

LEICESTERSHIRE MOOT-SITES: THE PLACE-NAME EVIDENCE

by

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The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle¹ entry for 1124 tells us that in this year Ralph Basset held a moot of the king's thanes at *Hundehoge* in Leicestershire.² Here he hanged forty-four thieves, six of whom were also castrated and had their eyes put out.

The site of *Hundehoge* has long been the subject of speculation by historians. As recently as 1950, W. G. Hoskins identified it with Croft Hill in the south-east of the county.³ In his article, he alters the Chronicle spelling *Hundehoge* to a hypothetical *Huncothoe* since the village of Huncote lies at the foot of the north-eastern slopes of the hill. Hoskins' interpretation and treatment of the Chronicle place-name are philologically unacceptable, and appear to be based on a misunderstanding of the meaning of Huncote. The first element of the village name is the OE personal-name *Hūna*—hence 'Hūna's cottage'. The rare spellings of that place-name with an intrusive *d* are very late and not significant. In contrast, the first element of *Hundehoge* is probably the ON personal-name *Hundi*. *Hundehoge* has no philological connection with Huncote.

The lost *Hundehoge* was in Cossington parish, which lies beside the Roman Fosse Way, some six miles to the north-east of Leicester (fig. 7). It occurs in a Cossington charter of c.1285 as *Hundehaug*, in 1325 as *Hundaue* and in 1332 *Hundauc* (or *Hundaue*).⁴ After this date it disappears. The name was originally a Scandinavian **Hundahaugr* "Hundi's mound or hill". A direct parallel appears in DB where we find *Huntou* "Hundi's mound", a hundred-name surviving as Huntow in the East Riding of Yorkshire.⁵ Such mounds, both natural and man-made, were often sites for assemblies. The name no longer survives among the field-names of modern Cossington. Its exact location must be a matter for speculation. The charter of c.1285 deals in part with the transference of title of two half roods of land *super Hundehaug*. Clearly the *haugr* in this case cannot refer to the artificial burial mound of a man called *Hundi* since two half roods of land are the equivalent of a quarter of an acre. It is tempting to identify *Hundahaugr* with the impressive Shipley Hill, a natural feature some 240 feet long, 60 feet wide and 40 feet high, once thought to be a Neolithic long barrow, but recently shown to be the tip of a spur of land cut off from its main body by stream action.⁶ The mound, roughly a quarter of an acre in area, stands beside Fosse Way; its distinctive shape has excited great curiosity over the years as the disturbances of old excavations along its ridge indicate. Although a natural

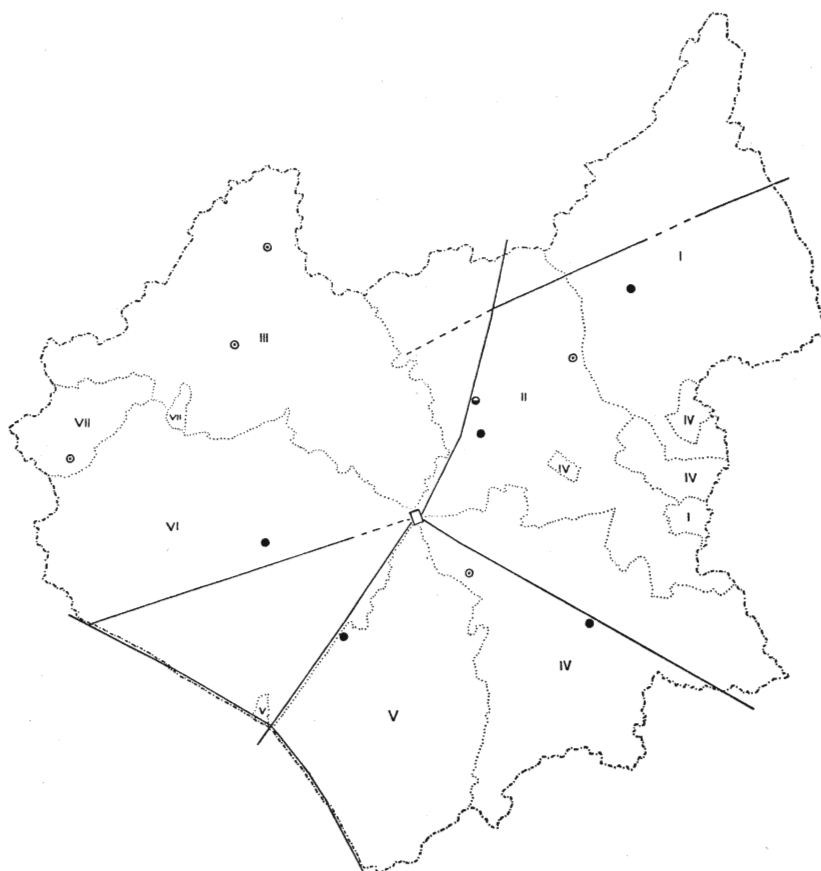


Fig. 7. LEICESTERSHIRE HUNDREDS AND MOOT-SITES

The Hundreds: I Framland, II East Goscote, III West Goscote, IV Gartree, V Guthlaxton, VI Sparkenhoe, VII Repton & Gresley (previously Derbys.).
 ○ Hundehogc, ● moot-sites of the Hundreds, ⊙ minor moot-sites,
 — Roman roads.

feature, it may well have been used as a convenient burial mound for Hundi. Shipley Hill now lies in Ratcliffe-on-the-Wreake, but it is possible that the parish bounds have altered here since 1332 to take in a small portion of Cosington whose natural south-eastern limit is River Wreake. If the landmark of Shipley Hill is to be discounted as *Hundahaugr*, the only other likely feature which may have borne this name is the ridge on which stands Humble Farm and over which the Roman road passes.

It is doubtful that *Hundahaugr* was the original site of the shire-moot or that, as Hoskins supposes, Ralph Basset was the shire-reeve. The presence of the king's thanes at the court held in 1124 suggests that Basset, a prominent member of the king's court, was acting as an itinerant justice. Leicester itself is the obvious site for the shire-moot. Æthelræd Unræd (979-1013) issued a code of laws at Wantage, relating mainly to the

1553, when the hundred was still united.¹⁴ The earliest mention of separation into two is in *State Papers Domestic* for 1571, which records the *hundred of East Goscott*.

The Guthlaxton Wapentake of DB seems to have been approximately the same size as that of Goscote; like Goscote too, its large area (twice that of Framland or Gartree) is to be accounted for by the sparseness of the population in the west of the county at the time of the tenth-century formation of the wapentakes. The men of Guthlaxton met beside Fosse Way in what is now Cosby parish. In 1807 Nichols notes that "a piece of land in this lordship (*i.e.* Cosby) is called *Guthlaxton Meadow*; and near it still remains a *tumulus* upon which, it is said, the Hundred Court was formerly held".¹⁵ The first edition Ordnance Survey 1 *in.* map of the area (published 1835) shows a *Guthlaxton Bridge* on the Fosse Way a half-mile south of Langham Bridge. The name Guthlaxton is OE **Gūðlāces-stān* "Gūðlāc's stone". This stone was probably a Roman milestone on Fosse Way; below the imposing Croft Hill it became a landmark at which the moot assembled. Who the Anglo-Saxon Gūðlāc was we do not know. The stone or the lost *tumulus* mentioned by Nichols may have marked his grave.

The divisions of Framland, Gartree, Goscote and Guthlaxton are all described as wapentakes in DB. By the middle of the thirteenth century, they had come to be known as hundreds. Framland and Gartree are occasionally so designated as early as *c.*1130 in the Leicestershire Survey. The Sparkenhoe Hundred appears for the first time in this Survey. It now comprises the western half of the original Guthlaxton Wapentake, its eastern boundary being Fosse Way. Thus it is coextensive with the deanery of Sparkenhoe first mentioned in the *Rotuli Hugonis de Welles* of the early-thirteenth century. The "hundreds" of the Leicestershire Survey formed subdivisions between wapentake and vill and seem to represent units created primarily for the purpose of assessment for taxation.¹⁶ These Leicestershire Survey "hundreds" take their names from important vill. The Sparkenhoe Hundred is the exception; no vill of its name is recorded. Like Framland, Gartree and Guthlaxton and the names of the majority of English wapentakes, its name is that of a feature of the landscape. It is probable that we should interpret the Sparkenhoe Hundred of the Survey as being a small wapentake in its own right rather than a hundred in the Survey sense. The Framland and Gartree wapentakes are occasionally, as we have seen, referred to as hundreds herein. VCHLei II 92 states that Sparkenhoe Hundred was formed between 1284 and 1300; there is also place-name evidence which suggests that it is earlier, belonging possibly to the time of the formation of the wapentakes of Framland, Gartree, Goscote and Guthlaxton.

So far we have seen that the moot-sites of the DB wapentakes are to be found in close proximity to the Roman roads which run through them. As often seems to be the case in other counties, these wapentake moot-sites may have had their origins as traditional places of popular assembly of dates prior to the tenth-century hundredal organization. But the Leicestershire pattern of Roman roads and wapentake moot-sites suggests deliberate selection of particular places of assembly both central to the wapentake areas

and near Roman roads leading to the nodal borough (*fig. 7*). The arrangement has every indication of being a piece of Anglo-Saxon county planning. Now the placing of the moot-site of the Sparkenhoe Hundred conforms exactly to the pattern created by those of the early wapentakes and appears to be part of the Anglo-Saxon organization. From Leicester, a nameless Roman road runs through Sparkenhoe Hundred to meet Watling Street at Mancetter. One mile from this road is Shericles Farm in Peckleton parish. Shericles is *Sherakehilles* in 1553.¹⁷ The first element of this place-name is OE *scīr* "a shire, an administrative district, a hundred" and the second OE *āc* "an oak tree": hence "the hundred oak".¹⁸ Here the men of Sparkenhoe Hundred must have held their monthly assembly. It is probable that the large nameless spur overlooking the road between Peckleton and Kirkby Mallory is the lost Sparkenhoe. This name is from OE **spearcanhōh* "a spur of land covered with broom"; the old name is echoed in the modern Broomhills near Shericles (*Broom Hill* in 1835). The headland of Sparkenhoe is the point at which the great open heath of western Leicestershire meets the Roman road. It would have been an obvious landmark for travellers to the hundred-moot. In neighbouring Kirkby Mallory the minor name *Shirrevesbrigge* (OE *scīr-rēfa* "a shire-reeve") occurs in the thirteenth century.¹⁹ A stream crosses the line of the road at the foot of Sparkenhoe; this is no doubt the site of "the sheriff's bridge", and may mark the ceremonial meeting place of the visiting sheriff from Leicester with representatives from the hundred-moot on the spur above.

An alternative explanation of the name Shericles is to interpret it as "the shire oak", and to identify it as the original site of the shire-moot. Western Leicestershire developed late in the Anglo-Saxon period. It is difficult to accept the meeting place for the shire assembly at a spot so far from the main areas of population even though we have the tempting *Shirrevesbrigge* at hand. We have also to bear in mind that this moot-site fits perfectly the pattern created by the other wapentake moot-sites and Roman roads. But it may be that the Sparkenhoe Hundred was carved out of Guthlaxton Wapentake between 1086 and c.1130 as the development of western Leicestershire progressed, that the site of the ancient shire-moot became that of the hundred (thus fitting Sparkenhoe into the organization of the pre-Conquest wapentakes), and that the shire-moot was then moved to the borough. More evidence is required.

In addition to the wapentake moot-sites of the tenth-century hundredal organization, there is in the county a series of names of places, both known and lost, which record local and perhaps earlier sites of assembly. Near Diseworth in north-west Leicestershire is Finger Farm. This is an original ON *þinghaugr* "an assembly mound or hill". It appears in the thirteenth century as *Thinghou*.²⁰ Finger Farm perhaps represents the moot-site of the inhabitants of the large island of land lying between rivers Trent and Soar and the northern edge of Charnwood Forest. A second *þing-haugr* is recorded, this in Frisby-on-the-Wreake where in c. 1200 we find *Thingou*.²¹ This lost site was very likely once the place of assembly of the men of the

Wreake Valley. Whereas we have some indication of the intensity of Scandinavian settlement in the valley of the Wreake from the distribution of place-names in ODan *bý* "a farmstead, a village", the presence of the *þing-haugr* in the Kegworth area suggests Scandinavian settlement from the Danish boroughs of Nottingham and Derby which is largely unreflected in the major place-names hereabouts. To be compared with these Leicestershire examples is the Thingoe Hundred in Suffolk where the *þing-haugr* gave its name to a major assembly.

For Oadby parish a *Spelthorn* is recorded in a charter of ante 1238.²² This is OE **spell-þorn* "thorn-bush at which speeches are made", obviously indicating a local moot-site. The Spelthorne Hundred in Middlesex is a direct parallel. We have already seen that moots sometimes assembled at prominent trees: the *geirtré* and the *scīr-āc* are other examples in Leicestershire. *Spelthorn* is an OE topographical name in a parish bearing a Scandinavian habitation name. Its origin no doubt predates Danish settlement in the county. A similar name occurs in Appleby Magna in the west of Leicestershire. A fifteenth-century terrier lists a *Spellow* in the old field next to Norton-juxta-Twycross.²³ This is OE **spell-hlāw* "mound or hill where speeches are made". It is to be compared with *Spellow* in Lancashire. As for Oadby's *Spelthorn*, one would suppose a pre-Danish date for Appleby's *Spellow*.

The final moot-site in Leicestershire of which we have some knowledge is *Swanimote Rock* in Charnwood Forest. The name is remembered in Swannymote Road which runs between Cademan Wood and High Sharpley near Whitwick. In 1800 Nichols notes, "High Cadman is finely contrasted in its form with one near it called *Swanimote Rock* which sits below it in the form of a squat tower, unlike in its formation to any other in the forest. On this formerly was held a court by the earls of Huntingdon which is now transferred to Whitwick".²⁴ *Swanimote* is OE *swāngemōt* "peasant-moot". The name suggests that the Swanimote was originally a local moot of dwellers in the forest: they may well have assembled by custom at *Swanimote Rock*. By the later Middle Ages it appears to have become a moveable court held in the various Charnwood manors. Thus in a Minister's Account for Shepshed, dated 1474, we learn of *the Swanimote held in Chernwode*. In another of 1512 for the manor of Groby we find that two *Swannemot* were held there in this year. Nichols' record of the removal of the court from *Swanimote Rock* to Whitwick appears to be a further example of the development of a manor court in the style of Shepshed and Groby, but there is no reason to doubt the antiquity of the moot-site of *Swanimote Rock*. It may well belong to the series of moot-sites which place-names record as having existed in the county before the Norman Conquest.

NOTES

1. The abbreviations used in this article are as follows:
AD *Catalogue of Ancient Deeds* (PRO), in progress
Charyte "Charyte's Rental"—Laud Misc. 625, Bodleian Library
DB Domesday Book
Dugd W. Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum*, 6 vols. (London 1817-30)
MiD Middleton MSS, University of Nottingham Archives
ODan Old Danish
OE Old English
ON Old Norse
OScand Old Scandinavian
PRO Publications of the Public Record Office
RTemple Rothley Temple Deeds, Leicester Muniment Room, Leicester Museum
VCHLei *Victoria County History of Leicestershire*, in progress
2. The Laud (Peterborough) Chronicle, otherwise known as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle E version
3. W. G. Hoskins, "Croft Hill", *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological Society* 26 (1950), 83-92
4. *Hundehaug* c.1285 RTemple, *Hundaue* 1325 (appears misread as *Hundane* in S. H. Skillington, "Medieval Cossington", *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological Society* 18 (1935), 224), *Hundauc* (or *Hundaue*) 1332 RTemple
5. O. S. Anderson, *The English Hundred-Names* (Lund 1934), 12
6. M. Posnansky, "A Palæolithic Implement from near Shipley Hill, Ratcliff-on-the-Wreak—With a Note on Shipley Hill", *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological Society* 31 (1955), 30-4
7. *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1330-4* (PRO), 292 and 1343-5, 404
8. *Records of the Borough of Leicester*, ed. M. Bateson and H. Stocks, 4 vols. (London and Cambridge, 1899-1923): I, 365; II, 79, 109
9. *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1391-6*, 716
10. J. Nichols, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester* 4 vols. (London 1795-1815); II pt 2, 791, 865.
11. G. Franzen, "Svensk Gertre och Engelsk Gartree", *Orter och Namn, Festskrift till Valter Jansson* (Lund 1967), 175 ff.
12. Nichols, *History and Antiquities* III pt 1, 2, 453
13. S. P. Potter, *A History of Wymeswold* (London 1915), 48
14. *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1547-53*, 229
15. Nichols, *History and Antiquities* IV pt 1, 140
16. *The Leicestershire Survey*, ed. C. F. Slade (Leicester 1956), 77
17. *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1547-53*, 95
18. Compare *Skyrack* in the West Riding of Yorkshire where Scandinavianisation of an English place-name has occurred. Anderson, *English Hundred-Names*, 22
19. *Shirrevesbrigge* Henry 3 AD bis, *Sirrevebrugge* ?12th cent. (1477) Charyte
20. *Thynghou* mid 13th cent. Dugd, *Thingouwe* 1275 AD, *Thynghou* 13th cent. MiD
21. F. M. Stenton, *Documents Illustrative of the Social and Economic History of the Danelaw* (London 1920), 306
22. G. F. Farnham, *Leicestershire Medieval Village Notes*, 6 vols. (Leicester 1929-33): VI, 21. Farnham's transcription *Spelithom* from this Hastings MS is clearly a misread *Spelthorn*.
23. Sloane Roll xxxi 9, British Museum
24. Nichols, *History and Antiquities* III pt 1, 134