

Traces of Ancient Paganism in Berkshire.

By G. W. B. HUNTINGFORD.

THE religion of our pagan forefathers is a subject of great interest, and at the same time one of great difficulty and much obscurity. Apart from mythology, we should like to know more than we do about their places of worship; but no pagan temple exists above ground. Sacred woods, predecessors of the built temple, may still remain, though we may not always be able to locate their exact sites. Yet the study of place-names can help in this quest in a way that no other study can. It is now some nine years since the English Place-name Survey was organised and the study of place-names put on a sound footing. A certain amount of preliminary work has been done towards elucidating ancient paganism, and this paper is an attempt to review some of the possible sites in Berkshire, offered with the object rather of indicating places which may be worthy of further investigation than of building upon somewhat uncertain traces an imaginary account of ancient religion in Berkshire.

GROVES AND TEMPLES.

The ancient elements in place-names which indicate " temple " in the widest sense of the word are five in number; the primary meaning underlying all of them is " sacred grove or wood," rather than " built temple."

(1) ALH, EALH.

The AS. *alh*, *ealh*, akin to Goth. *alhs*, OHG. *alah*, is found latinized by Tacitus as *alx*, genit. *alcis*: "*Apud Naharvalos¹ antiquae religionis lucus ostenditur; praesidet sacerdos muliebri ornatu, sed deos interpretatione Romana Castorem Pollucemque memorant. Ea vis numini, nomen Alcis; nulla simulacra, nullum peregrinae superstitionis vestigium.*"² Grimm, with

¹ A tribe of eastern Germany; another reading is Nahanarvalos.

² Tac. Germania, 43.

[Trans. Among the Naharvali a grove is to be seen which is connected with an ancient cult; the priest in charge wears a woman's vestment, but Castor and Pollux would be called the equivalent Roman gods. That is the domain of the god, whose name is Alx; there are no images, and no traces of nomadic superstitions.]

some probability, interpreted *alx* as the abode of the deity rather than as the deity itself.³ The only name in Berkshire that I am aware of which might be referred to this word is in Basildon, where the bounds pass "*andlang hagan on ealdan halh*" (Birch, Cart. Sax., 100). Dr. Grundy renders this as 'old hollow';⁴ but I suggest that there is at least a possibility that we might take it to mean "sacred grove," and with the whole phrase "*ealdan halh*" would compare the "*ealde calhstedas*" quoted by Grimm (see foot-note 3).

(2) *WIH*, *WEOH*.

AS. *wih* (genit. *wiges*), or *weoh* (genit. *weos*) "a sacred grove or place"—also "*īdol*"—is the same as OHG. *wih*, ONorse *ve*, Lapp *vi* = "wood." It is a recognised element in English place-names, and has been detected in names like Weedon (Bucks.), Weoley (Worcs.), and Willey (Surrey).⁵ A possible instance in Berkshire is Wigmoor in Brimpton, AS. *wigmor*,⁶ "the mor or swampy ground of or near a sacred place." Dr. Grundy, on account of "the frequency of the occurrence of Wig-with -more or -moor," thinks it "pretty certain that it is derived from AS. *wicga* a kind of insect."⁷ This frequency however, does not necessarily militate against the interpretation I suggest.

(3) *HEARG*.

AS. *hearg*, OHG. *harue*, ONorse *hörgr*, also means first a sacred grove, then a temple; for, as Grimm says, "what we figure to ourselves as a built and walled house, resolves itself, the further back we go, into a holy place untouched by human hand, embowered and shut in by self-grown trees. There dwells the

³ J. Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, (Eng. trans. of 4th ed. by J. Stallybrass, 1882), I. 66.

⁴ *Berks, Arch. Journ.* XXIX. 204.

⁵ *Antiquity*, I. 155 (1927).

⁶ One might expect *Wigesmor*, which would perhaps yield a modern *Wixmoor*; but cf. *Wigweorðing*, "worship of idols," *Beowulf*, 350.

⁷ *Berks, Arch. Journ.* XXIX. 210.

deity. . . ."⁸ Like *wih*, *hearg* is recognised as an element in place-names ; instances are Harrow (Middx.) and Arrowfield (Worcs.).⁹ In Berkshire we have Harrowdown Hill, AS.* *heargdun*, in Longworth. Here, on the N. side of the village is a hill rising to a height of 325 ft. (OM 1), the highest point crowned by a small coppice. I can find no mention of the name in the charters, for they deal only with the bounds and the site is within the ancient bounds of Longworth. Nor does Dr. Grundy mention it in his list of field-names, though it is given on the O.M. But a charter in Birch (CS. 1047) names "*haethan byrgels*" or heathen burial-places on the E. and W. boundaries of Longworth, both close to the foot of Harrowdown.¹⁰ These may have some connexion with a '*hearg*' on the hill. Another possible *hearg*-name is Earslow in White Waltham, AS. *heargeshlaew*, "the tumulus or 'low' by the grove or temple."

(4) BEARO.

AS. *bearo*, genit. *bearwes*, OHG. *paro*, ONorse *barri*, also means "sacred grove." I have already dealt with it in a paper on the meaning of the name "Berkshire."¹¹ which I ventured to refer to a sacred grove connected with an oak-tree in Windsor Park ; and to the same word I referred other "bear"-names, such as Billingbear, "the grove of Phol."

(5) LEAH.

AS. *ledh*, Goth. * *láuhs*, Lat. *lucus*, Slav. *lug*, mean first, "grove" or "glade," and then by extension, "meadow, field, pasture ;" and though by no means all names ending in -ley, -lea (derived from AS. *ledh*) are to be taken as evidence of the former existence of pagan groves, yet certain sites in woodland country are at least worthy of investigation. As a matter of fact, many of the -ley names in Berkshire without doubt simply mean "meadow." as in the case of Audley, AS. *eald ledh* ; Bagley, AS. *Bacgan ledh* ; [Besils] Leigh, AS. *ledh*, DB. *Leie* ;

⁸ Teutonic Mythology, I. 69.

⁹ *Antiquity*, I. 155.

¹⁰ Dr. Grundy in *Berks. Arch. Journ.*, XXX. 118, 119.

¹¹ See the present number, p. 34.

Chawley, AS. *Ceanuan ledh* ; Chieveley, DB. *Civelei* ; Hartley, AS. *hiorot ledh* ; Hockley, AS. *hoc ledh* ; Ilsley, DB. *hildeslei* ; Woolley, AS. *wulf ledh*.

But Oakley in Marcham, AS. *ac ledh*, "oak-grove" might refer to a sacred place. The name which I particularly wish to mention, however, is Radley. This place lies on the S. edge of Bagley Wood, parts of which, together with the isolated pieces of it called Radley Large and Small Woods, are actually in Radley parish. The name is undoubtedly the A.S. *Radan leah*,¹² "the leah of Rada or Raeda." It is not unique: *Radeleage* occurs in a Wiltshire charter (Birch, CS. III. 85); it is found again in Radley Farm and Radley Bottom on the line of the Roman road from Silchester to Cirencester,¹³ and possibly in the field-name Rudley in Barkham, though Dr. Grundy renders this as "Red lea."¹⁴ Skeat took the name Rada or Raeda as an ordinary personal name: but it may be more than that. The AS. *Hrêde*, OHG. *hrud*, ONorse *hróðr*, from *hrôð*, "fame," seem to express the name of a forgotten god or goddess of fame, after whom the Anglo-Saxons called the month of March *Hrêdemônað*; and Bede has a Goddess *Hrêde*.¹⁵ Can we interpret this place-name as "the grove of Hrêde or Raeda," and look for this grove at the SW. corner of Bagley Wood, near Chandlings Farm, where about 675 Hean, nephew of Cissa, founded a small monastery,¹⁶ perhaps where the ancient grove stood, as was so often done in the early days of Christianity when a Christian Church was built on the site of a pagan grove or temple?¹⁷

I do not contend that any of these Berkshire sites were built temples. They were probably open-air sanctuaries rather than buildings; for there are definite words which refer to built temples, which so far are not recorded in Berkshire. Such are

¹² Skeat, Berkshire Place-names.

¹³ P. Williams in *Berks Arch. Journ.* XXIX. 232.

¹⁴ *Berks Arch. Journ.* XXIX. 203.

¹⁵ See Grimm, Teutonic Mythology, I. 206; Bede, *de Temporum Ratione*, 13: "*Rhedmonath a dea . . Rheda*." Cf. the fem. name *Hruada* (Grimm, I. 290).

¹⁶ *Berks Arch. Journ.* XXIX. 140.

¹⁷ Sulpicius Severus, Vita S. Martini: "Nam ubi fana destruxerat [Martinus,] statim ibi aut ecclesias aut monasteria construebat." There are many similar references, proving that this was the usual practice.

AS., OHG., ONorse *hof*; AS. *heal*, OHG. *halla*; AS. *sele*, OHG. *sal*; AS. *reced*, OS. *rakud*. In connexion with this subject, the chapter on Temples in Grimm (Teut. Myth., I. chap. IV.) will be found of great interest.

MYTHOLOGY AND PLACE-NAMES.

Next to traces of sacred sites revealed by place-names, we have a few mythological allusions, which offer a little addition to our scanty knowledge of an obscure subject.

The legend which connects the dolmen known as Wayland's Smithy with Weland, the Northern Vulcan, plainly cannot have become current till after the Saxon invasion. It is just possible that there may have been in pre-Saxon days a British smith here, not necessarily a legendary one, but a real farrier who actually shod the horses of travellers along the Ridgeway, some 220 yds. to the S.; for in the middle ages, smithies were called 'Weland's houses' in Germany, and possibly also earlier, for we find places mentioned such as *Welantes gruoba*, "Weland's pit."¹⁸ Weland in many points resembles the Greek Hephaestus; for just as Hephaestus made an attempt upon Athena when she came to get weapons from him, so did Weland violate Beadohilt, (*Beadhila* or *Baduhilt*), by whom he had a son named Wittich. Now in the bounds of Woolstone, only 2 or 3 miles from Wayland's Smithy, a charter in Birch (CS. 491) names *Beahhildæ byrigels*,¹⁹ or "Beahhild's burial-place." It seems possible that this might be a copyist's error for Beadhildæ, and that the name was deliberately applied to this site on account of its association with Weland, being in fact no more the name of the person buried there than in the case of the well-known barrows at Gamla Uppsala in Sweden, popularly named after Odin, Thor, and Freya, which contain the bodies of three Swedish Kings mentioned in 'Beowulf.'²⁰

The name of Woden has been supposed to exist in names like Wadley near Faringdon, and Odney in Cookham. But the AS. forms *Wōdnesledh*, *Wōdnesig* must yield Wansley or Wadsley,

¹⁸ Grimm, Teut. Myth., I. 377.

¹⁹ *Berks Arch. Journ.* XXXI. 142.

²⁰ *Antiquity*, II. 331 and Pl. I. (1928).

Wansey, rather than Wadley, Odney ; and unless further confirmation from suitable intermediate forms come to light, these names cannot be derived from Woden.

Names for the Devil occur frequently in place-names. Besides " Devil " we have " Grim," which is synonymous with it, Devil's ditch as in Grim's ditch; and also Wendel, OHG, (*w*)*entil*, who was identified with Pan, and in German witch-trials was a name for the Devil.²¹ " Grim " has a complicated history. Originally ONorse *grima* meant ' helmet,' or ' mask ' (because it made the wearer dark or concealed) ; from ordinary helmets it became applied to the terrifying helmets like that mentioned in the Edda under the name of Oegishialmr ; hence it became applied to demons, to magical masks, and to witches as personal names. An ONorse name for a demon, *Grimr oegir*, suggests a possible source of the form " Grimmer " sometimes applied to ancient dykes, like Grimmer's Dyke²² in Ufton, Padworth, and Aldermaston.²³ Works which the pagan Saxons did not understand were not unnaturally attributed to the Devil. Wendel seems to be named in the bounds of Wootton, where in a charter of 985 (Chron. Monast. Abingdon, I. 401) occurs *Waendles cumbe*, or " devil's combe," an instance of the devil's name applied to a natural feature.

Lastly, though not belonging to Saxon paganism, there is a brief reference to Seovecesham, the first Abingdon, " a large and wealthy city, where was the royal residence, whither the people resorted to assist at the great councils of the nation, and where, before the establishment of Christianity, the Britons had a place or religious worship."²⁴ We would gladly know more of this ; the name will not help us, for it means no more than " Seofec's ham," and Seofec, who must have been a pre-Norman land-owner, is known to us in Seacourt also, DB. *Seuacoorde* Test. Nev., *Sevekworth*, " Seofec's farm." Can any one throw further light on this ?

²¹ Grimm, Teut. Myth., I. 375.

²² Lysons', Berkshire, p. 202.

²³ The mod. English adj. grim is not connected with these words.

²⁴ Lysons', Berkshire, 4. 216, where a reference to Dugdale's *Monasticon*, I. 99 is quoted.

[Note : Owing to the fact that the author of the above article is in Kenya it has not been possible to give him the opportunity of checking the proof of his contribution. Ed.]