Some Notes on Faroese Bird Names

By Håkon Hamre.

Fulkobbi, fulkubbi

In his article, "More on Faroese Bird Names", Fróðskapar-rit 16. bók (1968), W. B. Lockwood discusses the name of the little auk fulkobbi, p. 105. He concludes that the second element of the name is identical with the word kobbi m. "seal", while the first element is more uncertain, and could be either full- "full", or fugl- "bird", or maybe fúl- "foul". Earlier, in Faeroensia Vol. V (1961), "The Faroese Bird Names", he has on p. 66 suggested the meaning "bird cob".

The name is used in two variant forms, fulkobbi m. and fulkubbi m. The latter form indicates that the second element of the name is not generally associated with kobbi m. "seal", but could just as well be identical with Faroese kubbi m. "chunk; short, thick piece (of a log, etc.)", as will be discussed below.

The present pronunciation of the first element ful- would seem to indicate one of Lockwood's first two suggestions "full-" or "bird-" as the more likely interpretation. In compound names, however, such as place names and the names of plants and animals, it is a well-known fact that the individual components may undergo "irregular" developments. This may occur when the original components are no longer identified with their original meanings, (e. g., Faroese kalvi m. "halibut" <*kaflidi, lit. "depth-wanderer").

It may thus be considered a distinct possibility that the first component ful- could originally have been fúl- "foul", especi-
ally since this would offer us a more meaningful interpretation of the name. We have a similar use of the element fúl- in the Old Norse name fúlmár, literally “foul gull”, which has been adopted as a Norse loanword in English in the form “fulmar”. The ON name refers to the fulmar’s ability to spit an ill-smelling fluid at its attackers. It is interesting to note that another bird of the Procellariidae family, the stormy petrel, is often confused with the little auk, see Lockwood, Fróðskaparrit 16, p. 105. The name bárufjertur (or variants) refers in Fugloy to the petrel, and in Suðuroy (and in Norwegian) to the little auk. The name haftyrðill refers in Faroese to the petrel, in Icelandic to the little auk. The stormy petrel, like the fulmar, is able to defend itself by ejecting an oily substance, and the name fúlkubbi would, if originally applied to the petrel, not only be appropriate, but also a perfect parallel to the name fúlmár, the component -kubbi alluding to the lesser size of the petrel.

It is not, however, necessary to presuppose a confusion of the two birds as condition for the name. It clearly belongs to a sizable group of pejorative bird names which contain elements denoting dirt, excrement, and various other kinds of filth. In Faroese we find, for instance, lortamási “muck gull” for the common gull (Lockwood, Bird Names, p. 47), and skarnskortur “filthy face” for the immature puffin (Lockwood op. cit. p. 69). From the other Scandinavian languages the following examples can be cited: lortand “mud duck” for the teal, Anas crecca, in Swedish and Norwegian also found in the form saurand, same meaning. The same first component is found in Swedish lortskrika “muck jay” Garrulus glandarius 2. In Danish we find skiddenmette “filthy Mette” for the wagtail, and skidhejre “muck heron” Ardea cinera, and in Norwegian skitt-trast “muck thrush” Turdis pilaris. As second components, these and similar pejorative elements generally refer to the diminutive size of the birds named, as for instance in Faroese -fjertur (and variants) “fart”, in Norwegian -fjert and -fis in the same meaning, also in Norwegian -skit “muck”, and in Icelandic and Faroese -tyrðil(l) “little turd”.

The second component in fúlkubbi or fúlkobbi is in all probability identical with Faroese kubbi m., as mentioned above. This word, with the same meaning, is common in the other Scandinavian languages. In Icelandic it is found in the forms kubbur and kubbi, in Norwegian kubb, kubbe, in Swedish kubb, kobb, kubbe, kubba. In Icelandic and Norwegian it is also used to refer to a short, stocky person. The use of -kubbi has an exact parallel in a Norwegian name for the little auk, sjøkutt, where the last component -kutt has a meaning similar to -kubbi, and refers to the size and round appearance of this bird. It should also be mentioned that another Norwegian term for the little auk, alkekong(e) (or variant sjøkong(e)), also probably shows a parallel to -kubbi and -kutt if the second component -kong is interpreted to be an abbreviation of ON kúfungr m. (also kúðungr), alluding to the round figure of the bird. Still another Norwegian name for the same bird is klubbalke, where the first component klubb- likewise refers to the size and roundness of the little auk.

Lockwood, as mentioned above, has suggested that -kobbi in the fulkobbi form of the name is identical with kobbi m. “seal”. If this is a widespread explanation of the name in the Faroes, it is in all probability only an irrational popular etymological interpretation, but it would serve to explain the transition from -kubbi to -kobbi. Whether kobbi is in itself a diminutive of or a pet form derived from kópur m. “seal” is questionable. It seems reasonable to link it both etymologically and semantically with kubbi and variants, (see Alex. Jøhannesson: Isl. Etym. Wörterbuch, p. 313). The meaning “seal” for kobbi would then be secondary, the name originally having referred to the seal’s roundness, compare Swedish kubbsäl “seal”. Noteworthy, too, are other Germanic usages of the word: kobbe in Dutch and Frisian means “sea gull”, and cob (or cobb) in English can mean “sea gull, esp. great black-backed sea gull” (Webster Third New Internat. Dict.).
Karkarassur

Three of the many names for the puffin, usually called lundi m., have a common first component, karkarassur, karkarakkur, karkareyði. The first one is clearly a pejorative name, the second component -rassur meaning “ass”. In the second name -rakkur is, according to Lockwood, “presumably .... a corruption of -rassur,” while -reyði in the third name comes from the adjective reyður “red”, and refers to the red “beak and/or legs of the bird” (Lockwood, Far. Bird Names, pp. 17—18). The component karka- is according to Lockwood (op.cit.) obscure.

It would seem, however, that karka- might be interpreted satisfactorily as an onomatopoeic (sound-imitating) word. Transcribing screams and sounds made by birds and other animals in letters of the alphabet is of course a nearly impossible task, and the perception of the sounds is highly subjective. The crowing of the cock, the barking of the dog, and the grunting of the pig have many different transcriptions in the various languages. However, an investigation of the voice of the puffin in various books on birds, and also of some more general terms for the screaming of birds, indicates that the interpretation of karka- as a sound-imitating word is certainly very possible.

In Witherby: The Handbook of British Birds, 5. impr. 1948, Vol. V, p. 168, we find the following description of the puffin’s voice: “Has only one note uttered at or in burrows or on the sea, a low growling “arr”, sometimes uttered singly, but generally thrice in slow succession, and in fighting, same growl is uttered, but more sharply” (R. M. Lockley). Also rendered “co-o-or-aa” or “haa-haa” R. Perry. In Fuglene i Norden, Oslo 1953, Vol. 3, p. 231: “På vårtiden kan man høre et sakte kurrende gra-gra i forskjellige jamrende tonelag (Rosenius).” In Nordens Fugle i Farver, Copenhagen 1958—63, Vol. 3, p. 245: “et lavt rullende aar-ha-ha.”

In Bløndal, Íslensk-dønsk orðabók, Copenhagen 1920—24, we find the following more general reference to bird voices:
garg n. “skrig, (is.) Fugleskrig”, and garga v. “l. skrige (om Fugle).” M. A. Jacobsen og Chr. Matras, Føroysk-donsk orðabók, Tórsh. 1961, has the following interesting words referring to the voice of the common guillemot: “karr interj. (og n), efterligning af lomviens skrig”, and “karra -ði, (om lomvien) skriger”. The same verb karra is found in Norwegian in reference to bird voices, particularly that of the ptarmigan.

Taking into account the subjective perception of the voice of the puffin (and other birds), as demonstrated above, it would seem reasonable to assume the (earlier) existence of a sound-imitating verb *karka which characterizes the sounds made by the puffin, and also an agent noun *karki m., the genitive of which forms the first component in karka-rassur.

Náti

Náti m., also found in the form náta f., is a Faroese name for a) the fulmar or b) the nestling fulmar. According to Lockwood (Far. Bird Names, p. 54) the name has no parallel elsewhere. It is possible, however, that we have a parallel in Icelandic hnáta f. This word is used locally in Iceland in the meaning “little, chubby girl”. Hnáta is a cognate of Icelandic hnat n. “tuft of wool”, other related words are probably Icelandic (and Faroese) knöttur m. “ball”, and variants of this word in Norwegian knatt, natt, knott, nott with semantically related meanings, (Alex. Jóhannesson, Isl. Etym. Wörterbuch, p. 333).

The meaning of hnáta in Icelandic, referring particularly to a girl, is of course secondary. The original meaning obviously refers to the small size and round appearance of an object, and if we suppose that Icelandic hnáta is a cognate of Faroese náti, náta, this meaning would apply perfectly to the nestling fulmar, which is indeed a puffy-looking little creature. Lockwood has also suggested, for different reasons, that the name originally applied to the nestlings: “The name appears to have spread north (from Suðuroy) with the spread of the fulmars themselves as nesting birds, being taken over
into other dialects as a fowler’s term to denote the young birds before they can fly”. (Lockwood, Faroese Bird Names, p. 54).

ÚRTAK

Fyrri liður ful- í ordinum fulkobbi verður settur í samband við lýsingarordið fúlur, javnlikt við ful- í fúlmár, íslendska ordinum fyrir »havhest» (»náta«); ætlað verður, at tað sipar til, at hesin fuglur spyr frá sær, og at ordið upprunaliga hefur verið nýtt um drunnhvíta. Seinni liður -kobbi (ella -kubbi) verður mettur at merkja okkurt »kubbut« ella »stumput«.

karka-, fyrri liður í lundanevninum karkarassur (viðhvørt karkarakku eller karkareydi) sipar til ljóðið, íð lundin gevur frá sær.

Ordið náti (hendir seg náta) verður sett í samband við ísl. hnáta, »lítil, køggut genta«, skilt við hnat, »nipil«, o. o. og skuldi sostatt upprunaliga bert verið nýtt um ungan.