



## Ship Naming In Anglo-Saxon England

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### Introduction:

As far as can be found, there are no surviving recorded examples of names given to ships in Anglo-Saxon England. Lacking such information, it can be difficult to discern whether a ship naming tradition existed within Anglo-Saxon culture. Indeed, even the practice of referring to ships and boats as 'she' comes into question, at least in an etymological sense, when we understand the Old English word for ship (*scip*), to be a neuter noun (Bosworth,2014).

Faced with this issue, the article will attempt to provide a survey of the known examples of references to sea going vessels from the surviving Old English literature, alongside ship names from cultures associated with the Anglo-Saxons, or broadly from the medieval period. By this coverage, the intention is to uncover the likelihood of whether a ship naming tradition existed in Anglo-Saxon England, along with providing some suggestion as to the logic that may have underpinned such a practice. In addition, consideration will be given to the question of when and where the ship naming tradition first originated in Europe.

### Anglo-Saxon England:

In the available historical documents from Anglo-Saxon England that directly reference ships, official names for these vessels are not provided. In *Ælfric's Colloquy* for instance, he did not see it necessary to provide a name for the ship belonging to his hypothetical fisherman (Ælfric,1912,183-195). Similarly in the *Vita Ædwardi Regis*, in which a poem describes the ship gifted to Edward the Confessor on his return to England from exile by Earl Godwin, introduces the vessel only as 'a great ship' (Summerson,2010,127).

Looking elsewhere in the existing Anglo-Saxon corpus, we do find material relating to ships and sea going vessels that may bear some significance for how the Anglo-Saxons viewed and related to their ships. In the epic poem *Beowulf*, we are presented with a number of 'kennings', these being often two-word metaphors, or short riddles, that allude to sea going vessels. Many of these kennings are descriptive, often relating to either the ship's movement through the sea or some feature of its design. Such examples include 'wave-crosser' (*ýðlidan: Beowulf*,198), 'Sea-wood' (*sundwudu: Beowulf* 217), 'ringed-prow' (*hringedstefna: Beowulf*,32), and 'foamy-necked floater, much like a bird' (*flota fâmiheals fugle gelicost: Beowulf*,218). Kennings following a similar pattern appear elsewhere in the Anglo-Saxon Corpus, including 'wave floater' (*hærnflota: Guthlac*,87.1329-1333), 'sea wood' (*brim-wudu: Guthlac*,87.1329-1333;*Elene*,15.488), 'sea rusher' (*mere-byssa: The Legend of St. Andrew*,26.892), 'shining prow' (*brond-stæfn: St. Andrew*,30.1007.), and 'wave house' (*ýþ-hof: Elene*,15.503).

The number of kennings drawing on equestrian associations is also worthy of note, with these examples including 'sea stallion' (*wæg-hengest: Guthlac*,87.1329-1333, *Elene*,15.472; *brim-hengest: The Legend of St. Andrew*,30.1026), 'sea-steed' (*lagumearg: Guthlac*,87.1329-1333), 'sea horse' (*sund-hengest: Christ*,27.862;



*sæ-mearh*: St. Andrew, 16.533; Elene, 15.490; *Ýðhengestas*: Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, 1003), and 'wave-steed' (*ýþ-mearh*: Christ, 27.863),

Through these kennings we are offered a glimpse into how sea going vessels were perceived within certain areas of Anglo-Saxon society. In regard to those names drawing on horse imagery, it is perhaps no surprise that such connotations were made given the integral role of the horse as the privileged persons' preferred mode of transport across land during the early middle ages. Both horses and ships bear 'riders' and their cargo, allowing greater ease of movement across land and sea, respectively. The extent to which we can identify the existence of a ship naming tradition directly within these kennings is questionable, however. Kennings are indicative of an ancient oral tradition of poetic verse performed within elite Anglo-Saxon social settings, such as in the lord's hall during feasts. Following the Christian conversion of Anglo-Saxon England this tradition was subsequently preserved and developed in literary form through the efforts of ecclesiastical writers. Given this poetic setting for the apparent use of kennings, it can be difficult to say whether such a linguistic device was in turn applied in any wider social context. As such, hampered by the lack of surviving written examples, it is difficult to ascertain whether these ship-based kennings reflect a wider social practice of naming ships by such poetic phrases. Despite this fact, these kennings no less demonstrate the powerful place which sea going vessels held within the imagination of many Anglo-Saxons, and by extension the important position they held in the Anglo-Saxon world.

#### Viking Age Scandinavia:

Looking beyond Anglo-Saxon England, there is some evidence to suggest that ship naming existed as a practice in other cultures of the early medieval period. From medieval Scandinavia for instance, material survives which provides multiple examples of ship names from the Viking Age. Such sources include Snorri Sturlson's *Heimskringla*, in which several ships of the kings of Norway are named. This includes *Trana* ('Crane': *The Saga of Olaf Tryggvason*, 72), *Ormen Skamme* and *Ormen Lange* ('Short Serpent' and 'Long Serpent': *Tryggvason*, 80, 88), *Visund* ('Bison': *Saint Olaf's Saga*, 144), and *Karlfhofthi* ('Man's Head': *Olaf*, 47). As in the case of the Old English kennings noted above, we find in these names descriptions of the ships design and shape. *Trana* for instance refers to the ship's likeness to a Crane, a comparison much like that seen in the *Beowulf* excerpts listed above. Alternatively, *Visund* and *Karlfhofthi* refer to the design of figurehead on each ship. These are only a small number of the ship names recorded by Snorri in his chronicle, with examples also arising from the fleets of later 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century Norwegian rulers. [\[1\]](#)

Other examples of ship names from Viking Age Scandinavia appear within the Norse myths recorded in the Poetic and Prose Eddas. Some of these, again, appear highly descriptive, such as Baldr's ship *Hringhorni*, meaning roughly 'ship with a circle on the stem', as well as the ship *Skíðblaðnir*, said to belong to the god Freyr, meaning 'assembled from thin pieces of wood' (Sturlson, 2005, 49, 43). In addition, we have the ship of Freyr's sister, Freyja, this being called *Sessrúmnir*, meaning 'seat-room/roamer', along with the ship *Naglfar* or *Naglfari*, meaning 'nail farer', described as being made of the fingernails and toenails of the dead (Sturlson, 1987, 162; 2005, 51).

In addition to these recorded names, as in the case of Anglo-Saxon England, Viking Age Scandinavia also had a rich poetic tradition which employed kennings as a descriptive technique. These kennings survive in the skaldic literature of medieval Scandinavia, and there are some interesting comparisons that can be drawn between these and those from Anglo-Saxon England. As in the case of the Anglo-Saxon examples, for instance, connotations with horses appear frequently, such as *vigg brands* ('the steed of the prow'), *hesti hafnar* ('to the horse of the harbour'), *reggstrindar jó* ('of the stallion of the boat-land') among many others. Such animalistic associations are not limited to horses, however, with a wide range of other animals also drawn reference to, including bears, elks, oxen, swans, pigs, and reindeer. Other kennings such as *Langr sæmeiðr* ('The long sea-tree') and *æsiköldum meið unnar* ('the terribly cold tree of the wave') refer to the wooden construction of the ship. Modes of land transport beyond the horse form another metaphorical device for these kennings. These include those alluding to chariots, such as *lǫgreiðar* ('the sea-chariot'), alongside those representing a mode of



transport reflecting the snow-covered terrain of Scandinavia, skis, including *skíð flóðs* and *skíðs lagar* ('the ski of the sea').<sup>[2]</sup>

#### Post Conquest England:

Perhaps the most concrete example of a ship naming tradition existing contemporaneously to the Anglo-Saxon period comes with the Norman conquest of England in 1066. In the ship list of William the Conqueror, it is recorded that his flagship was named 'Mora', a name provided by his wife, Matilda of Flanders. The meaning of this name is of some uncertainty, however it has been argued by Elizabeth Waugaman that the name bore multiple levels of symbolic significance for William's claim to the throne of England. She suggests that the name drew reference to Williams Nordic lineage via a connection to the Mora Stone, a coronation stone of great spiritual significance near Uppsala, Sweden. In bearing the name of this stone, the ship could thus symbolise William's legitimacy as a Nordic king, and, by extension, his connections to the Norse kings of England. Waugaman also suggests that the name bore linguistic meaning for the Bretons that aided William in his campaign, with the word 'mor' meaning 'a great expanse of water' in Breton, and standing as the root of many of their words relating to the sea. By drawing these multiple points of reference through the name Mora, Waugaman believes Matilda's aim was to provide Williams flagship with a name that would bear significance for the culturally and linguistically diverse peoples that accompanied William on his campaign, while also symbolizing his right to the throne of England (Waugaman,2014).<sup>[3]</sup>

Moving further into the later medieval period we find a greater number of ships' names surviving through customs and administrative records. Many of these names had a religious nature, with *Mary*, the name of the Holy Virgin, as well as saints' names, appearing frequently (Jones,2000,24). Other religiously motivated names include *Jesus*, *Godebefore* ('Under gods guidance') and *Grace Dieu* (loosely 'the grace of god' or 'ship under god's protection'), a title given to Henry V's flagship (Jones,2000,25-26). Not all ships names follow this trend however, with secular titles also being present. One early example is that of Henry I's flagship the *White Ship*, which famously sank off the coast of Barfleur, resulting in the death of his heir, William. Other slightly later examples include *Godyer*, a name found regularly in the records meaning loosely 'I hope to have a good year' (Jones,2000,26). The desire to bring good fortune to the ship and its crew appears to have been a popular trend, with multiple ship names indicating similar sentiments. These include *Godale* ('good fortunes to those who sail this ship'), *Godbeyete* (possibly 'may it/we yield good profit), *Godchep* ('good sales/trade'), *Welfare* ('fare well/ good luck') and *Gowel* ('go well') (Jones,2000,26-28). Another commonly attested name possibly following this trend is *Blithe*, meaning 'glad, merry, high-spirited' (Jones,2000,28). Elsewhere we see the names of the ship's owners to become the name of the ship itself, as well as floral names being observed, such as *Rose* and *Garland* (Jones,2000,29).

#### Classical Examples:

Despite these various examples of medieval ship names, the question remains of where and when the tradition of naming ships began in Europe. Given our reliance on written material for these matters, it is perhaps no surprise that we are brought to Ancient Egypt for the first attested examples of ships being provided names. Here we find ships of the Egyptian navy bearing names of pharaohs, deities, animals, fish, as well 'their most prominent attributes' (Bruijn&Unger,2007). Turning to classical Greece, it seems that the names of 'hometowns, regions or countries' were popular names for ships, particularly those with political significance (Bruijn&Unger,2007). We may also consider the ship, *The Argon*, from Greek mythology, which was said to be named after its creator, Argus. Similarly in the Roman Empire, Gods, fauna, and terms 'proclaiming the benefits of Roman rule' were regular choices for the names of ships (Bruijn&Unger,2007). With the rise of Christianity in Rome, names associated with the new God began to become prevalent, akin to the kinds of names noted from the later medieval period (Bruijn&Unger,2007).



### Conclusion:

The list of names and means of reference to ships included here is by no means a comprehensive one, and there are many other examples that could be mentioned. Rather, from the examples selected here, the aim has been to provide a summary of the themes and trends which appear in the methods of referring to, or naming, ships from across medieval Europe.

Given the literary traditions that existed in the ancient civilisations of Egypt, Greece, and Rome, it is unremarkable that we find the first evidence of ship names to survive from these cultural regions. Whether or not this correlates with the tradition of naming ships originating from these cultures, or whether the lack of similar literary traditions in pre-Christian Northern European cultures conceals the practice existing and developing simultaneously in Northern Europe, is difficult to say. In turn, the lack of any recorded material detailing the names of ships in Anglo-Saxon England makes it difficult to come to any fixed conclusions on the presence of a ship naming tradition in that culture. It may be that the textual material cataloguing such information simply does not survive, or that the ecclesiastical scribes behind many of the surviving documents did not deem it necessary to include such information.

Regardless of origins, the evidence of ship names from cultures temporally proximate to the Anglo-Saxons, namely the Normans and the Vikings, demonstrates at least that a ship naming tradition was present in Europe at the time of the Anglo-Saxons, and it is perhaps from these cultures that we might garner the best indication of what logic an Anglo-Saxon practice of ship naming may have followed. Focusing on Viking Age Scandinavia in particular, the shared practice of kenning-based poetry between these two cousin cultures presents an interesting joint frame of reference towards ships. From both we see a close association between ships and horses given their use as modes of transport. Highly descriptive phrases are also common within both, a theme equally expressed in the ship names recorded in Scandinavia. As such, while relying on some measure of conjecture, looking to the Old English corpus, as well as the trends between Anglo-Saxon and Viking poetic devices, it would seem the most logical method for naming the Sutton Hoo ship, reflective of historically based Anglo-Saxon practices, would be to provide a kenning style name, particularly one equine in nature.

In saying this, problems arise when we consider the contemporary setting within which the Sutton Hoo ship building project is taking place. The linguistic developments of Old English into present day English for instance, along with the phonetic shifts this entails, present challenges for a modern audience of Old English language. A name such as *ýþ-mearh*, for example, could fail to resonate with a contemporary audience given the difficulties faced in pronunciation for those unfamiliar with Old English. If the name were to follow the convention of a kenning, or indeed any other Old English word, it would need to be one recognisable to a modern audience. What's more, for a project looking to help preserve the memory of Sutton Hoo within popular society, the name would need to be able to bear significance for those beyond academic circles, as well as within. To these ends, while Old English may indeed prove the best resource from which to draw a potential name for the Sutton Hoo ship, it should equally not be constrained by it.

### History

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| 27/07/21 | V0.1. | First draft put out to Research Group for comment.        |
| 06/09/21 | V1.0. | Minor changes, and raised to Issue 1.0 after peer-review. |

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[1] For a full list, see: <https://www.vikingskibsmuseet.dk/en/professions/education/the-longships/the-historical-sources/the-longship-in-the-medieval-saga-texts> [accessed 02/07/2021]

[2] For a full list of examples see: *The Skaldic Project*, <https://skaldic.abdn.ac.uk/db.php?if=default&table=kenning&val=SHIP> [21/07/2021]



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[\[3\]](#)See also van Houts, Elisabeth, (1988). 'The Ship List of William the Conqueror', in Brown, A.R., (ed.) *Anglo-Norman Studies X: Proceedings of the Battle Conference 1987*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press. pp. 172-73.