

# Etymological Notes on *roysni* etc., *smæra* and *ælabogi*

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The noun *roysni* n. can express two very different concepts, the one abstract 'great achievement or the like', the other concrete 'gable' – without question representing a conflation of two etymologically distinct words.

There will be no doubt about the antecedents of the former; it presupposes medieval *\*reysni*, a derivative of the recorded ON *rausn* – with similar meanings, basically 'magnificence'. But in the sense 'gable' *roysni* is less original, having been changed from *\*roysti*, still present in *roystisveggur*, an alternative to *roysnisveggur* (veggur wall), which squares exactly with Norw. *røyste*, derived from ON (Norw.) *raust*, both words meaning 'gable'. The change from *\*roysti* to *roysni* we ascribe to the influence of *roysin* 'erect; high; steep', an adjective with such meanings being likely to be often employed when speaking of gables.

The term *roysin* itself is first recorded by Svabo, *Ditc. fær.* 669), who compared it to Icel. »reisinn«. However, no such Icelandic word is known, hence Chr. Matras' query in the *Register*, 109. The term is thus evidently isolated in Faroese, but with every appearance of being ancient, presupposing ON

*\*reysinn*, which we would connect etymologically with ON *reisa* 'raise', *rísa* 'rise'.

The foregoing has relevance for a disputed point of Old Norse etymology, as follows. ON *rausn* 'magnificence' (above) has also a quite different sense 'forecastle'. Falk, *Wörter und Sachen* (1912) argued that such disparate meanings indicated that two etymologically distinct words had here fallen together, in support of which he quoted Far. *roysni* 'gable' – one could reasonably postulate a common underlying meaning something like 'higher section of a building'. Against this Heinertz, *SVS Lund* 7 (1927), 165 – we quote therefrom de Vries, *Altnord. etym. Wb.*, 435 – explained the meaning 'forecastle' simply as a special development of the original abstract sense. It looks as though this is right. At any rate the Faroese word lends no support to Falk's view, for Far. *roysni* 'gable' can have nothing to do with *rausn* in any sense seeing that the primary form is *\*roysti*.

We next notice that another, quite unrelated word has been drawn into the orbit of the Faroese words considered so far. This is *reystur* from ON *hraustr* 'strong; capable; bold'. The Faroese term has these meanings,

too, but only in poetic style; in ordinary usage the meanings are 'erect; high; steep', a striking difference which calls for an explanation. We now observe that the adjective *reystur* figures in compound nouns such as *reystmenni* n. 'capable man' from ON *hraustmenni*. In such compounds *reyst-* alternates with *royst-*, as like as not under the influence of Old Norse variants with *hreysti-*, hence also *roystmenni*, cf. ON *hreystimenni*. In these surroundings *t* was regularly lost in pronunciation, so that where the alternative *royst-* was established, it would be felt as *roys-*, bringing it into association with *roysni*, not a big step given the meanings, and willy nilly with *roysin* also. In some places, then, and at some time, *roysin* and *reystur* became confused, when the latter took on the meanings 'erect; high; steep' proper to the former alone.

It remains to be said that yet another totally unrelated word has become involved in these changes. This is *roysningur* 'walrus', first recorded by Svabo in the *Fiskakvæði* and in his *Dict. Fær.* compared with Icel. »rostúngr«. It seems that particularly the adjective *roysin* has been instrumental in converting ON *rostungr* into Far. *roysningur*, their relationship being reminiscent of the pattern seen in *heiðin* 'heathen' and its noun *heidningur*. Our standard authorities explain this word as 'rusty (animal)' in allusion to the colour, cf. de Vroes, *op.cit.*, 452, the name then being based on \**rost* 'rust', though there is no independent evidence for such a term in traditional Norse where the medieval word is *ryð*. Nor do our natural history books confirm that 'rusty' would be a likely epithet. However, V. Kiparsky, *L'histoire du morse*, (Annales Academiæ Scientiarum Fennicæ, Ser. B., Vol. 73.3) has

shown that ON *rostungr* is ultimately due to another Old Norse walrus name *rostm-* or *rosmhvalr*, where *rosm-* is the older variant and originally an independent name, corruptly rendering Lappish *morssa*, of which it is an anagramme (see particularly pp. 30-44 'Les formes scandinaves et leur rayonnement'). The Lapps were, of course, familiar with the animal long before the Norsemen reached its habitat on the shores of the far north. The name is presumed to be onomatopoeic, reproducing the loud, bellying call.

#### *Smæra* f. 'clover'

One recognises in Far. *smæra* f. the typical representative of the native Scandinavian term for clover, cf. Icel. *smæra* (local: Árnes-sýsla, otherwise *smári* m.), Norw. *smære*, Orkney Norn *smero*, older Dan. *smære*, Swed. dial. *smäre*, whereas standard Swed. *klöver*, like Dan. *kløver*, older *klever*, are borrowings from MLG *klever*.

S. Bugge, *Paul und Braunes Beiträge* xxiv, 455f., compared synonymous Irish *seamar*, which he regarded as standing in ablaut relationship to the Scandinavian words, though without going into details. We note that *seamar*, *seamair* f., often as the diminutive *seamróg*, the last taken into English as *shamrock*, where it is generally understood as the emblem worn on St. Patrick's Day, March 17th. But Bugge's view did not meet with the assent of others publishing in the field, doubtless since the ablaut variation implied is so irregular. In the following we aim to demonstrate that the words are indeed related, submitting that the nature of the material does not oblige us to operate with ablaut relationship as such. But first, we test



the credibility of the alternative etymologies offered.

These are, in essence, contained in the statements by Falk-Torp, *Norw.-dän.etym. Wb.* (1911), 1085f., etc., who euate the Norse word with OE *smaere* 'lip' on the basis of a supposed semantic parallel between Lat. *labrum* 'lip' and the tree name *laburnum*. This laboured analogy need hardly detain us. Suffice it to comment that the Latin words cannot be related, for *laburnum*, like its bed-fellow the shrub-name *viburnum*, is indubitably a loan word (Ernout-Meillet<sup>3</sup>, *Dict. étym. de la langue latine* (1959), 335. It seems that these authorities fancied that any Germanic cognate of *seamar* would need have the same consonant-vowel sequence. At any rate, they regarded 'summer' as related, cf. Falk-Torp, 1225, who see Norw. *symre* 'anemone' as one with OE *symering-wyrt*, which they interpret as 'summer wort'. These names are declared to stand in ablaut relationship to 'summer', and further to *seamar*, implying a basic meaning of 'summer flower'.

We find that the above correspondences show scant regard for the *Realien*. Anemones and clover are quite separate species, neither of them particularly meriting the epithet 'summer', no more than most other flowers. The former is not much in evidence, and hardly more than decorative, but the latter is a prominent, economically important plant, attractive to livestock and invaluable in the pastures. Two such dissimilar items can never have gone under the same name. As for the Old English term, its precise meaning is unknown. Even the literal interpretation 'summer wort' is open to doubt, see Holthausen, *Alteng. etym. Wb.* (1934), 340. So all we are left with are words having

at best a comparable consonant skeleton, but not a single verifiable fact to suggest that any of them are related.

For good measure, Falk-Torp, 1085f., further connect OE *smaere* 'lip' with an adjective in the same language, *galsmaere* 'zum lachen geneigt', on the strength of which Jóhannesson, *Isl. etym. Wb.* (1956)m 909, compares the plant name with *-smaere* as an adjective, implying a literal meaning 'similar'. Whether this is a likely name for clover we leave others to judge. But we hasten to add that the Falk-Torp view of the relationship of these two words is their own conjecture, not shared by Holthausen, 301, and surely for the best of reasons. Finally Pokorny, *Idg. etym. Wb.* (1957), 968, returned to the connection with 'lip', characterising clover as a 'Lippenblütler', evidently oblivious of the fact that not by any stretch of the imagination could clover be seen as a labiate.

We can safely assert that the words we are concerned with have not been etymologised, so that their true affinities remain unknown, and at this distance in time almost certainly unknowable. But one ineluctable fact persists. Scand. *smaera* and Ir. *seamar* denote one and the same plant, and a very significant one. These words must be related. The only question can be how they are related. The shape of the words as we know them precludes any suggestion of relatively recent, i.e. medieval, borrowing one way or another. In both languages the words will be traditional, as Bugge saw, their point of contact being somewhere in Europe at the time when Germanic and Celtic peoples lived as neighbours. That the phonological differences not do accord with the general rules is not surprising since plant names, like bird names,

are all too susceptible to unpredictable outside influences which can play havoc with neogrammarian principles – as like as not some such influence is responsible for the unexplained form of Icel. *smári* (above) at odds with Common Scand. *smæra*.

There is yet another aspect of this matter which supports our general position. Following Grimm, *Kleine Schriften* ii, 121, Bugge draws attention to a Gualish term for clover: trifolium ... gallice dicitur *uisumarus*', comparing it with Ir. *seamar*. The source is a medical handbook composed c. 400 by Marcellus of Bordeaux. Whereas the termination *-us* is, of course, due to Latin (rendering *-os* if the Proto-Celtic ending survived), any analysis of the rest of the word can, in our view, only be tentative. But should the word be a compound, dividing as *ui-sumarus*, as Grimm and Bugge supposed, then affinity with Ir. *seamar* will not be disputed, which would mean that the term once existed in P-Centic as well. However that may be, the mere mention of clover in this source speaks for its esteem in popular medicine. This cannot fail to remind one that shamrock, too, has a special place in Irish folklore; not for nothing will it have become a symbol of Ireland. Such testimony to the significant role of the plant in the practices of the Celtic peoples reinforces what has already been said about its economic importance and the conclusion drawn therefrom.

#### *Ælabogi* m. 'rainbow'

There is, of course, no doubt about the formal structure of this word, but the literal meaning 'shower bow' is unique among Scandinavian languages which generally speak of a 'rainbow', as ON *regnbogi* and its descendants; this is the usual concept in

other Germanic languages, too. How is the exceptional Faroese formation to be accounted for?

It is well known that, in the Viking age, there were connections between the Faroes and the then Gaelic-speaking world in Ireland and especially Scotland. These connections led to the introduction into Faroese of a number of gaelic words: for a general review see Chr. Matras, »Írsk orð í færoyskum«, *Álmanakki* 1966, 22-32. In the present case we also find a comparable connection. The Gaelic languages have various terms for 'rainbow', but the literal meaning is commonly 'shower bow', thus Irish *ogha ceatha*, Scottish *bogha frois* (or *froise*). A further Irish term is *tuar ceatha* lit. 'shower portent', while *bogha báistí* lit. 'rainbow' may be due to English influence. But certain it is that the concept 'shower' is predominant and indigenous. It is not possible to state exactly how old these terms are, but *bogha* itself is a loan from ON *bogi* (Marstrander, *Bidrag til det norske Sprogs Historie i Irland* (1915), 59, 127).

The expression 'shower bow' occurs, however, in the British Isles at a much earlier date, namely in a single attestation of OE *scurboga* from the poetical paraphrase known as Genesis A (text *scurbogan* acc., line 1540). The ms. is dated to 1000 or a little later, but the poem itself is older. It is similar in style to the famous Beowulf epic, which has drawn on it (A.N. Doane, *Genesis A* (1978), *passim*). Thanks to recent archaeological evidence Beowulf, previously thought to have been composed c. 725, can now be dated to the second half of the seventh century (M. Lehnert, *Beowulf* (1986), 5), with obvious consequences for the dating of Genesis A. It has for long been held that the



poem arose in Northumbria, though indubitable proof has not been forthcoming (Doane, *op. cit.*). Nevertheless it now seems possible to claim a Northumbrian origin on the following grounds.

Northumbria was first effectively christianised by the Celtic (i.e. Gaelic) mission emanating from Iona in Scotland in 634. This mission eventually found itself in conflict with its Roman counterpart centered in the south at Canterbury, until the latter resolved the dispute in its own favour in 663. As we now see, the revised chronology of Beowulf allows us date Genesis A to the period of Celtic ascendancy, and in using, in fact we believe coining, *scurboga* the poet was surely reflecting the preferences of the Celtic mission, for in this word we recognise the spirit of the Gaelic tradition. The term stands in marked contrast to other usage in English which knows only *rainbow*, first recorded as *renboga* c. 1000 (Ælfric, also Genesis text), this doubtless the expression employed by the victorious Roman mission, soon to prevail also in Germany, hence OHG *reganbogo*, and later generally in Scandinavia, as evidenced by ON *regnbogi*, which replaced the heathen *bifrost* – clear indication of the importance attached to terminology in religious rivalries.

Returning to Far. *ælabogi*, it can scarcely be doubted that here is a loan translation from Gaelic. But what force can have been so potent as to enable it to withstand pressures from *regnbogi*? We believe we can find the answer by taking into consideration another matter relating to Gaelic influence. In his essay on Irish words in Faroese (above, p. 31), Chr. Matras drew attention to *Páturs-messudagur* 'Pátur's (mass) Day', formerly kept on Mykines as a half holiday on March

17th. But this is also 'Patrick's Day', the most solemn festival in the Irish calendar, so that *Pátur* must here stand for \**Pátrik* (OIr *Pátric*) under the influence of *Pætur* 'Peter'. Seeing that the cult of st Patrick has no roots elsewhere in Scandinavia (*Kulturhistorisk Leksikon for nordisk Middelalder* xviii, 135), it must have reached the Faroes directly from the British Isles.

We now endeavour to place these to complementary pieces of evidence into historical perspective. Dicuil relates that the Irish anchorites left the Faroes when the Norsemen arrived, so that their rituals can have had no affect on the newcomers. However, among the newcomers were some who had already lived in the western colonies, indeed the first settler Grímr c. 825 had himself an Irish nickname *Kamban* (*Fróðskaparrit* xxv, 9-11). Such people had naturally been in touch with Celtic Christianity, some of whom will have been open to the beliefs of that creed. So it came about that, even in the heathen period, there were people in the Faroes who kept alive Christan practices, at any rate on out-of-the-way Mykines. Such people had coined the term *ælabogi*. We imagine that this new term, having the advantage of semantic transparency over the inherited *bifrost*, became general throughout the islands and thus able to resist *regnbogi*, unquestionably the official term of the decisive mission sent over from Norway c. 1000.

**Úrtak**

Givnar verða próvgrundir fyri, at *roysni* 'galvur' stendur fyri upphavligari *\*roysti*, sum enn sæst í orðinum *roystisveggur*, eftir árinum frá lýsingarorðinum *roysin*. Lýsingarorðið *reystur* í samansettum orðum við *reys(t)-* ella *roys(t)-* kendist at hoyra til orðini frammanfyri og tók tískil upp í seg merkingina hjá orðinum *roysin* við. Fornnorrønt *rostungr* broyttist til føroyskt *roysningur* vegna fólkaetýmologiskt hugmyndasamband serstakliga við lýsingarorðið *roysin*.

Sýnt verður á, at *smæra* er upprunaliga sama orð sum írska samheitið *seamar*, við tilvísing til germansk-keltiskt samband í Evropa í forsøguligari tíð. *Ælabogi* er tøkutýðing úr gæliskum; tað hevur trúarlígan týðning og umboðar eitt drag av keltiskum kristindómi innflutt av trúgvandi úr Bretlandi nakað um somu tíð sum landnám Føroya.

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