

OLD NORSE SHIP NAMES AND SHIP TERMS

Rudolf Simek

The nautical language of the North Sea Germanic area is a very elaborate and rich terminology. This was no less true at the time I am dealing with, namely the period from the Viking Age up to about 1400 A.D. This nautical language seems heavily dominated by the North Germanic languages, especially Old Norse. Therefore it may well be justified to take Old Norse as a starting point when one is dealing with the North Sea Germanic nautical terminology.

In the bit of research I have done on this field so far I have mainly concentrated on the words meaning the ship as a whole. But there are of course many other aspects to the nautical language, such as shipbuilding, ship equipment, board life, journeys, and navigation. This last aspect, navigation, is an especially tricky one. Alan Binns from Newcastle has done important research in this field.

But as I said, I will limit myself to the words and phrases meaning the ship as a whole. And here we have to deal with three groups of terms:

- firstly, proper names, of which about 150 are handed down to us,
- secondly, terms just meaning ship or boat of one kind or another, and here we know of about 260 expressions of this sort, and
- thirdly, poetical circumscriptions, so called kenningar, of which I found about 560 in Old Norse poetry.

I may now go into these three groups in further detail. As you can see, the group of proper names is the smallest of these three. We may distinguish here between two sorts of names, namely historical ones and mythological ones. Of the so called historical ones, some may of course be fictional, especially in the sagas of the Icelanders, but quite a lot of them are mentioned either in a number of sources or in historical documents.

We know from the Sagas of the Kings of Norway, that royal

ships were formally baptized in the 12th and 13th century; I may give here as an example the speech King Sverre made in the spring of 1183 at the launching of his new ship **Mariusúð**:

“Thanks be to God, the blessed Virgin Mary and the blessed king Olav, that this ship has come happily upon the water and to no man’s hurt, as many prophesied. — God forgive them all the unkind words they threw at us for that. Now I may trust that few here have seen a bigger longship, and it will greatly serve to ward the land against our enemies if this proves a lucky ship. I give it into the protection of the blessed Mary, naming it Mariusuden, and I pray the blessed Virgin to keep watch and ward over this ship. In testimony I will give Mary her own such things as most belong to divine service. Vestments that would be fine enough for even the archbishop though he wore them on high days. And in return I expect that she will remember all these gifts and give aid and luck both to the ship and all who fare in it.”

(Translation quoted from Brøgger & Shetelig: *The Viking Ships*, p. 212)

It should be mentioned, that the King had every reason to thank God that the ship was in the water, as it had been lengthened against the advice of his shipbuilders and was a rotten ship altogether, both ugly to look at and hardly seaworthy, although it was huge.

But surely ships were formally baptized long before that, and ship names even of the tenth century are handed down to us. Due to the kind of sources we have on these centuries, mostly names of royal ships are preserved. In the beginning ships were apparently often simply given names of animals, for example **Alptr** “The swan”, **Fálki** “The Hawk”, **Grágás** “The greygoose”, **Tráni** “The crane”, which was called so from its lofty prow, or **Uxi** “The ox”, **Vísundr** “The bison” or the famous **Ormr inn langi** “The long serpent” of king Olaf Tryggvason. As far as these names occur on warships, they probably carried an appropriate animal head as decoration on the end of the stems. But the wooden dragonheads found at Oseberg are no proof for this, as the word dragon was later much more of a synonym for a big longship than a proper name, although it was originally one. It really seems more likely to me, that **Dreki** “Dragon” was first the

name of King Harald's ship in the 870's and afterwards all the earls and chieftains wanted to have a dragon too, so that the name turned into a synonym for a longship this way, much rather than the other way round, as some scholars argue, namely that Harald called his flagship simply by the name of a longship.

From the beginning of the 12th century onwards we can observe a change in customs. Ships would now be called after saints, such as **Ólafssúð** "St. Olaf's ship", **Pétresbolli** "St. Peter's boat" **Katrínarsúð** "St. Catherine's ship", or even after St. Mary or Christ. This was not only, as one would expect, to place the ship under the guardianship of the saint, but there was also political reasoning involved, as it was of great importance to the various Norwegian rulers to secure the support of the church. In the 14th century some of these ships may have carried the image of the saint in one form or another. We are told that even relics have been placed in the ships. It should be mentioned, however, that not only warships, but also trading vessels had names from saints. But proper personal names in compounded ship names do not necessarily refer to saints. Ships are also quite often named after their owner or builder, as still is very common with fishing vessels nowadays, for example **Gunnarsbát** "The boat of Gunnar", **Ragnaslóði** "King Rakni's longship (?)", or **Kristiforusúð** "Christopher's ship". These types of names just mentioned belong mainly to the 14th century, which does not mean that they did not exist before that; but the kind of source is changing: now we can rely mostly on annals and custom registers, and the names we find are mostly names of trading vessels, such as names which give the home country or home town of the ship, like **Rygiabrandr**, called after the people of Rogaland in Norway, or **Lýsubúza**, a tradingship from the monastery Lysa in Norway, or simply **Íslendingr** "The Icelander". Some of these customs registers, which are published in "Diplomatarium Norvegicum", are extremely rich sources for ship-names, not only Scandinavian ones, but even for German, English and French ones.

I may mention in this place an example of how easily one can make mistakes in explaining names. The shipname **Háaugabúza** in the Hakonar Saga Hins Gamla had been explained by efficient German scholars as being derived from ON **hár** (gen. **hás**), a tholepin, and ON **auga**, eye or hole, so that the name would refer to the open part of

the rowlock or the porthole for the oars. And there was much speculation, in what way the portholes of this ship had been exceptional enough to give it its name — until a Scandinavian scholar happened to remark that there was a place called **Haasauge**, now **Halsaa** in Norway, from which the name, of course, is derived.

A large group of ship names belong to what I would call functional names; they may be very similar to ship terms, and it can be difficult to decide whether they are proper names or not, but sometimes it is possible to decide this from the context or the writing in the manuscript. So **Biskupsbúza** is known to mean the ship of a certain bishop, whilst **Biskupsskip** just means a ship of a bishop. Or **Hoensabúza** “Henship” is a genuine name, but **smörskip** “Buttership” is just a general term. Names of this sort we can find in most of our sources throughout the centuries.

Next, there are poetical names such as **Svalbarði** “Coolstem”, **Fiardakolla** “Cow of the fjord”, **Fífa** “Arrow”, **Gullbringa** “Goldbreast” or **Skjöldr** “Shield”, and finally we find shipnames referring to attributes and peculiarities of the ship, and which are surely rather nicknames than anything else. So the ship of Bishop Nicolas, who used to take his books with him on his journey, was called **Bókaskreppa** “Bookbag”; another long and narrow one was called **Görn** “Gut”, and yet another, which was repaired with iron cleats after having been wrecked, **Járnmeiss** “Ironbasket”. The saga of **Grettir** gives a passage about a group of Norwegian merchants that were shipwrecked in the north of Iceland and rebuilt their ship from the wreckwood. But the ship was now rather broad and shapeless and called **Trékyllir** “Woodbag”.

There are of course a number of Old Norse shipnames which we cannot explain. But probably people at that time liked to give their boats deliberately cryptic names as much as people nowadays do.

I may now turn from the historical or pseudohistorical names to the mythological ones. There are only 3 of this kind we know of, and they are all rather interesting: **Skíðbladnir**, **Naglfar**, and **Hringhorni**.

Skíðblaðnir was, according to Snorri Sturluson, the ship of the god Freyr. It was built by dwarfs, had always fair winds, and could be folded up and put into the pocket. The meaning of the name is, as widely accepted today, “something made from flat pieces of wood.” But what the name really means is dubious. The name as well as the myth mentioned by Snorri may date back, as I tend to believe, to a cult venerating the god Freyr, and to a sort of monumental boat erected on land for the duration of this feast and then taken apart again. But it may also date back to the important innovation of the plank built boat somewhere back in the Bronze Age. This idea has not yet been exploited by scholars. **Skíðblaðnir** was, according to Snorri, the best of all ships, whereas **Naglfar** was the biggest. On doomsday it will be launched and arrive, sailed by the sons of hell. Various Scandinavian folk-tales from Iceland to Finland and even further east know of this ship, and its name is usually explained by them as “nail-ship”, because the devil uses the uncut fingernails of the dead to build this ship; so you had better clip the fingernails of your dead before burying them, as this will postpone doomsday. But the name may well come from a ***ná**-**far** “ship of the dead”, thus being cognate to Goth. **naus** “dead” or Lat. **necare** “to kill”. If, or how far, the myth about **Naglfar** was connected with the Scandinavian custom of ship-burials is still a matter of dispute.

The third ship occurring in myths is **Hringhorni**, the ship in which the god Balder goes on his last journey. What the name means we do not know. Some scholars explain it as a ship with a bent, horn-shaped bow, which I can not find very convincing. I think it might rather indicate the round or spiral-shaped ornaments on the stem-ends. But it is a rather surprising coincidence that there is a ship-shaped stone-setting in Sweden, where a circle is engraved on one of the stem stones. Is this stone setting commemorating Balder’s journey into death? But there are of course quite a lot of different explanations of this and other finds of circular prow-decorations.

I may now leave the ship names and have a look at the ship terms. As you can see there is a large number of them, and they vary very much in importance, age, and usage. There are purely technical terms, but there are also poetical terms and then there is a number of words, difficult to explain, which occur only in the lists of synonyms in Snorri Sturlusons Edda, some of which are probably old words

already long died out, and others may be poetical words from poetry, lost long ago.

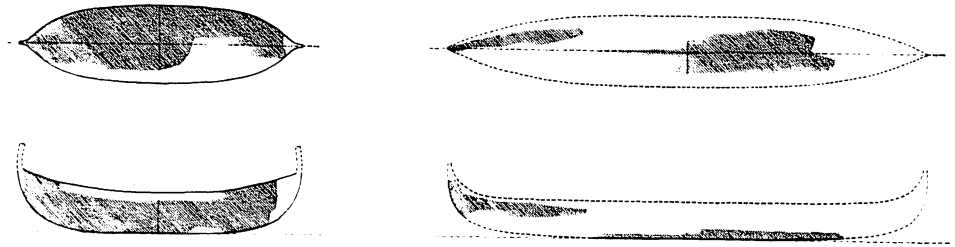
I do not think there is much point in listing all the technical terms for *ship* cropping up in the various ON sources. There are terms referring to the size of ships by ways of using the number of oars, or rowing benches, or shiprooms, and many others announcing the use of the shiptype.

But only the big archaeological shipfinds in Norway, and the more recent ones in Denmark give us some idea what sort of ships we have to identify with these terms. I do not want to go into this here in great detail, but you are surely all familiar with the ships of Gokstad and Oseberg, which do not belong, as commonly supposed, to the class of proper longships, nor have they been meant to sail the open Atlantic, although a copy of the Gokstadship has successfully crossed the North Atlantic in 1893. They both belong to the class of the **karfar**, which were a sort of coastal cruiser, often also used for inland expeditions in the east, sometimes used as private yachts of earls or kings, but nevertheless fast warships of high merits.

Much more illuminating for the types of ships widely used in the Viking Age than these royal yachts are the 5 ships found in the Roskildefjord in Denmark. Here we have a proper longship, with its 93 feet length some twenty feet longer than the Oseberg ship. One of the other wrecks was a smaller warship of less than 60 feet, which probably was a **snekkja**, the sort of ship frequently used in private Viking raids. The other ships found at Roskilde served more peaceful purposes. The smallest of about 40 feet length was either a big fishing boat or a small coastal cargo boat, which were called **ferjur**, while the biggest trader measured about 60 feet in length, but was broad and very high-boarded and surely a good example of the so-called **knörr**, the sort of trading vessel that was used for all overseas routes, as to England, Iceland, and even Greenland.

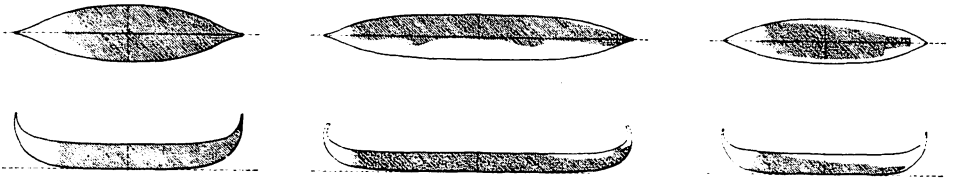
But of course most of the ship terms we know about we cannot identify with specific types of ships. But even so it is not uninteresting to investigate them, as they give us an impression of when and in which

The 5 Viking Ships found in the Roskilde Fjord



knörr
l: 16.5 m
b: 4.6 m

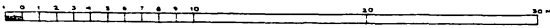
langskib
l: 28 m
b: 4.2 m



byrdingr (?)
l: 13.3 m
b: 3.3 m

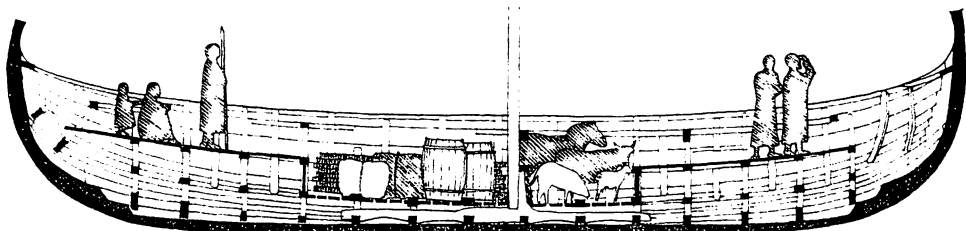
karfi
l: 18 m
b: 2.6 m

ferja (?)
l: 12 m
b: 2.5 m



direction words were moving in mediaeval North-West Europe.

To show this, I have chosen from 260 terms mentioned, about 100 basic or uncompounded terms. And of these, about 80% are genuine Norse words, half of them having cognates in other Germanic languages. Of the remaining 20% foreign or loanwords, nearly half come from Latin, about a quarter from Middle Low German, and the rest from Old or Middle English, Old Irish and Old Russian. But



Elevation of the Knörr

while nautical terms from the Norse filtered into other languages in considerable numbers mainly during the late Viking period, most of the loan words found in Old Norse appear from the beginning of the 13th century onwards. This is surely partly due to the rising power of the Hanseatic towns in the North Sea trade.

The chronological distribution of terms can be shown in a table like this

	9th	10th	11th	12th	13th	14th	century
knörr	■	■	■	■	■	■	
barði	■	■	■				
kuggi					■	■	
búza					■	■	

I have taken here a few obvious examples with a frequent occurrence, but the recruiting of the words is often as problematical as the dating of the sources. The word **knörr**, for example, the term already mentioned for a seagoing trader, is found throughout the whole period. As another example I may use **barði**, a term for a man-of-war fashionable during the Viking Age, but soon on its way out. On the other hand, there is **kuggi**, which comes from german **Kogge** and probably

reflects the innovation of the stern rudder and its introduction to the North. Brøgger and Shetelig state in their well-known book on the Viking ships, that **kuggi** replaced the type of ship known under the old name **búza**; but if we have a closer look at this term, we can prove this statement as wrong; **búza**, moreover, is a loanword from the Latin, possibly through Old French, but even in these languages the word is not found before the middle of the 12th century, and we may therefore dismiss the idea of the old Scandinavian ship type **búza**.

Another very interesting etymology is the one of the word-pair **ellidi** – a ship name in the *Friðþiofs saga* – and **leđja** – a rare ship term. A fair number of different etymologies for **ellidi** have been tried, as for example as a loanword from AGS *yðlida* “wavewalker”, or from an **einliði* “the exceptionally fast sailing”; but I believe – and I am not the only one to do so – that both words are derived from an Old Russian **öld-čies-*, *öldji-a-*, which turns through metathesis into *ladija/lodija* in the first half of the 9th century. So **ellidi** must have been borrowed before then, and **leđja** afterwards, but only very shortly afterwards, as the vowel-change before *i* in Old Norse ceases to be active around 900.

Another group of terms contains words of a purely poetical sort, but not kenningar; it is only a small group of terms, and they may have been real ship terms in older days, but in the time of our Old Norse sources they were limited to scaldic poetry: an example is **beit**, the original Old Norse cognate to Old English *bāt*, from which again ON *bátr* “boat” was borrowed. Or **eik**, that had otherwise lost the nautical side of its meaning and apart from in poetry only meant oak-tree in literary times, or **flaust**, originally meaning something floating, or **lung**, probably being an old loanword from the Irish *long*, this again being borrowed from Latin *navis longa*. To assign these terms to certain boat types, as has been tried in the past, is of course completely absurd.

I would now like to leave the ship terms, although I have not nearly exhausted this field, and move on to the last group of expressions, namely the kenningar. As most of you will know this term means a poetical circumscription of an object, and may consist of

2, 3, 4 or more elements, one of them being the so-called basic element, which is better defined by one or more determinants; these words are mainly nouns. This special poetical form was typical for Norse and Icelandic scaldic poetry of the middle ages, but was used in Iceland up to our times. Only a limited number of things has been described by means of kenningar, such as poetry, women, warriors, fights, blood, ships, swords and other weapons, and horses and other animals, but apart from man himself the largest variety of kenningar exists with the ship being the object. This shows, if nothing else would, the high rank the ship held in the minds of the Scandinavians of these times.

Firstly, there are kenningar consisting of only one word, which means that they have to be compounded words. A common example for this type is **brimdýr** “surfanimal”. There are quite a lot of this sort, like **unnblakkr** “wavehorse”, or **seglhundur** “sailhound” or the like. But we have also some more sophisticated ones like **hásleipnir** “Odin’s horse of the rowlocks”, or **hlunnbjörn** “bear of the wooden rolls”, the latter image taken from the clumsy expression given by a ship that is dragged over land, or nice ones like **fjardlinni** “fjordserpent”, or **borðvalr** “boardfalcon”, or **brimskíð** “waveski”.

By far the biggest group of kenningar consists, however, of two words, although the principles of construction are practically the same. So you can find ship-kenningar like **vigg vastar** “horse of the fishing place”, **fagrdrasill lögstiga** “beautiful horse of the seaway”, **vagn kjalar** “carriage on a keel”. But my personal favourites are **hestr svanfjalla** “horse of the mountains of the swans (i.e. the waves)” and **hestr hvalfjarðar** “horse of the whaleearth (i.e. the sea)” or **hrofs hreinn** “deer of the boathouse”.

In kenningar consisting of 3 or 4 words the system is more or less the same, and the only difference is that the determinant itself consists of a kenning already. We have seen this possibility above in kenningar like **hestr svanfjalla**, where the second part is a genuine kenning in one word. This way we get only a few, but very nice kenningar, such as **byrjar láds blakkr** “horse of the land of favourable wind”, **gláðr slóða kjallar** “horse of the way of the keels”, **reid**

Vandils jörmungrundar “the carriage of the wide land of the sea king Vandill”, **hreinn humra naustr** “the deer of the boathouse of the River Humber” or **hardvigg umbands allra landa** “hard draught horse of the belt of all lands”, this belt, of course, being the sea.

With this collection of a few examples I hope to have given in short an impression of the richness and beauty of the Old Norse nautical language.

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