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Worthy of great respect

Richard Coates (pp. 36–43)

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ABBREVIATIONS OF COUNTIES AND EPNS COUNTY SURVEYS

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

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It has long been noted that the element *worthy*, taken generally to mean something like ‘enclosure (with a particular status), curtilage’, ‘homestead, smallholding’, ‘tenant farm’,¹ is restricted more or less to place-names in south-west England. A. H. Smith (EPNE 2 276) states that “... it is extremely common in D[evon] and So[merset], and survives occasionally in the neighbouring counties of Co[rnwall], Do[rset], Ha[mpshire], W[iltshire] and Gl[oucestershire].” He also notes that in Middle English, “... *worthi* appears mostly in the later spellings of p.ns. that usually have *worth* earlier, and this replacement of *worth* by *worthi* is very common in D and So and extends to neighbouring counties such as Gl...”. There is no evidence that the element survives as a word in modern local dialects.

Once we have registered these so far undisputed facts, the only remaining distributional oddities presented by Smith are the following:

- *Bengeworth* (PN Wo 95), which appears in a single 12th-century copy of an 8th-century charter as *Benigwrthia*; Smith dismisses this as merely the use of a Latin toponymic suffix *-ia*, and we shall do the same. But there are two independent instances of *w(e)orðig* in Worcestershire charter bounds, as Kitson notes (1997: 107; *on heaðeburhe weorðyg, of ðæm worðige* at Pershore BCS 1282 (S 786 (i)), a charter of Edgar; *wið cybles weorðiges* at Cofton (but the same charter also mentions a *weorðing*) BCS 455 (1) (S 1272)). Neither of these potential place-names survives.
- *Northworthy*, the pre-Danish name for Derby (*locum qui Northuuorthige nuncupatur* 871 (c.1000) Æthelweard’s chronicle, book 4 (Campbell c.1962: 37); *Norðworðig* (c.1000) Liebermann *Heiligen Resting-places* 2, 11; *Norðweorðig* c.1020 *Liber vitae* Hyde 89; PN Db 446).
- *Tamworth*, in Staffordshire, which appears as *Tomeworðig*, *Tameworðig* in documents including BCS 293 (S 155), and the Chronicle (A) annal 922.

Smith wonders whether the last two exceptions are “genuine local forms or merely spellings due to W[est] Sax[on] scribal practice”, which is a not unreasonable thing to wonder. He appears to endorse this view for the case of Tamworth on the grounds that spellings of the *wordig* type are absent from the time of Domesday (though there are in fact a couple of 13th-century spellings which are of the older type; Horovitz 2005: 529); and of course Northworthy was no longer called by the relevant name by that time.

Since Smith wrote, it has been established by Margaret Gelling that the element appears as a simplex in a not inconsiderable number of minor names in Berkshire, with a spillover into Hampshire (PN Brk 917–18). There is a cluster in or close to the Kennet valley around Newbury, and there are four in the Thames valley, two close to Oxford (in Cumnor and Radley²) and two to Marlow (in Cookham and Hurley). Four in the Kennet group (in Bucklebury, Enborne (which may be the same place as that in Newbury and Speen, PN Brk 269), Stratfield Mortimer, and Thatcham) are recorded before 1500. The one in Stratfield Mortimer (*Wordia* 12th, PN Brk 219) might be judged in the same way as Bengeworth (above), in view of the fact that all of its later spellings suggest *wordǫ*, and be discarded accordingly.³ The relation of these discoveries to the usage which is the subject of the article remains unclear, but the fact that they are all simplexes suggests a later onomastic phenomenon detached from the usage of the Anglo-Saxon period. One instance occurs in Berkshire in an Anglo-Saxon charter boundary (BCS 1121 (S 713)) at some distance from all these (Kingston Lisle), and we return to this below, along with an isolated one in Oxfordshire.

There is one factor which suggests there is a profounder explanation of the early names than a mere clerical habit copied from Winchester. First a very brief history of the places in question:

- Tamworth was a Mercian royal borough, a royal capital since Creoda built a fortress there in 584, and the main stronghold of Offa from 757 (see e.g. Gould 1968/9). It is seven miles south-east of the cathedral city of Lichfield. After the Danes had sacked it, Æthelflæd, daughter of Alfred of Wessex, widow of Æthelred and Lady of the Mercians, rebuilt it as her chief residence in the 910s, dying there in 918. The place seems to have been originally *Tomtun*; some suggestions as to the nature of the distinction are offered by Gould. It appears under the name “Tamworthy” in a series of documents beginning ostensibly in 781, i.e. in Offa’s reign, though all in later copies (Horovitz 2005: 529). The first, BCS 239 (S 120), is an early-11th century copy whose authenticity has not been challenged, though that of its partner of the same year, BCS 240 (S121), has.

- Northworthy was seven miles north-east of Repton, an equally royal site, where Peada of Mercia had a residence⁴ and which was a meeting-place of the Mercian council. Repton was the site of the first Mercian bishopric before its transfer to Lichfield in 669, and later a royal mausoleum. It suffered the incubus of the Danish Great Army in 873–4, around which time Northworthy /Derby makes its earliest appearance in the record. Æthelflæd retook Derby for Mercia in 917. Cameron (PN Db 446) says that it is unclear what Northworthy was north of, “perhaps the R. Trent”; Watts (2004: 184b) suggests, perhaps not convincingly, north of Tamworth, some 25 miles away. But it clearly makes sense to associate it with the nearer Repton, following Roffe (1986: 111), despite the scepticism of Hall (1989: 155). Clinching evidence that Northworthy was a royal place is lacking,⁵ but the new name, *Derby*, to be associated with nearby Little Darley, is arguably for a deer-park rather than a literal ‘deer village or farm’ (as Ekwall 1922: 114–15 surmises also for West Derby, Lancashire), and suggests aristocratic or more likely royal pursuits.⁶ Clearly Northworthy was a place appropriate for singling out by the Danes for an administrative centre.

The areas around Tamworth and Repton were the twin foci of early royal Mercia. Neither of the *worthy*-names of important places is constructed with a personal name, as those naming churls’ holdings (evidenced in the laws of Ine of Wessex, Liebermann 1903 1: 106 [item 40]) often seem to be; contrast for example the two genuine early instances in Worcestershire mentioned above.

What Smith’s analysis disguises is that in fact there is only one ancient *worthy* in Hampshire, to which we shall return. The easternmost otherwise is Hamworthy (PN Do 2 20–21), which only acquires its *-worthy* as late as 1463. The element is otherwise almost absent, even from occasional variants of major names, in Dorset. It appears just once for East Lulworth in 1196 (PN Do 1 123) in a copy of a Pipe Roll, which may be treated as an aberration; once for Bloxworth (PN Do 2 75) in 1250 in a calendar of papal registers (likewise); twice for Wilkesworth Farm in Colehill (PN Do 2 137) in 1433 and 1484 in inquisitions post mortem, where in the first the whole place-name is analogically reformed (or misunderstood) as “Woodcocks-worthy”; and once for Holworth in Owermoigne as late as 1537 (PN Do 1 140). It is also practically absent from Wiltshire; the element-index (PN W 414) leads only to a farm in Charlton (PN W 55), not far from the Gloucestershire boundary.⁷ The normal, ancient, distribution of *worthy* in its application to places of modest significance, i.e. to the holdings of churls,

is far more restricted than Smith concluded: it amounts really to Devon, Somerset and sporadically Gloucestershire and early Worcestershire, with the ill-understood later scattered small groups in Berkshire, and a very few minor names in far-eastern Cornwall⁸ and north-west Wiltshire,⁹ which can be regarded as belonging to the Devon and Gloucestershire groups respectively.

The ancient and prominent Hampshire instance is therefore every bit as much an outlier as those in Mercia. It is the large, and now subdivided, estate consisting of King's Worthy (including Abbot's Worthy), Headbourne Worthy, and Martyr Worthy; none of these names is constructed with an Anglo-Saxon personal name in the "churlish" way. It lies between two and five miles north and north-east of royal and episcopal Winchester. Memory of the royal interest in Worthy is preserved in the name of one of the four estates. The first subdivision must have been quite early, for even one Anglo-Saxon document of the mid-10th century mentions the two *Worthys*.¹⁰ The earliest record is of 825 (BCS 389 (S 273), said to be a spurious document with an authentic basis independent of the Chronicle). Its bounds, in Old English, indicate clearly that this is Martyr Worthy (Grundy 1926: 182–5; given by King Egbert to St Peter and St Paul (i.e. the cathedral), Winchester). It appears therefore that this place had its name by 825. It should be noted however that none of the eight charters mentioning this Worthy is preserved in copies from before the 12th century.

There is clearly a significant relation outside the south-western counties between *worthy* as a place-name element, other than in the normal workaday sense of 'smallholding' or similar, and the interests of royal houses.¹¹ It could be that we have to do with "spellings due to WSax scribal practice" (though surely it would be better to say "vocabulary" rather than "merely spellings", since *wordig* and *word* are lexically distinct elements), but Smith's "merely" seems unreasonable. The first apparently trustworthy records of each are Tamworth 781, the Hampshire place(s) 825, and Northworthy around 871.

It is worth noting that Minsterworth appears in its earliest record as *Mynsterwordig* (c.1030, Förster *Flussname Themse* 769, cited in PN Gl 3 162); that Minsterworth is four miles west-south-west of Gloucester; and that Gloucester was re-established as a significant town (though not as a cathedral city) by Æthelflæd, who also endowed its monastery of St Peter, where she was buried after her death which took place in 918 at Tamworth. More problematic is the example *sunnemannes wyrðige* in the mid-10th-century bounds of Kingston Lisle (PN Brk 691), which appears to have a typical name of a churl's holding and to be distinct from the moderate number of simplexes in Berkshire field-names (PN Brk 917–18). But it lies

some 4.5 miles west of Alfred's birthplace Wantage, evidently a royal estate of considerable importance; and of course the parish-name itself should be noted.

It has been previously suggested (Coates 1989: 182–4) that the cause of the lop-sided distribution of *worthy* might be chronological, and that the Hampshire Worthys were being named as the West, especially Devon, was being anglicized. If that is the case, then the word was being applied in a different way in Winchester, a way which suggested a practical manifestation of royal majesty. The chronology of the surviving mentions is not particularly helpful for that; indeed, the settlement of Devon began the greater part of a century earlier than the earliest surviving “royal” usage. A possible alternative scenario is the following: that the special usage of a West Saxon dialect word and name-element was of the 8th century but independent of the more general usage;¹² that the Winchester Worthy had become, or been created as, a convenient rural retreat for the royal court, close enough to their capital and cathedral to maintain a finger on the political and ecclesiastical pulse; that Burgred of Wessex, in marrying Offa's daughter Eadburg, introduced this West Saxon idea to his father-in-law; and that the idea was brought to fruition in fact and name in Mercian Tamworth (in relation to Lichfield) and Mercian Derby (in relation to Repton¹³), and eventually through Æthelflæd also in Mercian Minsterworth (in relation to Gloucester, but with a somewhat different political relation since Gloucester was not formally a royal capital). It appears that *worthys* of this sort had a relation to politically and ecclesiastically significant places not unlike that which some saints' *stōws* had to religiously significant ones (see, among mentioned those by Gelling 1982, for example the ones near Lichfield and Lincoln).

The pattern just presented should also make us pause for thought about the *Francwordy* or *francherdie* found in the record as a 13th-century minor name, both forms preserved only in the same 15th-century MS, at Cassington, 4.5 miles north-west of the Mercian town of Oxford (PN O 254); this might instead be associated with the two simplex forms nearby in Berkshire south-west of Oxford (but see note 2). In the present context, we need an open mind about the relation of *Francwordy* to Oxford and *sunnemannes wyrðige* to Wantage.¹⁴

I have proposed, then, that there was a special sense of the characteristically West Saxon word *worðig* in use in Wessex in the later 8th century, and that this was introduced to Mercia through royal dynastic contacts to name places which were of particular significance to ruling families, and situated in a particular relation to other significant places nearby. Both the dates of the extant records and the preponderance of these

unusual instances of *wordig* in Mercian territory would permit the inference that the innovation was a Mercian one, assuming that the common noun *wordig* was available in Mercian dialects; but there is no evidence for this outside the group of names treated in this article except in the far south-west of Mercia, in Worcestershire. A West Saxon origin seems on balance more likely.

Notes

1. For the philology of this word and its close relatives, see Kitson (1997). For a historical analysis of its appearance in Devon, see Svensson (1991/2); and for Cornwall, Svensson (1987: 142–3). This paper is solely about *wordig* and not its relative *wordign*, which is occasionally confounded with it in the documentary record.
2. In neither of these instances is it clear that it was not originally a *word*.
3. Gelling asserts that some such simplexes are also found in (presumably north) Hampshire tithe awards. I have found no older examples in Hampshire so far.
4. According to Bede (*Historia ecclesiastica* 3: 21 (Plummer 1896); OE version 3: 15 (Miller 1890–1898)), Peada was baptized *Ad Murum* (*æt Walle*). The context forbids associating this name with Wall, Staffordshire, near Lichfield, and the wall in question is Hadrian's Wall. It is generally accepted that the place currently called Walbottle is the place in question (Colgrave and Mynors 1969: note to *HE* 3: 21).
5. But note Hall's view (1989: 158) that "[t]he foundation of St Alkmund's [at Derby] by c.800, as implied by the sarcophagus found there, indicates that it was one of the earlier stratum of minster churches associated with royal or aristocratic estate centres."
6. Hart (1977: 53) suggests that Northworthy was the capital of the North Mercians, and that it was so called to distinguish it from that of the South Mercians which in his view was at Tamworth. There are uncertainties with this view; it may refer to the regnal division of Mercia effected after the battle of the Winwæd in 655 (Bede 3: 24), and it is unlikely that this was still in force in the later 8th century.
7. Among late minor names there is only one in the tithe award of Whiteparish (PN W 391), near the Hampshire boundary.
8. Padel (1988) identifies two (*Canworthy* 64 and *Chilsworthy* 68); there are ten more smaller places mentioned by Svensson (1987: 142–3).
9. In the core area, the element remained in living usage into the Middle English period (EPNE 2 276; Svensson 1991/2: 57), as the case of the geographical aberration Hamworthy and other transitory late-medieval ones in Dorset, and those in Berkshire, also suggest forcefully.
10. BCS 652 (S 1491), bishop Ælfsige's will, 955× 958.
11. Despite its usually prosaic use in place-names, the OE word *wordig* was by no means devoid of the potential for elevated meanings. It appears in *Beowulf* (line 1972, Klaeber's edn) in a context which has to do with a palace. Indeed, the same building is called a *hof* two lines later. The name-form is clearly not related to the evaluative adjective *worthy*, which appears first in Middle English.

12. In the laws of Ine (about 694), churls had worthys (as noted above). Given that we have no secure instance of the “royal” meaning till the later 8th century, that appears to confirm that the “royal” meaning is a later development. It is interesting nevertheless that definite churl-*worthy* names remain absent from the historic heartland of Wessex. The drift of the main text here undermines the suggestion of Coates (1989: 183) about the possible chronological interpretation of the distribution, treating the Hampshire instance as a late interpolation into the landscape contemporary with the general usage further west, which now appears misleading or wrong. In the face of the evidence presented here, I also take back the guarded approval given there to Grundy’s suggestion that the Hampshire name may have originated in a form **Worð-īeg*. It seems much more likely now that the name derives from a special new usage of the common word.
13. Though it cannot finally be ruled out that Northworthy was named from Tamworth, or even from the Hampshire Worthy, in the circumstances suggested.
14. Kenworthy in Northenden (PN Ch 1 235–6) may be an altered instance of original *wordign*, to judge by the earliest record.

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