

## Faroese Bird-Name Origins

(I)

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### *Havtyrðil* 'stormy petrel'

This Faroese petrel name derives from ON *haftyrdill* 'eit slag sjøfugl, þul'. (L. Heggstad, *Gammelnorsk Ordbok*), cf. Mod. Icel. *do.* 'little auk'. In the *Faroese Bird Names*, 67, I was unable to decide whether the Faroese or Icelandic had retained the primary sense, but it seems that there are, after all, certain indications which lead to a solution.

We begin with the literal meaning of ON *haftyrdill*. It is 'ocean muck', *tyrðill* being a diminutive of *torð*- 'tord'. The word *tyrðill* continues in Modern Icelandic both in the literal and in a derived sense 'puny person'. It might be thought that this latter meaning should be postulated for the bird name, which would then have an approximate parallel in *hafdurtur*, a local Icelandic name for the little auk (*durtur* 'ruffian'). It must be said, however, that coarseness is a feature of the older stratum of names, cf. *flóðskítur* lit. 'flood shit' (>Mod. Icel. *flóðskítur* 'Sclavonian grebe') attested in the same medieval source as *haftyrdill*. At all events disparagement could hardly be more obviously expressed in these names for the little auk. In contrast, none of the dozen or so etymologisable petrel names in the various languages in our area bears any comparable pejorative nuance.

There is a further reason for arguing that ON *haftyrdill* meant 'little auk'. The name of the stormy petrel has been,

to an extraordinary degree, determined by linguistic taboo. It must have been very often changed, since wherever the bird is well known, as in Faroe or the islands off the north and west coasts of Britain, the local dialects preserve a remarkable number of different names, e.g. in Faroese also *drunnhvíti*, *bukari*, *livji*, *vendingarfuglur*, *báruffarta* and associated forms. It would follow that the modern terms are likely to be of relatively recent origin, older names having been lost in the continual process of tabooing. We incline to think that a medieval form would probably not survive in purely oral tradition. Since *haftyrðill* certainly existed in the Middle Ages, we are therefore led to suppose that it did not have the sense 'stormy petrel', but meant 'little auk' just as it still does in Icelandic. We suggest that the name will have survived for long in the Faroes in this sense, too, and this helped to preserve it into more modern times. Meanwhile, however, a new, uniquely Faroese, name for this bird *fulkobbi* had come into existence and spread at the expense of the older term. The traditional name managed to escape complete eclipse, but only because, in some localities (Vágar and Mykines), it was transferred to that other diminutive ocean-wanderer, the stormy petrel. Svabo's "hattiril" is evidence for the present pronunciation two hundred years ago. But it was doubtless already old then and the literal meaning of the name quite forgotten. Conceivably, some feeling for the significance of the first element remained, but the second element could only have been understood as *tyril* 'whisk' (<ON *pyrill*), the simplex *\*tyrðil* not surviving in Faroese. Such factors may have played at least a passive role in the secondary attachment of the auk's name to the petrel.

Lastly, the ornithological evidence. The little auk is a bird of the far north, moving south of the arctic circle only in winter. It is then abundant in Icelandic waters, but less so off Faroe. Where a species is particularly prominent, one would not expect it, or its name, to be confused with another. Conversely, the stormy petrel, common in Faroe, is rarer in

Iceland, where it is called *drúði*, also *sæsvala* lit, 'sea swallow', a name as plain as any that could be given. These things speak emphatically in favour of the conclusion that the sense of ON *haftyrðill* was 'little auk'.

### Müller's *bárufjatla*

This apparently now lost name was reported in the last century from Suðuroy by H. C. Müller as "*bárufjalla*", certainly to be normalised as *bárufjatla*, cf. *FBN*, 61.

The name is a transparent compound: *bára* 'wave', *fjatla* approx. 'walker', the latter element being elsewhere independently recorded as a noa name for the crow. In *FBN*, 61, *fjatla* was provisionally explained as 'hopper' and the essential correctness of this conjecture has since become apparent. Whereas the first edition of Jacobsen-Matras, *Føroy-sk-Donsk Orðabók*, quoted for the verb *fjatla* the senses 'forvikle; famle', the second edition added 'have en hoppende el. trippende gang', a more primitive meaning with direct relevance for the bird name, so that the noun *fjatla* is literally the bird with the hopping or tripping gait.

According to Müller, *bárufjatla* meant 'Sclavonian grebe'. But the name must originally have denoted the stormy petrel, since a term 'wave-walker' is incomprehensible as a name for a grebe, or indeed for any other seabird in our area, except the petrel. D. A. Bannerman, *Birds of the British Isles*, viii, 42, quotes "The birds untiringly followed the rising and falling of the water — — now going down into a hollow, and now rising with the wave until the edge broke and curled over, when the little feet were let down with a gentle tripping movement as if trying to get a footing on the treacherous deep". We already know that this habit of 'walking' on the water gave rise to another Suðuroy petrel name *bukari*, see *Fróðskaparrit*, xvi, 102—3.

It is scarcely possible to comment definitively on the misapplication of the petrel name to the grebe. There is no



obvious similarity likely to cause confusion. We note, however, that the grebe is a rare species in the Faroes and consequently little known — — there is some evidence that *gjøðr* is a locally established name — — and in matters like this there is constantly the possibility that the identification may be based on a misunderstanding at some stage. However that may be, we confidently claim *bárufjatla* as a one-time name for the stormy petrel.

*Bárufjarta*, etc. 'stormy petrel'

The Suðuroy word *bárufjatla* (above) can hardly be separated from another name from the same island, *báraffjertur* 'little auk', recorded by Mohr (*Dictionarium Færoense*, i, 37 "baarafiertur"), or from the Fugloy forms *bárufjarta*, *-fjarti*, *-fjertur*, noted down as noa expressions once in use for the stormy petrel. Cognates occur in Norw. *baarafjært*, etc., where the prevailing sense seems to have been 'little auk', a sense which again appears to be attested for Faroese in Clusius' "Barufiard", cf. *FBN*, 66.

The first task is to evaluate the evidence for the meaning 'little auk' against the evidence for the contrary meaning 'stormy petrel'. The meaning given in Fugloy, the parallel with Suðuroy *bárufjatla*, the likely philology of the word and, last but not least, the ornithological considerations compel us to interpret *bárufjarta*, etc., as 'wave-walker' and hence to define it as properly denoting the petrel only, with the rider that any other meaning must needs be secondary. The petrel and auk concerned are by far the smallest of seabirds, which presumably facilitates an interchange of meaning, cf. Far. *havtyrðil* (above).

As to the philology we cannot yet, it seems, adequately interpret the forms of the type *-fjarta*, *-fjertur*, but it is hard to avoid the conclusion that they must contain a derivative of *fara* 'go, walk'. The occurrence of radical *ja* beside *je* is reminiscent of a sound change in Continental Scandinavian,

cf. Far. *fjall* 'mountain', Norw. *fjell*, and it is noticeable that Far. *báraffjertur* is the exact counterpart of Norw. *baaraffjært*. The facts seem best explained if the Faroese words are taken as borrowings from Norwegian, variously assimilated to the native morphological system.

### *Teisti* 'black guillemot'

The derivation of Far. *teisti* (as of Norw. *teiste*, Norn *täisti*, etc.) from ON *þeisti*, usual hitherto, has the advantage of a certain formal economy. However, the current Icelandic forms *teista*, *þeista*, (very local) *teisti*, suggest that initial *t* may be as old as initial *þ*, so the Faroese (and other) forms could equally well go back to ON *\*teisti*.

This minor observation is of some relevance for the etymology. For Falk-Torp, *Norw.-dän. etym. Wb.*, and Torp, *Nynorsk etym. Ordbok*, the name is of obscure origin, but Hellquist, *Svensk etym. Ordbok*, offers a tangible explanation: *tjest*...et bohuslänskt dialektord, även *teste*, *tist*...; efter det fina pipande läte *ist*, *ist* som fåglen ofta utstöter i flykten; naturtrognare återgivet i den skånska beteckningen *iste*.

We shall demonstrate below that Hellquist's basis premise is without doubt correct, though his statement of the case is not free from misconception. It is patently unscientific to imply that *ist*, *ist* is the correct representation of the bird's cry, for in the nature of the case an accurate phonetic analysis in terms of human pronunciation is excluded. The Skåne form is neither better nor worse than *þeisti* and the rest. We see, moreover, that the argumentation in favour of an onomatopoeic origin is actually confirmed by the alternation of Icel. *t-/þ-* (above), for the types *þeisti*, *teisti*, *iste*, are clearly imitations of a whistling sound. Indeed, they are substantially masculine agent nouns with the literal meaning 'whistler', *þeista*, etc., being the corresponding feminine forms, cf. ON *arfi* 'heir', *arfa* 'heiress'.

One can, it appears, also test the theory of onomatopoeic

origin outside the Scandinavian world. The range of the black guillemot has brought it into the ken of the Russians, whose name for the bird is *čistik*. The standard authority, M. Vasmer, *Russ. etym. Wb.*, does not list this word, so that details are wanting, but its general affinity with Scandinavian as an onomatopoeic creation seems self-evident.

De Vries, *Altnord. etym. Wb.*, had the advantage of being able to draw on the conclusions of the earlier workers mentioned, yet he felt able to say no more than "man vermutet ein schallnachahmendes wort". However, there is finally the ineluctable testimony of the object itself. It is not merely that the black guillemot makes a whistling noise, as Hellquist was content to state. The really crucial fact is that the soft, but very audible, whistle of the black guillemot distinguishes it from all other birds, in particular from all other seabirds. It is the uniqueness of its voice which gave the bird its name.

### *Spógvi* 'whimbrel'

It has not been the practice in these studies to consider the etymologies of Old Norse prototypes in cases where the filiation of the Faroese was obvious, since such information is readily available. Admittedly, many outstanding problems of Old Norse etymology remain, and in the following we shall dispute an etymology which has found general acceptance and then suggest the correct solution.

Both *Numenius phaeopus* and *N. arquata* often go under one popular name, for although there is a difference in size, the species are very much alike in appearance and behaviour. Icelanders, for instance, may refer to them indiscriminately as *spói*; if they must distinguish them, then the names become *litli spói* and *stóri spói* respectively. The Faroese equivalent *spógvi* is, however, attached to *N. phaeopus*, the breeding species in the Faroes; *N. arquata*, only a winter visitor, is technically *tangspógvi* lit. 'seaweed-*spógvi*'.



All etymological dictionaries uncritically follow an explanation given by A. Noreen, *NTfFil.*, nr. 4, 37, according to which the name is formed from a Germanic verb meaning 'to speed', lost in North Germanic, but preserved in a secondary sense in West Germanic, e. g. Old Eng. *spōwan* 'prosper', the primary meaning surviving in the derivative *spæd* > 'speed'. Numenius was thus the 'speedy' bird since it both flies and runs rapidly.

It is pretty obvious that this is a bold conclusion in view of the gaps in the philological evidence. There is no verb in North Germanic and no parallel bird name in West Germanic. But this is not all. In this analysis, philological acumen is operating in a vacuum, ignoring the *Realien*, as a moment's reflexion shows. We do not disagree that both N. *phæopus* and N. *arquata* fly quickly and could well be called good runners. But we raise the obvious objection that the same and more applies to many other species. Built-in speed in birds is so much taken for granted that it rarely figures in the nomenclature, and then only quite exceptional performers can merit such distinction, e. g. Eng. *swift*. Elementary ornithological facts contradict outright any notion that the term *spói* can have anything to do with speed.

When faced with a problematic bird name of this sort, it may be useful to consider whether etymologisable names in other languages afford a clue. We shall soon see that a brief review of commoner names given in English will suffice. In English, the two species are distinguished in our examples by basically different names. N. *phæopus* is *whimbrel*, locally also *titterel*, while N. *arquata* is *curlew*, in the north often called *whaup*. The first pair contain imitative *whim* and *titt* with typical *-(e)rel* suffix as in *cockerel*, etc., the former with epenthetic *b*, as in *chamber* ultimately from Lat. *camera*. The name *curlew* is borrowed from French *courlieu*, a word with many variants as befits a name of onomatopoeic origin; the standard form is *courlis*. The mainly Scottish *whaup* presupposes older *\*whalp* (cf. *auk* from ON *alk-*), to be closely

compared with Dutch *wulp*, Fris. *wylp*, imitative names for Numenius.

Diverse as they are, these names have a common origin in onomatopoea, as reference to any bird book at once makes understandable. W. Makatsch, *Die Vögel Europas*, 1966, 271, characterises the curlew's voice as "klangvoll, laut und flötend tla-ü, der trillernde Balzruf des Männchens klingt wie tui, tui, trüih....", while the whimbrel utters (272) "klangvolle auf- und absinkende Rufreihen, die wie tütje.... klingen." E. Sandars, *A Bird Book for the Pocket*, 1945, 170, describes the curlew's voice as "wild, far-reaching 'curlew!', also long bubbling note" and the whimbrel's similarly, only "shriller". We remember that, in favourable conditions, the cry can be heard as much as a mile away, so that many have heard Numenius, who have never seen him. M. á Ryggi reminds us of the calls, too: (*Fuglabókin*, 40) "Spógvin kemur ....og....hoyra vit hansara vakra mál í bø og haga....", (42) Tangspógvi....Harðmæltur er hann; eitt snjalt 'hújid' hoyrist...."

There is no need to consider here the difficulties inherent in the analysis of bird cries or the problems of their representation in writing. Suffice it to say that some species have a wide vocal range and among these are the curlew and the whimbrel, hence also the corresponding variety of onomatopoeic names illustrated above. At this point it only remains to be noted that ON *spói* fits as easily into this broad imitative category as it does into the well-known class of masculine nouns. The name is undoubtedly of onomatopoeic origin.

#### ÚRTAK

Fyrst verður *havtyrðil* »drunnhvíti« samanborið við íslenskt *havtyrðill* »fulkobbi«, og sýnt verður, at líkt er til, at føroyska merkingin er ikki upprunalig. Síðan verður drigið fram, at bókstavliga merkingin av *bárufjatla* »gjeðr« og *bárufjarta* o. s. fr. »fulkobbi, drunnhvíti«, t. e. ávikavist »aldu-hoppari« og »aldu-gangari«, bendir á, at hesi nøvn upprunaliga hava bert verið nýtt um drunnhvítan. Møguligur ljóðhermingar-



uppruni hjá *teisti*, bókstavliga »bríkslari« verða kjakað, og sýnt verður hvussu tað ber til, at navnið er vorðið hetta. At enda verður sýnt, at vanliga greiðingin av *spógvi* sum »kvikur fuglur« er av leið, tað, sum fæst burtur úr samanberandi navnagávu, hjálpir at veita vissu fyri, at navnið er komið av ljóðherming.