

Where there's a well, there's a way: Old English *-ingas* group-names, social identities, and negotiating control of land and water in the early Anglo-Saxon period

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Initially, I had this paper pegged as being less about a social otherness and more a spatial/topographical one – albeit in the context of social groups and their associations with the physical and nominal landscape. However, reading around otherness in the context of social identity made me realise that it has synergies with one of the main themes of my PhD research; the meanings and functions of sub-ethnic group-names in early medieval culture. So, what I want to look at here is how some pre-historical social groups in post-Roman Britain could negotiate control of resources or features in the landscape at the margins or even beyond what would seem to have been their heartlands.

My research aims to profile, through a range of different data, the people behind particular types of Old English (OE) group-name preserved in current and historic English place-names. The most numerous and to my mind most interesting type of OE group-name formation are those ending *-ingas*. These occur in a range of contexts: in a large number of extant or recorded place-names, as well as the names of royal houses, monastic communities, and communities associated with one or more settlement or other geographical entity.

In all these examples, OE *-ingas* represents the plural form of singular noun-ending *-ing*, which had multiple senses. In toponymic contexts, and when preceded by a male personal name (by far the most common type of prototheme or first element), *-ingas* and its genitive plural inflected form *-inga* (often found as the medial element in compound place-names) are perhaps most closely related to what the linguist AH Smith classified as an *-ing₃* ending, with a 'patronymic function' giving a meaning 'son of'. This would imply that, when pluralised, it had a multi-generational

“dynastic” sense i.e. ‘sons of’, though Smith introduced what he termed a ‘more generalised’ meaning, ‘dependants of’. As a corollary to this, it’s worth noting how linguists and non-linguists alike have ascribed a multitude of other meanings to *-ingas*, from migratory or quasi-religious ‘followers’ to pseudo-anthropological ‘tribe’ or ‘clan’.

Group-names are an obvious aspect of social identities, past and present, although perhaps not discussed as much as they might, especially in early medieval Insular contexts below the level of ethnonyms such as “Saxons”, “Britons”, etc. Their relevance can be extrapolated from even the most fundamental statements concerning group identities proffered by non-medievalists, such as the following – and I hope you’ll forgive the mismatch between the topic being appraised by its author and the one in hand here – translated from Simone de Beauvoir’s seminal 1949 work, *The Second Sex*:

‘Thus it is that no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself’

In other words, group identities are relational, inevitably involving a decision on the part of one group to define itself against others – or to choose alterity for itself in one or more characteristic. The name of a group is likely to have carried meaning in a way that fitted the aspirations of those who came up with the name. Of course, social identity could – and can – be assigned as well as claimed, and names are no different. It is possible that some *-ingas* names were coined by authorities who were not part of the group – such an overlord or a text’s composer – but it’s my thesis that those with personal name protothemes for the most part make more sense as in-group creations.

How come? Part of my interest in *-ingas* groups lies in the strategies at play in the choices of the elements that make up their names. To date, *-ingas* name formations have been seen almost exclusively in the frame of Anglo-Saxon migration and subsequent colonisation of a large chunk of Britain, most often with

the personal name forming the first part of the group-name being seen as that of an erstwhile leader. Kenneth Cameron's reading of the Lincolnshire place-name Barlings, taken from his 1998 study *A Dictionary of Lincolnshire Place-Names*, is a relatively recent instance of such a line of interpretation;

'Barlings is in origin a group-name, denoting a body of people bound by kinship or lordship, *Bærla* being the name of the leader. It became a p[lace-name] when the *Bærlingas* settled in what is today Barlings.'

I'm exploring alternative possibilities, however, notably that the construction of sub-royal *-ingas* group-names, such as are found in so many place-names, was in part guided by their ability to convey messages about the lineage and legitimacy of these groups, not simply to exist, but moreover to claim land, resources, and other significant natural or anthropogenic landscape features. They seem to have come to the fore at a time when social stratification was increasing, fuelling greater competition between those who held power and those who aspired to do so – as encapsulated in Steve Bassett's well-known (if problematic) "knock-out competition" model of the formation of the early historical Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Claiming legitimacy through descent or association with particular forebears may have been one ideological means of competing against other participants in this environment.

Explicitly foregrounding the name of one personage in that of a group in this way makes better sense if they were a figure with a place in wider legend or other storytelling traditions, as opposed to a real-life leader whose fame was unlikely to have stretched far beyond the group in question, certainly not with any great time-depth. *-ingas* names may stand as witnesses to elaborate origin stories now lost to us, borrowed from or based on a "common stock" of traditions and characters (whether real-life or legendary). If such social identities were predicated on pedigree from personages whose names and actions had broader resonance in time and space outside the eponymous groups, then arguably it is better to conceptualise the personal names in *-ingas* formations as those of figureheads, not simply former leaders.

This also fits with some early textual evidence. I've mentioned briefly the use of *-ingas* in names of Anglo-Saxon royal houses, but perhaps more relevant here is the use of the singular *-ing3* ending in royal genealogies. Scholarly consensus holds that the genealogies are manipulated and often stray far from biological reality in order to enhance the claims of the members of the lineage and more to the point their descendants to legitimate rule and all that came with it. Those handful of Anglo-Saxon genealogies that survive written down in early manuscripts may stand as the unrepresentative remnants of a much more extensive, predominantly oral culture of non-royal genealogy, although the matter is controversial. Notwithstanding this circumstance, and the caution that must be exercised in making the leap from genealogical texts to *-ingas* place-names, I believe there is considerable overlap between them that simply hasn't been factored into etymological debates before now.

In an environment such as Eastern Britain in the 5th and 6th centuries, which may not be wholly illiterate but equally doesn't seem to be capable of producing extended textual compositions such as charters and law-codes, I would contend that a self-legitimising group-name formation based on *-ingas*, when attributed to spaces and places in the landscape, could not only help to legitimise the group's existence, but also its claims over territory and resources in the minds of others. Creating a social identity based on pedigree from a figurehead of wider renown, articulating this through the group name, and attaching it to features in the physical landscape, enabled a social group to attain and consolidate their real-life political/social/economic goals in the absence of formal title deeds that in the OE-speaking sphere would come with the written legal culture of the 7th century onwards.

The topic in hand is a vast one, so I'm going to consider it through the medium of one type of early textual evidence: named points contained in the descriptions of the boundaries of estates set down in charters of the Anglo-Saxon period. In the earliest extant charters and credible copied texts, bounds tended to be in Latin, little more than a sequential list of features at the four cardinal points. Beginning in the

9th century and proliferating to near-ubiquity in the 10th, boundary descriptions were written in OE and listed many more points, often taking the form of true perambulations circumnavigating an area of land beginning and ending at the same point. My examples are drawn from some of the many charter bound texts reproduced and translated on the LangScape website (langscape.org.uk), which unfortunately seems destined to remain stuck in beta version without the full treatment given to charter bounds from a number of important English monastic archives.

The first of my examples interlinks with the vibrant recent discussions of the power derived from the re-use of earlier monuments in the landscape, such as barrows and linear earthworks, as the sites of new, often elite settlements and burial places, especially in the 6th and 7th centuries. Here, for example, is a postulation put forward by Sarah Semple in her 2013 monograph *Perceptions of the Prehistoric in Anglo-Saxon England*, concerning the reuse of such sites as funerary spaces of multivalent character in what was to become the South Saxon kingdom, later Sussex;

‘By associating burials with visible ancient monuments, populations may have sought to claim continuity of landownership and control of local resources.’

Were *-ingas* groups among the ‘populations’ engaged in such practices? If so, did they apply their names to the ‘ancient monuments’ as part of the process? Rather disappointingly, the LangScape corpus contains only one instance of an *-ingas* name formation combined with a term for a barrow (in this case OE *hlāw*). Coincidentally this happens to be in Sussex.

In the boundary clause delimiting an estate at South Heighton, from what is generally treated as credible copy of a diploma of 988 (calendared as Sawyer 869), we find (*on, of*) *eccinga hlæpe*, “the barrow of the **Eccingas*”. It has been equated with the extant round barrow on the South Heighton parish boundary known as Five Lord’s Burgh. This stands at the meeting-point of three parishes (formerly five), as if a place of contact between different communities. The OE name suggests a connection to a social group called the **Eccingas*, which does not survive as an uncompounded place-name, but seems to occur in the compound p-n’s Etchingam (from OE *hamm*) and Itchingfield (OE *feld*) far to the north in the Sussex Weald. Such a spread might bespeak of a group with the power to acquire and exploit grazing resources far from a heartland closer to the coast.

However, we run up against uncertainty as to whether any barrow with significance to a particular group was a central place, or a peripheral one. Early Anglo-Saxon-period barrow burials such as Sutton Hoo are often set at the edges of the polities to which they probably pertained, and many early meeting-places are likewise in liminal rather than central locations. Closer to home, we might also note how, according to Eddius Stephanus, the “chief priest” of whichever group of non-Christian people that confronted St Wilfrid and his companions upon their making landfall on the South Saxon shore was stood “on a high barrow/mound” (*in tumulo exce/so*) when attempting to curse and constrain the newly-arrived Christian party. This places the mound, possibly an artificial barrow, close to the seashore and hence again in an arguably liminal location.

Five Lords Burgh has not been subject to any archaeological intervention or survey work that has yielded evidence for its date or purpose. The record of (*on, of*) *eccinga hlæpe* thus stands as a tantalising instance of a mound associated by name with an apparently important *-ingas* group, but which gives away precious few clues as to the basis for this.

The inherently liminal nature of charter boundary descriptions makes it tricky to comprehend the points named therein as anything other than liminal features.

Therefore, I'm dispensing with the "central or peripheral?" debate to consider a class of landscape feature that is hard to understand as existing at anything other than the margins: ditches or dykes. The LangScape database contains up to four instances of *-ingas* group names in combination with the relevant OE noun, *dic* (interestingly, in none of the four cases I am accepting here is there any independent record of the *-ingas* group in question, which I consider to be a decent index of a more "primary" association between group and ditch/dyke):

Name	Location	Date	Source
<i>Fullingadich</i>	uncertain, Surrey	c. 670 x 675 (13th)	Sawyer 1165
<i>(on) buntinge dic</i>	Oldberrow, Warwicks	840 x 842 (12th/ 13th)	Sawyer 79
<i>(bufan) fripelinga dic</i>	Micheldever, Hampshire	904 (16th)	Sawyer 374
<i>(to) brydinga dic</i>	Chalke, Wiltshire	955 (13th)	Sawyer 582

In a recent chapter, Eric Grigg introduced an analysis of the functions of early medieval dyke earthworks in England and Wales with the following scene-setter;

'More recently scholars have linked dykes to the rise of kings and kingdoms, seeing them as manifestations of imperial pretensions, assertions of power in the landscape, methods of unifying/defining a heterogenous kingdom and ways of creating an "us and them"'

It hardly needs me to highlight the connection between talk of "us and them" and otherness. Grigg proceeds to highlight the almost total failure of such earthworks to bear recorded names incorporating that of a king or kingdom. However, his focus on dykes solely as the manifestation of the political power of royalty cuts out the possibility some could have been the work of sub-royal actors – a scenario perhaps admitted by the *-ingadīcas* under discussion.

Caution must be urged as to the likely size of an *-ingadīc*; we are not talking massive earthworks on the scale of 8th-century Offa's Dyke, and as such from the

outset their functions may not have been the same as those studied by Grigg. Indeed, we may not be talking about any ditch-like feature in the “usual” sense. Over the years I’ve had cause to study the fugitive *Fullingadich* in Surrey, twice mentioned in Sawyer 1165 and accepted to be found in genuine 7th-century portions of the diploma’s text. To my mind, the best suggestion for its location and hence morphology is as one or more embanked stretch of former Roman road traversing once-waterlogged areas south of Kingston upon Thames. This is as yet unproven by archaeology, but is consistent with the implications of the charter bounds in terms of topography and so forth. Regardless, in being described as an “ancient ditch”, *Fullingadich* calls into question views of early medieval boundaries as liminal zones rather than well-defined lines – although many of the salient details remain maddeningly unclear.

My final category of landscape feature encapsulates the “spatial otherness” I mentioned at the start of this paper. It’s a commonplace that early medieval polities and/or social groups could have distant subordinate landholdings that were physically detached from the main land unit. Sometimes the connection is laid bare in a charter, but for the pair of examples I shall discuss here there is no such documentary support, just the testimony of the names.

One, (*on*) *reading[a] pylle*, is found solely in a boundary clause of an authentic diploma of 1007 from the St Albans archive (Sawyer 916), in an uncertain location close to the River Colne south-west of Watford in Hertfordshire. The other occurs in the LangScape database as (*on*) *sunninga pylles broc*, present in 12th- and 13th-century copies of a charter boundary clause of 955 x 956 from the Abingdon archive (Sawyer 605). This is derivative from the extant Oxfordshire place-name Sunningwell, which appears in two earlier Abingdon charters, as (*ad*) *Sunnigwellan* in Sawyer 166 of 811, and *Suniggawelle* in Sawyer 183 of 821. Both charter texts likewise only survive in later medieval copies, and are considered to be spurious in their received form, but show signs of basis in lost 9th-century sources of information. Sunningwell is descended from OE **Sunningawell*, so the corrupt place-name spellings could be contended to be consistent with faulty transmission from earlier texts.

We're dealing here with two names derived from OE *well* or one of its many dialectal derivatives, a very common place-name element considered to mean 'spring' or 'stream', with a greater preponderance towards the former in toponymy. **Rēadingawell* (to reconstruct its likely original form) seems to be linked to the place-name Reading – a name that has often been postulated to be descended from the eponym (OE **Rēadingas*) for a territory making up one half of what was to become eastern Berkshire. The other half to the east consisted of what would seem to have been an equivalent polity, **Sunningas*, remembered above all in the name of Sonning – philologically connectable to Sunningwell, some 30 miles/50 kilometres distant.

I'm going to focus on Sunningwell and **Sunningas*, as the former can be pinpointed in the contemporary landscape and the latter arouses especial interest owing to its appearance as a "province" (*provinciae quae appellatur Sunninges*), i.e a defined and recognised polity, in the same largely 7th-century diploma text from which I took my earlier example of *Fullingadich* (Sawyer 1165). This is not to say that the **Sunningas* considered themselves to have autonomous control over a "province" – the term smacks of later Mercian diplomatic terminology for sub-kingdom-level political-cum-administrative units – but its roots could well have lain in a territory controlled by the group.

What was so special about this *well* that led to it acquiring the name **Sunningawell*? The observation that 'spring' not 'stream' is the more frequent sense of OE *well* in place-names is born out by the field observations made on a visit to Sunningwell in late June 2017. There are a number of springs in the parish area, rising partway up the southern slope of Boars Hill, but these issued barely a trickle after a month of little rainfall. At the same time, by contrast, a spring-fed pond in the middle of the village immediately north of the medieval church of St Lawrence was full and overflowing, and is said never to freeze. It's a remarkable natural feature, and surely must account for the generic or second element of the place-name.

In considering the significance of Sunningwell as a place-name, a few other things are clear. It's not like the **Sunningas* were short of fresh water in their Thames-abutting core territory. Nor would the mixed agricultural topography of the parish suggest it was a pastoral outlier, given the plethora of options available to the **Sunningas* along the Thames and the less fertile, wood- and heath-covered tracts away to the south. And whatever its precise significance, the OE place-name **Sunningawell* suggests a group with sufficient power as to be able to articulate their name and their association with the *well* in a way that was to become "fixed" and endure in name anyway right through to the present day.

It's possible the **Sunningas* of Sunningwell were an entirely separate group which had constructed its identity on association with the same figurehead – or a namesake – as the group connected to Sonning. However, distance between identical group-names may be an indicator of movement instead of the concurrent existence of multiple namesake groups. In this regard we might think of the origin of Sunningwell lying, as Victor Watts posited, in a 'detached group' of the **Sunningas*, although this doesn't get us any closer to answering why they chose distant Sunningwell as an outpost.

Just possibly **Sunningawell* post-dates the "group" and/or "political" significance of **Sunningas*, and instead derives from the later status of Sonning as a minster church. The scenario here would be that the minster community acquired an estate, perhaps named **Well*, and to imprint their ownership of it and to distinguish it from others with the same simplex name, genitive plural **Sunninga* was added as the specific. It must be borne in mind that the Abingdon charter testimony, if it can be taken seriously, would imply the link had been established and severed by the early 9th century. Reading was also the site of a minster, but why would these two neighbouring communities be the only two to name *wellas* after themselves? Should we view the *-ingawell* names in connection with the frequent associations of early monastic sites – and by extension their communities – with holy springs?

Going in completely the opposite direction, there may be a more figurative explanation for the name. Sunningwell sits at the edge of a zone identified as being the prodigious post-Roman cultural core from which emerged the group known as the Gewisse, and in due course the West Saxon kingdom. Though I think it's a step too far myself, the place-name might denote "the spring of the **Sunningas*" in the sense of the place from whence they sprang, where their social identity was first forged prior to relocating some 30 miles to the south-east. One issue with this is the total absence of known archaeological evidence of the 5th/earlier 6th centuries from Sunningwell parish, in contrast to at least two "hotspots" of artefacts of those dates from the area of the **Sunningas* polity – but then again we must be wary of falling into the trap of making simplistic connections between archaeology and names.

This paper has attempted to look at a particular type of sub-ethnic social identity, expressed through name – but no doubt also by other practises no longer evident to us. Moreover, even when specific attributions of group-names are subject to careful study, much remains hazy or simply unknowable. But, when some are seen in the contexts of the places and spaces to which they were attached, and the interplay between social groups and landscape features, we can perhaps start to get a sense of why the formulation of *-ingas* names and their attachment to particular locations, be it their main "home" area or a distant outlier, was such a widespread phenomenon in post-Roman Britain.

I've sought to appraise these names by situating their formation in broader trends in material culture and political ideologies of the period, notably increased social stratification between the 6th and 8th centuries, and the ways in which elites inscribed their claims to power and legitimacy on the landscape through the creation or appropriation of monuments. Inherent in this was competition and power differentials. Might we perhaps understand the handful of *-ingas*-named barrows and dykes or ditches as products of the same processes, "monumental" interventions in the landscape as statements of these groups' own claims to be taken seriously as wielders of power? Nevertheless, when we arrive at the horizon of credible documentary testimony for the OE-speaking realm in the final third of the

7th century, the *-ingas* of toponymy were no longer the masters of their own destinies. Instead, time and again *-ingas*-named places and polities are recorded as being subject to the overlordship of kings, suggesting the groups behind the names had lost out in the intense, violent competition to acquire power and form ever-larger kingdoms.

And what of the *-ingawellas*? These are not obvious statements of political power. One recurrent characteristic that marks out name formations like these when a counterpart uncompounded *-ingas* place-name is known is their spatial remove from the “central” name. As Leeds’ own late, great sociologist Zygmunt Bauman once noted, ‘stranger is the other of native’, and I would argue that a toponym like Sunningwell, so very probably an application of a “non-native” identity to a resource that should by rights belong to the “natives”, was coined in the knowledge that an *-ingas* name carried a weight and resonance that was respected by others in lieu of, say, a large permanent presence of group members or a written title deed.

Therefore, the creation of an *-ingas* name was, I suggest, a facet of early-OE period social identity formation that allowed a group to define itself against others, in order to help safeguard its existence and, through deployment in toponyms, its access to land and resources. It was a potent strategy for claiming, acquiring and retaining such things in the absence of formal written records. To judge from the frequent attestations of such name formations, in the short to medium-term at least, the strategy was often a successful one.