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An Irish etymology for *kjafal* ‘hooded cloak’ in *Porfinns Saga*

The account of the discovery of America in *Porfinns Saga Karlsefnis*, sometimes called the *Saga of Eric the Red*, is found in the fourteenth-century Hauksbók and another, fifteenth-century manuscript (respectively Copenhagen, University Library, MSS 371, 544, and 675; and MS 557).¹ It describes how a Scottish man and woman, called Haki and Hekja, who had been given to Leifr Eiríksson by Óláfr Tryggvason, are taken on the voyage. They can run very fast and return with grapes and wheat when sent to explore.

Haki and Hekja wore a garment described as follows. “Þau váru svá búin at þau höfðu þat klæði er þau kǫlluðu *kjafal*; þat var svá gort at hǫttrinn var á upp, ok opit at hliðum ok engar ermar á, ok knept á milli fóta. Helt þar saman knappr ok nezla, en ber váru þau annars staðar.”² (‘They were dressed in the garment they called a *kjafal*; it was made with a hood at the top, and was open at the sides and without sleeves, but fastened between the legs with a toggle and loop; they wore nothing on the rest of the body.’)

Gordon notes *kjafal* of Hauksbók appears as *bjafal* in AM 577. He comments that both may be corrupt, and that Gaelic *cabhail* ‘the body of a shirt’ and *gioball* ‘garment’ have been compared, but that direct connection with either is difficult.³

It is not difficult to eliminate *cabhail* and *giobal* here. The first of these means ‘trunk, torso; frame (of a structure, vessel); body (of garment), bodice’. Poorly attested in early texts, it can be ruled out as the

¹ H. M. Chadwick and Nora Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature: The Ancient Literatures of Europe* (Cambridge, 1932), 536; E. V. Gordon, *An Introduction to Old Norse*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1957), lxxvii, 39.

² Gordon, 48–9; cf. Gwyn Jones, *El primer descubrimiento de América* (Barcelona, 1965), 240, 252.

³ Gordon, 215.

source of *kjafal* on semantic grounds.⁴ *Giobal* 'rag, clout' is also unsuitable as regards meaning, and is in any case hardly attested before the seventeenth century, when it figures in the Irish Protestant Bible (of the swaddling of the Infant Jesus), and the Catholic devotional text *Parrthas an Anma* ('Paradise of the Soul'), published at Louvain in 1645.⁵

It seems better to take Gordon at his word on the corruption of *kjafal* (still more *bjafal*). There are strong reasons for deriving *kjafal* from early Irish *cochall* 'cowl, hood, hooded cloak'. Deriving from Latin *cucullus*, this is well attested at all periods of Irish.⁶ The tenth-century scriptural poem *Saltair na Rann* refers to the *cochall* of the priest Aaron.⁷ The heroic tale "The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel" in the twelfth-century Book of the Dun Cow describes how Da Derga's warriors wore "short cloaks (*gerrchochail*) to their buttocks".⁸ In modern Irish, *cochall* means 'hood; mantle; pod; landing net; muffler', etc., while *cochall gaoithe* is a 'windsock'.⁹

There are three reasons for taking *kjafal* as a corruption of Middle Irish *cochall*. The words are tolerably close, the Norse labial fricative [f] presumably being substituted for the Irish unvoiced velar fricative [x], since in Norse of this period [x] no longer existed except internally before *s* or *t*, or at the beginning of words.¹⁰ Second, *cochall* is a common word, which might easily be come across. Third, the description of the *kjafal* as having a hood, but going down to leg-height, corresponds to descriptions of the *cochall* (it will be seen that Haki and Hekja's *cochall* was longer than the "short" ones worn by Da Derga's men, which went down just to their buttocks).

If this explanation is correct, we solve a crux in an important Old Norse text, as well as revealing some rare evidence for the clothing of ordinary Scottish people a thousand years ago.¹¹

⁴ *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla*, ed. Niall Ó Dónaill (Baile Átha Cliath, 1977), 165.

⁵ *Dictionary of the Irish Language* (Dublin, 1913-76), s.v. *gibal*; Ó Dónaill, 632.

⁶ *Dictionary*, s.v. *cochall*; Joseph Vendryes, *Lexique étymologique de l'irlandais ancien: Lettre C* (Paris, 1987), 138.

⁷ *Saltair na Rann*, ed. Whitley Stokes (Oxford, 1883), 65.

⁸ *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, ed. Eleanor Knott (Dublin, 1936), 16; cf. *Ancient Irish Tales*, ed. T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover, 2nd edn (Dublin, 1969), 107.

⁹ Ó Dónaill, 259.

¹⁰ Gordon, 269, 279.

¹¹ On the subject of Celtic dress, cf. H. F. McClintock, *Old Irish and Highland Dress* (Dundalk, 1950); K. H. Jackson, *The Oldest Irish Tradition: A Window on the Iron Age* (Cambridge, 1964), 15, and his *The Gododdin: The Oldest Scottish Poem* (Edinburgh, 1969), 32 n. 1, 33-4; A. A. M. Duncan, *Scotland: The Making of the Kingdom* (Edinburgh, 1975), 127. I thank Professor Desmond Slay of Aberystwyth for advice on *kjafal*.