

OE *WAGU 'SOMETHING QUAKING'

GILLIS KRISTENSSON

Stockholm University

A great deal of attention has of late years been devoted to the origin of the place- and river-name WEYBOURNE in Norfolk (*Wabrunna*, *Wabrune* 1086 DB, *Walbruna* 1158 France, *Wabrun* 1177 P, *Wabrunne* 1254 NfArch, *Wauburn* 1275 RH, 1318 Pat, 1319, 1333 Ch, *Waburne* 1281 FF, 1302, 1316, 1401-02, 1428 FA, *Wabrone* 1307 Ipm, *Waubroun* 1328 Ch, *Wahourn* 1335 Bodl, *Waburn* 1346 FA, 1385 BM, *Wayborne* 1610 Speed).¹ The time-honoured explanation of the name derives from an article by Ekwall in *Studies on English Place- and Personal Names* (1931). Ekwall believes that the name goes back to OE *Weargburna* 'felon stream' with dissimilatory loss of *r* (after *g* had disappeared between *r* and *b*). This etymology was unchallenged until Karl Inge Sandred in two articles (1978 and 1981) advanced two alternative suggestions about the origin of the first element. In his opinion the first element could be of pre-Germanic origin, either from the root **war-* 'water, dirty liquid' given by von Wartburg as Low Franconian Burgundian, or from Gaulish **war* 'water, rain', stated by von Wartburg to occur frequently in river-names in old Gaulish territory. To Ekwall's and Sandred's etymologies it might be objected that none of the early forms for WEYBOURNE exhibits an *r* in the first element and that the etymologies proposed are therefore hypothetical. It is true that loss of *r* is common before *s* and that it occurs in other cases, too. But in such place-names as are the results of dissimilatory loss of *r*, the *r* concerned is generally attested in early forms of the name. WEYBOURNE, however, has no forms in *War-*.

In an article in *Sydsvenska Ortnamnssällskapets Årsskrift* 1981, I suggested that the first element of WEYBOURNE goes back to OE **wagu* 'quagmire', attested in the charter-form *wagufen*, and that this **wagu* referred to a quagmire at the site where there is now a mill-pond. I had not visited the place, and, as far as the topography is concerned, my suggestion was tentative. The

¹ The forms are adduced from Sandred 1981.

advantage of the etymology was that an OE *wagu as a first element would be reconcilable with all the forms recorded for WEYBOURNE.² In an article in *Florilegium Nordicum* (1984) Karl Inge Sandred discussed my proposal, regarding it as interesting but hypothetical. Sandred, however, provided valuable information about the old course of the river, of which more below.

Olof Arngart, in an article in *Journal of the English Place-Name Society* (1983), contributed yet another suggestion about the origin of the river-name WEYBOURNE. He proposed that the first element was an OE *wær*, *waru* 'river-dam, fishing-enclosure in a river' in reference to the mill-pond outside the village. This presupposes two lines of development: one where *r* was lost through dissimilation, another where *r* became *l* through dissimilation (with Anglo-Norman <u> spellings for *l*). Ultimately the former development came to prevail, whereas the latter had no permanent effect on the name. This is intrinsically possible. However, the supposition that the first element of WEYBOURNE is OE *wær*, *waru* 'river-dam' would imply that the river got its current name only after the dam had been constructed, probably by the monks of Weybourne Priory. The river must have formed part of the land already when the Anglo-Saxons took over, and we expect the name to be nearly as early as that. That the river did not get its present name until after the mill-pond had been built is possible, but not very plausible.

In his valuable thesis *Studies on Middle English Local Bynames in East Anglia* Stig Carlsson adduces the form *Will. del Waghe* from Suffolk, and takes the local byname to represent OE *wagu 'quagmire' or the like, and to corroborate my suggestion that the first element of *Weybourne* was OE *wagu. In a review of Stig Carlsson's thesis Arngart (1989), however, rejects all this, stating that there is no evidence for OE *wagu 'quagmire' and that the river-name WEYBOURNE has nothing to do in this connection. Arngart claims that the first element of the charter-form *wagufen* is OE *wagu 'wave' which survives in ME *wawe* 'wave'. This leaves Carlsson's form *Waghe* unexplained and raises the question of whether waves are imaginable in connection with a fen.

In what follows I will take up the question again for discussion and make my position clear. I will try to maintain my former view that the first element of WEYBOURNE was OE *wagu, though in the sense 'marsh', not 'quagmire'. When I suggested that the first element of WEYBOURNE contained OE *wagu 'quagmire', I was under the impression that there had been a quagmire at the site where the river was later dammed up and where there is now a mill-pond. Sandred (1984), however, cannot find any support in the topography for the existence of a quagmire here. A valuable description of the topography and also of the old course of the river is given by Sandred, and my account here is entirely based on his description.

From its fountainhead on a hill above the present village, the Weybourne flows along a fairly narrow valley, then through the village, where it is today largely built over, to a mill-pond north of the church and the ruins of Weybourne Priory. It leaves the pond by a waterfall before it runs into a large shingle bank in the sea. The river starts at the 200-foot contour and reaches the level of 50 feet in the village, a distance of not more than one mile. The water current is here quite powerful. The distance from the village to the sea is less than a mile, and the length of the present river is thus less than two miles.

The original course of the river was quite different, however. Ekwall (1931) who had old maps at his disposal states that the river 'runs westward along the sea to the Glaven', i.e. from the village it did not run northwards to the sea as it does today, but it ran due west along the sea to the river Glaven, a distance of four miles. About this route Sandred states that 'Along the coast there is a shingle bank inside which there are wide marshes, drained by numerous ditches, when we approach the Glaven'. Sandred goes on to say that 'In the neighbouring parish of Kelling to the west of Weybourne there is a hollow open towards the sea called *The Quag* (found on the Ordnance Survey maps). I have not found any old evidence for this name, but this does not mean that it could not be old. If there was once a much larger area called by this name off the present coast, through which the river passed on its way to the open sea, this might have been the feature from which the name derives'. Sandred also tells us that *William Faden's Map of Norfolk* from 1797 'gives the impression that the marshy character of the coast line was then somewhat more prominent. The feature called *The Quag* on the Ordnance Survey maps has no name, but it is connected with an equally low-lying small area along the Weybourne coast called WEYBOURNE MARSH'.

It is thus apparent that from the village of Weybourne, the river originally ran four miles due west through land which is now low-lying and marshy, and according to maps was even marshier in the 18th century. The fact that parts of the area west of Weybourne are now drained by ditches leads us to suppose that the whole area inside the shingle bank was marshy. So, for four fifths of its course, the Weybourne ran through this marshy area, and it may not be amiss to assume that this left its impact on the name-giving. I think that the first element of WEYBOURNE is developed from OE *wagu in the sense 'marsh' and that the name means 'river through the marsh (or marshy area)'. My earlier proposal that OE *wagu meant 'quagmire', based on insufficient knowledge of the topography, is thereby withdrawn.

The first element of WEYBOURNE is in all probability identical with the *wagu that is attested in the charter-form *wagufen* and lives on in ME (*Will. del Waghe*). Arngart (1989) takes *wagu in the charter-form to mean 'wave' and be the predecessor of ME *wawe* 'wave'. But in connection with a fen we can hardly imagine waves. A fen can occasionally have bare water, but the water is very

² See Kristensson 1981:78

shallow, and waves do not occur on such water. An OE *Wagufen* may also be behind the early forms of the place-name WARNE in Devon (*Wagefen* 1194, *Waghefen* 1242, *Wawefenne* 1284) which Ekwall interprets as 'quaking fen'.³ The first element is a noun, and on Ekwall's authority we may assume that the basic meaning of the noun was 'something quaking'. Such a meaning would be very appropriate for (some kind of) a marsh, and the word would in time come to mean 'marsh', perhaps of some specific characteristic. OE **wagu* in this sense may also underlie the first element of the place-name WAGAFORD WATER in Devon (*Wagheford* 1244).⁴

The existence of an OE **wagu* 'marsh' is further corroborated by ME *wagge* 'quaking bog, marsh'⁵ which must be developed (with geminate *gg*) from OE **wagu* or the like. Cf. OE **hagga* – *haga*, **ragge* – *ragu*, *twigge* – *twig*. Such forms with geminate *gg* presuppose a form with the single consonant and have developed as hypocoristic or phonaesthetic forms. It is true that Wright (1925: §256) reckons with geminate consonants in old *n*-stems where geminates arose in front of *n*, but Wright's theory is questionable, being rejected by Luick (1914: §631 Anm. 2), Campbell (1959: p. 167, footnote 1), and others. In his detailed treatment of geminate consonants in Old English, Richard M. Hogg (1982) does not mention Wright's theory and considers native words with geminate consonants as hypocoristic (for instance *docga*, *frogga*, **picga*, **stacga*, *sucga*, **tagga*, **teggga*, (*ēar*) *wicga*) or phonaesthetic (for instance *byffan*, *wlaffian*, *woffian*) in origin. Ekwall (1936: 119) is explicit in calling OE *hagga* a kind of hypocoristic form of OE *haga*. As hypocoristic forms are developed (in daily-life language) from non-hypocoristic ones, the corollary must be that behind ME *wagge* there was an OE **wagu* or the like.

OE **wagu* 'something quaking' is related to OE *wagian* 'to wag'. In my earlier article (1981) I took **wagu* in *wagufen* to be a *u*-stem, because OE *ō*-stems were liable to drop their thematic vowel in composition. It is not, however, absolutely clear that **wagu* was a *u*-stem. If the first element of the ad-hoc compound *wagufen* was strongly associated with a **wagu* in the living language, it could be expected to keep its *-u*, even if it was an *ō*-stem.

In Old English there also existed a **wagen* 'quaking bog, marsh' which is behind the Yorkshire place-name WAWNE (*Wag(h)ene* 1086 DB).⁶ OE **wagen* was a derivation of OE *wagian* 'to wag' with the same suffix as in OE *hæfen*. Such a derivation (with the suffix **-ōnī-* or **-unīō*⁷) must be very old, probably West-Germanic, and the question arises how **wagu* is related to **wagen*. Could it be a late form of OE **wagen*?

In Old English the feminine abstract nouns in *-īn* were generally remodelled on the analogy with the short *ō*-stems, for instance OE *brædu* (<**brādīnī-*), *ieldu* (<**aldīnī-*).⁸ But also other *-īnī*-stems were remodelled in this way. OE *-legu* in *ealdorlegu* 'destiny, death' comes from **(ge)legen* (<**zalažīnī-*), OE *-þegu* in *bēor-þegu* 'beer-receiving' from **(ge)þegen* (<**zapažīnī-*), OE *-neru* in *feorh-neru* 'salvation' from **(ge)neren* (<**zanazīnī-*). On such analogies OE **wagen* (<**wazōnī-* or **wazunīō*) might have been remodelled to (late) OE *wagu*.

If we assume that the river-name WEYBOURNE goes back to OE **wagu* and *burna*, we get a compound with the meaning 'river through the marsh (or marshy land)' which suits the topography. OE **Waguburna* (or **Wagburna* if OE **wagu* was an *ō*-stem) would be ME *Waweburn*, *Wauburn*, and here *au* would be *ā* before a labial.⁹ A long vowel is suggested by the modern spelling *Wey-*, which dates from the 17th century and probably reflects a diphthong which can only be explained from a long vowel. It is true that the modern pronunciation is reported to be /wæbən/, but this must be due to some specific subsequent circumstance since it is irreconcilable with the spelling and the Middle English forms. The Middle English vowel was long even if, with Ekwall, Sandred and Arngart, we assume dissimilatory loss of *r*, because in that case we should have late ME *Wāburn* through lengthening of the vowel in an open syllable. Ekwall (1931) also explicitly states that the vowel 'was lengthened in ME times and gave mod. [ei]'.¹⁰

All this warrants us to submit that there existed an OE **wagu* 'marsh' and that it forms the first element of the place- and river-name WEYBOURNE. The question then arises as to the relation between OE **wagu* (ME **wawe*) 'marsh' and ME *wawe* 'wave'. ME *wawe* or *wawes* (pl.) 'waves' cannot by any stretch of the imagination be derived from OE *wāgas* 'waves' since this word would be ME **wowes* except in the North. OE **wagu* (ME **wawe*) 'marsh' and ME *wawe* 'wave' may actually both be from OE **wagu* in the sense 'something quaking'. Then two lines of semantic development could have taken place: one towards the meaning 'marsh', the other towards the meaning 'wave', in the latter case under the influence of early ME *wawes* 'waves'. In the spoken language OE **wagu* (ME **wawe*) was replaced by the hypocoristic *wagge*, and ultimately disappeared since it was liable to confusion with OE **wagu* (ME **wawe*) 'wave'.

⁸ See Campbell 1959: §589 (7).

⁹ See Luick 1914: §427, Jordan 1974: §§112 Remark and 286 Remark, Dietz 1986: 222-263. The change *au* > *ā* was not limited to position before a labial or palatal. It also manifests itself, for instance, in place-name forms that contain OE *haguþorn*, *-þyrne* 'hawthorn': HATHERLEIGH Devon [*Hadreleia* DB, *Hatherlega* 1193], DOWN & UP HATHERLEY Gloucestershire [*Huphat-herleye* 1312, *Dounhatherleye* 1327], HATHERN Leicestershire [*Avederne* DB, *Hatherne* 1333], HATHERTON Cheshire [*Haretone* DB, *Hather-ton* c 1300], HATHERTON Staffordshire [*Hargedone* DB, *Hatherdon* 1262], v. Ekwall 1960, s. nn. and Kristensson 1987:178-80.

³ See Ekwall 1969 s. n. WAWNE and Kristensson 1981:79, footnote 12.

⁴ See Gover, Mawer & Stenton 1931: 171 and Kristensson 1981:79, footnote 12.

⁵ See Löfvenberg 1942: 218.

⁶ See footnote 3.

⁷ See Kluge 1926: §§148, 149.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, J. (ed.) 1982. *Language form and linguistic variation. Papers dedicated to Angus McIntosh*. Amsterdam Studies in the Theory and History of Linguistic Science. IV. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Arngart, O. 1983. "The place-names Weybourne and Wooburn". *Journal of the English Place-Name Society* 15.5-8.
- Arngart, O. 1989. Review of Stig Carlsson, *Studies on Middle English bynames in East Anglia*. *English studies* LXX. 587-88.
- Benskin, M. & Samuels, M. L. (eds.) 1981. *So many people longages and tongues, philological essays in Scots and mediaeval English, presented to Angus McIntosh*. Edinburgh.
- Campbell, A. 1959. *Old English grammar*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Carlsson, S. 1989. *Studies on Middle English local bynames in East Anglia*. Lund Studies in English 79. Lund: University Press.
- Dietz, K. 1968. *Die Rezeption des vorkonsonantischen Lin romanischen Lehnwörtern des Mittelhochdeutschen und seine Reflexe im neuenglischen Standard*. 2 vols. München: Flink.
- Ekwall, E. 1928. *English river-names*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Ekwall, E. 1931. *Studies on English place- and personal names*. Kungl. Humanistiska Vetenskaps-samfundets i Lund Årsberättelse 1930-31. Lund: CWK Gleerup.
- Ekwall, E. 1936. *Studies on English place-names*. Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets-akademiens Handlingar 42: 1. Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand.
- Ekwall, E. 1960. *Concise Oxford dictionary of English place-names*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Florilegium Nordicum En bukett nordiska språk- och namnstudier tillägnade Sigurd Fries den 22 April 1984*. Umeå Studies in the Humanities 61. 1984. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International.
- Gover, J. E. B., Mawer A. & Stenton F. M., 1931-32. *The place-names of Devon*. 2 vols. English Place-Name Society VIII-IX. Cambridge: University Press.
- Hogg, R. M. 1982. "Two geminate consonants in Old English. In Anderson, (ed.) 1982: 187-202.
- Jordan, R. 1974. *Handbook of Middle English grammar. Phonology*. (transl. and rev. by Eugene J. Crook). The Hague: Mouton.
- Kluge, F. 1926. *Nominale Stammbildungslehre der altgermanischen Dialekte*. Sammlung kurzer Grammatiken germanischer Dialekte. Halle (Saale): Max Niemeyer Verlag.
- Kristensson, G. 1981. "The place-name Weybourne in Norfolk". *Sydsvenska Ortnamnsällskapets Årsskrift 1981*. 76-80. Lund: Sydsvenska Ortnamnsällskapets Förlag.
- Kristensson, G. 1987. *A survey of Middle English dialects 1290-1350: the West Midland counties*. Publications of the New Society of Letters at Lund 78. Lund: University Press.
- Luick, K. 1914-40. *Historische Grammatik der englischen Sprache*, repr. 1964. Stuttgart: Tauchnitz.
- Löfvenberg, M. T. 1942. *Studies on Middle English local surnames*. Lund Studies in English XI. Lund: CWK Gleerup.
- Sandred, K. I. 1978. "Weybourne. Ett namn på en socken och ett vattendrag i Norfolk". *Ortnamnsällskapets i Uppsala Årsskrift 1978*: 18-26.
- Sandred, K. I. 1981. "WEYBOURNE: a parish- and river- name in Norfolk". In Benskin, M., & Samuels, M. L. (eds.) 1981: 161-66.
- Sandred, K. I. 1984. "A river-name, a linguistic change and the importance of non-linguistic evidence". *Florilegium Nordicum 1984*: 240-47.
- von Wartburg, W. 1928-57. *Französisches etymologisches Wörterbuch. Eine Darstellung des galloromanischen Sprachschatzes*. Bonn, Leipzig, etc.
- Wright, J., and E. M. 1925. *Old English grammar*. Oxford: University Press.