

Faroese Bird Name Origins

(II)

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Glibbari 'young shag'

This apparently now forgotten name was recorded in Hestur by Jakob Jakobsen, who compared it with Norw. *glibba* 'sluge i sig' (*Faroese Bird Names*, 27). Bird names in *-ari* are uncommon in Faroese; we otherwise know only of *bukari* 'stormy petrel' and *jarmari* 'great shearwater', from *buka* 'strike', *jarma* 'bleat'. As formations of this sort are likely to be recent in Faroese, it may be that a Faroese verb **glibba* is still in use locally awaiting a collector.

Havhestur 'fulmar'

The provenance of this term, also Norw. *havhest*, has not been definitively explained. In *FBN*, 53, it was suggested that the name could owe its origin to superstitious beliefs, but I was unable to make more than a guess at the motivation. I believe the matter can at last be elucidated.

The fulmar's voice has been dealt with in detail by J. Fisher, *The Fulmar*, 1952. It has a considerable range, depending on the given situation, and Fisher quotes, on pp. 326—7, observations of previous naturalists. The earliest (1767) declares that "the voice is shrill, and brought out with a certain snorting", while a later source (1883) refers to the bird's "thin, whinnying voice". Snorting and whinnying are, of course, primarily associated with horses. One may therefore consider that the name *havhestur* lit. 'ocean horse' was

motivated by the bird's call. We are not surprised that the fulmar's voice could give rise to a name, for synonymous Far. *náti*, also *náta*, must surely be echoic. Nor is this the only time that a bird's cry has been likened to a horse's voice, as local Far. *gneggjus* 'common gull' from *gneggja* 'neigh, whinny' conveniently illustrates.

Likka 'lesser black-backed gull'

As stated in *FBN*, 45, the onomatopoeic origin of this uniquely Faroese name cannot be in doubt. It would have been appropriate, however, to have adduced parallels from other languages to illustrate that the gull's cry could lead to a name of this shape. In this connection we may notice Finnish *lokki*, the generic term for 'gull', with variants in certain other languages of this family. As to the general onomatopoeic background, one could compare Icel. *blakka* 'scream (of eagles)', a term known since medieval times.

Meyrus 'great skua'

This mysterious name is known only from Mohr's Dictionary, see now J. C. Svabo, *Dict. Fær.*, i, 544 ("Mejrus"), where it is quoted from a proverbial saying: *táð ið hann gevur, má meyrus tiggja*, and noted as meaning 'great skua'. It is, of course, likely that the term comes from Suðuroy.

The Faroese noun ending *-us* has clearly been abstracted from Danish examples such as *Rasmus*, whence the purely Faroese *Hanus*, *Janus*. From such proper names, the ending has occasionally been used to create ordinary appellatives, thus *gánus* 'fool' from *gána* 'gape', and the local bird names *gneggjus* 'common gull', *pippus* 'quail' from *gneggja* 'neigh, whinny', *pippa* 'chirp'. If *meyrus* belongs to this latter category, it will derive from a verb **meyra*. Such a verb has not been recorded, but we note a widely attested, etymologically identical, Norw. *maura* with the meanings 'arbeide flittig, være i stadig bevægelse; myldre; klø, krille', and having a parallel in Shetland Norn *mor* 'krille, pirke, smaaverke' (Torp,

Nynorsk etym. ordbok). Such occurrences make it highly likely that this verb was at one time known in the Faroes, too.

The skua is a 'robber gull', relentlessly pursuing and buffeting other species, so compelling them to disgorge. Skua names may be based upon this habit, as Sc. Gael. *fàsgadair* lit. 'squeezer, presser' or Eng. dial. *teaser*. We now notice particularly the meanings 'klø, pirke' (above), i. e. 'prick, prod', attested in Norwegian and Norn, and observe that they most aptly describe the skua's hunting behaviour, so that 'pricker, prodder' would be a thoroughly appropriate designation for this bird. We therefore surmise that such is, in fact, the literal sense of Far. *meyrus*, presupposing a lost **meyra* 'prick, prod'. But perhaps it is not entirely lost. Since nouns in *-us* are of rather recent origin, there is just a chance that the verb in question still survives in local use. In this respect, we seem to have the same situation as with *glibbari* (above).

Nakkalanga 'razorbill'

The name *nakkalanga* was noticed in *FBN*, 59, and duly compared with *nakkalangur* 'ashamed, shamefaced'. The latter is easily explained as a figurative use of an original meaning 'long-naped', the long nape resulting from holding one's head in shame. But the bird name remained problematic, neither the secondary 'ashamed, etc.' nor the primary 'long-naped' making any recognised sense. However, I failed to consider the ornithological evidence sufficiently.

It is true that, anatomically speaking, the razorbill's nape is not what could be called long. The name, however, derives from a posture of these birds: "They sit on their tarsi, with the body vertical and held high. . . . They preen themselves, shake the water off their plumage, keep turning their heads from side to side, point their bills into the air. . . ." (D. A. Bannerman, *The Birds of the British Isles*, vii, 76f.). Thus the bird name, properly *álka nakkalanga*, is the only attestation of the literal meaning of the adjective *nakkalangur*, a term apparently confined to Faroese. However, it turns out to have

considerable relevance for the etymological explanation of the primary name *álka*, as we shall soon see.

Alka 'razorbill'

There is no doubt that here is the Old (West) Norse name for this well-known species, cf. Icel. *álka*, New Norw. *alke*. The prototype is ON *alka* (*þula*, see Fritzner), the antiquity of which is confirmed by its presence as a loan word in Sc. Gael. (*f*)*alc* and Northern Eng. *auk*. Swed. *alka*, Dan. *alke* are modern borrowings from West Norse. We ignore here an alleged Old English cognate *ealce*, quoted in some works. This problematic word, of uncertain meaning, appears in H. Middendorf, *Altenglisches Flurnamenbuch*, 1902, whence via *Beiblatt zur Anglia*, xiii, 359, it became incorporated in F. Holthausen, *Altengl. etym. Wb.*, so acquiring an undeserved status.

The etymological dictionaries usually regard the name as of ancient onomatopoeic origin, occasionally as a term denoting colour. In illustration of these typical views, it will suffice to quote from the remarks by De Vries, *Altnord. etym. Wb.*: *alka* 'meervogel, alca'...mit in Tiernamen gebräuchlichem *k*-suffix **ala-*, **alla-*, vgl. aschw. *alle*, *alla*, *all*, *ala*, *al*...nschw. *alfågel*, nisl. *hávella* 'fuligula glacialis' — kymr. *alarch* 'schwan'...weiter lat. *olor* 'schwan', gr. *eléa* 'sumpfvogel', *elōrios* 'wandervogel', mir. *ela* 'schwan', vgl. auch lat. *alcedo*, gr. *halkúōn* 'eisvogel' — Unter hinweis auf *elptr*, *qlpt*, kann man auch diese vogelnamen auf eine idg. wzl. **el*, **ol* 'farbebezeichnung'...zurückführen — Man verbindet auch mit einer homonymen wzl. mit der bedeutung 'schreien'.

Such argumentation is truly lamentable, if only for the fact that it whole-heartedly ignores natural history and the principles of name giving. If it is to be held that ON *alka* contains the same root as found in the name of the long-tailed duck (i e. Swed. *alfågel*, Icel. *hávella* — also of course Far. *ógvella*) and traceable to other Indo-European languages, notably in words meaning 'swan' and 'kingfisher', in reference either to colour or call, then one is certainly entitled to learn

what is common in these respects to the species concerned. If it is to be the colour, we object that four species less alike could scarcely be contemplated, or if it be the call, we submit that the same objection is equally valid.

The philology of the above-mentioned duck name has been treated in some detail (*FBN*, 10f., 20, *Fróðskaparrit*, xiii, 51f.) and there can be not the slightest doubt that our Norse names of this duck are ultimately based on spontaneous imitative forms, having nothing what ever to do with Indo-European roots. By the same token, these names cannot under any circumstances be genetically connected with ON *alka*, to the philology of which we may now turn.

We first consider whether this name is likely to be of onomatopoeic origin at all, i. e. does the voice of the razorbill suggest a sound like *alka* or (if for the sake of argument we accept the theory of a *k*-suffix) the above postulated base **ala*-? With one accord the ornithological handbooks tell us that the razorbill utters low guttural cries, as seems duly reflected in various onomatopoeic names. Characteristic examples include Welsh dial. *aron* (M. Parry, *Enwau Adar*, 26) and Eng. dial. *murre*, *marrott* (from Cornwall and Scotland respectively, cf. C. Swainson, *Provincial Names of British Birds*, 218).

Having observed that many of its names are of onomatopoeic origin, one is then surprised to learn that the razorbill is a rather silent bird. However, further enquiry into natural history explains the apparent contradiction. Razorbills consort with their near relatives, the more numerous and much noisier guillemots. The two species are close enough in appearance to be indistinguishable at some little distance and their cries are not dissimilar. Inevitably their names very often become confused and, as the ornithological facts would suggest, it is usually the name of the more prominent guillemot which extends to the less conspicuous razorbill, e. g. Sc. Gael. *langach* 'guillemot, razorbill', a (naturalised) loan from ON *langvé* 'guillemot'. It is therefore likely that an onomatopoeic name

for the razorbill will have originally denoted the clamorous guillemot, and indeed the specimen names from Welsh and English, quoted above, can equally refer to this bird also — *murre* is, in fact, the usual American English term for 'guillemot'.

Now, the evidence of the derivative languages mentioned above indicates that ON *alka* is a name proper to the razorbill, so that its descendant, Orkney Norn *ak*, *aak* 'guillemot', is plainly a case of secondary transference. We are therefore not disposed to regard this term as of onomatopoeic origin at all, and further observe that, in any case, none of the other names for this bird, or the guillemot, so far noticed, bears any resemblance to *alka* or to the theoretical base **ala-*, (above). If we are to discover the true origin of this name, we must forget about onomatopoeia.

Since the indications are that ON *alka* properly denotes the razorbill, it is to be assumed that the name will refer to some distinguishing feature, as Eng. *razorbill* or Icel. *drumb-, klumbunefja* 'club bill', or Far. *nakkalanga* 'long nape', the motivation of which was explained in the foregoing section. At this point we notice the Icelandic expression *teygja álkuna* or, more commonly, *teygja álkuna fram* 'crane one's neck', known since the seventeenth century. According to Blöndal, *álka* in this context means 'chin' or (of animals) 'snout'. Other languages commonly use 'neck' in comparable idioms, cf. in addition to English, Ger. *einen langen Hals machen* or Dan. *strække hals*. That this was once the case in Icelandic, too, making 'chin; snout' derived senses, is strikingly exemplified in a verse by Stefán Ólafsson (d. 1685) to which Jakob Benediktsson has obligingly referred us; two girls are described: *Hálsstutt við axlir höfuð ber, / hin teygir álku langa* (*Kvæði*, ii, 30, Copenhagen, 1836).

Icelanders feel that *álka* in the idiom in question must somehow be a figurative use of the bird name — so Jóhannesson, *Isl. etym. Wb.* — but the truth is evidently the opposite, for the dual meaning 'neck; razorbill' cogently recalls the

history of Far. *nakkalanga*. Unless all appearances are deceptive, the bird name stands revealed as a special application of a hitherto unrecognised word for 'neck'.

Skúgvur 'great skua'

Far. *skúgvur*, older *skúvur*, regularly descends from ON *skúfr* 'great skua; tassel', and also has meanings comparable to 'tassel' (Jacobsen-Matras). The word further survives in Icelandic, though here only 'tassel' has the expected form *skúfur*, the bird now being *skúmur* as the result of later differentiation (Chr. Matras, *Fróðskaparrit*, ii, 20—27).

The bird name has been held by the etymologists to be a secondary development, making 'tassel' the primary sense. However, no reason for the motivation of the bird name has been suggested. It is easy to understand how, for instance, Eng. *shag* as a bird name could derive from the crest ('shag') which distinguishes this species from the cormorant, but there is nothing at all about the great skua which reminds one of a tassel.

We have already referred to one type of skua name motivated by its robber habits (under *meyrus*). Another type is based on the loud call, as ON (> Icel., Far.) *kjóí* 'arctic skua', a parallel formation to ON (> Icel., Far.) *spói* 'curlew, whimbrel' (*Fróðskaparrit*, xviii, 1970), or to Far. *jói* 'pomatorhine skua', according to Svabo 'som . . . tillægges den Egenskab at skrige højt' (*FBN*, 39f.). The great skua is likewise notoriously noisy — Icel. *skúmur* can denote a loquacious, gossiping man — so that ON *skúfr* in the sense 'great skua' may be of analogous origin. Indeed we see that this is so, except that in the present case the call — actually the pursuit call — suggested a word already in existence in the language. So it came about that the bird was alleged to call *skúfr* 'tassel' and was itself so named.

A note on names of the type ON *svanr* 'swan'

ON *svanr* 'swan' is Common Germanic, Pr. Cmc. **swanaz* being comparable to Lat. *sonus*, Skt. *svanás* 'sound, noise, cry,

call', and this must be the literal meaning of the bird name, 'swan' being then properly '(swan-)song'. There is a striking parallel in ON *lómur* 'red-throated diver' lit. 'moan', both senses being attested in Mod. Icel. *lómur*. Seeing that *a*-stems denoting animate objects are rather scarce in Germanic, and mainly restricted to words of known Indo-European ancestry, as ON *fisker* 'fish', *ulfr* 'wolf' (Lat. *piscis*, *vulpes*), we suggest that other onomatopoeic bird names in this class are likely better interpreted as words properly denoting the call rather than the bird. We notice (CGmc.) ON *bróker* 'crow' and the raven names ON *korpr*, Far. *gorpur*, *krunkur*, which then mean literally 'croak' rather than 'croaker'. By the same token, (CGmc.) ON *gawker* 'cuckoo' may originally have denoted the call. The same principle could apply to ON *skarfr*, an imitative term which must originally have been used both of the shag and the cormorant, since in addition to their general similarity, their calls may be described as virtually identical. On ON *skúfr*, 'great skua', see previous section.

At all events, the above mentioned bird names are seen to belong to an archaic type and, as such, to contrast with the agent names, as (CGmc.) ON *hani* 'cock' lit. 'crower' (Lat. *cano* 'sing, crow'), which have attracted a number of echoic formations, for example ON *kejói* 'arctic skua', *spói* 'curlew, whimbrel', *þeisti* 'black guillemot'.

Blikur 'eider drake'

The eider drake is known in Faroese as *æðublikur*, cf. Norw. dial. *ēblik*, Swed. dial. *ärbleg*, further Icel. *æðarbliki*, or simply *blikur*, cf. Icel. *bliki* 'Navn paa visse Arter af Hanfugle, Andrik, Han-Ederfugl' (cf. *FBN*, 11).

An etymology has been given by Jóhannesson, *Isl. etym. Wb.*, where *bliki* — without mention of its cognates — is connected with *blika* 'to shine', the name thus literally meaning 'shiner'. An analogous formation would be, for instance, local Icel. *brúsi* 'great northern diver' from *brúsa* 'to roar'.

It is noticeable that, as a formation, Icel. *bliki* contrasts

with Far. *blikur*, Norw. *-blik*, Swed. *-bleg*, which presuppose ON **blikr* m., beside recorded *blik* n. 'shine, splendor'. This form of the bird name is reminiscent of the type represented by ON *lómr* 'red-throated diver' lit. 'moan', etc., quoted in the foregoing section. It must be another instance of the secondary application of an abstract noun to name a bird. Far. *blikur*, etc., thus belong to an archaic statum in the nomenclature, apparently older than the Icelandic, which seems to have innovated by turning an original abstract into an agent noun.

Jóhannesson does not consider the question of motivation. However, it seems unproblematic. The term will have been inspired by the gorgeous plumage of the male, in particular by the resplendent white feathers, all in marked contrast to the monotonous brown of the plain and unpretentious female. The term will therefore be proper to the eider, its extended use to designate the drake of other species in Icelandic being a later, local development.

ÚRTAK

Fuglanøvnini *glibbari* 'skarvsungi' og *meyrus* 'skú(g)vur' eru lýst sum heldur ungar navnorðagerðir burtur úr óuppskrivaðum sagnorðum **glibba* 'skræða í seg' og **meyra* 'skriða; kláa', sbr. norskt *glibba*, *maura* við hesum merkingum. Ætlað er, at orðið *havbestur* kann vera komið av tí neggjandi ljóði, sum er stundum at hoyra á málinum í hesum fugli. Navnið *nakkalanga* 'álka' kemur av høvuðburði hjá fuglinum, meðan sjálvt orðið *álka* er greitt sum enn ófunnið orð fyri 'hálsi'. *Skúgvur*, *skúvur*, fornnorrønt *skúfr* er runnið av eltingarljóði hjá fuglinum og hevur verið tillíkt fornnorrønum *skúfr* 'skú(g)vur, skúgving' (da. dusk). At enda merkir *blikur* bókstavliga 'glampi, ljómi, glitur' og sipar til hin glæsiliga fjaðurhamin.