VII.—*Notes on the “Hwiting Treow” of the Anglo-Saxons.* By JOHN YONGE
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TACITUS, in his description of the ancient Germans, speaks of their reliance upon auguries and decisions by lot. The latter was performed with twigs cut from the branches of a fruit-bearing tree, and thrown upon a white garment:—
“Sortium consuetudo simplex. Virgam frugiferæ arbori decisam in surculos amputant eosque notis quibusdam discretos super candidam vestem temere ac fortuito spargunt.”—Germ. 10.

We find this ceremony described perhaps more in detail in the laws of the Frisians, after their conversion to Christianity, where, in the case of homicide in a tumult, two twigs, one of which was marked with the sign of the cross, were covered with clean wool, and then laid upon the altar or reliques:—

“Duo tali de virga præcisi, quos tenas vocant; quorum unus signo crucis dignosceretur, alius purus dimittitur, et lana munda obvoluti super altare seu reliquias mittuntur.”—Leg. Fris. tit. xiv. 1.

The *tan* or twig was thus used by all the Northern nations, and, according to Herodotus, by the ancient Scythians.

In the legend of St. Andrew, an Anglo-Saxon poem, the use of the twig is thus described:—

Leton him þâ betweonum

tân wîsian :

* * * * *

* * * * *

Ðâ se tân gehwearp

efne ofer ænne

eald-gesiða

They let among them

The twig decide :

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* * * * *

Then went the twig

even over one

of the old comrades.

The object of these remarks is to identify, if possible, a tree or trees the twigs of which furnished the *tan* used on these occasions here cited. Three trees at least had the term *Hwiting* applied to them by our forefathers, viz. :—

I. The lesser Lime, or Linden (*Tilia cordata*). The fact that the shields of the Saxons and kindred nations were formed of its wood, and that "lind" in their poetry stood for shield, is sufficient to justify the appellation.

II. The Rowan or Quick-beam, or, as it is popularly termed, the Mountain Ash (*Sorbus aucuparia*), and, in some counties, the Whiten-tree and the Witty. From this tree the Northern nations cut their rûn-stafas. Dr. Prior observes, in Popular Names of British Plants, p. 192 :—

"Rowan or Roan-tree, called in the northern counties Ran or Royne, Da. and Sw. rön or runn, the Old-Norse runa, a charm, from its being supposed to have power to avert the evil eye. 'The most approved charm against cantrips and spells was a branch of the Rowan-tree planted and placed over the byre. This sacred tree cannot be removed by unholy fingers.'—Jamieson's Scot. Dict. 'Roan-tree and red thread haud the witches a in dread.'—Johnston, in East Bord. The word runn, from Skr. ru, murmur, meant a secret. A rûn-wita was a private secretary, one who knew his master's secrets; and from the same word were derived rynan, to whisper, rûna, a whisperer—in earlier times a magician, and rûn-stafas,^a mysterious staves. From this last use of the word the name "rûn" came naturally to be applied to the tree from which such staves were usually cut, as "boc" to that from which book-staves, boc-stafas, were made; but it does not appear to be ascertained why this tree should have been so exclusively used for carving runes upon, as to have derived its name from them, not only in the British Isles but in the Scandinavian countries also. There was probably a superstitious feeling of respect for it derived from ancient times."

The people of the North built their ships of this wood, and a walking-staff made of it was thought to protect the traveller from harm.

III. The Wayfaring-tree, Spindle-tree, Mealy Guelder Rose, Whiten-tree or Whiten-beam (*Viburnum Lantana*). Of this tree Aubrey says :—"Witty-tree, or Wayfaring-tree, is rare in this country; some few in Cranbourn Chace, and three or four on the south downe of the farme of Broad Chalke. In Herefordshire they are not uncommon; and they used, when I was a boy, to make pinnes for the yoakes of their oxen of them, believing it had vertue to preserve them from being forespoken, as they call it; and they use to plant one by their dwelling-house, believing it to preserve from witches and evill eyes."—Aubrey's Nat. Hist. Wilts, p. 56. This tree is universally known by the rustic population of the Southern, Midland, and Western counties by the last name here given, viz. the

^a See the interesting dissertation on Anglo-Saxon Runes, by J. M. Kemble, in the *Archæologia*, xxviii. 307.

Whiten-tree or Whiten-beam. It is used in some parts of England at this day in the making of strong coal-baskets.

IV. The Dog-wood, or Cornel-tree (*Cornus sanguinea*). Dr. Prior tells us that Dog-wood should be written Dauk-wood, to "dauk" being, in the West-country dialect, to prick or stab. The word occurs in the old nursery rhyme: "Prick it and dauk it, baker's man." The term seems to be applicable to any kind of wood which could be made into skewers; hence the name Prick-wood, or Skewer-wood, which is sometimes given to it.

It will be seen at once by those who will take the pains to examine these trees that the one glossed by Ælfric thus, *Hwiting Treow*, *Variculus arbor*, is the only tree of the four to which the appellation can apply. It seems to me highly probable that this tree, conspicuous in the hedges in summer-time by its blossom and fruit, and in the winter by its blood-red stems, whence its name, is in reality the *Frugifera arbor* of Tacitus, and that the twigs cut from it were occasionally used by all the Northern nations. My opinion is founded on the evident fact that the appellation Hwiting is the generic term applied to any kind of wood that might be easily whittled or shaped into pins, pegs, or spindles, and the dog-wood or daukwood-tree is certainly of that character.

I have heard that the dogwood-tree has been sometimes called the whiten-tree, but have not been able to verify it. I forward branches of the whiten-tree and the dogwood-tree, each being *frugiferæ arbores*, in which a great dissimilarity may be observed. The dogwood-tree is still used extensively by butchers for skewers.^a I may observe, in conclusion, that "to draw cuts" is, in the language of the rustic population, to draw lots.

^a The term skewer-wood is given popularly to a tree known to the rustics as the catrash or catrush, perhaps from its having a green bark like a rush. It is preferred to the dogwood on account of its extreme hardness. It is also called spoke-wood, a term which seems to reflect the superstitious practice mentioned by Aubrey.