

## Faroese Bird-Name Origins

### VII

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#### *Jaðra- or Jarða(r)kona?*

This, the current name for the water rail, is treated in *Faroese Bird Names*, 22ff., and seen to be allied to ON (pula) *jaðrakárn* and Icel. *jaðraki*, *jaðreka*, *jarðreki*, etc., etc. '(black-tailed) godwit', and further to a (presumed) Norw. *jordkone* quoted from Bj. Sæmundsson, *Fuglarnir* (1936), 415. Meanwhile, two further studies have been concerned with this name, and we accordingly begin by reporting on these.

The first, by H. Guðmundsson, 'Fuglsheitið jaðrakan', *Afmælisrit Jóns Helgasonar* (1969), 264-84, examines the multifarious Icelandic varieties of this name. It is shown that *jaðrakan*, the usual literary form today, is spurious, final *n* being in the last analysis a misunderstood suffix article. The form first appeared in 1848, gaining currency thanks to its adoption by Ben. Gröndal from 1874 onwards, who believed that this form best reflected a supposed affiliation with Gael. *adharcán* 'lapwing' mooted by S. Egilsson, *Lexicon Poëticum* (1860), 'Vox dicitur Hibernica esse'. Genuine forms of the name go back to the early 17th century, the oldest being *jaðraka* f., which may be envisaged as descending from the medieval prototype as follows: ON *jaðrakárn* (c. 1300) > \**jaðrakarn* > \**jaðrakan* > *jaðraka* (c. 1600), whence the medley of secondary variants, including those with *jarð-* as the first element. In the case of the Faroese, however, the likely descent of the

second element will have been: *-kárn* > \**-korn* > \**-kon* whence by folk etymology *-kona* 'woman'. We return to the first element below.

The article further considers the presumed Norw. *jordkone* 'water rail' and finds that this attestation is, in fact, most dubious, being to all appearances an amendment to an untrustworthy Norw. *Jordkenne* quoted in F. Faber, *Über das Leben der hochnordischen Vögel* (1825), Anhang II. We had already noted that the term was not recorded in the files of *Nynorsk Ordbok* in Oslo, and may now confidently dismiss this word with the observation that the name we are dealing with is found only in Iceland and Faroe.

The second study of our word by J. Rischel and P. Skårup on pp. 58 f. of their *P. H. Resen: Atlas Danicus, Færøerne* (1972) makes it clear that Resen's 'Jadrekone' (most likely from the 1670's) is a certain representation of a contemporary Far. *jaðrakona*, and then shows that the meaning of the name at this time was not 'water rail' as in the current language, but unequivocally 'godwit' as in Icelandic. It is further shown that, a hundred years later, Svabo (and Mohr) also understood what was by then 'jêarakona' (*Indberetninger, Lex. Fær.*) as denoting the same species (see below), and that moreover this sense survives in two present-day idioms which allude to the long, thin legs of the godwit, namely *jarðá(r)konuleggir* 'tynde og lange ben' (Jacobsen-Matras, *Orðabók*?) and 'Beinini sum á jarðarkonu' — tá ein hefur óvanliga long bein (J. Chr. Poulsen, *Føroysk orðafelli og orðtøk* (1958), 11. It goes without saying that 'godwit' will thus also be the meaning of the word in the traditional *Fuglakovæði*. However, beginning with M. Th. Brünnich, *Ornithologia Borealis* (1764), 58, 'Jord-Koene' appears as the Faroese name for the water rail, a meaning reported by J. Landt in 1800 and by all other writers after him. On this evidence, *jaðrakona* can be said to have changed its meaning in the second half of the 18th century.

It is abundantly clear that our knowledge of the bird name in question has been very greatly advanced by the new infor-

mation presented in the above studies, and this in turn permits further conclusions, as follows.

First of all, the meaning of ON *jaðrakárn* is no longer in doubt; it must have been 'godwit'. It will be next of interest to learn how and why the meaning in Faroese could change from 'godwit' to 'water rail'. As we see it, the reason must have been basically linguistic. In Resen's day the name was pronounced /jaðrakona/, by Svabo's time it had become /jearakona/. The sound shift began when, let us say c. 1700, /ð/ became silent and the ensuing /jara-/ was at once necessarily modified to /jeara-/ in accordance with the phonological pattern of the language, hence Svabo's 'phonetic' spelling. But this new pronunciation at once gave the first element a new meaning, since /jeara-/ is 'earth', so that the name was henceforth automatically understood as 'earth-woman'. The godwit is not a common Faroese bird, many speakers at the time would then have no clear ideas about it and the name, in its new shape, was transferred to the water rail, not a common species either, and secretive into the bargain, but one whose habits seem to be reflected in a name like 'earth-woman' — the bird, rarely observed on the wing, flees from human intrusion by swiftly running away, its body held close to the ground (FBN, 24). There is no record of an older, more original Faroese name for the water rail. Still we might guess, though no more than guess, that it could have been the same as synonymous Icel. *jarðsmuga*, the first element *jarð*- 'earth' then being a predisposing factor in the adoption of the godwit name. The Icelandic name certainly appears to be ancient, since the second element is traditional in bird names, cf. Swed. *gårdsmyg* 'wren' (Hellquist, *Svensk etym. Ordbok*) or Ger. *Grasmücke* 'Sylvia', OHGer. *grasemucca* presupposing \**grasas-mukka* (Kluge, *Deut. etym. Wb.*). But however this may have been, the semantic shift in question has thus been essentially brought about by phonetic changes occurring as part of the normal evolution of the language, an odd coincidence which, to the best of our knowledge, is quite unique in the history of bird names.



Turning now to the orthographical consequences, it is clear that Resen's implied *jaðra-* is historically correct, matching as it does the earliest Icelandic and, of course, the Old Norse prototype. On the other hand, the present Faroese sense arose from an apparent meaning 'earth-woman', orthographically *jarða(r)-*. We thus have the unusual paradox that both spellings are etymologically justifiable. The following solution may suggest itself. The spelling *jarða(r)kona* could be kept as the word in the living language technically designates the water rail, but where the term applies to the godwit, as in the traditional *Fuglakvæði* or the two idioms quoted above, then *jaðrakona* is appropriate.

We are now in a position to consider the origin of this name. Two etymologies have been proposed so far, as explained in *FBN*, loc. cit., and with further details in Guðmundsson, op. cit., and we take these as the basis for our further discussion.

The first interpretation which would derive ON *jaðrakárn* from Gael. *adharcán* 'lapwing' has already been touched upon above. A certain similarity between the words is obviously present and the Norse could, on formal linguistic grounds, quite conceivably be envisaged as an admittedly rather free, but nonetheless entirely plausible, naturalisation of the Gaelic. There is no doubt that, if this were the case, the latter would be the donor, and not vice versa. A native Celtic word, *adharcán* is traditional and generally dominant throughout Gaeldom, and will owe its stability to its being semantically transparent, literally 'little horn' in allusion to the bird's striking crest, i. e. *adharc* 'horn' with diminutive suffix *-án* in use since Old Irish times. An apparently important non-linguistic aspect could be held to point in the same direction. The name *jaðrakárn*, as we now know, is not attested in Norway; indeed, the godwit is not properly a Norwegian bird at all. It is therefore arguable that the Scandinavian settlers in the West had no native name for this bird, hence the borrowing from Gaelic. Now the lapwing is rare in Iceland, so that it is further arguable that the Gaelic name could then easily be transferred

from the lapwing to the godwit, particularly since the loud calls of these two birds can be very similar, as bird books frequently confirm, and compare the identical second element in the English names *peewit* 'lapwing' and *godwit*. But this argument is not quite so strong when applied to the Faroes, for here the lapwing occurs more commonly, though granted it is not prominent.

But there are more cogent reasons for suspecting the validity of such argumentation. Supposing the Scandinavian settlers had no indigenous name for the godwit, they certainly had one for the lapwing, namely *vípa*, for the lapwing is a common bird in Norway. One could understand their borrowing a Gaelic term for the unfamiliar godwit, but not for the well-known lapwing, and the Vikings surely weren't so perverse as to borrow the Gaelic word for lapwing just to name the godwit. And this is not all. Gaelic loans in Norse are by now pretty well known. There are 30 or so in the medieval records (listed by De Vries, *Altnord. etym. Wb.*, xxi) and a few more, about half as many, have been identified in the modern languages. In general, these loans are clearly recognisable as terms reflecting Gaelic influence on Scandinavian life in the Viking Age, cf. W. B. L., 'Chr. Matras' Studies on the Gaelic Element in Faroese: Conclusions and Results', *Scottish Gaelic Studies*, xiii, 112-26. True, there is a bird name among these loans, i. e. *dunna* 'tame duck' (*FBN*, 13 f., *Fróð.*, xxv, 12), but this borrowing is explicable in terms of material culture. However, as far as is known, there is no comparable motivation to account for the adoption of the name of a wild species like the lapwing for which, as already noted, the Scandinavians had a perfectly good name of their own.

There are thus, we submit, too many unanswered questions for one to have any confidence in the proposed derivation from Gaelic, and we therefore turn to consider the second interpretation. According to this, the name will be native Scandinavian, ON *jaðrakárn* consisting of a first element *jaðra-* associated with *jaðarr* m. 'edge', i. e. 'edge of a marsh



or wood', and a second element *-kárn* occurring as a simplex in the same ms. as *jaðrakárn* itself, and further in Far. *kráku-kárn*, Norw. *kråkekonn*, also Norw. *ramnkorn* 'blåkråka' (FBN, 22).

We refer first to the element *jaðra-*. We ourselves thought it unlikely that such a general meaning as 'edge' could figure in a bird name except as a result of secondary folk-etymology. This may be so, but it will not have been impossible that, at some stage or in some areas, ON *jaðarr* acquired a narrower sense than has been recorded, perhaps 'edge of a marsh' or the like. And in fact such a development is now known to have taken place in cognate Far. *jaðari*, also specifically 'kanten af en strøm' (Jacobsen-Matras, op. cit.). A word with such a meaning could naturally enter into a bird name, a close parallel here being Ger. *Uferschnepfe* '(black-tailed) godwit' (*Ufer* 'shore, bank of a river or stream', *Schnepfe* 'snipe'), certainly a popular name, as also e. g. *Uferschwalbe* 'sand martin' (*Schwalbe* 'swallow'). One may evidently reckon with the possibility that *jaðra-* in our word could indeed be a composition form of ON *jaðarr*.

We now take the element *-kárn*. Its onomatopoeic affiliations are in no doubt, and the Faroese and Norwegian examples show it as a constituent of crow names. Could this element be expected to occur in a godwit name? The possibility is apparently not excluded, for in addition to the peewit-like calls, the godwit produces other, quite different notes. H. F. Witherby et al., *Handbook of British Birds*, iv, 161 f., quote reports that 'feeding birds sometimes use a monosyllabic »kuk« and »kik« . . . a quick barking »querk-querk-querk« . . . also . . . a uniform »gäge-gäge-gäge« . . . in scrape ceremony, varied by loud, clear, gull-like »gāk« . . .'

In the light of the foregoing, it appears that ON *jaðrakárn* must, in the first place, be taken seriously at its face value. At any rate, and whatever the ultimate origin of the elements concerned, this compound is undoubtedly ancient and its presence in both Icelandic and Faroese makes it as certain as may

be that its origin is to be sought in Viking-Age Norway. At once, however, one is faced with an apparent dilemma, since the godwit is hardly a Norwegian bird and hence not likely to have had a traditional Norwegian name. It seems to us, however, that philology has here something to contribute to ornithology. If the godwit is rare in Norway today, that was evidently not so in the past — our linguistic material implies as much. In other words, the absence of a descendant of ON *jaðrakárn* in the land of its origin is seen to be due to the fact that the species it designated so much declined there that its very name was forgotten.

Our material contains more evidence of ornithological interest, again implying that godwit populations have been anything but stable. We have already spoken of the godwit as an uncommon species in the Faroes today, and M. á Ryggi, *Fugla-bókin*, 42, writes that the bird 'er ikki ofta at síggja í Føroyum, og sera sjáldan hevur hann reiðrast'. It was not well known two hundred years ago either, to judge from Svabo, *Indberetninger*, 15: Jêarakona (*rallus aquaticus*) sees i Flokke. Hvad Tid af Aaret den her opholder sig, er mig ubekjendt. En eneste Flok lykkedes det mig at see paa Sandøen mod Midten af Septembr. 1781. As Rischel and Skårup, loc. cit., point out, the definition *rallus*, i. e. 'water rail', is erroneous, the description 'sees i Flokke' making it certain that Svabo had the godwit in mind. But the godwit will not always have been such an elusive bird in the Faroes; on the contrary, it must once have been a quite common sight. We recall the two idioms (above) alluding to the conspicuously long legs. Such expressions could not have arisen had not the godwit at some time been a familiar species.

#### *Koparsnípa* 'godwit'

In *FBN*, 77, we (erroneously) stated that the godwit was without a native name and observed that *koparsnípa*, adopted from Dan. *kobbersneppe*, had been used to denote the species in question before M. á Ryggi introduced the neologism *reyð-*



*spógvi* in *Fuglabókin* (1951). Since it is now known that Faroese did in fact possess a traditional name for the godwit in the shape of *jaðrakona*, maintaining itself as such until the second half of the 18th century, during which it came to mean 'water rail' (see previous section), the loan word *koparsnípa* will most likely only have come into use after the native name of the godwit had been transferred to the water rail.

*Kvørkeveggja*, etc. 'blackbird'

This purely Faroese name occurs in two main types: *kvørkeveggja* (*kever-*), *-kevikkja*, to which add a further variant *-kevekkja* (Jacobsen-Matras, op. cit.), f., and *kvørkeviski* (*kever-*) n., the latter also having the sense 'shy, retiring person' — we ignore here the unverified *kvørkevísla* said to have been used in Nólsoy (*FBN*, 50 f.). In our previous work, we were unable to propose etymologies here; this omission we now hope to make good, at least in part.

The Common Scandinavian name for the blackbird is represented by ON *súsvort* lit. 'very black one'; it is continued in Norw. *susvorta*, and corruptly in Dan. *solsort*, Swed. dial. *solsvärta* (Falk-Torp, *Norw.-dän. etym. Wb.*). Uniquely preserving the old emphatic particle *sú-* (De Vries, op. cit.), the name is clearly of considerable antiquity. The species is thus named after the all-black plumage of the male, as in so many other languages: suffice it to mention Ger. *Schwarzdrossel* or Russ. *tshornyí drozd* lit. 'black thrush', or Eng. *blackbird* paralleled in Welsh *aderyn du* (*du* 'black'), and even tautologically, as Ger. *Schwarzamsel*, Ir. *londubb*, beside the synonymous simplex *Amsel*, *lon* 'blackbird'.

In Faroese, however, this traditional name has been lost, due we suppose to the bird's being a relatively rare visitor to the islands and consequently not well known. Its present name *kvørkeveggja*, etc., will thus be a Faroese innovation, and we ask: how can such a neologism have arisen? If the name has a meaning, it can be expected to contain a word meaning 'black', as Icel. *svartþröstur* lit. 'black thrush'. As this is not



so, we conclude that the name is not properly meaningful, in which case it will only be explicable in terms of onomatopoeia. We therefore identify *kvørkveggja* and its variants as onomatopoeic representations of the shrill, screeching chatter of the startled blackbird. We notice that the gender is feminine and wonder if we may see in this a faint trace of the lost ON *súsvørt* f.

Turning next to the other type *kvørkviski*, one sees that this form contains a quite different second element, and further differs from *kvørkveggja* in being meaningful. The question arises: is its meaning 'shy, retiring person' a figurative use of the bird name or is the opposite true? At this point we observe that *kvørkviski* is neuter, a gender which is most exceptional in primary bird names (*Fróð.*, xxiii, 28 f.). On the other hand, compound formations of this nature denoting persons may well have this gender, as the common *-menni*, *-vætti* (Jacobsen-Matras, op. cit., 277, 511). Evidently then *kvørkviski* is not primarily a bird name at all, but how did it come to mean 'blackbird'? The development must be due to folk etymology motivated, it would seem, by the blackbird's shy and retiring behaviour in the Faroes. M. á Ryggi, op. cit., 6, writes: (*Kvørkveggja* . . . er varugur fuglur, flýgur mest høgt fram yvir jørðini og dámar væl at fjala seg.

Whereas we hope to have adequately explained the origin of *kvørkveggja* and its variants, we are not yet able to do as much for *kvørkviski*. But we can offer suggestions. The second element *-viski* appears to be an extension of *-visi*, occurring in the variant *kvørkvisi* (Jacobsen-Matras, op. cit.) and paralleled in Icel. *örkvisi* 'degenerate person', whence the Faroese adjectives *örkvisin* 'sensitive' and *kvørkvisin* 'shy, retiring'. Dare we guess that the latter may be no more than the former modified by contamination with the bird name *kvørkveggja*?

#### Vípa 'lapwing'

We considered the two etymologies long ago proposed for this term in *FBN*, 73 f., preferring that one which views it as

a purely onomatopoeic creation rather than as a word basically meaning 'crest'. After further study of lapwing names in a European context, we have come to believe that the meaning 'crest' must, after all, be primary. At the same time, the phonetic structure of the word eventually led to its being regarded as reproducing the bird's call. One has something of both worlds, so to speak, as we now explain.

A characteristic feature about lapwing names of primary onomatopoeic origin is their disyllabic pattern, as Eng. dial. *peewweet* (whence literary *peewit*), *peeweep*, *teewweet*, *teeweep*, with which compare Dutch *kievit* (dial. *kiewit*) beside Flem. *piewit*, paralleled with slavising *-tz* in Ger. *Kiebitz*, dial. *Piewitz*, and the same elsewhere, as Russ. *tshibis*, sometimes made meaningful, as French *dix-huit*. These two-syllable words reflect the penetrating alarm call.

Now the lapwing is as often named after its remarkable, mobile crest. We have already referred to a Gaelic example, i. e. Ir. *adharcán* lit. 'little horn' (first section above), comparable to many Welsh names based on *corn* 'horn', as *corn y wich* 'wheezy horn' or *cornichyll* with obscure second element, but ancient as a corresponding form occurs in Bret. *kernigell*. Further French *vanneau* lit. 'crest' or Eng. dial. *hornpie*, while Eng. *lapwing* itself, earliest OEng. (Leiden Gl., late 8th century) *laepiwince*, can be shown to be tautological, each element ultimately meaning 'crest'; a related simplex survives in North Fris. *liip* 'lapwing' (W. B. L., *Lapwing* and associated Names, *Transactions of the Philological Society*, forthcoming).

We may now refer to the Scandinavian name. Falk-Torp, op. cit., *vibe*, write. . . . 'Der vogel hat wahrscheinlich seinen namen nach dem federbusch auf dem kopfe, den er (wie einen fächer) legen oder heben kann: vgl. mnd. *wîp* 'quaste'. . . .' De Vries, op. cit., *vîpa*, compares in addition to MLGer. *wîp* its synonymous cognates MDutch *wijp*, (older) *wipe*, OHGer. *wîffa*, further Norw. *vîpa* 'steifes Haar, Granne', the direct descendant of ON *vîpa* (attested as a sobriquet). In view of the very high incidence of 'crest' names in lapwing nomen-



clature, it will be methodologically correct to regard this name, too, as having the basic sense 'crest'. When later, except locally in Norway (localities in Torp, *Nynorsk etym. Ordbok*), the meaning 'steifes Haar, Granne' or the like was lost, *vípa* lived on solely as a bird name. But a bird name of this phonetic shape could suggest the lapwing's cry, recalling the second syllable in primary onomatopoeic forms. That this happened over wide areas may be inferred from the use of *vípa* in Swedish to name various other species, *FBN*, 74.

#### ÚRTAK

Í greinini heldur hövundurinn fram fuglanavningarannsóknir sínar við stöði í nýggjum viðrakingum. Serstakliga verður víst á, at bæði *jaðra-* og *jarða(r)kona* hava upprunafroðiliga rætt fyrri sær, hitt fyrri er upphavligt og merkir 'reyðspógvi' eins og hitt skylda íslenska *jaðrakan*. Navnið fær ikki verið gæliskt, sum hildið hevur verið, men má vera komið úr Noregi í víkingaöld. Hetta bendir á, at hetta fuglaslagið, ið er at kalla ókent í Noregi í dag, eigur at hava verið vanligt har á landi í fyrndini. Tað hevur eisini verið til í Føroyum einaferð, sum verður prógvað av orðatiltakinum *beinini sum á jaðrakonu*, ið er meint við long bein.

*Kvørkeveggja* verður víst at vera eitt (alføroyskt) ljóðherminavn, sum onkustaðni er komið í bland við eitt heilt annað orð *kvørkeviski*, ið merkir 'smæðið, hvørvið fólk'. Navnið *vípa*, sum ofta hevur verið hildið at vera ljóðhermandi, er heldur eitt fornt orð fyrri toppinum, sum er so sermerktur fyrri henda fugl.