

Old English *gārsecg* — an Eke-Name?*

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THE OE WORD *gārsecg* is listed in dictionaries with two meanings, “spear-warrior” or “spear-man” and “ocean,” the one a simple, literal compound, the other a name, apparently derived from the first, but in some quite unobvious way. Attempts to explain this relationship have been generally implausible. Grein (s. v.) refers to several early ones, little more than imaginative guesses. Sweet’s (213–5) derivation of it from *gāsrīc* (in the Franks Casket inscription) requires a stretched translation and has found no acceptance. Walde-Pokorny (I.459) quotes Holthausen’s surmise of a connection with the base **ghēi:ghī* but considers it “unsicher.” Most recently, Jan de Vries has returned to this (s. v. *geimi*), citing the OIcel word as meaning “open sea” and taking it as related to OE *gār*; but as there is no evidence for a parallel form or meaning, the uncertainty remains. The firmest proposal is probably Bosworth-Toller’s (s. v.):

The myth of the armed man, a spear-man is employed by the Anglo-Saxons as a term to denote the Ocean, and has some analogy to Neptune holding his trident. Spears were placed in the hands of the images of heathen gods, as mentioned by Justin.

But this says less than it appears to at first sight. If the analogy were granted it still would show no actual connection of the Old English word with the image from Roman culture. Figures of gods regularly carry symbols of their status, “scepters” of some sort. Neptune as god of the sea (a late calque of Poseidon) rules over the fish, and his scepter is a fish-spear, the tool or weapon of a fisherman, not that of a Germanic warrior. The Anglo-Saxons’ heathen images, by having spears placed in their hands, are identified as gods of war, intended to give success in battle. But there is no necessary or indeed any visible connection with the sea or ocean. The “analogy” with Neptune is hardly even that: its only link — an unrevealing one — is through the scepter.

The sense of the word is best illustrated by King Alfred’s phrase, “Oceanus . . . ðone man gārsecg hāteþ.”¹ Bosworth translates *man* as

* Elliott Dobbie’s editorial judgments in *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* could always be depended upon to combine thorough scholarship with cautious good sense. While he might have hesitated to accept the suggestion made in this note, he would have given it an honest hearing. What more can one ask?

¹ Joseph Bosworth, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, ed. and enlarged by T. Northcote Toller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), citation from Orosius’ *History of the World*.

“we” – making Alfred speak for the English as one of them – which is probably true to the intent of the statement. This appellation for the ocean was evidently the regular one in Alfred’s world, and since no parallels are found elsewhere in Germania it would appear to have been English. For some reason as yet unknown the Anglo-Saxons conceived of the ocean as a spear-warrior. What basis can this metaphor have had?

The component words are fully attested. *Gār* has cognates in OHG and OS *gēr*, OIcel *geirr* in the same meaning, and is connected with the base **ghaisos* (Walde-Pokorny I.528). It enters freely into compounds, frequently in names of plants having spearlike shoots or leaves (*gārleac-gārclife*);² it furnishes the metaphor, through shape, of a *gore* of land, a narrow portion coming to a point. The literal sense “spear” remains the regular one in all accounts of fighting. The epithetic overtones, as in *Gār, Dene*, are favorable – as one might expect in a warlike society.

Secg “man, warrior,” is also old, with IE base **seq^u-* (Walde-Pokorny II.476), also the base of Lat. *sequor*, and its sense is that of a follower: in military terms, a man who follows a chief. In OE it is poetic – not a word of everyday usage but having an aura of the past, perhaps heroic, certainly favorable. In OE the simplex *secg*, used occasionally for “ocean,” is apparently an abbreviation of *gārsecg*; if so, it testifies again that *gārescg* is the regular, established word.

Secg “man,” has a feminine homonym *secg* “sword,” from a quite different IE base **seq-* (Walde-Pokorny II.474), which is also the base of Latin *seco* “I cut” and of OE *seax*, a short sword or knife. By interesting coincidence this also furnishes the metaphor for various plants with swordlike and especially cutting leaves, under the name of *sedg* (*Carex*). This sense is attested from at least the eighth century; like *gār* it is old, has Germanic cognates, and no Roman connections. But sense and grammar rule it out as the second element of *gārsecg*: **spear-sword* does not correspond to any known weapon, and the compound is never feminine.

Gārsecg clearly seems by its composition to mean “spear-man,” yet the fact is that no clear example of it in this sense survives: the only meaning it ever has is “ocean” or “sea.” This implies either that this form is not the original one but has come about perhaps by folk-etymology, as Sweet thought, or else that the meaning “ocean, sea” became established so early or under such special conditions that other words were preferred to signify “spear-man,” specifically *gārberend*, *gārwiġa* or *-wiġend*, *gāra*; *æsc-berend*, or *æsc-wiġa*.³

² Thomas Wright, *Anglo-Saxon and Old English Vocabularies*, 2nd ed., ed. and collated by Richard Paul Wülcker (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968), s.vv.

³ But *æscman* became specialized with the other sense of *æsc*, “(ashwood) boat: a pirate.” Wright-Wülcker’s Glossary XI (eleventh century) 469. 6–7: Piratici, *wicings-ceaþan*, *sæscceaþan*, *æscmen*.

By sheer speculation one might bridge the gap between *spearman* and *ocean* by imagining a figure either protective or threatening, as both the warrior and the sea can be, ocean defending the land from enemies like an encircling wall, or contrariwise, constantly attacking the land (by *gārræses*), literally rushing at dikes and cliffs, wearing the land away. This may be the relic of an early kenning to which the key is lost.⁴

But *gārsecg* is more than a descriptive epithet. Equated with *Oceanus* it is a name and implies personification. The term “spearman” should therefore mean a specific one – “the spearman” – or even “Spearman.” As Bosworth apparently suspected, we may well be dealing not with a mere kenning but with a mythic concept. Ideas of deity develop from objects of nature – sun, moon, earth, sea, wind, etc. – every early pantheon has the chief ones and the Germanic pantheon was no exception. But whereas Neptune is fully developed as a human or man-fish deity who rules like a king over the sea and its inhabitants, Oceanus is something more primitive, the surrounding sea itself, a force of nature, which has taken only the first step of anthropomorphism in which a name is conferred. (As the development proceeds, he is “explained” as the son of Uranus, god of the heavens, and Gaia, goddess of the earth – and all are Titan figures who precede the further humanized “Olympian” gods.)

If the Anglo-Saxons conceived of the ocean or sea in mythic terms as the Spearman, the best candidate among the Germanic gods for this epithet and this association would seem to be Woden (or Wuotan, Wodin, Wotan, Oðin, Odin). It is pretty well established that while his cult was not originally Germanic, it had taken firm root in the North and was expanding in Scandinavia by the beginning of the sixth century.⁵ As is usual with growing cults, the properties of earlier gods were being attributed to Odin alongside traits of his own, and with different groups of worshippers emphasizing one or another. Most importantly, however, Odin is a god of battle, inspiring warriors to fight, choosing those to be slain (an activity later delegated to the Valkyries – OE *wælcyrige*). In the Eddic songs appear the twin kennings for battle, “the storm of spears,” and “Odin’s wrath.” Some of his chief exploits concern his magic spear, Gungnir, his characteristic weapon. The sword he gives to Sigmund is victorious in every fight except the last, in which Sigmund attacks Odin (in disguise), who parries with his spear, snapping the sword and then killing Sigmund.

It was customary for Odin’s worshippers, before beginning a battle, to promise him as a sacrifice all of the enemy who would be slain, and the ceremonial mark of this sacrifice was the hurling of a spear completely

⁴ If so, it may have followed some such course as Ocean > great (stormy) sea > land-attacker > spearman.

⁵ H. M. Chadwick, *The Cult of Oðin* (London: Clay, 1899), p. 65.

over the enemy troop as if to grasp and subject them within its arch. Other associations with the spear may include the wedge-shaped battle array (like a spearhead) of the Germans, attributed to Odin, who "taught it to Hamel." Odin's swan-maidens, as swans, fly in a wedge formation.

These latter are Scandinavian associations, most of them recorded late, but there is no question that the cult of Woden was practiced in Anglo-Saxon England. Meyer (369) notes: "Die Sachsen aber führen schon im 5. Jahrhundert unter 'Wodans Führung' nach Britannien hinüber, wo er um 660 der Hauptgott der Angeln hieß." The royal genealogies trace back to Woden.⁶ And as to the spear, it is considered significant that as part of Coifi's rejection of heathenism he profanes the altar by hurling a spear into it.⁷

Several apparent allusions to Woden's cult have been noted in *Beowulf*, the clearest coming in the episode of Herebeald and Hæðcyn (especially lines 2444-9)⁸ where reference is made to dead warriors hanging on the gallows in the manner of sacrifices offered to Woden.

It is less easy to show Woden as having a strong association with the ocean. Yet he was considered the husband of Nerthus, Mother Earth, whose chief shrine, as Tacitus noted, was "in an island of Ocean"⁹ – the Baltic sea. Thus the sea or ocean is the surrounding, embracing force which complements the land. Woden's cult was strongest in eastern Scandinavia among the Danes, Swedes, and Gautar (whereas the Norwegians favored Thor and the continental Germans Tyr).¹⁰ Keary (53-4) has written, "Wodin is first the Tempest-god, the rusher over land and sea, the god of battle . . ." – a god of storms. Nevertheless, in the *Hymða-lay* he is said to give fair winds to sailors.¹¹ As just noted, it was Woden who led the Saxons over the sea to Britain, where his cult became firmly established. If "Spearman" is a name for the ocean personified and deified, it suits Woden better than it does any other god.

But if so important an equation existed, how can it have left so little trace? The answer may well be that by far the greater part of what re-

⁶ Cf. especially Kenneth Sisam, "Anglo-Saxon Royal Genealogies," *Proceed. of the British Academy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953).

⁷ Bede, *Eccl. Hist.* II. 13.

⁸ Cf. E. V. K. Dobbie's edition, Vol. IV of the *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*.

⁹ Tacitus, *Germania* 40.2: "... Nerthum, id est Terram matrem . . . Est in insula Oceani castum nemus . . ."

¹⁰ The "Gär-Dena" of the first line of *Beowulf* are probably not given this epithet by accident or merely for the sake of alliteration. They are famous spear-fighters; they may appropriately be thought of as Gärseg-Dene, too.

¹¹ Elard Hugo Meyer, *Mythologie der Germanen* (Straßburg: Trübner, 1903), p. 368; Frederick York Powell, *The First Five Books of the Danish History of Saxo Grammaticus. With Some Considerations on Saxo's Sources, Historical Methods, and Folk-lore*, trans. by Oliver Elton (London: Nutt, 1894), lx.

mains about Odin and the other Germanic gods is Scandinavian and relatively late. The acceptance of Christianity did not deter Snorri from recording pagan beliefs and customs in considerable detail. Not so in Anglo-Saxon England: the records were preserved not by scopps but by priests who sternly put things pagan behind them. That the cults persisted can be read between the lines – the backsliding of Hrōðgar’s Danes under Grendel’s attacks probably represents the situation in the *Beowulf* poet’s England. There is the notorious case of Ingeld, not a god but a pagan warrior who, for Alcuin, could not share the room with Christ and must be rejected. Thus the word *gārsecg*, more and more specialized as “Spearman,” a name for Woden, and displaced in the simple sense by *gārwiga*, *æscberend*, and other words, would retain only the special meaning “ocean, sea.” Even in this sense it did not outlive the OE period except in a few glossaries and in corrupt forms which imply increasing unfamiliarity and ultimate disuse.

A favorite theme in OE poetry, the storm at sea, finds one of its best adaptations in *Exodus* when the walls of water in the Red Sea, having let the Israelites pass through, now begin to rush down upon the hosts of Pharaoh. Especially striking are the lines in which *gārsecg* appears (487b–495):

Wlance ðeode

ne mihton forhabban helpendra pað,
 merestreames mod, ac he manegum gesceod
 gyllende gryre. Garsecg wedde,
 up ateah, on sleap. Egesan stodon,
 weollon wælbenna. Witrod gefeol
 heah of heofonum handgeweorc godes,
 famigbosma flodwearde sloh,
 unhleowan wæg, alde mece, . . .

Here the personification turns full circle: the sea becomes the warrior – his fighting anger (*mōd*) aroused; it is a yelling horror (*gyllende gryre*), words also used of a spear in flight. The Ocean becomes mad (*wēdde*), strikes down from above as if with an old sword. In short, it rages as a warrior might rage in battle. It is impossible to prove that this anthropomorphic view of the Ocean consciously expresses the spirit of Woden (the etymology of whose name may be related to the adjective *wōd* “mad,” and our verb *wēdan*).¹² Indeed, in a Christian poem this may be an entirely fresh conception, innocent of any such echo. Yet traditional themes are tenacious – and how excellently this passage would serve as a description of Woden making a furious attack!

¹² Cf. Chadwick’s discussion, *op. cit.*, pp. 66, 67.

Some words of H. C. Wyld (55) are appropriate to the present case:

It is difficult for us to-day to reach back through the centuries and grasp the precise shade of meaning which each of these apparent synonyms [for ocean or sea] once expressed It may be possible in many cases to discover the remote origin of words by the light of etymology. But even when this is reliable for one particular purpose, it may be but a misleading guide to the poetical and emotional value of a word in the mouth of a poet.

In the case of *gārsecg* etymology produces no firm solution. If folk-etymology has taken part, the word which became transformed into *gārsecg* has not been found. The limitation to English use, at one time solidly established then later quickly falling into disuse, calls for some explanation. To see the word as having pagan and mythic allusion may furnish a key to its "poetical and emotional value." Woden, Spearman, the rager, god of battle, has another aspect: he is also the embracing ocean, husband to Mother Earth, sponsor of sea-expeditions. But when the new religion comes and Christ conquers the old pagan gods, he falls at last a casualty with the rest.

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