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Taking Turns

Linguistic economy and the name of the Vikings

Recently, the Norwegian medievalist Eldar Heide (2005, 2008) has sought to bolster Bertil Daggfeldt's (1983) etymological linkage of *Víkingr*, the Old Norse studies term *par excellence*, with Old Icelandic *vika (sjóvar)* 'nautical mile'; cf. Old Swedish *vika siō(s)*, Middle Low German *weke sē* 'id.'; cf. Andersson (2007), Krüger (2008: 4–7). Heide even goes so far as to postulate that *Víkingr* is a late Roman Iron Age coinage (< *wīkingaz*) and reflects a term used to describe prehistoric rowing shifts, basing his argument on physical testimony such as the Nydam finds, the appearance of cognate terms in Old English and Old Frisian, and an old etymology (also employed by Daggfeldt) that connects *vika* 'nautical mile' with the changing of rowing shifts by early Northern oarsmen (Falk and Torp 1903–6: II.409). Heide's two articles contain much etymological and semantic conjecture, however, and little sense of sustained formal linguistic (as opposed to nineteenth-century-style philological) inquiry. Old Icelandic *Víkingr* is surely related to the feminine deverbative noun *víking* 'freebooting voyage' and the development of agentive forms (such as 'freebooter') from abstract descriptions ('freebooting') is quite common cross-linguistically (cf. Engl. *theory, theorist*; *philology, philologist*).[1]

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[1] Exact morphological parallels in Old Icelandic are harder to demonstrate: as is shown by comparable formations such as *skiptingr* 'changeling' (cf. *víxlingr* 'id.' to -*víxl* 'exchange' in *giafavíxl* 'exchange of gifts') and -*skipting* 'division' (in *arfskipting* 'division of an inheritance') to *skipta* 'divide, exchange', we may often be dealing with two independently derived deverbatives.

Abstract: The etymology of the term *Víkingr* is reviewed in this paper and the methodological shortcomings of the many suggestions made in previous scholarship are explored, particularly from the perspective of semantic theory. A majority of the etymologies proffered in prior accounts suggest that the term is best to be taken simply as a derivation of the early Nordic verb **wīkan* 'to turn', much as Old Icelandic *víkja (ýkva, víkva)* 'to move, to turn' has well-attested nautical usages, even if many previous treatments have failed to take a linguistically economical approach to the development of this defining description in Old Norse studies.

Víkingr and *víking* seem most simply to be understood as full-grade deverbatives; cf. Old Icelandic *snatta* 'roam about aimlessly', *snöttingr* 'rover', *bey(r)sta* 'bruise, beat', *beystingr* 'bully, roughneck, bruiser' (Munske 1964: 123–25, Krahe and Meid 1969: 205). And as Holm (1992: 120–21) points out (citing Olson 1916: 440–53), although Askeberg (1944: 174–75) criticises such an etymology (first suggested by Von Richthofen 1840: 1149) on the grounds that derivations from Old West Norse strong verbs that are morphologically comparable to *víking* are rare, they are attested (e.g. *heiting* 'threat' and *hvekking* 'escapade').[2] Yet it is rather less clear on formal linguistic grounds that *víking* is to be understood as reflecting a semantic suggested by (zero-grade) *vika* – i.e. in terms of 'a shifting (of rowers), a (rowers') shift'. The rowing-shift etymology boils down mainly to accepting the existence of an assumed (rather than actually attested) semantic stage in the development of the zero-grade deverbative noun *vika* 'nautical mile'.

   The rowing-shift etymology of *vika* is clearly (in turn) predicated on comparison with Old Icelandic *röst* 'mile', literally a 'rest'; cf. the *rast at lande, viku at vatne* of the old Östergötland provincial law (Klemming 1867: 286). But the presumed connection of Old Norse nautical miles with resting rowers is hardly a linguistically straightforward one – and a further connection of shifts of rowers with the description *Víkingr* even less obvious. Indeed a formal semantic analysis of Heide's etymology renders the developmentally precarious nature of his derivation quite plain (cf. Blank 1997 who empirically validates the formal developmental scheme of Ullmann 1962: 197–210 that is indebted to Bloomfield 1935: 425–43). The putative development of Germanic **wikōn* 'a turning' to *vika* 'a nautical mile' via 'taking turns at rowing' (or rather 'shifting' as Heide asserts, invoking a semantic claimed to be attested in Old Swedish) would seem to represent a metonymic development followed by a specialisation and then a further metonymic change: i.e. 'a turning' > 'a changing over' > 'a changing of rowers' shifts' > 'the distance travelled on a ship between a changing of rowers' shifts, a nautical mile'; cf. Heide's rather looser[3] formulation of 'a shifting' > 'a shifting (Daggfeldt's 'exchanging') of tired with fresh rowers' > 'the distance travelled on a ship between a shifting (exchanging) of tired with fresh rowers, a nautical

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2   Askeberg (1944: 174–75) only accepts *hvekking* as directly deverbative (and as Christian and hence late), but it does not really matter from a formal perspective whether *víking* developed from **wīkan* directly or by means of another deverbative (the latter of which is Askeberg's preferred solution).

3   One does not "shift" rowers in English.

mile'. This is clearly a more complex evolutionary development than that posited for *röst* '(land)mile', however – and we are still not even at *Víkingr* yet. The further development from 'a turning/shifting/exchanging of rowers' > 'a freebooting voyage by ship' (and this for a full-grade *vík-* rather than zero-grade *vik-*) presumably entails another analytically complex development: i.e. of metonymy ('a turning/shifting/exchanging of rowers' > 'a rowing'), generalisation ('a rowing' > '(any kind of) a voyage by ship') and then specialisation ('a voyage by ship' > 'a freebooting voyage by ship'). The formal semantic complexity of this derivation is more than just remarkable – taken along with Heide's reliance on an assumed (and disputable) etymology of *vika* 'nautical mile', the developmental odyssey assumed in the rowing-shift etymology (with its six otherwise unsupported semantic steps) makes it look quite tenuous when it is assessed in a formal semantic manner.

One wonders, therefore, whether an employment of Occam's everparsimonious razor might clear things up derivationally somewhat. Heide would seem to be right to dismiss Staffan Hellberg's (1980 and cf. Hødnebo 1987, 1988; Holm 1988; Hellberg 2008) connection of *Víkingr* with the Norwegian place-name *Vík(en)* (i.e. 'the bay'; cf. Old Icelandic *víkverjar* 'a person from Vík') – else we might have expected (as Hellberg 1980: 70–71 admits) an Old West Norse form **Víkungr*; cf. Askeberg (1944: 170–72) and Ståhle (1946: 26–28 and 32–35).[4] The appearance of the form *wīcingas* in the Old English poem *Widsith* has been invoked to argue that the description Viking is very old (Askeberg 1944: 116–17, Hofstra 2003: 149–50), but such suggestions tend to ignore the considerable difficulties inherent in dating such works; cf. Niles (1999), Heide (2008: 26–27). Similarly, the medial assibilation seen in the Old Frisian cognate *wīzing* 'Viking, Scandinavian pirate' (i.e. **k > ts*) needs not be as ancient as Heide (2006: 46–47) has claimed it is – the date of the pre-Old Frisian affrication (following phonetic palatalisation) has long been contested; cf. Stiles (1995: 195–96), Laker (2007) and North Frisian *wikkinger* 'bay men' (Askeberg 1944: 146). And Elis Wadstein's (1925) linkage of *Víkingr* to Latin *vīcus* 'hamlet, village' (cf. Old English *wīc* 'a dwelling-place, abode, habitation, place, village, town'), supported most recently by the late Ottar Grønvik (2004), would seem rather too

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[4] Heide (2005: 43) joins Widmark (1994: 208) in summarily dismissing Hellberg's attempt to demonstrate that a connection of Vikings with Víken can be demonstrated in literary sources. Hellberg's suggestion that *Víkingr* might represent loan from Danish (where comparable ablatives in *-ingr* are attested, unlike in Old West Norse) also seems more to represent a philological fudge than a straightforward analysis of the evidence.

peripatetic to be at all likely, no matter whether one seeks to derive putative *wīkingaz 'pirate' (with Hofstra) from an unattested (continental?) semantic 'trader' < 'townsman' or (with Grønvik) via an equally inventive (putative Old English) meaning of 'invader, settler'; cf. Björkman (1910: 8 = 1911–12: 140), Askeberg (1944: 117–20), Sawyer (1978) and Widmark (1994: 205–12).[5] The Old English and Old Frisian Viking words would seem largely to represent etymological red herrings and Heide's argument that Old Frisian wīzing necessarily indicates that Víkingr is a very old construction no better than relying on a tendentiously early date for the wīcingas of Widsith.

The earliest securely datable instance of Old English wīcing is in the compound wīcingsceadan 'piracy' found in the seventh- or perhaps eighth-century Epinal glossary (Fell 1986: 297–98). On the other hand, Old Frisian wīzing first appears in texts from the late eleventh century, and even then it is often preceded by a specification 'northern' – e.g. fonta norda wīsing (Askeberg 1944: 141–46, Buma and Ebel 1972: 172, Fell 1986: 313, n. 2). There seems little doubt other than that the earliest attested uses of the term betray an essential connection with seafaring. Most of the etymologies proffered in the past for Víkingr, however, essentially represent the same formal development: i.e. that Víkingr is ultimately derived from the Indo-European base *weig- (*weik-) 'bend, turn, bind, yield, run away'; cf. Sanskrit vijáte 'speed off, flee', Greek εἴκω 'yield, give way', Latin vincio 'bind, fetter', Lithuanian víkstu 'bend oneself, become supplied', Old English wīcan 'yield, give way' and Old High German wīchan 'id.' (cf. Askeberg 1944: 115–20 for a survey of the older historiography, Heide 2005: 41–42 for a consideration of more recent contributions).

In Germanic there are two main developments of this underlying form and they can be characterised by the English homophones weak and week. The weak forms proceed from the 'bend, yield' semantic, including developments centred around the key notions of 'bending' or 'yielding (branches)' and hence both 'weak limbed' and 'weak willed'; cf. Old English wāc 'soft, weak, miserable', Old Saxon wēc 'weak', Old High German weich 'soft, weak, fearful', Old Icelandic veikr 'pliant' as well as Old English wice 'wych elm' (i.e. an elm with pliant branches). The second (and rather more obviously Viking-like) derivations represent

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[5] Neither etymology is semantically impossible (metonymy and then pejoration with Hofstra, specialisation, then generalisation and specialisation again with Grønvik) – rather it is the unempirical nature of each theory (i.e. being so dependant on unattested medial semantics) that makes such schemes seem so speculative (and hence unlikely).

extensions on the considerably less impotent 'turn' semantic, including *week* itself (Old English *wicu*, Old Icelandic *vika*, Old High German *wecha*) as 'a turning (of the moon)' (as weeks seem originally to have been determined by the phases of the moon; see Buck 1949: 1005), Old English *wīce* and Gothic *wicō* 'a turn (at something)' > 'an office, a duty, an obligation' (i.e. a semantic suggesting a similar notion of periodisation), perhaps Old English *wīc* in its meaning 'temporary abode, a place where one stops', and above all the rather more nautical Old Icelandic *vika* 'a turning (inward of the coast)' > 'a bay' (also 'a bend in a river' etc.) and similarly Old Icelandic *vík* (and hence *Víken*) 'a small creek, inlet or bay' (cf. also Gothic *waihsta* 'angle, corner', Old Swedish *vik* 'id.', Old Icelandic *giafa-víxl* 'exchange of gifts', Old Saxon *wehsāl* 'trade, money', Old High German *wehsal, wehsil* 'change, exchange, trade'). The more specialised and technical term *vika* 'nautical mile' undoubtedly represents some sort of similar (nautical) periodisation or 'turning' associated with sea voyages, but whether this had anything to do with taking turns at rowing (as a comparison with Old Icelandic *röst* 'mile' suggests) is less than clear; cf. Old English *mīl*, Old Icelandic *míla*, Old High German *mīl(l)a* 'mile' < Latin *mille passus* 'a thousand paces, a mile'; Modern English *cable (length)* 'a tenth of a nautical mile' (originally the length of a ship's anchor's cable) and *knot* 'a nautical mile per hour', originally a knot on a measuring line attached to a float (or log) used to measure a ship's speed. Instead, *Víkingr* seems most simply (and directly) best to be explained as 'someone who turns (nautically)' or 'someone who goes on a (nautical) turning' (and clearly not the putatively developed semantic 'shifting' as Heide would have it) – and given the full-grade vocalism, it presumably represents a direct deverbative development of **wīkan* 'to turn' (rather than a secondary development of an unattested zero-grade deverbative nominal). Other suggestions proposed in the past would necessarily be less likely given the generally accepted linguistic principle of explanatory economy.

After all, Old Icelandic *víkja (ýkva, víkva)* 'to move, to turn' exhibits a range of specialised and metaphorical meanings. As well as less marked phrasings such as *megu vér þat til víkja* 'we may call there', Cleasby-Vigfusson's (1957) catalogue of employments of *víkja* even includes such decidedly nautical expressions as *viku inn til hafan* 'steer into port', *viku þeir nú stöfnum* 'now they veer the ship around' and *landi víkr* 'the land recedes (as one sails on)'. Indeed Fritzner (1867) records similar usages, glossing Old Norwegian *víkja (víka)* as 'to move away from a place', 'to take oneself from place to place' as well as the simpler 'to turn, to head

away from something'. We are less-well equipped to judge the earlier semantic range of Early Modern Danish *vīge* 'to give way, to go away from, to leave' and it is hard to be sure if any of the more specialised attested usages of Old Swedish *vīka* 'to move, to go in another direction, to change position, to turn' are all that relevant to an etymology of *Víkingr*. Söderwall et al. (1884–1918), for example, list usages such as *week israel* 'diverit Israel' and *swa at thz thörfte äkke vika* 'so that it didn't move about'. But it is only the Old West Norse counterparts of **wīkan* which are obviously attested in nautical contexts – and at that, clearly in forms much more flexible semantically (and hence productively polysemous) than are their more patently (and Common Nordic) maritime derivatives *vík, vika* '(small) bay (etc.)' or *vika* 'nautical mile'. Consequently, it is not too hard to imagine how an expression such as *fara í víking* could have emerged from a literal meaning of 'to go (away) on a turn, a voyage (of nautical freebooting)' or the like – i.e. *víking* is presumably best to be taken as representing a semantic specialisation of a term which originally indicated 'a moving from place to place, a voyage'.

Although the suffix *-ingr* in itself most readily suggests an ablative origin, the semantic development of **wīk-* in Old West Norse instead points to a deverbal development for *Víkingr* – in fact one similar to that suggested by Grønvik (2004: 13) when he connected *Víkingr* to Old English *wīcian* 'to lodge, to camp, to stop (a while), (when travelling by water) to land'. The derivational simplicity represented by such an etymology may seem semiotically disappointing given the centrality of Vikings to Old Norse studies, but it proceeds directly from well-attested meanings associated with **wīk-* in light of long-established principles of formal semantics. Complex house-of-cards etymologies are intrinsically speculative – empirical semantic evidence such as that provided by cognates, attested employments and collocations should always be given its full due in etymological study. It is surely in light of the developments and usages of the inherited root **wīk-* in North (and West) Germanic that an etymology for *Víkingr* is most profitably to be sought, but not in a manner reliant on a debatable semantic proffered in light of another assumed etymological development for a derivationally similar early Scandinavian description for nautical miles.

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