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NB Some of the arguments of this article are developed and corrected in my monograph: *In the Shadow of Death: St Boniface and the Conversion of Hessa, 723-754* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010)

Sacred Landscapes and the Conversion of Eighth-Century Hessa

Abstract

The place-names of Hessa in central Germany are a valuable resource for the study of the early medieval conversion period. A number of them refer to pagan gods and sites of Christian and pagan worship which are unevidenced in the historical sources. These sites are discussed and interpreted in relation to one another, to the regional topography and to the relatively well-documented context of the Anglo-Saxon mission to Hessa in the eighth century.

Introduction

Hessa, the northern part of the modern German province of Hesse, was the focus of a co-ordinated Anglo-Saxon mission in the eighth century led by the renowned St Boniface of Devon. Despite the fame of Boniface as a historical figure (Levison 1946, 70-93; Reuter 1980; Fletcher 1997, 204-213), Hessa, the core of his mission field, has yet to be subjected to dedicated interdisciplinary study. This study is a development of my doctoral research (Clay 2008) in this area, and has a particular concern with the toponymical and topographical

sources. [FIGURE 1 TO GO HERE]

The first two steps will be a historiography and some comments on place-name studies. These will be followed by a sketch of the historical context of the Bonifatian mission to Hessa. We shall then examine the place-name evidence for sites of conversion-period pagan significance, and give an overview of the evidence for the earliest Christian foundations in Hessa. The final discussion will place this material within its broader historical context.

Historiographical background

There is a well-established tradition in Anglo-Saxon studies of using place-names as evidence of pre-conversion religious practice. Ernst Philippon (1929), Eilert Ekwall (1935), Bruce Dickins (1934) and Frank Stenton (1941) can be credited with the earliest dedicated studies in this area, beginning a line of enquiry that has been followed especially by Margaret Gelling (1961; 1973; 1978, 154-159), David Wilson (1985; 1992, 6-16), Audrey Meaney (1995) and, most recently, Sarah Semple (2007). Semple's work in particular has been inspired by Stefan Brink's (1997; 2001) topographical and toponymical studies of sites of pagan ritual significance in Scandinavia.

Although there is a strong German tradition of place-name studies, the specific field of pagan place-names has not yet received the systematic attention it has in England and Scandinavia. The parallels between Anglo-Saxon and German material have long been known and commented on by, for example, Stenton (1941, 11), who observed that place-name elements in Germany derived from *harah*, the Old High German (henceforth OHG)

cognate to Old English (henceforth OE) *hearg* 'temple', were extremely rare, while those derived from OHG *alah* 'temple, shrine', cognate to OE *ealh*, were much more common (see also Wilson 1935, 151). German place-names with possibly religious etymologies were noted by Ernst Förstermann (1913) and discussed by Edward Schröder (1938, 195-200) and Adolf Bach (1953, 362-370), but place-name studies in general, particularly those focusing on our area of interest in Hesse, have tended to be more concerned with philology and questions of ethnic identity and settlement history.

This article is the product of ongoing research which bears some comparison with Semple's (2007) preliminary work on Anglo-Saxon *hearg* sites and Stefan Brink's (1997; 2001) research in Scandinavia. A major difference is its focus on a particular phase of a well-organised mission that is virtually unique in the early medieval period for the scope and quality of its surviving historical records. The basic advantage of these documentary sources is that they allow a relatively thorough understanding of the historical context of the mission within a defined time frame. We are therefore in the valuable position of being able to view pagan place-name evidence, which is usually very difficult to relate to broader historical developments, against a background of specific political and social processes that occurred within the space of two generations (721 to 772).

Some comments on the study of place-names

The foundation of place-name studies, as Stenton (1941, 3) observed, is 'the collection of early spellings', for without these it is impossible to be confident of the antiquity of any surviving form. This is amply illustrated in the Hessian material: the place-name Altenstädt,

for example, is unusual in that its first element is derived from *alah* 'shrine, temple', as proven by an 831 reference to *Alahstat* (CdF, no. 483). Far more typical of this name type is Altenstadt, near Frankfurt, which is recorded 750x802 as *Altunstat* (UBF, no. 344). Without the earlier forms it is often impossible to distinguish between identical modern name types with very different etymologies.

Most of the settlement place-names used as evidence in this article have sufficiently early attestations to allow reasonable confidence in their etymology.¹ The same cannot be said of the names of topographical features, which were far less likely to be recorded in charters. Those place-names used as evidence which are not attested before 1300 I have preceded with an asterisk throughout this article. Modern German *Teufel* 'devil', for instance, frequently appears in the names of fields and topographical features across Germany. Examples in Hesse include such forms as **Teufelswiesen* 'devil's meadow' and **Teufelstück* 'devil's piece', but I have yet to find an example recorded before the mid-nineteenth century.² Although Bach (1953, 368) believed that some such field names might have originated in the conversion period, and allowing for the fact that the derivation of *Teufel* from OHG *tiofal* is undisputed, the extreme rarity of pre-modern references makes determining their antiquity all but impossible. This is very unsecure territory for toponymics, and in order to steady ourselves it is necessary to spread the weight as far as possible: in other words, we must identify and account for potentially significant patterns within the corpus as a whole rather than putting our faith in individual examples. This is equally true for place-names such as

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- 1 There is no German equivalent of the English Place-Names Society. The most useful printed source for early attestations of place-names in Hesse is Andrießen (1990), although he restricts himself to the earliest forms and brief etymologies of place-names recorded before 1200. The LAGIS (*Landesgeschichtliches Informationssystem*) website, operated by the provincial government body responsible for Hesse's cultural heritage, offers a useful online database of cultural information which includes a list of early place-name citations for individual settlements: http://web.uni-marburg.de/hlgl/lagis/hiolex_xs.html.
 - 2 Since my research into Hessian field names is at a very early stage, this may change.

*Petersberg or *Priesterberg, whose explicitly Christian elements may have been coined any time after the conversion period instead of during it.

The historical context of the mission

[FIGURE 2 TO GO HERE] The region known in the early medieval period and in this article as Hessia, recorded in eighth- and ninth-century charters as the *pagus Hessorum* ('district of the Hessians'), comprises the northernmost part of the modern central German province of Hesse (Figure 2). Measuring approximately 80 km north-south by 70 km east-west, Hessia forms a natural corridor of low-lying river valleys flanked by forested hills to the east and west, and thus connects the fertile valley of the middle Rhine in the south with the lowlands of Germany and the Netherlands in the north. The northern limit of Hessia is the river Diemel, which flows from the Siegerland north-eastwards to the river Weser; the southern limit lies approximately on the Weser/Rhine watershed.

The most important long-distance communication route through Hessia was known in the late medieval period as the *Weinstraße* ('wagon road'; cf. English 'wain'), which ran from the Rhine/Main confluence along the Lahn valley, skirted the western border of Hessia and continued north into Saxony (see Figure 2). In addition to this long-distance transit route a number of other routes formed a hub in the densely-populated basin north of the lower Eder, which had been the major focus of settlement in Hessia since the Bronze Age (Gensen 1974, 10-18).

Because the major routes between the middle Rhine and Saxony ran through Hessia, controlling the region became a major concern of the Rhineland Franks, who from the

seventh century onwards were able to expand their territory over much of modern France and southern Germany (James 1988, 78-120; Geary 1988, 179-220). The Saxons, however, a loose grouping of independent tribes who lived in what is now northern Germany, proved to be extremely resistant to annexation by the Franks, and by the last decade of the seventh century they had themselves begun to encroach aggressively on Frankish-controlled territory (Fouracre 2000, 116). Hesse became the keystone of the Frankish-Saxon borderlands, and was to remain so for the better part of a century until the Frankish ruler Charlemagne finally pushed the Saxons beyond the Weser in his first Saxon War of 772 (Becher 2003, 59).

A small number of wealthy Rhineland-style burials appear in Hesse between the mid-seventh and early-eighth century that are judged to be indicative of increasing Frankish influence (see Figure 3; Gensen 1972; Uenze 1971; Sippel 1989). In the last decade of the seventh century the Franks occupied and fortified the two large hillforts of Büraburg and Christenberg, each of which was perfectly situated to watch over Hesse's major transit routes (see Figure 2; for an English-language discussion of these two sites, see Schlesinger 1976). The establishment of these two hillforts coincides with a watershed in the regional ceramic evidence, which describes a steady and widespread process of settlement expansion into previously marginal territory that lasted into the tenth century (Haarberg 1973; Stephan 1992/93). [FIGURE 3 TO GO HERE]

Boniface, originally born in Wessex *c.* 675 and educated at the monasteries of Exeter and Nursling, was in his forties by the time became a missionary. He first spent two years working alongside the Northumbrian Willibrord in Frisia, where there had been an Anglo-Saxon mission for almost three decades, before he launched his own mission, independent of Willibrord and with the direct support of Pope Gregory II and Charles Martel, in Hesse in

721 (Barlow 1980; Fletcher 1997, 204-206). That there was some degree of religious and political tension in central Hesse is suggested by the account of Willibald, in his *Vita Bonifatii* (written 754x768), of Boniface's destruction of a major pagan shrine near Geismar, which lay just one kilometre north of Büraburg (around the end of the eighth century, Geismar shifted from the position shown in Figure 3 to its modern position half a kilometre to the north). Boniface, believing that a dramatic show of Christian supremacy was required to overcome the trenchant local paganism, gathered his followers, including those locals who supported him, marched on Geismar and felled a tree known to Willibald as the *robor Iovis*, the 'Oak of Jupiter' (text Levison 1905, 19-32; translation Talbot 1954, 40-46). Jupiter in this case is almost certainly the *translatio romana* of OHG *Donar* or Old Saxon (henceforth OS) *Thunaer* (cf. OE *Thunor*).

Boniface's early success, however, was hardly conclusive, and the political turbulence between Franks and Saxons continued. The Frankish annals record at least four campaigns by Charles Martel against the Saxons between 719 and 729, any or all of which might have used the hillforts of Hesse as staging-posts (Böhmer and Mühlbacher 1908, 13-16; Fouracre 2000, 117). He launched another major campaign north of Hesse in 738 (Fouracre 2000, 117-118) that allowed Boniface to expand his mission beyond the river Diemel. This campaign appears to have ensured a degree of stability in Hesse for several years, for Boniface used the opportunity to found one of his first bishoprics at the Frankish hillfort of Büraburg in 741 (Tangl 1916, 81; Emerton 2001, 57).

The annals record another Frankish victory north of Thuringia in 743 which was followed by forced baptisms among the Saxons (Böhmer and Mühlbacher 1908, 23-24). In 745 a major Saxon retaliation destroyed part of Boniface's mission infrastructure either in

Hessia, Thuringia or both, as he wrote to the Pope (Tangl 1916, 121; Emerton 2000, 86). In 748 a rebellion by the eastern Saxons was suppressed (Böhmer and Mühlbacher 1908, 30). In 752, more than thirty of Boniface's churches on the Hessian-Saxon frontier were burned by invading Saxons (Tangl 1916, 234; Emerton 2000, 159), who were in turn punished the following year by a campaign of Pippin, Charles's son (Böhmer and Mühlbacher 1908, 35). In 754 Boniface was martyred at Dokkum on the Frisian coast, and the historical sources fall silent concerning Hessia until 772, when Charlemagne conquered the Saxon fortress of Eresburg on the Diemel and destroyed the nearby pagan shrine of the *Irminsul* (Becher 2003, 59). If Eresburg was in pagan Saxon hands in 772, all of Boniface's mission territory beyond the Diemel must have been lost by this date, and there is, indeed, no evidence for any surviving Bonifatian foundations north of Hessia.

Thus, apart from a possible spell of peace after Charles's 738 campaign, Hessia was plagued by tit-for-tat invasions, punitive campaigns, impositions of tribute and rebellions across the Frankish-Saxon borderlands for the entire duration of the Anglo-Saxon mission. Many local communities must have suffered the inevitable social and cultural dislocation that comes with such consistent, low-level warfare. The Hessia into which Boniface led his missionaries was not a quiet pagan backwater where religious conversion was a matter of personal choice and extended consideration, but a turbulent frontier where political and religious loyalties could easily become matters of life and death. It is clear, for instance, that churches were deliberately targeted on a huge scale by the Saxon invaders in 752; the priests who ministered these parishes were fortunate indeed that only the previous summer Boniface had requested, and obtained, permission from the pope to abandon any frontier churches that he judged to be under serious threat of attack (Tangl 1916, 200; Emerton 2000, 141). The

priests may have escaped, but one wonders what became of the converts who were left behind.

Despite many areas of uncertainty, the surviving historical sources provide invaluable evidence for the course of the Bonifatian mission in Hessia. They help us appreciate, first of all, something of the social and cultural upheavals that accompanied the conversion process, and the central role that religious allegiance might have played in local politics. The borderlands of eighth-century Hessia and Saxony can be fairly well defined through contemporary charter evidence, settlement toponymics and ecclesiastical boundaries, all of which coincide to produce a broad line running from the upper Eder to the middle Diemel (see Figure 2). This was the interface between Christianity and paganism for most of Boniface's mission, and a vital feature of the context in which we can now consider the place-name evidence. We shall do so under three headings: theophorous place-names; place-names containing elements derived from OHG *alah* 'shrine, temple' or *wih* 'sacred'; and 'demonised' place-names, i.e. those containing the elements *heide* 'pagan' and *teufel* 'devil'.

Theophorous pagan place-names

There are six possible instances of theophorous place-names in Hessia, four of which refer to Wodan and two to Thunaer. In this article I will use the Old Saxon forms of the gods' names, including *Wodan* in preference to OHG *Wotan* and OE *Woden*, and *Thunaer* in preference to OHG *Donar* and OE *Thunor*. This will help remind us that the gods of the Germanic-speaking peoples may have varied somewhat from place to place not only in their names but in their characteristics and associated mythologies. Furthermore, while Hessia lies precisely

on the isogloss between the OHG- and OS-speaking areas, the limited toponymical and historical evidence suggests that *Wodan* and *Thunaer* were the forms most probably used in the region during the eighth-century.

Aside from the Bonifatian letters, a vital source of information concerning central Germanic paganism are the so-called Merseberg incantations. These two charms were added in an early or mid tenth-century hand to a single folio of an early ninth-century Fulda homiletic manuscript, but since neither bears any trace of Christian influence, most likely they originally date from the conversion period (Murdoch 1988; Beck and Lundgreen 2001; Giangrosso 2001). We shall consider the first incantation below; Wodan (*Uuodan*) appears in the second incantation attempting to heal an injured foal where an array of other Germanic gods, included *Balder* (cf. Norse Baldr) and *Friia* (cf. Anglo-Saxon Friga and Norse Freyja), had failed. The major value of this incantation for us is that it demonstrates Wodan's importance in the pagan cosmology of the Hessian mission field, including his supremacy over the other gods.

GUDENSBERG (Figure 3 and Figure 4) first appears as *Guodenesberch* in a charter of 1119 (UBM 1, no. 482), and the derivation of *Gudens* from OS genitive *Wodanes* is universally accepted (Bach 1953, 363; Andrießen 1990, 200); the mutation of the initial *w-* into a modern German *g-* is a well-attested linguistic phenomenon (Christmann 1944; Bach 1954, 553-554). The heavily wooded hill of Gudensberg rises abruptly some 100 metres above the surrounding basin, providing a visually impressive and naturally defensible vantage point that was fortified from at least the eleventh century, although no earlier occupation is known. [FIGURE 4 TO GO HERE]

Casual ceramic finds suggest some Roman-period settlement between Gudensberg

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and *ODENBERG, close to the transit route that runs from Fritzlar to the north-east, passing directly between the two hills. Although local folk etymology gives *Odenberg the same derivation as Gudensberg, the lack of early forms makes this very uncertain; the absence of an initial consonant (cf. Odensachsen near Frankfurt, attested in 1101 as *Hodensasson* (MGH DD H II, no. 51)) makes its etymology difficult to determine. It should however be noted that there may have been an important conversion-period pagan burial ground at the southern foot of Odenberg, close to the deserted medieval village of *Unseligendissen (see below).

[FIGURE 5 TO GO HERE]

If one takes the route north along the valleys from Wichdorf, midway to the Diemel one arrives at a road junction overlooked by the twin peaks of *GROSSER GUDENBERG and *KLEINER GUDENBERG, which tower 340 and 300 metres above the surrounding valleys respectively (Figure 5 and Figure 6). They are densely forested and uninhabited, although each summit was the site of a fortification from the twelfth century. Jacob Grimm regarded Gudenberg, along with the abovementioned Gudensberg, as being named for Wodan (Grimm 1875, 138) although he did not cite any early forms of the name as evidence and was known to be somewhat uncritical when identifying mythological place-names (Bach 1953, 363). Grimm's assumption that *Guden* in this case was derived from *Wodan* is made less plausible by the existence of *Gudo* as a personal name, as attested in the 1172 place-name *Gudenburg* (UBM 2, no. 376). On the other hand, a personal name such as Gudo is rather less likely to have been attached to the topographical suffix *-berg* 'hill, mountain' than to *-burg* 'town, castle', and *-berg* is the most common suffix to Wodan in place-names; Bach (1953, 363) gives four definite examples in Germany, including the Gudensberg near Fritzlar.

[FIGURE 6 TO GO HERE]

DONNERSBERG, a low, flat rise overlooking the major confluence and crossing point of the middle Diemel (Figure 8), is first recorded as *Thuneresberch* in 1100, at which time it was the site of an important assizes court (Jellinghaus 1923, 11). The first element of the name is clearly derived from OS *Thunaer*, and it seems highly possible that this is an example of a conversion-period pagan gathering place that retained some significance well into the Christian period.

Thunaer's name also appears in *DONARQUELLE, the name of a spring at the foot of Johanniskirchenkopf (-quelle from OS/OHG *kwella*) (Figure 3). As is typical with such micronyms, the antiquity of the name is impossible to ascertain. The fact that the spring is less than two kilometres upstream from Geismar may hinder, rather than support, its authenticity, for Geismar has been known since the eighth century as the approximate site of the Oak of Thunaer described in Willibald's *Vita Bonifatii*, and hence the naming of the spring for Thunaer may be an embellishment of local tradition rather than a foundation of it.

[FIGURE 7 TO GO HERE]

DESENBERG is a prominent basalt outcrop that rises 150 metres above the surrounding vale of the middle Diemel (Figure 7 and Figure 8). In 1070 the chronicler Lampert of Hersfeld referred to it as *Tesenberg* (Holder-Egger 1894, 115). The first element of this name is derived from OS *idisi*, literally 'women' (cf. OE *idesa* and Old Norse *disír*), but more specifically denoting a class of supernatural female beings who appear in the first of the Merseberg incantations (Giangrosso 2001). In this charm they are invoked as protectors of warriors in battle and liberators of captives, roles also fulfilled by the *disír* of Eddic mythology. The fact that the *disír* seem to provide a connection between cult activity and communal gatherings in several Scandinavian place-names, including Disen, Dystingbo,

Disaøys and Disahøyr (Simek 2003, 126-127), also strengthens the possibility that the *idisi* fulfilled a similar ritual role among the Saxons, and that Desenberg was one such meeting place that was associated with them. [FIGURE 8 TO GO HERE]

Alah and *wih* place-names

There are numerous Anglo-Saxon place-names which include the OE elements *hearh* and *wēoh*, thought to indicate the existence of a pagan temple or shrine. The equivalents in central Germany are OHG *harah/harug* and *wīh*, with the addition of *alah* 'shrine'. There are no surviving *harah/harug* place-names in Hessia (the nearest is Harxheim, from *harahesheim*, attested 776x796 near Mainz (UBF, no. 216)), but there is one definite and one possible example of a *wīh* place-name, and also one possible and one definite example of an *alah* place-name.

WICHDORF is on the route north from Kirchberg, encircled on three sides by forested hills at the edge of the Fritzlar basin. It is first attested 949x957 as *Vuihdorpf* (*in finibus Vuihdorpforum*, UBH, no. 52), with *wīh* either in its adjectival form meaning 'sacred' or as the substantive 'shrine, sacred place'. The topographical situation of Wichdorf is highly reminiscent of the Anglo-Saxon *wēoh* place-names, which, according to Wilson (1985, 181-182; 1992, 6-10), appear to have referred to roadside shrines rather than to less accessible places of communal gathering. Furthermore, it may be significant that Wichdorf's fifteenth-century church was dedicated to St John the Baptist (Classen 1929, 194). This dedication, should it be eighth-century in origin, might indicate that Wichdorf was selected by the missionaries as a suitable place to supplant a pre-existing pagan shrine with an early

baptismal church. It may also be the case that *wīh* refers to Christian, not pagan, sacrality, for the adjective does not distinguish between the two; but this, too, could support the theory that Wichdorf was the site of early baptisms.

Fifteen kilometres further north along the road from Wichdorf, one reaches the confluence of a stream named *Heilerbach with the Warne (Figure 6). The name of the stream, of which there are many comparable examples in Germany, is derived from OHG *heilag* 'holy' and *bacha* 'stream, beck'. Like the adjective *wīh*, *heilag* can refer to either Christian or pagan sacrality, but the absence of any known church or chapel in the vicinity would suggest the latter. The source of *Heilerbach is a short (about one kilometre long), steep-sided combe that looks out on the Warne from the east. At the head of this combe is a large basalt extrusion, rising almost vertically twenty-five metres above the grass and scrub of the valley side, traditionally known as the *WICHTELKIRCHE, 'gnome church', due to its spire-like appearance. There is an old local folk tale involving a gnome king who lived in the ground beneath the Wichtelkirche, which he is said to have built in an unsuccessful attempt to impress a Christian maiden whom he wished to marry (Hufschmidt 1905, 73-75).

The folk tale itself need not be older than the nineteenth century, but the most interesting aspect of it is the name given to the basalt outcrop. *Wichtel* is indeed the diminutive form of modern German *Wicht* 'gnome, goblin' (OHG *wiht*), but in this case there is also a plausible derivation from OHG *wīh-tal* 'sacred valley'. There would be no good reason to suggest this were it not for the presence of *Heilerbach, which already suggests that the combe had some pre-Christian sacred significance. My cautious explanation here, therefore, is that the massive bulk of the Wichtelkirche was the focus of pagan rituals in the conversion period that gave the names *Wichtal* to the combe and *Heilerbach to the stream

that runs down it (the combe is now called Heilerbachthal after the stream).³ After pagan activity had ceased, the prominence and suggestive form of the outcrop attracted a name such as OHG *Wīchtal-kirihha*, and only later did the fortuitous homophony with *Wichtelkirche* lead to the legend of the goblin king who built a church to win a Christian maiden. In other words, the myth wrapped itself around existing place-names rather than *vice versa*, as myths often do. This would also explain why the legendary gnomes should happen to appear in the place-name in the diminutive, i.e. as *Wichtelkirche* instead of simply *Wichtkirche*.

ALTENSTÄDT, first attested in 831 as *Alahstat* (CdF, no. 483), lies directly on one of the routes through the valleys that run north from Fritzlar (Figure 6). The first element of its name is unambiguously derived from *alah* 'shrine' (Andrießen 1990, 150). Fifteen kilometres north of Altenstädt the hill of *ALSBERG stands astride a routeway that runs down the Twiste valley to Donnersberg (Figure 8). It lacks early attestations, but it may be derived from OHG *alahes-berg*. Comparable examples of the development from *alahes-* to *als-* would be Alstat, 25 km north of Würzburg, which is recorded 750x802 as *Ahalstat* (UBF, no. 346) and c. 800 as *Alahestat* (CL, no. 3660b), and Alsheim, 25 km south of Mainz, recorded in 831 as *Alahesheim* (Schröder 1935, 197). The theory that *Alsberg was the site of a pagan shrine is supported by field-name evidence, for, of the fifteen *Teufels-* micronyms recorded within the borders of Hesse by Lyncker (1853, 21), three appear to the immediate west of *Alsberg (**Teufelsbruch*, **Teufelshohlsbruch* and **Teufelsumkehr* outside Volkmarsen) and two to the immediate east (**Teufelswiesen* and **Teufelstück* outside Breuna). The strength or weakness of this evidence will become clearer once the precise locations of the field-names have been ascertained.

3 See Bradley (2000) on the attraction of natural places such as rocky outcrops for pre-Christian religions in Europe.

Also worth a mention is FRITZLAR (Figure 3), first attested in Willibald's *Vita Bonifatii* (754x768) as *Frideslare* (Levison 1905, 35). The suffix *-lar* belongs to the earliest strata of place-name elements in Hesse and carries the general meaning of 'enclosure' (Dittmaier 1963, 68). Arnold (1881, 63) suggested that the first element derived from OHG *fridu* 'peace, security, contract' and indicated Fritzlar's status as a place of assembly and religious significance, an interpretation with which Schröder (1938, 139) agreed, citing the fact that Boniface chose Fritzlar as the site of his first monastic foundation. Andrießen (1990, 229) prefers the likelihood that *Frides-* is simply derived from the personal name *Fridus*, although there is no other known example of a *-lar* place-name with a personal name prefix.

'Demonised' place-names

What I have termed 'demonised' place-names are those which refer explicitly to non-Christian sacrality from a Christian point of view. The places in question have been literally demonised in the sense that their defining characteristic, as expressed in the place-name, is an association with the devil or with heathenism in general. Such names are much more often applied to fields, hills, springs or other topographical features rather than settlements, and this inevitably means that early documentary references are rare.

The only example to be discussed here that has a pre-modern attestation is the unique place-name *UNSELIGENDISSEN (Figure 3), first attested in 1307 as *Unselgenhusen* (Kuchenbecker 1735, 182). It includes the OHG element *unsālīg* 'unholy' and was interpreted by Arnold (1881, 131) to refer to a pagan burial ground. As already mentioned, *Unseligendissen is a deserted medieval village that lies at the foot of *Odenberg and, while

its name does not prove that the place-name *Odenberg means 'Wodan's hill', it does at least suggest that the vicinity was at some point associated with 'un-Christian' practices, very possibly a conversion-period pagan burial ground or cult site.

The remainder of the demonised place-names are of topographical features. As I have not yet fully explored the field-name material and have not been able to locate most of the examples more accurately than the nearest village, any conclusions drawn from them must of necessity be viewed as provisional. It is also impossible to place any great faith in individual place-names of this type, since none of them can be proven to date from the eighth century. The best approach, therefore, is to contextualise them as far as possible with more reliable forms of evidence and to look for patterns that might best be explained by a common, if not universal, origin in the conversion period. The basic assumption of this approach is that certain places may have come to be associated with the devil or with paganism because they were close to a site of pagan activity that was condemned by Christian preachers.

There is one possible example of a reference to pagans in *HEIDEKOPF, a hill (OHG *-choph* 'head, peak') overlooking Geismar at the southern end of the Langerwald routeway (Figure 3). The first element is derived from either OHG *heida* 'heather' or *heidan* 'heathen', but it is impossible to determine which based on the modern name alone. Gelling (1978, 158) observes an identical problem with occurrences of OE *hæthen* in Anglo-Saxon place-names. However, the fact that a major routeway runs directly across *Heidekopf could support the notion that it was the site of a *wēoh*-style roadside shrine.

We should also note the fact that *Heidekopf is only two kilometres from Geismar, in whose vicinity, according to Willibald, Boniface felled the Oak of Thunaer in 723. It is possible that Willibald used the less precise phrase 'at the *place* called Geismar' (*in loco qui*

dicitur Gaesmere; Levison 1905, 31) to refer to a hill overlooking the settlement, and it may also be significant that a patch of woodland close to Geismar carried the name *Teufelsholz, 'devil's wood', in the mid-nineteenth century (Lynker 1854, 22). Nonetheless, here, as in the case of the nearby *Donarquelle, we must be wary of assigning antiquity to place-names that may have been inspired by the fame of Geismar in Boniface's posthumous cult. [FIGURE 9 TO GO HERE]

There are two hills in Hessa whose names refer directly to the devil. The first is *TEUFELSKOPF, which forms almost a mirror image of *Heidekopf at the opposite end of the Langerwald, 30 km to the north-west (Figure 9 and Figure 10). Like *Heidekopf, *Teufelskopf is a heavily wooded hill that overlooks an important medieval routeway as it climbs onto the long, narrow ridge of the Langerwald. This is made especially interesting when we consider that the route between the two hills, now a largely disused series of tracks through dense woodland, is about the distance of a good day's journey on foot; if *Heidekopf and *Teufelskopf were indeed roadside shrines, they were ideally situated for the use of travellers entering or leaving central Hessa along this route. A similar example may be *TEUFELSHOHL, 'devil's hollow', a low, wooded rise in the Hessian-Saxon borderlands, which is situated half a kilometre from the major medieval transit route known as the Weinstraße. [FIGURE 10 TO GO HERE]

There is one example of a stream in Hessa named for the devil, *TEUFELSBORN, which flows into the Warme near Ehlen (Figure 6). The springheads originate in the lower slopes of three hills called Bosenberg, Hasungen and Hundsberg. According to the *Vita Haimeradi*, written 1072x1090, Saint Haimerad came to Hasungen in the early eleventh century in order to become a hermit (*in montem Hasingun pervenit*; Heinrich 1862, 602). The

author of the *vita* follows a typical hagiographical topos by stating that Hasungen was suggested to Haimerad by divine inspiration, but it is very probable that the hill was already known as a hermitage to the monks of Haimerad's parent monastery of Hersfeld, which was itself originally founded as a hermitage under the personal direction of Boniface (Pertz 1829, 367). It is therefore possible that Hasungen was the site of an early conversion-period chapel that survived as a hermitage until the eleventh century; furthermore, the fact that a stream named for the devil originates on its slope would suggest the proximity of a pre-existing pagan shrine.

To this might be added further toponymical evidence: the place-name Hasungen is derived from OHG *haso* 'hare', while Hundsberg is from OHG *hunt* 'hound' and the large hill north of Bosenberg is known as Bärenberg, from OHG *bēra* 'bear'. The presence of three adjacent hills named for different animals would be unusual even without the additional fact that the name of the village towards which *Teufelsborn flows, two kilometres due east of Hasungen, is derived from OHG *elah/elaho* 'elk' (Ehlen, first attested as *Elhen* in the *Vita Haimeradi*; Heinrich 1862, 604). The reason for such a concentration of animal place-names is unclear, but such creatures may have had some totemic significance in the local pagan cosmology. Especially noteworthy in this context is the place-name *BOSENBERG, between Hasungen and Bärenberg, which approximates to 'evil hill' (OHG *bōsa* 'cruelty, wickedness'; a derivation from OHG *boscus* 'bushes' is made unlikely by the long initial vowel of *Bosenberg*).

We therefore have an 'evil hill' surrounded by three larger hills bearing animal names, while from its foot a 'devil's spring' flows towards a settlement bearing a fourth animal name. One kilometre to the west of Bosenberg is the village of Wenigenhasungen, outside which

was a field called *Teufelsland in the mid-nineteenth century (Lyncker 1854, 21). The closest of the three larger hills to *Bosenberg, the one named after the hare, appears to have been selected as the site of an early Christian chapel that held special significance for the Hersfeld inheritors of the Bonifatian tradition. Caution is necessary with so few early name forms, but it is not pushing the evidence too far to suggest that this district may have been one important focus of religious confrontation during the conversion period.

Christian foundations in Hessa

After Boniface destroyed the Oak of Thunaer near Geismar, Willibald claims that he used the wood of the shattered trunk in order to build a chapel dedicated to St Peter (text Levison 1905, 19-32; translation Talbot 1954, 40-46). Willibald fails to specify where the chapel was built, and the tradition that it was the predecessor of the surviving abbey of St Peter at Fritzlar dates only from the end of the fifteenth century (Wand 1974, 42, n. 271a). Jestädt (1924, 44-46), acknowledging the lack of any solid evidence, suggests that both oak and chapel were on the hill of *Johanniskirchenkopf, named for the now-ruined church of St John which stood upon it (Figure 3). This church was re-dedicated to St John in the late medieval period and its original patron is unknown (ibid.). A third alternative is that the pagan oak was on *Heidekopf and the replacement chapel on *Johanniskirchenkopf half a kilometre to the north, which in that case might have formerly borne a name such as Peterskopf.

There is some support for this last explanation in further Hessian examples of Christian toponyms occurring in close proximity to sites of possible pagan shrines. Names of saints suffixed by *-berg* are widespread in Germany; Bach (1953, 368) knew of more than 30

examples of Petersberg alone. We have already seen how *Heidekopf appears to be reflected at the opposite end of the Langerwald by *Teufelskopf, but it seems that *Johanniskirkenkopf also has its fellow in *Simonskopf, a wooded hill two kilometres north of *Teufelskopf (Figure 9). Similarly, *Teufelshohl, the rise close to the Weinstraße, is four kilometres north of a similarly situated hill called *Probstberg (from OHG *probost* 'provost'), whose name implies some kind of relationship to the church. We have already noted the proximity of the probable early chapel on Hasungen to *Bosenberg (Figure 6), and another similar example is *Petersberg, a hill two kilometres north of *Alsberg (Figure 8).

We encounter a second *Petersberg nine kilometres south-east of Eresburg, immediately astride a routeway running west from the Weinstraße to *Alsberg. On the opposite side of the routeway, one kilometre to the north, is a hill called Auf der Eulenkirche, which is attested in the twelfth century as *munitio dulenkerken* (Knappe 1995, 119). *Munitio* simply means 'fortification', and the first element of *dulenkerken* is therefore probably derived from OHG *tuola*, 'ditch', referring to a defended enclosure whose precise location has since been lost. Knapp (ibid.) suggests that an early church on Auf der Eulenkirche replaced a pagan shrine. Finally, *Priesterberg, 'priest hill', is half a kilometre from the Weinstraße and two and half kilometres from Eresburg, in whose vicinity stood the Saxon shrine of the Irminsul (Figure 11). [FIGURE 11 TO GO HERE]

Aside from the place-name evidence for early Christian foundations, we find surer ground with those churches that are historically or archaeologically attested. There is minimal evidence that the Franks attempted to promote Christianity among the local population (Werner 1982, 277; Schwind 1974, 70; Schieffer 1954, 141). Two definite pre-Bonifatian foundations are the Frankish churches at Büraburg and Christenberg, dedicated to St Brigid

and St Martin respectively, which were no doubt intended to serve the garrisons of the hillforts and were probably the initial bases of Boniface's mission. The church of St Martin at Bergheim is likely also a Frankish foundation, judging from its dedication to the Frankish patron saint, the typically Rhineland Frankish *-heim* suffix of the place-name and its location on the main route between Christenberg and Büraburg.

Eighth- and ninth-century charter evidence also gives us sound reasons to regard a network of eleventh century mother churches that were subordinate to the archdeacon of Fritzlar, including Bergheim (see Figure 2), as dating from Boniface's mission (Gockel 1974, 96-102). These churches are similar in their distribution to the early eighth-century network of minsters in central Wessex (see Hase 1995), and the coherence of their distribution strongly suggests that they were founded by a single organising hand, most likely Boniface himself. Each of them lies on a major routeway leading towards central Hessa, and four of them, Fritzlar, Gensungen, Mardorf-Berge and Schützeberg, had medieval dedications to St Peter, Boniface's main patron (the medieval dedications of Kirchditmold, Kirchberg and Urff are not recorded).

Discussion

Having reviewed the evidence for Christian and pagan sacred sites from conversion-period Hessa, we can now consider it in more depth. There are three important matters to discuss: first, the relationship between Christian and pagan sacred sites as suggested by the toponymical and topographical evidence; second, the relationship of these to the Hessian mother churches; third, the significance of the material in light of the historical context of the

Bonifatian mission.

The 'Christian' place-names of *Johanniskirchenkopf, *Simonskopf, *Probstberg, the two *Petersbergs, Auf der Eulenkirche and *Priesterberg represent the complete corpus of this form of evidence in Hessa to the best of my knowledge. None of them, let it be added, has yielded any historical or archaeological evidence of an early medieval Christian foundation, and only *Johanniskirchenkopf and Auf der Eulenkirche are known to have been the sites of later churches, both of which are now gone. Bearing this in mind, the overall coincidence of potential pagan sacred sites and potential early Christian sacred sites is striking. The relationships can be briefly summarised: *Heidekopf to *Johanniskirchenkopf, half a kilometre; *Teufelskopf to *Simonskopf, two kilometres; *Bosenberg to Hasungen, half a kilometre; *Alsberg to *Petersberg, two kilometres; Auf der Eulenkirche to *Petersberg, one kilometre; *Teufelshohl to *Probstberg, four kilometres; *Priesterberg to the Irminsul, ? kilometres.

We should also observe that no site occurs further than two kilometres from an early medieval routeway, and nine of the thirteen (excluding the unlocated Irminsul) are within half a kilometre of a routeway. Likewise, the probably pagan sacred sites of Gudensberg, *Unseligendissen, Altenstädt, Wichdorf, Donnersberg and Desenberg are all directly on routeways.

Since a unifying feature of the Christian place-names discussed here is the lack of any surviving churches associated with them, this must be explained. Their close relationships with pagan place-names may provide an answer. We know that Boniface replaced the pagan shrine at the Oak of Thunaer with a chapel dedicated to St Peter, a policy that may have been partially inspired by Pope Gregory the Great's advice to Augustine that he turn pagan Anglo-

Saxon shrines into Christian ones wherever possible (HE i. 30, 106-108). Yet in Hesse we appear to witness indirect rather than direct replacement; that is to say, pagan shrines may well have been superseded by Christian ones, but evidently not on the same site. It is also possible that Christian chapels or oratories were founded while the nearby pagan shrines were still occupied as part of an overall strategy of piecemeal confrontation, an attempt, as it were, to claim the landscape for Christ one hill at a time.

Despite the apparent success of this strategy, chapels on elevated positions, even if convenient for travellers, were often marginal to the most densely populated areas and therefore would have been ill-suited for the ongoing Christianisation of the district. Some sites, such as Hasungen, might have been retained as isolated hermitages, but pastoral care would have been much more effective if organised from churches in the low-lying villages themselves. Hence the foundation for this purpose of the Hessian mother churches which survived until the Reformation, while most of the isolated hilltop chapels, like the pagan shrines they had supplanted, disappeared before they could leave a historical trace. The conversion of Hesse to Christianity thus saw a drastic re-orientation of the sacred landscape.

Finally, we can relate the sum of this evidence to the historical context of the mission between 721 and 772. Schröder (1938, 145), on the strength of the place-names Fritzlar, Gudensberg and Wichdorf alone, described the Fritzlar basin as a 'sacred district'. We can now suggest that this sacrality spread its roots much farther into the valleys of the Hessian-Saxon borderlands. Whichever route one chose to take from Fritzlar into the pagan north, sacred shrines overlooked the road: *Heidekopf, Altenstädt, Wichdorf, *Bosenberg, Gudensberg. Beyond these lay more sites: *Teufelskopf, *Alsberg, Donnersberg, Desenberg. *Teufelshohl overlooked the Weinstraße, which in 772 crossed the Diemel somewhere near

the shrine of the Irminsul; at the village of Zierenberg on the Warme, one can still stand with the twin peaks of *Gudenberg looming to one side and the combe of *Heilerbach receding to the other.

The evidence provokes even more questions: does the field-name *Teufelskammer outside Wolfhagen (Figure 6) have anything to do with the location of a conversion-period mother church on the hillock of Schützeberg? Or that of *Teufelsäcker outside Felsberg (Figure 3) anything to do with the mother church of Gensungen, facing it from the opposite shore of the Eder? The *Teufels*- field-names, when viewed as a whole on Figure 2, do show a concentration along the Hessian-Saxon frontier. Does this suggest a general origin in the violence and uncertainty of the conversion period? And, considering the location of Auf der Eulenkirche deep in the borderlands, might it be the case that a fortified pagan sanctuary here was superceded by a chapel on Petersberg, which, when the border wars erupted, was itself forced to abandon that undefensible hill and occupy the ramparts of its old enemy, leaving us with the odd twelfth-century place-name *dulenkerken*?

My research in this area is ongoing, and the clarification of the field-name evidence in particular will add another layer to the toponymics. The main purpose of this article has been to present the evidence thus far obtained and draw some reasonable conclusions from it. It is clear that the continent is rich in material that will reward the sort of interdisciplinary approach that has been especially fruitful in England and Scandinavia, not only because some conclusions may be similar, but because some may be different, and hence particularly illuminating of the field as a whole.

Yet some features of the conversion period strike chords across regions: the confrontation of beliefs and meanings and their manifestation in the landscape; the end of old

ways and the beginnings of new. Semple concluded that the process of Christianisation eventually ended any pagan religious activity at the three Anglo-Saxon sites she studied, but that it

may have served to fossilise these places within the myths and legends of the early Christian period, weaving them into a new mythology of landscape aligned to the stories and tales of the Conversion (Semple 2007, 285).

This much, it seems, can also be said of eighth-century Hessa.

Abbreviations

CdF	Dronke, E., ed. (1850) <i>Codex Diplomaticus Fuldensis</i> , Theodor Fischer, Cassel.
CL	Glöckner, C., ed. (1933) <i>Codex Laureshamensis, Band 2</i> , Verlag des historischen Vereins für Hessen, Darmstadt.
HE and R.	Bede (1969) <i>Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum</i> , ed. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, Clarendon, Oxford.
MGH DD H II 3:	Breslau, H., ed. (1903) <i>Die Urkunden der deutschen Könige und Kaiser</i>
deutsche	<i>Die Urkunden Heinrichs II und Arduins</i> , Gessellschaft für ältere Geschichtskunde, Hannover.
UBF	Stengel, E., ed. (1958) <i>Urkundenbuch des Klosters Fulda, Band 1</i> , N. G.
G.	Elwert, Marburg.

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- UBM 1 Stimming, M., ed. (1972) *Mainzer Urkundenbuch, Band 1*, Hessische Historische Kommission, Darmstadt.
- UBM 2 Acht, P., ed. (1971) *Mainzer Urkundenbuch, Band 2*, Hessische Historische Kommission, Darmstadt.

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