

Chapter 33

Name borrowing among the Vikings

Henrik Williams

There are many sources that tell us about the personal names used by Scandinavians in the Viking Age, not least the Old Norse sagas and the runestones of Denmark, Norway and Sweden. The names, as such, in these sources are readily available for study, the former most easily by consulting Erik Henrik Lind's dictionaries of Norwegian-Icelandic first names and bynames (1905-15, 1920-21, 1931) and the latter by using Lena Peterson's Internet dictionary of Runic names.

Also naming customs are mentioned in the Old Norse literature, although it is uncertain how dependable this material is. Thus sources may flow abundantly, yet I would claim that we know comparatively little about many aspects of names and naming among the Viking Age Scandinavians, or the Vikings, as I shall call them hence-forth.

One area that requires much more research is name giving: not just why a certain person was given a certain name, but also when in life names were given – was it only in the first year or could a person's name be changed later in life, perhaps more than once, and who got to decide this?

The relationship between the first name and possible bynames also touches upon the problem of naming. In medieval times the use of bynames was very common, probably because the denser population in the cities made it necessary to distinguish between people with the same first name, especially since some first names of Christian origin became extremely common.

The medieval bynames were often of a non-flattering character, *Ingrid Thieves' fingers* just to name one example. But the use of these negative names was not neutral, we often find them in sources where the name-bearers or the name-bearers' relatives couldn't "control" the form in which they were referred to. It is more startling, however, to find that on the runic memorials these superficially negative names were also frequently used, even though the memorial was commissioned by a family member. Furthermore, the use of the byname was almost often exclusive, that is: a person was referred to only by what looks like his byname. A single example should suffice. The name *Óþvegin* is used on three Swedish runestones, all of them in Uppland. In the first *Óþvegin* is one of the five siblings commemorating a parent, in the second *Óþvegin* is the name of the stone carver, and in the third *Óþvegin* is the father being commemorated.

Now, the name *Óþvegin* means 'unwashed, dirty' and couldn't really be considered a very positive name. Yet it was used without shame by the name bearers themselves and

for their honored dead. Elsewhere (Williams 1993), I have argued that superficially negative names may have been given as nicknames to participants in Viking expeditions where such names can acquire a positive aura (cf. McClure 1981:72, 74). These and other names are also indicative of "later" name giving, i.e. names not necessarily given to babies, although many may certainly be the result of naming a person after somebody else (Swed. *uppkallelse*).

I introduce my paper in this way because I want to emphasize that we know very little indeed why any one person bears a certain name. This uncertainty is contested by no one, as far as I know, yet it does not seem to have been considered in due extent at least within one other area of onomastics, i.e. the question of name borrowing.

My reason for choosing to talk about name borrowing is simply that during my research on personal names in the past decade, I have come across a number of names that have brought the question of borrowing in focus.

To reveal the not-so-grand conclusion at the very outset of my talk: I have come to doubt that the borrowing of personal names was a common method of naming people in the Viking Age.

I should begin by defining what, exactly, I mean by name borrowing. I use this term to refer to a practice where a child, or perhaps a grown-up, in pre-Christian Scandinavian tradition would be given a name, taken from *outside* this person's own family.

Thus I exclude two important ways of naming from what I call borrowing. The first is where foreign names are given to a Scandinavian simply because his or her family has a foreign background. I imagine that most or all Celtic names, for example, were originally introduced into the Scandinavian onomasticon, the stock of names, because the first bearers had a Celtic or part-Celtic parent.

The second naming practice I exclude is the giving of saints' names. These are indeed an example of outside names introduced into the Scandinavian personal nomenclature, but they cannot, of course, be seen as part of the original, pre-Christian, naming practices. Besides, the Christian names occur late and seldom in the Viking Age, at least in eastern Scandinavia. Of the more than 1,300 individual names occurring in Swedish runic inscriptions only half a dozen, found on stones after 1050, are saints' names (Williams 1996:70).

Consequently I take the term *Name borrowing* to denote two other, very different phenomena. The first relates to certain names in runic inscriptions that are assumed to be borrowed from fictitious persons in contemporary or older literature. Some of these are presumed to have been imported from the Continent: e.g. *Atli*, *Erlingr*, *Hagbarðr*, *Hogni*, *Ingjaldr*, *Magnhildr*, and *Uffi*. Other names occur only as mythological names in Old Norse sources. Some of these might seem somewhat odd: e.g. *Beinvíðr*, *Ennibrattr*, *Fáinn*, *Fjólvarr*, *Fúlñir*, *Hjörvarðr*, *Hornbori*, and *Róta*, but others look natural enough: *Faðir*, *Nefr*, and *Pegn*. Especially the three last examples should constitute a warning to us not to underestimate the richness of the Nordic onomasticon, nor to assume that all names were spread evenly over Scandinavia. We may very well find that fictitious names in the Old Norse literature were current as actual personal names in Viking Age Denmark and Sweden, and why not? On the other hand some names do certainly seem as if they were borrowed. It is easiest to tell with the names that derive from Continental sources (e.g. *Uffi*, cf. Peterson 1996:142), even if I think they are thought to be too many. It is more difficult to tell whether a name in for example Sweden is borrowed from Danish or Norwegian.

The second kind of name borrowing deals with perfectly normal names in one Scandinavian country that some scholars believe have been imported from another.

One can, for example, find statements to the effect that a reasonably common name in the Viking Age must necessarily have been given because some famous person had that very name. These famous persons are usually kings and I would like to discuss a few instances of this alleged practice.

One clear example is found in the corpus edition of Sweden's runic inscriptions from the province Västmanland, where Sven B. F. Jansson has the following to say about the name *Knútr*, which appears on the runestone from Lilla Kyringe (Vs p. 49):

Knútr is not a common name in our runic inscriptions from the eleventh century. If you disregard the cases which refer to Canute the Great, there are only six instances [and he names half a dozen stones around the Lake Mälaren]. It seems very likely that the name was put in use by naming after Canute the Great. (In that case the naming is also testimony of the participation of Swedes in the Viking raids to England.) The occurrence of the name on the runestone from Lilla Kyringe has therefore been used when dating the inscription and the carvings of Balle in general.¹

In fact, there are two further instances of the name *Knútr* in Viking Age Sweden, on the runestone from Spånga church (Jansson 1953:266-68) and the fragment from Fivelstad church (Gustavson 1997:28). But the question is whether these eight name-bearers were all given the name because their father or perhaps grandfather had served with Canute the Great in England. It is certainly possible, but I don't see that it has any bearing on the dating of Swedish runestones which no one has suggested be dated to the 1030's or earlier.

Also *Hákon* is a distinguished name, used by Norwegian nobility and kings. It was common in Norway, but not in Iceland. In Sweden it was also common, or even very common, since at least a score of Swedes are recorded on the runestones as having had the name *Hákon*.

The name *Haraldr* must be very old, since already Tacitus mentions a name *Chariovalda* (Peterson 1984: 18; cf. the possible place-name *Harjavalta* in Finnish (*op. cit.* p. 6, note 2), which must have been imported in the Proto-Norse period). The name is also found in Old High German and Old English. One would surmise that since *Haraldr* was a common Germanic name it is only to be expected that a fair number of Scandinavians also bore it. But in western Scandinavia the name is concentrated to the royal family, although possibly borrowed from the Danish, and is found already in the ninth century. Many kings, especially Norwegian of course, were called *Haraldr* but few other Norwegians before the 13th century and the same is true of Iceland.

There are also some seven Swedish name-bearers in the Viking Age with a more southern provenance than *Knútr*. If all men named *Knútr* had "borrowed" names the same should be assumed for the men named *Haraldr*, I suppose, but this hasn't been claimed by anyone to my knowledge.

Finally I want to mention the name *Sveinn*. The most famous *Sveinn*, of course, is *Sveinn Forkbeard*. Now, in the Middle Ages *Sveinn* was a most common name in mainland Scandinavia and owes nothing to its popularity to the church. Its etymology is clear, it means young man, and the name seems to be perfectly comparable to for example *Steinn*. Nevertheless, as late as in 1983 Staffan Hellberg (p. 78 f.) claims that the name *Sveinn* was popular in Sweden because of Danish influence:

Since the entire fashion of runestones, with the younger runic script, is considered to be imported from Denmark, it is close at hand to [...] see the high frequency of the name *Sveinn* as a manifestation of a Danish fashion in Sweden.²

He does not explain why this would be so, but the reference to a new way of writing runes would date the influence very early indeed, to the ninth or tenth centuries, and could then have nothing to do with *Sveinn Forkbeard*.

It is quite interesting to take a look at the distribution of the name *Sveinn* in the Viking Age inscriptions. There are more than 90 Swedish inscriptions with this name and 14 Danish. But the Danish inscriptions are not spread all over Denmark. Almost all of them are found in Skåne or on Bornholm, areas very close to Sweden, whatever Sweden means at that time. If the Swedes felt a need for importing a popular and common Danish name one would expect a more general pattern of distribution on its home soil. But, of course, one could explain the distribution pattern by assuming that *Sveinn Forkbeard* deserves all the credit for the name's high fashion, and by the time this happened few runestones were carved in Denmark proper; at least the Bornholm ones are decidedly later.

I want to round off this paper by a few observations.

It seems likely that at least some personal names in Scandinavia became popular within royal families; at least *Haraldr* and *Knútr* belong to this group. From then on it could have worked in two ways: either the names spread to other groups or just the opposite, that is they were more or less monopolized by the high and mighty.

But, in either case the name borrowing by "ordinary" people was affected primarily in the country in which the particular name was adopted by the royalty. If *Knútr*, for example, enjoyed a favorite position among Danish kings, other Danes may have felt encouraged to name their sons *Knútr* or contrariwise were discouraged to use this exclusive name. But Scandinavians outside Denmark were most likely not so affected. It is instructive to note that in Norway and Iceland the name wasn't used almost at all in early times. In Iceland there were one or two early name-bearers, but the name never became popular. In Norway the name was not used before the twelfth century, but did become rather common after the year 1300 (Lind col. 698 f.), probably because it had become a saint's name. In Sweden, on the other hand, there were some eight men named *Knútr* already in the tenth century. Obviously the name pattern does fluctuate in different Scandinavian areas.

Secondly, one must question whether the assumption of name borrowing between the Scandinavian peoples can ever be used when discussing from where a certain individual got his or her name. Even if a name was borrowed across the borders, once established in a new country it could take on a life of its own, growing in popularity for other reasons than its original royal connections, being handed down by other means of transformation.

The question of name borrowing between the Scandinavians has never attracted much attention. My reason for raising the topic here is that occasionally there will be a statement assuming such borrowing to be an established fact which I very much doubt it to be. Possibly the problem deserves more attention.

Bibliography

Gustavson, Helmer 1997: Verksamheten vid Runverket i Stockholm. *Nytt om runer* 12 (publ. 1998), pp. 24-31.

- Hellberg, Staffan 1983: Namnet *Sveinn* i äldsta tid. *Svenska landsmål och svenskt folkliv* 106, pp. 78-85.
- Jansson, Sven B. F. 1953: Uppländska runstensfynd. *Fornvännen*, pp. 262-80.
- Lind, Erik Henrik 1905-15: *Norsk-isländska dopnamn och fingerade namn från medeltiden*. Uppsala-Leipzig.
- 1920-21 *Norsk-isländska personbinamn från medeltiden. Samlade och utgivna med förklaringar*. Uppsala.
- 1931: *Norsk-isländska dopnamn och fingerade namn från medeltiden*. Supplementband. Utg. av Det norske videnskaps-akademi i Oslo. Oslo-Uppsala-København.
- Peterson, Lena 1984: *Harald* och andra namn på *-(v)ald*. *Studia anthroponymica Scandinavica* 2, pp. 5-25.
- 1996: Review of Nordwestgermanisch. Eds. E. Marold & Ch. Zimmerman (1995) *Studia anthroponymica Scandinavica* 14, pp. 141-8.
- *Nordiskt runnamnslexikon*. Fjärde, reviderade versionen med tillägg av frekvenstabeller och finalalfabetisk namnlista. Februari 2002, (www.sofi.se/SOFIU/runlex).
- McClure, Peter 1981: Nicknames and Petnames: Linguistic Forms and Social Contexts. *Nomina* 5, pp. 63-76.
- Williams, Henrik 1993: Ó-namn. Nordiska personnamn med det privativa prefixet Ó-. *Personnamn i nordiska och andra germanska fornspråk. Handlingar från NORNAs artonde symposium i Uppsala 16-19 augusti 1991*. Ed. L. Peterson. Uppsala 1993 (NORNA-rapporter 51), pp. 95-105.
- 1996: Vad säger runstenarna om Sveriges kristnande? *Kristnandet i Sverige. Gamla källor och nya perspektiv*. Ed. B. Nilsson. Uppsala (Projektet Sveriges kristnande. Publikationer 5), pp. 45-83.
- Vs = *Västmanlands runinskrifter*. Granskade och tolkade av Sven B. F. Jansson. Stockholm 1964 (Sveriges runinskrifter 13).

Notes

- ¹ *Knutr* är icke något vanligt namn i våra runinskrifter från tiohundratalet. Om man bortser från de belägg, då namnet åsyftar Knut den store, finner man det endast sex gånger: Sö 217, U 38, U 92, U 818, U 1149, Vs 15. Det förefaller mycket sannolikt, att namnet har kommit i bruk genom uppkallelse efter Knut den store. (I så fall är också uppkallelsen ett vittnesbörd om svenskars deltagande i Englandstågen. [- -]) Namnets förekomst på Vs 15 har därför använts vid dateringen av inskriften och av Balles ristningar över huvud taget [...].
- ² Eftersom hela runstensmodet, med ny runrad, anses ha kommit från Danmark, ligger det nära till hands att [...] se också den höga frekvensen av namnet *Sveinn* som ett utslag av danskt mode i Sverige.

Viking and Norse in the North Atlantic

*Select Papers from the Proceedings of the Fourteenth
Viking Congress, Tórshavn, 19-30 July 2001*

Edited by
Andras Mortensen

and

Símun V. Arge



Annales Societatis Scientiarum Færoensis
Supplementum XLIV

Tórshavn 2005

Published by
Føroya Fróðskaparfelag - The Faroese Academy of Sciences
Debesartrøð, Postrúm 209, FO-110 Tórshavn, FAROE ISLANDS
fff@froedskaparfelag.fo, www.Froedskaparfelag.fo

in collaboration with

Føroya Fornminnisavni
Historical Museum of the Faroe Islands
www.natmus.fo

© 2005 by
Føroya Fróðskaparfelag and the individual authors, 2005

ISBN 99918-41-44-X

International distribution:
Bókasølan í SMS
e-mail: bokasolan@bokasolan.fo
www.bokasolan.fo

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form
or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying,
recording or otherwise, without written permission
of the publishers.

Typesetting:
Føroyaprent

Printed in the Faroe Islands at
Føroyaprent

Table of Contents

Foreword	9
<i>Chapter 1 · Knut Helle</i> The position of the Faeroes and other 'tributary lands' in the medieval Norwegian dominion	11
<i>Chapter 2 · Símun V. Arge</i> Cultural Landscapes and Cultural Environmental issues in the Faeroes	22
<i>Chapter 3 · Arne Thorsteinsson</i> "There is another set of small islands"	39
<i>Chapter 4 · Else Mundal</i> Færeyinga saga – a Fine Piece of Literature in Pieces	43
<i>Chapter 5 · Andrew Wawn</i> Færeyinga saga: Victorian Visions and Versions	52
<i>Chapter 6 · Richard North</i> Money and religion in Færeyinga saga	60
<i>Chapter 7 · Gro Steinsland</i> The Mythology of Rulership and the Saga of the Faroe Islanders	76
<i>Chapter 8 · Andras Mortensen</i> One Facet of the Tendency in Færeyinga Saga	87
<i>Chapter 9 · Ditlev L. Dall Mahler & Arne Jouttijärvi</i> Experiments with peat charcoal and iron production in the Faeroe Islands ..	92
<i>Chapter 10 · Anna Katrin Matras</i> The Viking Settlement „Niðri á Toft“, Kvívík, Faroe Islands – a reanalysis ...	99
<i>Chapter 11 · Marie Stoklund</i> Faroese Runic Inscriptions	109
<i>Chapter 12 · James Graham-Campbell, University College London</i> The Viking-Age Gold and Silver of the North Atlantic Region	125
<i>Chapter 13 · Mark Blackburn</i> Coinage and Contacts in the North Atlantic during the Seventh to Mid-Tenth Centuries	141
<i>Chapter 14 · Gillian Fellows-Jensen</i> Some new thoughts on personal names in the Viking colonies	152
<i>Chapter 15 · Ian Fisher</i> Cross-currents in North Atlantic Sculpture	160