

Place Names and Viking Age Religion

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Abstract

Place names with religious connotations have been used as a source of knowledge about Viking Age religion. The chronology of such names – referred to here as ‘sacral place names’ – is uncertain, however, and many may pre-date the Old Norse period. To assemble a corpus that can shed more definite light on this segment of time, the author attempts to identify sacral place names in areas colonised by Scandinavians during the Viking Age.

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Sacral Place Names

The subject of this paper is place names related to Old Scandinavian or pre-Christian beliefs. Examples of such names are *Ulleråker* ‘the sacred field of the god Ull’ or *Odense*, from an Old Danish *Othensvi* ‘the sanctuary of the god Odin’ (Woden), *Helgö* ‘the holy island’ or ‘the island where religiously sanctioned peace prevails’, and *Gussjö* (**Gudsjö*) ‘the lake of the gods’.

We do not have a really good designation for such names. They are sometimes referred to as cultic place names, but it is rather obvious that not all of them denoted ritual places. Some of them might have done, like *Götavi* for example, probably ‘the sanctuary of the god *Gaut’, where a ritual platform has been excavated (Vikstrand 2010). Others, like *Torsberget* ‘the hill or rock of the god Thor’, may have formed part of narratives in which the gods acted in the landscape. The most common designation today is probably *sacral place names* (Holmberg 1994), which I will use in this paper.

For a long time, sacral place names have been utilised as a source of knowledge about the Old Scandinavian religion of the Viking Age. But there is a serious problem with this, and that concerns the age of these names. The main reason they have been preserved to our own day is that they have become names of settlements, of farms and hamlets. But recent research suggests that the main bulk of settlement names in the areas where we have these sacral place names, like the central part of Sweden, actually pre-date the Viking Age (Vikstrand 2013). There is thus reason to suspect that the sacral place names themselves may also be much older than we had earlier thought. Thus, they cannot automatically be expected to reflect religious aspects of the Viking Age. At least, we cannot be sure which names belong to that period and which do not. So what we need are sacral place names securely dated to the Viking Age. A rather obvious way to find such names is to turn to areas that were colonised by Scandinavians during the period, and this is the aim of my survey.

If we turn first to the east, matters are fairly simple. Swedish settlement in Finland and Estonia first took place in Christian times, so we would not expect to find much evidence of pre-Christian beliefs in the place names of these areas. There are only a few names to consider, first and foremost *Odenholm*, *Odensö* and *Viborg*. These names all have a clear

pre-Christian character and should most probably be understood as travellers' names or 'names of the road', that is, names given by Scandinavian or rather Swedish seafarers during the Viking Age.

Odenholm is an island off the Estonian coast. The name might be a reinterpretation of an Estonian toponym (Naert 1991: 255-256), but in its Swedish form it must nevertheless be understood as a compound of the god's name *Oden* 'Odin' and *holm* 'island', thus meaning 'the island of the god Odin'. There are several parallels to this name in central Sweden, so there seems to have been a connection between Odin and islands. As to what conceptions or rituals lay behind this, one can but speculate. We might, however, recall a passage in *Gautreks saga* where Odin demands a human sacrifice from King Víkarr to put an end to unfavourable headwinds. The medieval law of Uppland in central Sweden (*Upplandslagen*), moreover, tells of uninhabited islands where seafarers went ashore to await favourable winds, idling away the time with games (*skæmta sik ok wædher skodha* 'enjoying themselves and watching the weather', *Upplandslagen* 12: 7). One could very well imagine that seafarers in pre-Christian times also conducted rituals on such islands, in order to secure good sailing conditions with favourable, following winds, although maybe not always as drastic as the one undertaken by the men of King Víkarr. Perhaps names like *Odenholm* are reminiscences of such rituals, directed towards Odin as a god of winds (Vikstrand 2001: 125-126).

A similar background could be conceived for the hamlet and island of *Odensö* (*Odensö* 1549) in Nyland, off the coast of Finland. This name has puzzled scholars, as the Swedish settlement in the area does not seem to be of pre-Christian origin (Zilliacus 1994: 88, Huldén 2001: 201, Örnmark 2003: 103). However, *Odensö* is situated by the inner fairway in Nyland, on the route to Russia and Novgorod. Swedish seafarers frequently used this route during the Viking Age, and important islands, straits and harbours ought to have had Swedish names. *Odensö* in Nyland may be such a name.

Viborg (*castrum Wiborg* 1295), at the far eastern end of the coast of Finland, should also be a name given by Swedish seafarers in the Viking Age. The name is clearly of Scandinavian origin, probably compounded from the words *vi* 'sanctuary, holy place' and *borg* (*burg*) 'stronghold, castle' (Andersson 2002). The first element could also be the adjective *vi* 'holy' that lurks behind the noun *vi* 'sanctuary'. We do know that hill forts or strongholds could have sacral names. Swedish examples are *Vistena* in the province of Östergötland, probably meaning 'the holy fort', and on Gotland *Torsburgen* 'the stronghold of the god Thor'. During the Middle Ages, *Viborg* was an important Swedish castle, guarding the realm against the Russians. The name indicates that the military function of the place stretches far back into the Viking Age. This is vividly verified by a rune stone in central Sweden (U 180), commemorating a man called Sigsten who is said to have died in *Viborg* (*i Viburgum*) some time during the 11th century.

Iceland

As regards Iceland, I am able to draw on a thorough investigation of sacral place names carried out by Svavar Sigmundsson (1992). When contemplating his map of theophoric place

names in Iceland, however, I think it is wise to look for what is typical and general, rather than pondering the unique and special. And what is typical is no doubt the rich occurrence of names containing *Þórr* ‘Thor’ and, on the other hand, the total absence of names containing *Oðinn* ‘Odin’. There are also a number of toponyms that may include names of other deities besides *Þórr*, such as *Baldur*, *Njörður*, *Freyr* and *Týr*, but these interpretations have nearly always been challenged and, even if they are correct, they represent the special and unique rather than the typical. One might accept *Freyr* in place names like *Freysnes* and *Freyshólar*, but otherwise I think it is a good policy not to depend too much on these interpretations.

Another of Svavar Sigmundsson’s maps shows the distribution of names containing the words *hof* and *høgr*. Both these words are, in the Old Norse language, closely connected with ritual places, *hof* being some kind of building and *høgr* perhaps some sort of altar-like construction. The more precise meanings of these words, however, have been discussed for more than a century without any consensus being reached (Vikstrand 2002: 132-135). In recent years there have been extensive excavations of the farm Hofstaðir in Myvatnstveit in the north of Iceland (Lucas and McGovern 2008). The name *Hofstaðir* literally means ‘the place where there is a *hof*’. The excavations show beyond doubt that Hofstaðir was the scene of advanced ritual activities during the Viking Age. But, alas, I do not think that these investigations provide a definite answer to what *hof* stands for in the name. It might be the hall, it might be one of the smaller constructions, or it might be the farm in its entirety.

It is conceivable that the majority of *hof* and *høgr* names in Iceland could have a ritual background, but what strikes me as a bit suspicious is the sheer number of such names. Iceland was rather sparsely populated during the Viking Age and this density of ritual place names is, at the very least, surprising. I think it is important to remember that both *hof* and *høgr* also have well-testified topographical senses, *høgr* meaning ‘cairn, stony ground’ and *hof* ‘elevation, hill’. Both these meanings are without doubt represented in place names on the Scandinavian mainland (Vikstrand 2001: 214-216, 258-260; 2002: 132-135). The core of this frustrating problem is that the relationship between the topographical and the ritual meanings is still very unclear.

The Faroe Islands

When it comes to the Faroe Islands, names with religious connotations are very few. There are two names containing *Þórr*, *Tórshavn* and *Hósvík* (< **Þórsvík*) (Jakobsen 1909: 69-70), and also a *Hov* on Suðuroy (Vikstrand 2013a).¹ To this group should be added a couple of *Halgafelli* ‘the holy mountain’. A corresponding *Helgafell* occurs no fewer than eight times in Iceland (Svavar Sigmundsson 1992), and on the whole there is a great resemblance between the sacral place names of Iceland and of the Faroe Islands.

Yorkshire

Finally we come to Britain. I have as yet only touched upon the vast body of Scandinavian names in Britain and have so far confined myself to Yorkshire. My gateway to the Yorkshire

¹ The much-discussed *Velbastaður* should probably not be regarded as sacral (Vikstrand 2013a).

names has been Gillian Fellows-Jensen's fundamental work on Scandinavian settlement names in Yorkshire from 1972. The material found, however, is very sparse and uncertain. Fellows-Jensen mentions two names which might include the name of the god Thor, and these are *Torbar hundred* and *Toreshov hundred*. Regarding *Torbar hundred* (with that spelling in Domesday Book), Fellows-Jensen (1972: 106) states that the first element could be a personal name *Þórr* or *Þórir* or possibly the god's name *Þórr*. The second element is Old Norse *berg* neut. 'hill' or perhaps Old English *beorg*. The absence of a genitive marker, she argues, makes an interpretation from *Þórr* unlikely. Fellows-Jensen's main suggestion, that it is the name *Þórir*, *Þóri*, is preferable, and the name should thus be interpreted as **Þóra(r)bergh*.

Toreshov hundred is a Domesday Book division of Buckrose Wapentake. For the first element of this name, Fellows-Jensen (1972: 107) gives the same alternatives as for *Torbar hundred*: a personal name *Þórr* or *Þórir* or possibly, but less credibly, the god's name *Þórr*. The spellings in Domesday (*Toreshov hundred*, *Toreshov Wapetac*, with a two-syllable first element) seem to support that view. The second part of the name, according to Fellows-Jensen, is Old Norse *haugr* 'mound'. From a Scandinavian point of view this interpretation might seem somewhat surprising, but already A.H. Smith in *The Place-Names of Yorkshire and York* consistently interprets names written in *-hov* in Domesday Book as reflecting an Old Norse *-haugr*, cf. his assessment (in 1928) of *Howe* in the parish of Pickhill in Halikeld wapentake, written *Hov*, *Hou* in Domesday. However, if we dare to suggest that the last element in *Toreshov* could be Old Norse *hof* 'ritual building' rather than *haugr* 'mound', we could understand this name as originally an Old Norse **Þórshof* 'the *hof* of the god Thor'. Such a name has several parallels in Norway, e.g. *Torshov* in Oslo and Old Norse *Ullinshof* (today *Ullensaker*) in Akershus fylke.

As regards the word *hof*, there seems to be one certain occurrence among Scandinavian place names in England, and that is *Hoff* in Westmorland (*Hofes* 1158-66, *Houf* 1179, *Hof* 1239; Ekwall 1959: 244, Smith 1967: 97-98, Cameron 1996: 121). In a later work, Fellows-Jensen (1985: 46) recognises that the generic of the name is Old Norse *hof* and adds that 'it can hardly be a mere coincidence that the Westmorland Hoff is less than three kilometres from Appleby, the administrative centre of both the Barony and the County of Westmorland'. Nevertheless, she rejects the idea of a sacral *hof* because of 'the absence of other indications of the survival of heathen religion among the Scandinavian settlers in the North-West'. Now, as I mentioned earlier, *hof* does not necessarily have a religious meaning, but on the other hand we cannot rule that possibility out, even for the Westmorland name. It should also be pointed out that, as early as the 1960s, the discussion of the word *hof* moved away from a strict dichotomy between religious and non-religious, and it has been suggested that *hof* might be a term for the chieftain's hall or that, in place names, it may have designated his entire abode (see Olsen 1966 *passim*, Brink 1996: 260, Vikstrand 2001: 260-261, Sundqvist 2009). Although this view is far from unproblematic, it should nevertheless be mentioned, as it somewhat disarms the argument against a non-topographical interpretation.

Returning to *Toreshov hundred*, I recently had the privilege of discussing this name with Gillian Fellows-Jensen and she has convinced me that the last element is most probably Old Norse *haugr*. On the other hand, she is now inclined to construe the first element as the

god's name *Þórr* and to regard *Þórshaugr* as originally the name of the assembly place of the hundred. I find this a very plausible interpretation. In Scandinavia, there are several examples of large burial mounds being connected with *thing* assemblies and cult sites (Sundqvist 2013: 89-95), and it has even been suggested by Stefan Brink (1996: 262) that '*hög* was used as a kind of technical term for a central place during prehistoric times'. Such places are often called just *Hög* (Old Norse *Haugr*), but when the names are compounded the first element is often a man's name (e.g. *Anundshög*, *Ólvishaugr*, *Vemmenhög*), while theophoric names for mounds are rare and not uncommonly a result of 19th-century speculation. Perhaps, therefore, we should not rule out the possibility of *Toreshov hundred* containing the man's name *Þórir*, as the spelling in Domesday Book suggests.

In a work from 1992, Fellows-Jensen highlights another name, which she regards as the most 'reasonably certain example' of a sacral place name in the whole of the Danelaw. This is *Roseberry Topping* in Yorkshire, an impressive conical hill just on the border with County Durham. The name is written *Othenesberg* in 1199 and thus seems to be an *Odensberg* 'the hill of Odin'. But Fellows-Jensen is not convinced that this is a 'real' sacral place name. It is possible, she argues, 'that this hill-name was brought over ready-coined by the incoming Danes' (1992: 265). The original name, or model name, she suggests, is the Danish parish name *Onsbjerg* (*Othensberg* 1424) on Samsø. That name is also connected to a prominent hill (Dyret), situated near the village of Onsbjerg (Fellows-Jensen 1981: 135).

Roseberry Topping might very well be such an 'instant name'. On the other hand, it is fully conceivable that both *Roseberry Topping* and *Onsbjerg* in Denmark reflect narratives connecting the god Odin with hills. In fact, there seem to be scattered parallels to such names all over the Germanic area. Examples are *Odens kulle* 'the hill of Odin' in Västergötland in Sweden, *Woensberg* in Noord-Holland in the Netherlands (Boshouwers 2016), and **Wotansberg*, now *Bad Godesberg*, outside Bonn in the Rhine valley in Germany. There seems to be something about Odin and mountains that cannot be dismissed out of hand, and perhaps these names hint at some kind of myth or story in which Odin acts or lives on a hill. As far as I know, we have no literary evidence of such a narrative, but one could mention *Hliðskjálf*, Odin's seat of honour in *Ásgarðr* from which he gazes out over the world. The word *skjálf* shows quite clearly that this is understood as some kind of chair or scaffold, but at least it connects Odin with a vista or viewpoint. It could be mentioned that the word *skjálf* also occurs in a number of place names in Sweden (e.g. Old Swedish *Hidhinskialf*, *Gnupaskialf*, *Viskialf*, *Skialf*), where it is used metaphorically of shelf-like rock formations.

Be it as it may with *Roseberry Topping*, the contrast between Yorkshire and the North Atlantic area, with Iceland and the Faroe Islands, is in any case striking. The Yorkshire corpus of Scandinavian sacral place names remains meagre, no matter how generous we are in our assessment. There could be several reasons for this divergence. One might be the early conversion to Christianity of the Scandinavian settlers in Yorkshire. If the Scandinavians were converted already before the end of the 9th century (Fellows-Jensen 1972: 228, Whitelock 1941), this of course limits the period of time for the creation of pre-Christian sacral place names. It has been pointed out that such names need to be well established to survive the transition to Christianity (Cameron 1996: 114). On the other hand, the notion of an early conversion of the Danelaw has been questioned. It has been suggested that, rather than a swift conversion, one should speak of a process of Christianisation, which may have

been quite prolonged (Abrams 2001, Jesch 2004: 55-57). This could actually have a bearing on what kind of sacral names we should expect to encounter in the Danelaw, a topic that I will address briefly at the very end of this paper.

Results

If I try to summarise the results of this rather superficial survey, I would say that there is some evidence of the worship of Odin and Thor during the Viking Age, and perhaps also of Frey. The material is rather meagre, but nevertheless there are regional differences that might reflect real distinctions in rituals and beliefs. The most striking is the absence of Odin in the North Atlantic. He is present in the Baltic area and perhaps in England, but not in Iceland or the Faroe Islands. There are also a few words designating sanctuaries, and in the west these are *hof* and *høgrgr*, with *hof* possibly represented in Britain as well as in Iceland and the Faroes. In the very sparse material from the east we do not have these words, but there is probably *vi* ‘sanctuary’ in *Viborg*. This word is not found in the place names of the North Atlantic islands, but it may actually appear in England. *Thoresway* in Lincolnshire is written *Toreswe* in Domesday Book and has traditionally been interpreted as a compound of the Old Norse man’s name *Þórir* and Old English *weg* ‘road’. But as personal names are rarely combined with *weg*, John Insley proposes that the Domesday form can be taken for an Old Danish *Þórswæ* ‘the shrine dedicated to Thor’ (Cameron, Field and Insley 1992: 151).

In her study of Scandinavian paganism in England from 2004, Judith Jesch argues that a kind of ‘cultural paganism’ may have lingered on among the newly Christianised Scandinavians. This allowed for pagan references in art and literature, e.g. that Cnut in *Knútsdrápa* could be called by a kenning based on the name of a heathen god. Jesch does not mention the existence of heathen place names, but I think that they too could be seen in the light of the notion of cultural paganism. Such an attitude would probably make a name based on pagan narratives, such as *Othensberg*, socially acceptable, while names referring to ritual places and cultic activities may have met with disapproval. Finally, I would like to point out that in future discussion of Scandinavian paganism in Britain it is important to consider the evidence of place names.

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