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The “erg” place-names of Northern England

Mary C. Higham (pp. 7–17)

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ABBREVIATIONS OF COUNTIES AND EPNS COUNTY SURVEYS

| | |
|---------|--|
| Co | Cornwall |
| Ha | Hampshire |
| He | Herefordshire |
| K | Kent |
| La | Lancashire |
| Nb | Northumberland |
| Sf | Suffolk |
| So | Somerset |
| Wt | Isle of Wight |
| CPNE | <i>Cornish Place-Name Elements.</i> |
| EPNE | <i>English Place-Name Elements, Parts 1 and 2.</i> |
| PN BdHu | <i>The Place-Names of Bedfordshire and Huntingdonshire.</i> |
| PN Brk | <i>The Place-Names of Berkshire, Parts 1, 2 and 3.</i> |
| PN Bu | <i>The Place-Names of Buckinghamshire.</i> |
| PN Ca | <i>The Place-Names of Cambridgeshire and the Isle of Ely.</i> |
| PN Ch | <i>The Place-Names of Cheshire, Parts 1–5.</i> |
| PN Cu | <i>The Place-Names of Cumberland, Parts 1, 2 and 3.</i> |
| PN D | <i>The Place-Names of Devon, Parts 1 and 2.</i> |
| PN Db | <i>The Place-Names of Derbyshire, Parts 1, 2 and 3.</i> |
| PN Do | <i>The Place-Names of Dorset, Parts 1–4.</i> |
| PN Du | <i>The Place-Names of County Durham, Part 1.</i> |
| PN Ess | <i>The Place-Names of Essex.</i> |
| PN ERY | <i>The Place-Names of the East Riding of Yorkshire and York.</i> |
| PN Gl | <i>The Place-Names of Gloucestershire, Parts 1–4.</i> |
| PN Hrt | <i>The Place-Names of Hertfordshire.</i> |
| PN Le | <i>The Place-Names of Leicestershire, Parts 1–7.</i> |
| PN Li | <i>The Place-Names of Lincolnshire, Parts 1–7.</i> |
| PN Mx | <i>The Place-Names of Middlesex (apart from the City of London).</i> |
| PN Nf | <i>The Place-Names of Norfolk, Parts 1–3.</i> |
| PN Nt | <i>The Place-Names of Nottinghamshire.</i> |
| PN NRY | <i>The Place-Names of the North Riding of Yorkshire.</i> |
| PN Nth | <i>The Place-Names of Northamptonshire.</i> |
| PN O | <i>The Place-Names of Oxfordshire, Parts 1 and 2.</i> |
| PN R | <i>The Place-Names of Rutland.</i> |
| PN Sa | <i>The Place-Names of Shropshire, Parts 1–9.</i> |
| PN Sr | <i>The Place-Names of Surrey.</i> |
| PN St | <i>The Place-Names of Staffordshire, Part 1.</i> |
| PN Sx | <i>The Place-Names of Sussex, Parts 1 and 2.</i> |
| PN W | <i>The Place-Names of Wiltshire.</i> |
| PN Wa | <i>The Place-Names of Warwickshire.</i> |
| PN We | <i>The Place-Names of Westmorland, Parts 1 and 2.</i> |
| PN Wo | <i>The Place-Names of Worcestershire.</i> |
| PN WRY | <i>The Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire, Parts 1–8.</i> |

THE 'ERG' PLACE-NAMES OF NORTHERN ENGLAND

Any student of Historical Geography working in Northern England has been reared on the idea that the 'erg' element is an indicator of Norse immigration and subsequent settlement via Ireland in the early years of the 10th. century. Place-name scholars in printed sources¹ appear united in their interpretation of both the origin and meaning of this element. They see it as an Old Norse loan word from the Irish 'airge', meaning 'a shieling; a hill pasture; or a summer pasture in the mountains', its presence in Northern England showing where these Norse immigrants colonised and settled. Documentary research, and fieldwork, however, have indicated that there is a strong case to be made for the re-appraisal of the evidence, and, following from this, a possible re-interpretation of its origins and meaning, together with an assessment of its significance in the evidence for pre-Conquest settlement in the north of England.

As far as the origin of the element is concerned, one has to query the reasoning behind the initial name-giving. On present interpretation, the Norse apparently 'borrowed' a word from the Irish to describe a shieling or hill pasture, both of which they would have been familiar with in their native land, and for which they had a perfectly acceptable Norse word - 'sætr', which is also part of the place-nomenclature of northern England. The word they borrowed is not part of the place-nomenclature of Ireland, although it does appear in the literature². Neither is it a feature of the place-names of Scandinavia, and yet Norse immigrants into northern England are said to have given this name to some of their primary settlements there.

One is also confronted with a single surviving example of this place-name element occurring in Orkney³ in a form similar to that of the 'erg' names in the North Riding of Yorkshire. This in itself would not raise any questions, as Norse colonisation in Orkney is well attested, but there is a fundamental dichotomy between the

1. The relevant volumes published by the *English Place-Name Society* have been used, together with H. Ekwall, *The Place-names of Lancashire*, (Manchester, 1922).
2. Personal communication with Éamonn de hÓir, *Príomhoifigeach Logainmneacha*, Ordnance Survey Office, Dublin, 1974.
3. H. Marwick, *The Place-names of Birsay*, (Aberdeen, 1970), 80.

place-name experts on the origin of these 'airy' forms, Smith⁴ seeing the North Riding 'airy' as indicative of Norse immigration by way of Ireland, and Marwick⁵ identifying the Orkney 'airy' as a pre-Norse relic.

Another unusual feature is the relative absence of the element in the place-names of the Wirral (Fig. 1). One might have expected this indicator element to be present in some strength in the only area for which there is evidence for Norse settlement by way of Ireland.⁶ This settlement is accepted as being associated with the expulsion of Norsemen from Dublin in 903, the Annals of Ulster commenting that the Foreigners of Dublin 'left a great number of their ships and escaped half-dead after having been wounded and broken'.⁷ Apart from this, the particular phase of Norse settlement under discussion is not recorded, the evidence for it depending on the survival of supposedly diagnostic place-names such as the 'erg' names, which, in the light of evidence so far examined seems a slightly dubious, and indeed a somewhat circular argument.

It might be said that the relative absence of the 'erg' element from the Wirral might well be the result of the topography of the area. It is predominantly lowland, and not likely to be used for shielings or hill pastures. These are usually associated with the uplands, those tracts of rough grazing land able only to be used in the summer months because of the high rainfall and comparatively low temperatures. These hill pastures were used to relieve pressure on the lower land so that this could be used to provide fodder for winter keep⁸, and one would expect to find the 'erg' element suitable for using in this way.

When locations are analysed however, it is immediately apparent that many of the settlements with 'erg' names are well below the expected altitude for summer hill grazing. For example, of the twenty-nine Lancashire 'ergs' so far identified, only five are in what might be considered to be approaching true shieling locations, over 600 ft. above sea level. The remaining twenty-four are below

4. A.H. Smith, *The Place-names of the North Riding of Yorkshire*, (English Place-name Society, Vol. 5., Cambridge, 1928), xxii.

5. H. Marwick, *op.cit.*, 80.

6. F.T. Wainwright, *Ingimund's Invasion*, (English Historical Review, No. CCXLVII, 1948), 145.

7. P.H. Sawyer, 'The Vikings and the Irish Sea', *The Irish Sea Province in Archaeology and History*, (Cardiff, 1970), 88.

8. There is no evidence in the medieval accounts studied that there was wholesale slaughter of animals before the onset of winter.

350 ft., and the greater proportion of these are below 200 ft. Analysis of the locations of the Cumberland, Westmorland and the North and West Riding 'ergs' shows a similar pattern, and it would be very difficult to accept many of the 'erg' locations as typical shielings or hill pastures.

The quality of the land on which many of these settlements are situated is also unlike that of shielings. Far from being on marginal land, they are often sited on the best soils in their areas, on pockets of light glacial till, on alluvium, or on limestone, all of which would have been capable of supporting permanent occupation, including arable cultivation, without modern tillage techniques. This is borne out by an examination of the status of the 'ergs' in the post-Conquest period. Many of them gave their names to townships, the local administrative units which were a feature of northern England. Of the twenty-nine Lancashire 'ergs' already mentioned, twelve became townships, three of the West Riding fifteen, five out of the Cumberland fifteen, and two in the North Riding out of a total of seven. This again does not seem to match the picture one has of shielings, which are thought to give an essentially temporary settlement pattern, closely linked to transhumance, where huts might be used in summer by people and stock having their permanent habitation elsewhere. It does not seem likely that temporary shelters made by a group of Norse refugees from Ireland would have given their name to whole townships. Shielings imply some sort of linkage with permanent habitations, and it is *this* group which one would, by definition, expect to give names to townships.

It is certainly the permanent settlements which would become the Domesday vills, and yet there are four 'ergs' mentioned in the very incomplete record for the area now known as Lancashire, two in the North Riding, one in the West Riding, and one in Westmorland, notwithstanding the virtual ignoring of this area, and Cumberland, by the Domesday commissioners. This is not the status expected to be achieved by hill-pastures or shielings, and even present-day 'erg' settlements, after some thousand years development, seem to support the idea that the greater majority of them were not shielings. The most striking example is probably Sizergh in Westmorland, which developed in the medieval period into a fortified manor house of some size, and is now a 'minor stately home' in the area, now in the possession of the National Trust.

From the evidence so far examined, it would seem that the 'erg' element in northern England was applied to a significantly large number of settlements, which, because of their geographical location and their later status, seem unlikely to have been hill pastures or shielings. The settlement names were apparently given, in a language other than their own, by a group of people who already possessed, and used, a word to denote a shieling or hill pasture. This would seem to indicate that the 'erg' names were given to settlements having some special characteristic to which the term could be specifically applied.

An examination of the Lancashire 'ergs' and those in Bowland in the West Riding has indicated that the clue to the identification of this special characteristic might lie in the medieval tenurial obligations operating there. Much of the area was designated 'forest' or 'chase' in the post-Conquest period, and this has usually been accepted as land set aside for hunting, in which settlement and agriculture were largely forbidden. An examination of the evidence however, shows that these forest areas were exploited economically by lords who operated stock-rearing enterprises there. An example of this was the vaccary organisation of the De Lacy family during the 13th. and 14th. centuries. This was operated with the object of supplying draught oxen for demesne farms, meat and hides for immediate use or sale, and for the production of dairy goods. The vaccaries were stocked by the lord, but were supervised by vaccary keepers, who were closely controlled by an official of the De Lacys, known as the *Instaurator*, who was assisted by a *Sub-storer* and a clerk. The vaccary keepers paid a farm of £3 per annum for the milk, butter and cheese produced, but the stock and progeny, alive or dead, remained the prerogative of the lord.⁹

A closer examination of these cattle-rearing enterprises has suggested that these could well be survivals of an older tradition, being the assumption of control of an already flourishing cattle-rearing economy. There was a Celtic system of stock-leasing known as *Daer-rath*¹⁰ in which the chieftain leased out stock to tenants. Under daer-stock tenancy, the chief gave cattle, mainly draught animals, to the tenant, in direct proportion to the honour-price of the chief. It could be forced upon no-one (probably because of the 'free' nature of the tenants, who were often kinsmen of the chief), and was a contract freely entered into, but not terminable

9. R. Cunliffe Shaw, *The Royal Forest of Lancaster*, (Preston, 1956), 355.

10. T.P. Ellis, *Welsh Tribal Law and Custom in the Middle Ages*, (Oxford, 1926), 209/10.

at will. The tenants paid a low rent, and they were subjected to a series of fines should they desire to end the connexion or be neglectful in observing the conditions of tenure. If the daer-stock tenant and his family continued to hold stock for three generations they became *adscriptus* to the lord, not bound to the soil, but bound to receive stock in daer-stock tenancy. Had this system existed in the forest areas, as seems likely from the evidence, the De Lacy family in Blackburnshire and Bowland, and the lords of Lancaster, Wyresdale and Amounderness forests would have been able to continue a long-standing tradition of compelling tenants to accept their stock for rearing, and, in fact, all these areas had vaccaries in the medieval period.

There are various pointers to support the idea that the vaccary organisations were something rather special, and not just a means of exploiting upland areas or areas unsuitable for intensive arable cultivation. Edmund de Lacy 'could have' seven vaccaries in Bowland in 1258,¹¹ and, much later, John of Gaunt was granted, amongst other things, 'the lordship of Bowland, the Vaccary of Bowland and Blackburnshire'.¹² The term 'vaccary' is apparently used here to imply something rather distinctive, and not merely the raising of cattle in a demesne context. The granting of the lordship of Bowland would, in itself, have enabled him to continue the pastoral farming there on his own account, unless this pastoral farming incorporated ancient right and custom, thus requiring a separate and specific grant, because vaccaries were units having special characteristics.

In the Irish context, authorities agree¹³ that the meaning of the word 'airge' extended to 'a herd of cattle', and it could be postulated that the term was used in northern England for settlements which, at the time of their naming, were held under daer-stock tenancy. An examination of the distribution of the 'erg' names in Lancashire and Bowland shows a positive correlation between forest areas, where it is known that cattle-rearing enterprises similar to daer-stock tenancy operated in the medieval period, and the 'erg' settlements.

11. Wm. Brown (ed.), *Yorkshire Inquisitions of the reigns of Henry III and Edward I*, (Yorkshire Archaeological and Topographical Association, Record Series, Vol. XII, 1891), 48.
12. J. Croston (ed.), *The History of the County Palatine and Duchy of Lancaster*, Vol. 1, (1888), 56.
13. Éamonn de hÓir, loc.cit., quoting from *Contributions to a Dictionary of the Irish Language*, (Royal Irish Academy, 1964), and Vendryes, *Lexique Étymologique de l'Irlandais Ancien*, (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies 1959).

Twenty of the twenty-nine Lancashire 'ergs' are located in former forest areas, with a further four situated in West Derby Hundred, where, in 1066,¹⁴ one of the customs was the taking of 'both the land and all the father's cattle' if an heir was unwilling to pay the 40s relief due on taking up the land of his deceased father. This forfeiting of both the land and cattle could well be a reference to daerstock tenancy at some time in the past. The two Bowland 'ergs' were actually vaccaries, Battrix and Gamellsarges having herds of cattle located there in the medieval period. Ortnor in Wyredale also operated as a vaccary, and there is an interesting reference to closes in Halton in Lonsdale bearing the name 'Arrow'.¹⁵ The useage here is probably similar to that of Arrowe Park in the Wirral,¹⁶ the inference being that the land originally belonged to the 'erg'. Halton was the *caput* of a very large area in the pre-Conquest period, an area which in the later period had vaccaries, these being centred on Lancaster which superseded Halton as the administrative vill. It could be thought that the pre-Conquest equivalent of the *Instaurator*, centred at Halton, collected stock from the vaccaries under his control and kept them on the land belonging to the 'erg' in Halton until they were sold or slaughtered, and these Arrow closes could be the linkage there with the 'ergs' of the Lune valley and the Lancaster forests.

Similar correlations between former forest areas and 'erg' settlements can be seen in other areas. Siwardsherges¹⁷ was in the forest of Knaresborough, Stockdalewath, Tirril and Winder in Inglewode Forest,¹⁸ Snelsner in Mewith Forest,¹⁹ and the Westmorland 'ergs' in Kendal and Fawcett Forests.²⁰ Even Arrowe Park in the Wirral was in Wirral Forest. It seems more than coincidental that this distribution should occur, and it seems possible

14. J. Croston, *op.cit.*, 39.

15. Lancashire Record Office, DRB/1/92.

16. J. McN. Dodgson, *The Placenames of Cheshire, Part Four*, (English Place-name Society, Vol. XLVII, 1972), 261/2.

17. A.H. Smith, *The Place-names of the West Riding of Yorkshire, Part 5* (English Place-Name Society, Vol. XXXIV, 1960), 120.

18. A.M. Armstrong, A. Mawer, F.M. Stenton & Bruce Dickins, *The Place-Names of Cumberland, Part One*, (English Place Name Society, Vol. XX, 1971), 246, and A.H. Smith, *The Place-names of Westmorland, Part Two*, (English Place-Name Society, Vol. XLIII, 1966), 208, 211/2.

19. A.H. Smith, *The Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire, Part Six*, (English Place-Name Society, Vol. XXXV, 1961), 238.

20. A.H. Smith, *The Place-Names of Westmorland, Part Two*, 110, 130, 131, 146, 149.

that the 'erg' element should be looked upon as an indicator of settlements which, in the pre-Conquest period, had been held under daer-stock tenancy, the herds of cattle held of the lord being indicated by the use of the term 'erg'.

There would appear to be at least three ways in which this element came to be used. Norse/Irish immigrants could have brought the system over with them from Ireland,²¹ giving the name 'erg' to those settlements which they operated under daerstock tenancy, which was similar to a system operated in Ireland at the time,²² and to which the Irish possibly applied the term 'airge'. Alternatively, the Norse/Irish immigrants could have taken over as minor aristocracy in already established settlements operated under daerstock tenancy to which the term 'erg' seemed appropriate, or, just as in Orkney, the 'erg' element is a pre-Norse relic which survives in northern England because of the essentially conservative nature of the area, which falls in Fox's Highland Zone.²³ This is an area for which there is considerable evidence for British survival, and in which British names are held by townships of sufficient status to qualify as Domesday villis. It is necessary, therefore, to examine the evidence available to ascertain which of these alternatives is most probable.

It would seem extremely unlikely that the Norse refugees would have had the resources to set up a stock-land-lease organisation over so wide an area as that indicated by the distribution of 'erg' names, if indeed they had been allowed to do so. There is evidence to suggest that they had requested permission to settle in the Wirral from King Alfred's daughter, Aethelflaed, Lady of the Mercians,²⁴ who, on her husband's account at the time of the Norse expulsion from Dublin, and later on her own account, controlled lands in Cheshire and the Wirral. From the Domesday evidence, it is probable that she also controlled lands to the north as well. That much of the land 'Inter Ripam et Mersham', and indeed Amounderness and Bowland, was in royal or quasi-royal hands in 1066 would appear to support this. It is more likely that Aethelflaed already held settlements in daer-stock tenancy, and gave some of the Norse immigrants posts as vaccary keepers within her organisation. This

21. T.P. Ellis, *op.cit.*, 210.

22. This could merely represent an 'Irish Sea' culture province, rather than a direct Irish importation.

23. Sir Cyril Fox, *The Personality of Britain*, (Cardiff, 1932).

24. F.T. Wainwright, *loc.cit.*, 146.

could be indicated by a number of Old Norse and Irish personal names which are linked with the 'erg' elements in place-names. Of the twenty-nine Lancashire 'ergs', ten have Old Norse/Irish personal names linked with them, both the Bowland 'ergs' have personal name elements, with a further five in the rest of the West Riding, two in the North Riding, four in Westmorland and two in Cumberland.

One has then to explain why the other 'ergs' have not got a personal name element as part of their name. If one had a Norse minor aristocracy taking over control of already established settlements and re-naming them, as the use of this supposedly Irish term would seem to imply, using the term 'erg' to describe their tenurial structure, one might expect all the 'ergs' to have personal names linked with them, and this is certainly not the case. The significance of other elements linked with the 'ergs' is not evident,²⁵ and one can only say that the case for the taking over of control and re-naming is hinted at in the place-nomenclature, but certainly not proven.

Whether the 'erg' element *can* be a fossil element indicating pre-Norse and indeed pre-Anglian settlement in the area is properly a decision for the place-name scholar. There is evidence for British survival in the place-nomenclature and in documentary sources, and this is also hinted at in other customs and tenures of the post-Conquest period. There was certainly a significantly large and potentially hostile population in the Roman period, requiring the building of forts and roads in an attempt to control it. The correlation between Roman forts and roads and the 'erg' names is striking, and one could speculate that the daer-stock tenancies of the Sub-Roman period were continuations of cattle-rearing enterprises which met the Roman needs for meat and hides, and that the forests of the medieval and pre-Conquest periods mask old Imperial estates taken over later by a native aristocracy.²⁶

Archaeological evidence for native farmsteads of the Romano-British period has been found recently in former medieval deerparks in the Sedbergh area,²⁷ and there are a few settlements identified in

25. The place-names 'Salter' and 'Docker' occur in more than one area, and these, in particular, need further investigation.

26. Further evidence has come to light recently to support this idea, and the writer intends to do further research on this.

27. N. Higham, *Native Settlements in Cumbria*, (Paper read at the One-Day Archaeological Conference held under the auspices of the Centre for North West Regional Studies and the Department of Classics and Archaeology, The University of Lancaster, February 1976).

the Kirby Lonsdale district, where there are also several 'ergs'. One interesting find recently was that of a hoard of Roman coins at Docker,²⁸ an 'erg' linked by bridle path to the fort at Burrow with Burrow. The archaeologist publishing the discovery himself speculated on the possibility of a native farmstead in the area. So often in the north however, good land once found is farmed for hundreds of years, with present settlements close to, or indeed overlying earlier ones, and underneath our present substantial 'erg' settlements, there may well be settlements of great antiquity.

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28. A.J. White, *Hoard of Roman Coins from Docker*, (Contrebis, Vol. 3, No. 1, Lancaster, 1976), 43.



