Eldar Heide: *Pre-Christian* hǫrgr*: passages through barriers*. Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 2025. 214 pages (ill.). Online (open access), DOI: https://doi.org/10.18261/9788215067810-25.

This short and richly illustrated book offers a comprehensive topographically-based analysis of place-names containing Old Norse *hǫrgr*, its relatives and descendants in Norway, Sweden and Iceland, with occasional forays into other Scandinavian lands, especially Denmark, leading to a new theory of the original sense of the term.

The author's primary concerns are, firstly, to dispute the commonly held view that the primeval meaning of the term had to do with piles of stones and that it might be glossed 'cairn' or similar in English; and, secondly, to offer an alternative etymological account and an insight into its subsequent semantic development in various Scandinavian dialects and their place-names. After a short Preface, the Introduction (ch. 2, 10–16; page references are to the pdf version of the book) starts from the premiss that *hǫrgr* (etc.) is well represented in surviving texts in North and West Germanic languages: *hǫrgr* (Old Norse), *hargh(er)* (Old Swedish, Old Danish), *harug / harag* (Old High German), *h(e)arg* (Old English). In texts in these languages it regularly denotes a cult-site of some kind, and the variety of the sites involved "constitutes a tricky topic in Old Germanic religion" (10). Heide notes that a consensus has emerged that the original sense must have involved stony places or stone objects. He is able to show persuasively that the fountainhead of this consensus is work done by Jakob Grimm in the 1840s (31, 35, 58, etc.), and that Grimm's view has been handed down, adopted and adapted by generations of scholars, but this opinion has "never been more than an assumption" (10). Whilst the book shows that there is an interesting relationship between places so named and stone-bearing landscapes, Heide's view is that the primordial meaning of the term was something more abstract, as indicated in the subtitle of the book. He sets out to demonstrate the reasons for his view in a topographically firmly grounded analysis. The rest of the introduction is devoted to a well-informed discussion of the (claimed) wider Indo-European [IE] relations of **harguz*, the Germanic proto-form the author uses to refer to the set of related words in their respective languages. It culminates in a rejection of the widely accepted connection with the IE set exemplified by Welsh *carreg* 'rock' and a suggestion that

the appropriate comparandum is Latin *carcer* ‘enclosed space, starting gate for horse-races, prison’, as first suggested by Adolf Noreen as long ago as 1892 when the ‘cultic site’ sense may have been thought paramount (60–61). Formally, that relationship is fully defensible. However, the reviewer still finds the nature of the proposed semantic link between ‘enclosed space’ and the proposed ‘passage through a barrier’ sense (as opposed to the later senses of **harguz* to be mentioned below) problematic, although Heide makes heroic efforts to justify it, in effect by prioritizing the sense of *carcer* ‘starting gate’, i.e. a means of release from an enclosure.

Ch. 3 (17–65) explores the evidence that might appear to support the “stony” hypothesis, beginning with what could be seen as its “type-site” and best representative, Harreby in Jutland with its wealth of archaeological finds and with what appears to be a stony structure crying out to be taken for the original **harguz*. Heide rejects the archaeologists’ interpretation of this feature and concludes further that, armed with the “stony” hypothesis due to Grimm, subsequent scholars have been led by confirmation bias to look for stones in the vicinity of the many other **harguz*, and that, whilst frequently discovering some, they have missed something more fundamental. Moreover, he argues that stones are not integral to, or crucial in, a significant number of the sites investigated.

In the long core of the book, ch. 4 (66–160), Heide offers a painstaking analysis of each of the places identified as having a **harguz* name, looking for landscape traits that might offer an insight into what any more fundamental characteristic might be. It turns out that there is no single trait, but that the great majority of instances might be viewed as referring to passages through various barriers in the landscape (or more strictly, barriers to a human journey though it). Such barriers may be formed by mountain promontories, fjords, lakes and swamps, islands surrounded by shoals, and so on. Heide carefully assesses each place for its stoniness, finds that a large number fail the test, and that there are many equally stony places that are not named with **harguz*. Moreover, as regards cairns, “[t]o my knowledge, there is no certain or even probable example of a place with a pre-Christian **harguz* name that derives its name from a construction of these types.” (137). The great majority of the analyses offered struck the reviewer as at least moderately convincing, though it is fair to say that special pleading appears necessary to rescue some, for

example where "there are several kilometres of farms between Horge and the barrier, i.e. the place at which travel down the valley is virtually blocked" (138), and it is suggested that the place is named from the point at which a track avoiding the virtual blockage departs from what would be the most obvious through-route on the map, with the name acting rather like a road-sign warning of potential dangers ahead.

That said, the reviewer has no detailed personal knowledge of the Scandinavian landscape and is reliant on visual aids. Ch. 4, like those that follow, is illustrated by many annotated maps, each fully related to the accompanying text. The only fault I would find with these is that some lack an indication of scale, and seeing that their scales clearly diverge greatly, the reader would have been helped to assess the comparability of the sites in question by a consistent indication; e.g. in the cases of those lacking on pp. 86 and 93, but there are many others. There is a scale on the map on p. 117, but it is illegible, and given the apparent distance of the relevant name (Horgen near Lake Jarenvatnet near Oslo) from the feature responsible for it, that is unhelpful. And while the profusion of maps is welcome in itself, an illustration of some of the "barrier" sites viewed from ground level would also have been beneficial, so that the salience of the feature for human observers rather than migratory birds could be assessed; the lower image on p. 102, showing Horgstinden in Lofoten in 3D-effect from a semi-elevated viewpoint, is an example of what could have been more widely useful.

Semantic change is of course endemic in language, and it is no surprise that some developments of the earliest inferrable sense are claimed. The Trojan horses might be moraines or other ridges, which may act either as the way of getting through or across some barrier or as the barrier itself (139). Thus some instances of **harguz* may relate to the topographical barrier, i.e. to a feature which causes a separation between districts (in some sense). The brief ch. 5 (161–168) and ch. 6 (169–171), starting from an interesting consideration of the important cultic site of Odensala /**Odensharg* in Uppland, suggest that man-made structures, some of which would have been formed by stones, could be named with **harguz* from conveying a visual impression similar to a natural barrier and/or having relevant functions, e.g. those of excluding access to it or ritualizing it. In ch. 7 (172–174) we find the fullest and most ingenious expression of this idea: that the basically topographical-functional application of the

term was connected to the early-attested sense of 'cultic building' "firstly, [by the] ritualization of such passages, secondly, [by] imitations of such barriers and passages, in the form of crescents and circles of standing stones …". Finally, in ch. 8 (175–192), Heide considers whether the connection of **harguz* with landscape might simply be illusory; perhaps the settlements bearing such names were simply convenient or strategic. He counters this idea by noting that "many **harguz* names that are likely to be ancient are names of natural formations and have never been names of settlements." (175). The book finishes with a summary of the argument and the author's conclusions (ch. 9; 193–197), and an extensive bibliography.

There is always a risk with a resolution of the toponymic landscape having a degree of semantic abstraction about it that other perceivers will induce different patterns. If they do, they will need to make a powerful case to combat Heide's hypothesis. Provided that one accepts the premiss that **harguz* is a landscape term, the level of empirical support for it is high, possible counterevidence is candidly interrogated, the inferences drawn from the evidence are broadly persuasive, and the structure of the argument in its favour is laid out with exemplary clarity. In any case, doubters will need to address the lack of stones or stony ground at a significant number of **harguz* places.

Heide is careful to point out the need to assess **harguz* in relation to the wider vocabulary of potentially functionally similar toponymic elements such as those meaning 'door', 'gap' or 'narrows' (140–142). He is not a naïve reader of landscape history: he takes into account the topographical effects of 2000 years of post-Ice Age isostatic rebound and sea-level change, and these effects have had a marked positive effect on the plausibility of some of his claims.

As we noted earlier, Heide is also well aware that **harguz* is represented in the toponymy of other Germanic languages, and the reviewer is well aware that the product of Heide's researches could, and should, provoke an evaluation of the history of Old English *h(e)arg*, a well-known place-name element (as in the conspicuous *Harrow-on-the-Hill*) which is considered to have the primary sense 'heathen temple'. Long ago, A. H. Smith, the author of the authoritative *English place-name elements* (1956), suggested a possible link with OE **hær* 'stone' (which the reviewer regards as a ghost), a supposed cognate of Swedish *har* 'skerry,

stony ground'. This has been taken by some scholars (not including Heide; 68) to be somehow connected with the **harguz* for whose primordial meaning Heide dismisses a connection with stones, preferring, as we have seen, 'passage through a barrier' (*passim*), or 'barrier' as in the case of Swedish *harg* (33–34; usually taken to mean 'stony ground'). The Germanic toponymic cauldron has been well and truly stirred. But the reviewer cannot quite detach himself from the idea that the well-known later ritual or cultic element must also have been an early component of these names.

That said, Germanic was established in Scandinavia long before it appeared in Britain, and it would be no surprise if the proto-sense of **harguz* that Heide interestingly, though not wholly persuasively canvasses had no representative west of the North Sea. Aligning his findings with toponymy expressed in Continental West Germanic may, I suspect, prove a sterner test which will hopefully be conducted soon.

Richard Coates