 to criticise the comparative lack of attention the editors had paid to the topographical aspect of onomastic research.[3] At the same time he noted that the study of place-name elements, combined with examination of the sites of the places whose names contain these elements, could sometimes make a contribution to Old English (OE) or Middle English lexicography, revealing the existence of topographical appellatives that are not recorded in the surviving written sources. That there must have existed an OE word **coll* 'hill', for example, related to the recorded Scandinavian *kollr*, is suggested by place-names such as Coleshill, Berkshire. Coleshill is situated on a prominent hill. It should be noted, however, that Margaret Gelling, in the most recent discussion of this name, considers that the OE word **coll* is only the third of three possible sources for the specific, the other two being a river-name **Coll* and a personal name **Coll*.[4]

While Ekwall criticised the EPNS editors for not paying enough attention to topography and for being too inclined to take the specifics of place-names to be otherwise unrecorded OE personal names, he was even more critical of a fellow Swede, R. E. Zachrisson, who had instituted a one-man crusade against the acceptance of abstruse and unintelligible personal names as the specifics of place-names.[5] Ekwall cited a string of words that Zachrisson considered to be unrecorded OE words for 'hill', namely, *badde, beaduc, bate, buc, dūc, dȳdel, ēocer, hlides, oc* (or *ōc*), *ocer, hnoþ* and *wroc*. The explanations of these words given by Zachrisson are indeed for the most part far from convincing. Zachrisson acquired a few rather half-hearted disciples in his lifetime but he died before he could convince the early EPNS editors that it was even worth considering the possibility of interpreting the specific of a name as a topographical element rather than an unrecorded personal name. I was myself inspired by Zachrisson's infectious enthusiasm to embark on a crusade on behalf of topographical terms as the specifics of *ingtūn*-names[6], a crusade that was frowned upon as misguided by sadder and wiser colleagues. Dr. Gillis Kristensson of Lund, for example, made an erudite and painstaking study of the place-names containing a postulated appellative **lill* or **lille* 'slope, valley with a river', which is a model demonstration of the way in which, even when the number of place-names which seem to contain a given element makes it extremely likely that such an element did in fact exist in OE, it can be impossible to find any convincing etymological explanation for the element or to point to any topographical feature with which it can reasonably be identified.[7] One of the basic

problems with the study of the relationship between toponyms and the topography is, of course, that very few topographical features are so striking that an identification with a topographical appellative can be taken for granted.

2. While toponymists have made use of place-names to identify topographical terms that are not recorded independently in OE sources, historical geographers have made use of the names to identify topographical features that have disappeared from the face of the land and for which there are no other records. Professor H. C. Darby, for example, has demonstrated the way in which place-names can reveal how widespread was the distribution of heath over England in earlier times.[8] More recently, Professor Alan Everitt has made a study of wold settlements in south-east England, in which he argues that the word wold (OE *weald*) in this area definitely denotes woodland or forest and not simply the 'elevated stretch of country' which it is often said to signify.[9] He raises the question as to whether other areas of wold, now largely treeless, were also originally areas of continuous forest, noting that he has as yet no evidence for woodland on the Yorkshire and Lincolnshire Wolds. Unfortunately, in these areas place-names can only be of limited assistance in solving the problem. There are comparatively few surviving early names containing elements denoting woodland in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, if the ambiguous element *weald* itself is left out of account. This must partly be because in areas of such dense Scandinavian settlement, English place-names that might have been able to provide evidence of early topographical conditions have often been obliterated by the Vikings, whose settlement names were more likely to stress the fact of private ownership than to describe the site of the settlement.

3. A study of the distribution of various types of habitative place-names can contribute to our knowledge of the progress of settlement in England, when the distribution pattern is plotted on a map that gives some indication of the topographical conditions. For a useful survey of the increasing use that has been made of distribution maps in the study of place-names, reference can be made to a paper by Professor Kenneth Cameron.[10]

The significance of topography and geology for the interpretation of settlement patterns had, of course, been acknowledged many years before they began to be exploited seriously. In 1920 Sir Allen Mawer drew attention to an article by a Dr. Woolacott in the *Geographical Journal* for 1907, which pointed out that the surface geology of an area, which affected the ease with which water could be obtained, had 'considerable influence in determining the position of minor places of settlement'.[11] In the light of this paper Mawer had a fresh survey made of the topography of the sites of all place-names in *ingtūn* in Northumberland and Durham. The result of the survey was rather indeterminate, although in eastern Northumberland a correlation could be pointed out between many of the names in *ingtūn* and sites not on streams but where geological circumstance would favour the finding of springs. It was not until fifteen years later in 1935 that a really serious attempt was made to discuss the settlement pattern of an extensive area in the light of the surface geology. This was Dr. L. W. H. Payling's study of the place-names of the Kesteven division of Lincolnshire.[12] Payling showed how villages with English names tend to favour sites on gravel spreads over Lias clay, where there would be good drainage and an adequate water-supply, or sites along the spring-lines, where the Lias clay outcrops below the Lincolnshire limestone. The vills with Scandinavian names, on the other hand, tend to have penetrated further into the districts that are likely to have been wooded. This fact led Payling to the conclusion that 'there was no general displacement of the native population during the Scandinavian invasion' but that as the demand for more arable land arose, with a population swollen by the advent of invaders and later settlers, these new settlers gradually cleared more woodland.

Thirty years later again Kenneth Cameron developed Payling's technique to make detailed investigations of the sites of English and Scandinavian settlements in the territory of the Five Boroughs.[13] Cameron was well aware of the inadequacy of the small-scale geological maps for his purpose. The information contained in the maps could sometimes be shown to be misleading. In any case, it is impossible to consider settlement simply in terms of the drift map. In a study of settlement patterns in Anglesey, for example, W. F. Grimes had shown that there seemed to have been a marked preference for sites on boulder clay from the Neolithic period through to the Iron Age.[14] At first sight this seems surprising but soil maps reveal that much of this boulder clay was covered by light or well-drained soils and it was in such areas that the majority of the sites were to be found. John G. Evans has pointed out that there is evidence from various parts of Britain that the kind of medium soil which is best suited for settlement, with high fertility, good but not excessive drainage, and an ability to withstand agricultural processes without serious deterioration, can be found overlying a wide variety of solid and drift geological deposits, ranging from chalk to boulder clay.[15] This means that it is dangerous to build too much upon the information about the site of any individual village that can be drawn from a small-scale geological map, unless confirmation has been sought from soil maps, personal observation or conversation with local farmers. It does not seem unreasonable, however, to base discussions of the types of sites enjoyed by groups of names as a class on the geological drift maps, as long as the limitations of the evidence are borne in mind.

In his three lectures Cameron argued that by and large the Grimston-hybrids, that is names consisting of a Scandinavian personal name plus the OE habitative generic *tūn*, represent English villages taken over and partly renamed by the Danes at an early stage of the Viking settlement in England. The Scandinavian *býs*, on the other hand, tend to lie in the valleys of tributary streams, on the edges of stretches of favourable land, or on much smaller patches of such land than do the English vills, and very often they lie on ground that is comparatively infertile or badly drained. The sites of the *thorps* tend to be even less satisfactory than those of the *býs*. Cameron see the *býs* as vills newly established by the Viking settlers on the best available vacant land and the *thorps* as dependent secondary settlements.

I followed Cameron's lead in my own study of Scandinavian settlement names in Yorkshire and my conclusions largely agreed with his.[16] I noted, however, that there are in all sixteen Grimston-hybrids in Yorkshire whose situations are demonstrably inferior to those of neighbouring English vills and that five of these sixteen vills are actually called Grimston. This means that five out of six places in Yorkshire actually called Grimston have comparatively unfavourable situations and thus form exceptions to Cameron's view of Grimston-hybrids. I suggested that these names might contain the mythological name *Grímr*, a by-name of Odin, that may have been used as a pseudonym for the Devil after the conversion of the heathen Germanic peoples to Christianity, rather than the Scandinavian personal name *Grímr*. The compound Grimston would then have had a derogatory sense and the name could have been given to places with unfavourable situations, in the same way as names such as Devils Dole, Cains Ground and Job's Close were given in later times to fields that were infertile or difficult to cultivate.[17]

I would now wish to make a radical revision of my views on the Scandinavian settlement.[18] In our treatments of the place-names in relation to topography, neither Cameron nor I drew a sharp enough distinction between the age of a settlement and the age of its name and neither of us was willing to recognise that the relative desirability of the sites only indicates the order in which they are likely to have been occupied and does not provide an absolute dating for their occupation. A settlement on an unfavourable site might be of considerable antiquity. I would now argue that the *býs* and *thorps* reflect not so much colonisation in the strict sense as the fragmentation by incoming settlers of large estates into smaller units. Some of these units were probably able to

retain their English names, while others were partly or wholly renamed by the Danes, who also established independent vills on the outfields of older settlements which may or may not have been deserted. These new settlements suggest that there had been an influx of settlers which brought about an intensification of cultivation of the available land, with reclamation of marginal areas, re-occupation of deserted areas and sub-division of the old estates into numerous smaller units of settlement.

What kind of names were borne by these large estates or their foci? Some had names in *hām*, the oldest recorded habitative generic in the Germanic area and a generic that was often used for districts rather than for individual settlements. Its earliest recorded use is by the historian Strabo (born c.54 B.C.). His geography of the Roman Empire contains a reference to the name of Bohemia, 'the home of the Boii'.[19] That *hām* was also often used of a large estate in OE is suggested by the fact that the Latin version of Bede translates the term by *civitas* rather than *villa* (the word used for *tūn*) or *urbs* (the word used for *burh*), and that the Latin term used to describe the places bearing *hām*-names in Bede and the early charters is *terra* much more frequently than *locus*, *vicus* or *villa*.[20] Assuming that the medieval parishes were sometimes coterminous with older estates, I have made a study of the kinds of names that were borne by these parishes in Yorkshire and the East Midlands. This shows that there are 55 medieval parishes with names in *hām* and 47 with names in *ingahām*. This means that 70% of the *hām*-names and no less than 92% of the *ingahām*-names are borne by medieval parishes. These figures can, for example, be compared with that for the *tūn*-names, of which only about 44% are borne by medieval parishes.

Many old estate centres have topographical names. In Yorkshire and the East Midlands there are no fewer than 521 medieval parishes with OE topographical names and in the East Midlands 58% of the settlements with such names were medieval parishes. These figures suggest that it must have been quite usual for the old estates to be referred to by topographical names and hence that such names must be among the oldest settlement names of English origin. Some support for this theory is given by Barrie Cox's examination of the place-names recorded in the earliest English records, i.e. from between 672 and 731. Of the 224 names recorded (excluding river-names), no less than 119 or 53% are topographical names. In most cases these topographical names denote estates or the sites of settlements.

Margaret Gelling has drawn attention to a number of estate-centres with topographical names in Berkshire.[21] Blewbury, for example, which originally referred to an Iron Age hill-fort on Blewburton Hill, became the name of a large estate which was probably coterminous with Blewbury Hundred as it was in the tenth century. Other OE names for villages and settlements within the estate are probably younger, Aston demonstrably so, since it is so called because of its position to the east of Blewbury.

The same kind of relationship between a topographical estate name and younger habitative names for individual units within the estate can be found elsewhere in England. In the West Riding of Yorkshire, for example, is found Sherburn in Elmet, which formed part of the well documented fee of the Archbishop of York. Domesday Book merely records the joint assessment for Sherburn with its berewicks, which are neither specified nor numbered. There is, however, an OE document dating from 1030 which describes the estates of the archbishop and names the berewicks of Sherburn.[22] Together they cover about two-thirds of the wapentake of Barkston Ash, and in the whole of the area concerned only Hambleton is not mentioned as being part of the soke belonging to Sherburn. The area around Sherburn is still well wooded and that there must have been even more woodland in earlier times is shown by the names of the berewicks. There are sixteen places with thirteen different topographical names. Of these, seven have generics indicating woodland: *wudu* (Cawood), *lēah* 'clearing in wood-

land' (Flaxley, Barlow), *bryne* 'clearing made by burning' (Burn), *bircen* 'place growing with birch-trees' (Birkin), and *hyrst* 'wood' (two Hirsts). Of the nineteen places with habitative names, three have specifics indicating woodland: **styfic* 'stump' (Steeton), *sele* 'willow copse' (Selby), and Scandinavian *lundr* 'wood' (Lumby). The only one of the berewick names which puts any difficulty in the way of the suggestion that its bearer originally belonged to the estate of Sherburn is Ledsham, an old name in *hām* whose specific is the British place-name Leeds. Leeds lies some ten miles north-west of Ledsham and Hugh Smith notes that no administrative connection between the two places is known and therefore he suggests that the *regio Loidis* mentioned by Bede may have extended into this part of Elmet. Glanville Jones considers that Ledsham, which has an eighth-century Anglo-Saxon church, may originally have been the church focus of a *regio Loidis* that would have been co-extensive with the wapentakes of Barkston Ash and Skyrack.[23]

Sherburn is not by any means the only West Riding estate centre of which we have early evidence. From among the estates whose existence is indicated by Domesday Book and other early sources can be mentioned Bradford, Gomersal, Kippax, Otley, Snaith and Wakefield, all places with OE topographical names. Estate centres with other types of names do occur, such as Ripon, a tribal name, and Laughton en le Morthen, a habitative name in *tūn*, but the majority of the old estate centres in the West Riding would seem to have had topographical names.

The last kind of topographical toponym that I want to discuss is the *x-ing* type place-name in which the *x* is a topographical term or the name of a plant or animal. Examples are Colling in Kent (an OE **coll* 'rounded hill') and Clavering in Essex (OE **clǣfer* 'clover'). Such names are comparatively rare in England, although they are common in Scandinavia, and I have argued that they very often lie behind the commoner English place-names in *ingtūn*.[24] I have suggested that the *x-ing* name may originally have denoted a largish area of land, for example that covered by a present-day parish or even a hundred. As more settlements came to be established within this area or perhaps as subsidiary units within the estate came to be recognised as in-dependent settlements, the common habitative generic *tūn* may have been added to the *x-ing* name to form a name for the estate centre. It is noteworthy that the majority of the *ingtūn*-names in England are borne by parish villages. In the East Midlands and the North and East Ridings of Yorkshire, for example, the percentage of *ingtūn*-names borne by medieval parishes is 66.

When arguing for the existence of the *x-ing* type of name, I acknowledged that some of my postulated *x-ing*-names were less certain than others and Margaret Gelling has subjected six of my suggested examples from Berkshire to a detailed investigation.[25] For one of the names, *Elington*, she accepted my suggestion that the specific is **ǣling*, probably an appellative denoting an 'eel fishery', while she demonstrated convincingly that my suggested etymologies of Brightwalton and Steventon are less satisfactory then her interpretations involving personal names. For the names Brimpton, Donnington and Everington, it would seem at the moment to be a question of taste whether they are to be interpreted as containing personal names or as containing topographical names formed from **Brūn*, a hill-name, *dūn* 'hill' and *eofor* 'boar'.[26] I would merely plead that the toponymist should bear both possibilities in mind when confronted with an *x-ingtūn* place-name. And with this renewed plea for an open mind and a willingness to contemplate alternative explanations of difficult names, I will conclude this review of topography, toponymy and topographical toponyms.

Notes

*An abridged version of a paper read to the tenth Conference of the Council for Name Studies in Great Britain and Ireland on 15th April 1978.

1. H. C. Wyld and T. O. Hirst, *The Place Names of Lancashire* (1911).
2. E. Ekwall, *The Place-Names of Lancashire* (Manchester, 1922).
3. E. Ekwall, 'Engelsk Ortnamnsforskning', *Moderna Språk* XLI (Malmö, 1947), 161-97.
4. PNBrk 356-57. (PN + county abbreviation denotes a publication of the English Place-Name Society.
5. Cf. particularly his papers in *Studia Neophilologica* 5 (1932), 1-69, *ib.* 6 (1934), 25-89, 133-63.
6. G. Fellows Jensen, 'English Place-Names such as Doddington and Donnington' *Sydsvenska Ortnamnssällskapets Årsskrift* (Lund, 1974), 26-64.
7. G. Kristensson, 'Personal Names or Topographical Terms in Place-Names?', *Onoma* XIX (1976 for 1975), 459-67.
8. H. C. Darby, 'Place-names and the Geography of the Past', in *Early English and Norse Studies*, ed. A. Brown and P. Foote (1963), 6-18.
9. A. Everitt, 'River and wold. Reflections on the historical origin of regions and pays', *Journal of Historical Geography* 3 (1977), 1-19.
10. K. Cameron, 'Maps and the Study of Place-Names', *Bulletin of the Society of University Cartographers* 4,2 (Liverpool, 1970), 1-9.
11. A. Mawer, *The Place-Names of Northumberland and Durham* (Cambridge, 1920), xvii-xix.
12. L. W. H. Payling, 'Geology and Place-Names in Kesteven (S. W. Lincolnshire)', *Leeds Studies in English* IV (1935), 1-13.
13. K. Cameron, *Scandinavian Settlement in the Territory of the Five Boroughs: The Place-Name Evidence* I (Nottingham, 1965), II in *Mediaeval Scandinavia* 3 (1970), 35-49, III in *England before the Conquest*, ed. P. Clemoes and K. Hughes (Cambridge, 1971), 147-63.
14. W. F. Grimes, 'Early man and the soils of Anglesey', *Antiquity* 19 (1945), 169-74.
15. J. G. Evans, The Environment of Early Man in the British Isles (1975), 134-38.
16. G. Fellows Jensen *Scandinavian Settlement Names in Yorkshire* (Copenhagen, 1972), 202, 211-12.
17. J. Field, 'Derogatory Field-Names', *Journal of the English Place-Name Society* 9 (1976-77), 19-25.
18. See G. Fellows Jensen, 'Place-Name Evidence for Scandinavian Settlement in the Danelaw. A reassessment', *The Vikings. Proceedings of the Symposium of the Faculty of Arts of Uppsala University June 6-9, 1977*, ed. Th. Andersson and K. I. Sandred (1978), 87-96, and *Scandinavian Settlement Names in the East Midlands* (Copenhagen, 1978).
19. A. Bach, *Deutsche Namenkunde* II (1954), § 581.
20. Cf. B. Cox, 'The Place-Names of the Earliest English Records', *Journal of the English Place-Name Society* 8 (1975-76), 12-66.
21. PNBrk 829-31.
22. *Early Yorkshire Charters* I, ed. W. Farrer (1914), no. 7. For the names see PNYW 4, 16-64.
23. G. R. J. Jones, 'Early Territorial Organization in Gwynedd and Elmet', *Northern History* X (1975), 3-27 and map 3.
24. *op.cit.* in n.6.
25. PNBrk 849, 933-35.
26. Cf. *Notes and Queries* (February 1977), 56.

GILLIAN FELLOWS JENSEN

University of Copenhagen