

Place Names – A Place for Cats?

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Abstract

The majority of the many names beginning in *Katt-* ‘cat’ in Sweden refer to small and insignificant localities, often with a derogatory meaning, or compare the localities to a cat or to different parts of the cat’s body, especially the tail.

Some prehistoric settlement names, e.g. *Kättinge*, *Kattunga*, dating back to AD 1-500, have been considered to contain inhabitant designations formed from other place names containing the word *katt* referring to the wild cat or the lynx (Sw. *lo* or *lokatt*). That place names which could have been a basis for such an inhabitant designation referred to the domestic cat is of course not easy to maintain, the cat being an insignificant house pet and not a wild animal. But since the wild cat has been extinct in Sweden since at least c. 500 BC and there is archaeological evidence of the domestic cat in Sweden from the first century after Christ or possibly earlier, the author means that these names can contain inhabitant designations with a derogatory meaning with direct reference to the domestic cat. This interpretation implies that the word *katt*, a common European word, came to Scandinavia earlier than is evidenced by the written continental sources.

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On the official maps from the Swedish National Land Survey, some 1,400 names beginning in *Katt-*, meaning ‘cat’, are found, and in the place name collections at the Institute for Language and Folklore in Uppsala, around 5,000. Do these names refer to the domestic cat, and, if so, can they throw light on the existence of and views on the cat down the ages?¹

Domestic Cat, Lynx or Stoat

The oldest archaeological find of a cat bone in Sweden, dated to the period 590-520 BC, was made in 2011 during excavations of a settlement in the province of Uppland, just north of Uppsala. The bone, which was located in the inner area of a house, most probably belonged to a domestic cat, not a wild cat, that species having been extinct in Sweden since at least c. 500 BC (Aspeborg and Seiler 2012: 70). A definite find of a domestic cat bone comes from a grave in the province of Västergötland in south-western Sweden, dating back to the first century after Christ. Greyhound bones were also discovered in the grave, indicating that the people buried there were of high social status. In the period AD 300-600, the domestic cat was to be found on most farms in southern and central Sweden, probably because it was a useful ally in the fight against mice (Pedersen and Widgren 1998: 376-377).

The word *cat*, OSw. *katt*, Old Norse *katr*, *qotr*, referring to the domestic cat, is common Germanic and is considered to have its origin in late Latin *cattus* with the same meaning (Kluge 2002: 478, *Katze*; de Vries 1977: 343, *qotr*). It also occurs in Slavic languages (Vasmer 1953-1958 1: 643, *кот*). The word is considered to be of uncertain,

¹ For a broader treatment of this subject, see Wahlberg (2012).

possibly North African, origin and is not known in its masculine form *cattus* until the 6th century AD (Cortelazzo and Zolli 2004: 489, *gatto*; Walde 1938-1954: 182, *cattus*). The feminine form *catta* is first known from the apocryphal book of Baruch (6: 21) in the Vulgate version of the Bible from c. 405, preceded by older Latin translations (Walde 1938-1954). But the word must certainly be older – it is not likely that a new, barely established word would have been used in the Vulgate. *Cattus* is thought to have succeeded the older *felis* when the domestic cat was introduced in Rome, but the real reason for this change of word and when it happened is not clear (Cortelazzi and Zolli 2004). According to the latest research findings, the wild cat is thought to have been domesticated as early as around 10,000 years ago – finds have been made in a 9,500-year-old grave in Cyprus (Driscoll *et al.* 2007). The generally accepted idea that the domestic cat was spread by the Roman expansion should perhaps be re-evaluated. An exploration of the European history of the domestic cat and how it has been denominated in different languages, however, is beyond the scope of this short paper.

***Katt* in Old Place Names**

Relatively few old settlement names in Sweden have been considered to contain the word *katt* or its derivative. Some examples are *Kattedal*, the name of a farm in the province of Småland (*Kattadall* 1433), *Kattnäs*, a parish in Södermanland (*Kattænes* 1334), and *Kättinge*, a village in Östergötland (*Kættinge* 1413). Since it is difficult to explain why an insignificant house pet would have given rise to such names, it has mostly been argued that they refer to the wild cat or the lynx. As previously mentioned, the wild cat has been extinct in Sweden since at least 500 BC, so that is not an alternative. It is true that the lynx is a feline, a cat, that is indigenous to Sweden and that must always have been a well-known animal. The Swedish word for the lynx is *lo* or a compound with *katt*, *lokatt*. (*Lodjur*, a compound with *djur* ‘animal’, is also used – in modern Swedish probably the most frequent word.) But in Old Swedish only the simplex *lo* is known – the compound *lokatt* is not recorded until 1580 (*SAOB* L 1005). That the lynx could have been called *katt* in spite of that is of course theoretically possible, but there is no evidence that the simplex *katt* has ever been used for the lynx in Swedish. If the lynx was the animal referred to in these old place names, we must also assume that it was associated very early on with the domestic cat, almost immediately after the latter’s introduction. It should also be mentioned that word *lo* for the male lynx and the word *göpa* for the female are quite common in both old and more recent place names (Leibring 2014: 90-93).

In *Gylfaginning* in his *Edda* from c. 1220, Snorri Sturluson (Jónsson 1931: 31) tells us that the chariot of the goddess Freya was drawn by two cats. The Swedish historian John Bernström (1963) has argued that *cat* here originally refers to the stoat. According to him, the tradition of Freya’s two draught animals may have been reinterpreted in Iceland, where the cat was found in the 12th and 13th centuries, but not the stoat. But the British historian E.O.G. Turville-Petre takes it for granted that cats are intended, since, as he puts it, the cat ‘as the Norse pagans must have known is the most lascivious of beasts’ (1964: 176) – as is well

known, Freya was of easy virtue.² However it may be, it is worth considering whether *katt* could refer to the stoat in place names. The stoat is indigenous to Sweden and is well-known for its valuable fur. Both the Old Norse and the Swedish word for it are compounds with *cat* as their second element. The Old Norse word *hreysikattr*, the first element of which means ‘mound of stones’, is known from the Icelandic *Völsungasaga* from the 14th century. The Swedish word, first recorded in 1293, is *lekatt* (Schlyter 1877: 413), with an obscure first element. The two words must of course have been coined after the introduction of the domestic cat. But it must be questioned whether the simplex *katt* was ever used for the stoat. No other old word for the stoat in Swedish is known. *Hermelin*, the most common word for this animal today, is borrowed from Middle Low German and the corresponding English *ermine* from French or German.

Among some groups of old settlement names, datable with certainty to before the 11th century, namely those ending in *-hem*, *-sta* and *-vin*, several animal designations are found as specifics, but the cat is absent. Among names with the second element *vin* we find grazing animals (goose, calf, sow), among those with the second element *hem* we find wild animals (beaver, bear, crane), and among those ending in *-sta* we find domestic animals (goat, calf, ewe lamb, and possibly *hund* ‘dog’ – perhaps used as a man’s name).

Among settlement names ending in *-inge*, *-linge* and *-unge/-unga*, though, we do find some names which have been explained as containing derivatives of the word *katt*. Place names belonging to this type date back to the period AD 0–500 (Vikstrand 2013: 52–54). Following the opinion of Carl-Ivar Ståhle (1946: 525), they are generally considered to contain inhabitant designations, formed from different words for topographical features or from place names. Ståhle explains the names we are concerned with here as incorporating inhabitant designations formed from other place names containing the word *katt*, used with reference to the lynx: *Kattunga*, parish, province of Västergötland (*Kattungesokn* 1413), *Kattunga*, village, Västergötland (*Kattunga* 1454), *Käslinge*, village, Östergötland (*Katzlinge* 1405), *Kättinge*, village, Östergötland (*Kættingge* 1413), *Kättinge*, farm, Uppland (*Kædhinge* 1409), *Kättslinge*, village, Uppland (*Kæslinghe* 1422), and *Kättslinge*, farm, Uppland (*Ketlinge* 1368).

To prove that the domestic cat is a possible choice for these names in *-inge*, *-linge* and *-unge/-unga*, it is of course a necessary condition that both the domestic cat and the word *katt* were established when the names were coined, i.e. in the period AD c. 1–500. The first condition is unproblematic, in that there are physical finds of domestic cats at least from the time around the birth of Christ. We must also assume that the word was introduced in Scandinavia earlier than the oldest written records of *cat* from the continent indicate, since they date from the 5th and 6th centuries. It seems likely that the word accompanied the introduction of the cat in Scandinavia, possibly through continental Germanic languages. This means that the word must be of older origin than is generally supposed. In Swedish, the word *katt* is first recorded in the provincial law of Uppland from 1296. In Old Norse it is first attested in Snorri Sturluson’s *Edda*, written around 1220. A closer investigation of place names on the continent could perhaps provide evidence of earlier occurrences of the word

² François-Xavier Dillman (Snorri Sturluson 1991: 57, 166), in his French translation of *Gylfaginning*, does not question, either, that the reference is to cats.

than in the written records. Eilert Ekwall (1960: 90) assumes that Old English *catt* ‘cat’ in the sense ‘wild cat’ is probably the first element in a good many English place names beginning with *Cat-*. But he notes that the word was also used as a personal name and that the Old Scandinavian personal name *Káti* must be considered as well. The new *Cambridge Dictionary of English Place-Names*, too, gives the interpretation ‘wild cat’ for some old place names in *Cat*, e.g. *Catford* ‘wild-cat ford’ (Watts 2004: 120). For several older German place names containing the word *Katze*, Adolf Bach (1953-54: § 192,2, § 320, § 324) also gives the explanation ‘wild cat’. How old these English and German names are considered to be is unknown to me. As I have understood it, the wild cat is not extinct in Europe outside Scandinavia, which means that it could be the animal referred to in these English and German names.

As I have mentioned, Carl-Ivar Ståhle is of the view that the names in *-inge* etc. discussed here contain inhabitant designations derived from place names of which the word *katt* was a part. That place names which could have been a basis for such an inhabitant designation referred to the domestic cat is not easy to maintain, since the cat is a rather insignificant house pet and not a wild animal. That was of course the reason Ståhle proposed the lynx, as other scholars have done for other names containing *katt*. But for one of the names (*Kattunga*, parish, province of Västergötland, *Katunge* 1383), the domestic cat has been suggested – a high mountain with the shape of a cat arching its back could have been called **Katten* ‘The Cat’, from which an inhabitant designation may have been formed (Karlsson 2011: 46-47).

But there is another solution worth considering. For *-inge* names containing animal designations, Ivar Lundahl (1946: 55-56) takes a different view from Carl-Ivar Ståhle, arguing that names such as *Gettlinge*, *Gässlinge* and *Kattunga* could contain derogatory inhabitant names derived directly from the animal designations *get* ‘goat’, *gås* ‘goose’ and *katt* ‘cat’: *gettlingar*, *gässlingar*, *kattungar*. Such an explanation of course presupposes that, when the place names were coined, the cat had already acquired a reputation that could make such designations derogatory. The possibility of explaining *-inge* names as containing derogatory inhabitant names derived from an animal designation has lately also been suggested by Per Vikstrand (2007: 66) in his treatment of the village name *Gettlinge* on the island of Öland in Sweden, which contains the word *get* ‘goat’. As a parallel, it can be mentioned that names formed from animal designations are very common among derogatory parish inhabitant names, given by neighbours.

Among more recent names ending in *-måla*, *-rum*, *-rud/-ryd/-röd* and *-torp*, coined during the Viking Age or later, there are many examples with a first element *Katt(e)*. These names have been explained as containing a man’s name **Kati*, a byname *Katt* ‘The Cat’ or the animal designation *katt*, referring either to the lynx or, in a disparaging sense, to the domestic cat (Wahlberg 2012: 306-306).

***Katt* in Recent Place Names**

The majority of the place names that contain *katt* are relatively recent minor names referring to topographical features, fields, meadows and the like, some of which may have become settlement names. The majority of these names do not put the cat in a particularly favourable light, denoting something small or having a generally disparaging sense. This view of the cat is also evident in many words and expressions, such as *kattguld* ‘cat gold’ and *kattsilver* ‘cat silver’, meaning ‘tinsel, cheap glittering trash’, and expressions like *det är minsann inte kattskit det* ‘that’s certainly not cat’s dung’, referring to something quite valuable. The Swedish 14th-century saint Bridget wrote in her *Revelations*: ‘What can be worth less in a house than a cat or a dog?’ (Broberg 2004: 27). In popular belief, the cat plays an important role and is often connected with supernatural and evil powers. During the Middle Ages it was associated with those practising black magic, especially women.

I will give some examples of the many place names which contain *katt* in a disparaging sense, but also names belonging to the category of comparative names.³ Such names are also found in other parts of Europe – for German examples, see Bach (1953-1954: §325,8, § 325,2) and Niemayer (2012: 308 *Katzenelnbogen*).

Many small lakes and pools bear the name *Katthavet* ‘Cat Sea/Ocean’, where the second element is ironically meant (Brevner 1942: 160-161). Names like *Kattsjön* ‘Cat Lake’ and *Kattgölen* ‘Cat Pool’ refer to very small lakes or pools. Names of marshes and springs like *Kattmossen* ‘Cat Bog’, *Kattkärret* ‘Cat Fen’, *Katthålet* ‘Cat Hole’ and *Kattkällan* ‘Cat Spring’ signify that the localities concerned are small or worthless. An explanation often given for these names is that cats were drowned or buried there, but in most cases this is probably just an attempt to explain the names – it does not seem likely that particular places would have been chosen for that purpose.

Names of hills and mountains like *Kattberget* ‘Cat Mountain’ and *Katthöjden* ‘Cat Hill’ normally do not refer to particularly impressive mountain formations. A rocky height in Stockholm, *Mariaberget* ‘Mary’s Mountain’, which was called *Katteberget* or *Kattebergen* ‘Cat Mountain(s)’ in the middle of the 17th century, is quite large, and the reason for the name may well be that domestic cats used to gather there (*SG*: 254, Rosell 1979: 36).

Islands with names like *Kattön* ‘Cat Island’, *Kattholmen* ‘Cat Islet’ and *Kattskäret* ‘Cat Skerry’ are of modest size. A very small island bears the name *Kattsvältan*, the second element of which is formed from the word *svält* ‘starvation’ – it was probably considered too small to feed even a cat. The reason given for *Kattsvältan* as the name of two crofts is that one of them was a generally wretched place, while the people living in the other were so poor that even the cat starved.

That the cat is and has been very close to man is evident from the many place names that compare localities to a cat. The most common among these are *Katten* ‘the Cat’ and *Kattan* ‘the She-Cat’. When a small island with such a name was said to look like a cat, the name giver probably thought of the characteristic shape of a cat arching its back (Ohlsson 1939: 94). But many of these names were no doubt given simply because the islands were small.

³ My examples are taken from the place name collections at the Institute for Language and Folklore in Uppsala (<http://www.sprakochfolkminnen.se/sprak/namn/ortnamn/ortnamnsregistret.html>).

The different parts of the cat's body are often used as place names, especially the tail, which is represented by at least four different words: *hale* 'tail', *rumpa* 'rump', *stjärt* 'tail/backside' and *svans* 'tail'. These names refer to long, narrow localities. The most common name is *Katt(e)rumpen/Katt(e)rompan*, referring to long and narrow fields or meadows, small and narrow protruding parts of a bog, and also hills and islands. Another word for 'tail', *hale*, for instance, is found in the village name *Kattala* (ij *Katalum* 1374), which is undoubtedly an old field name.

Other parts of the cat's body are also used, either to describe the shape or the size of the locality or for some other, unknown reason:

- The back: rocks, small islands, a field – with the shape of a cat arching its back (*Kattryggen* 'Cat's Back').
- The head or skull: rocky islets, small islands, promontories, hills (*Katthuvudet* 'Cat's Head', *Katt(e)skallen* 'Cat's Skull').
- The neck: islands, a promontory, a bay, a field (*Kattnacken* 'Cat's Neck'). It is difficult to understand how a locality can look like a cat's neck – perhaps these names are synonymous with *Katthuvudet/Kattskallen* 'Cat's Head/Cat's Skull'.
- The ears: a field (*Kattöronen* 'Cat's Ears').
- The eye: a very small lake, the innermost part of a bay of a river (*Kattögat* 'Cat's Eye').
- The nose: a cottage (*Kattnosen* 'Cat's Nose').
- The throat: a narrow gorge, a narrow and rapid-flowing part of a rivulet (*Kattstrupen* 'Cat's Throat').
- The feet: a marsh, a field, a wood, mine holes – probably meaning that the localities are very small; the fourth example refers to four small mine holes lying close together, looking like an impression of a cat's foot (*Katt(e)foten* 'Cat's Foot'; *Kattens fötter* 'The Cat's Feet'; *Katfötterna* 'Cat's Feet').
- The skin: a very small field (*Kattskinnet* 'Catskin') close to a somewhat larger one called *Hundskinnet* 'Dogskin' because of its shape. This name belongs to quite a common field name type, which compares fields to different animal skins.
- The behind or, to use a more appropriate translation, the arse: two small rounded bays, coves, which may have been compared to a cat's posterior (*Kattröven* 'Cat's Arse'). One name, referring to a spring, is probably generally disparaging (*Kattröven*).

The last of the parts of the cat's body found in place names, referring to the she-cat, is:

- The cunt: springs, wells, a small, mowable marsh, a rivulet, a hollow, a cottage – names for small and worthless localities, doubly disparaging, I am afraid to say (*Katt(e)fittan* 'Cat's Cunt').

Of the different parts of the cat's body, only the chest, the belly and the legs seem to be absent from place names.

Conclusion

The Swedish settlement names *Kattunga*, *Käslinge*, *Kättinge* and *Kättslinge*, dating back to the first half of the 1st century AD, may, in my opinion, contain derogatory inhabitant designations, *kättingar* etc., that are derived from the word *katt* ‘cat’, referring to the domestic cat. This interpretation implies that the word *cat*, a common European word of unclear origin, came to Scandinavia earlier than is evidenced by the written continental sources. Since there is archaeological evidence of the domestic cat in Sweden at least from the 1st century after Christ, this is quite possible. It is likely that the word *katt* accompanied the introduction of the animal in Scandinavia.

Medieval settlement names, such as *Kattarp*, *Kattemåla* and *Katterud*, may contain a man’s name *Kati* or *Kate* or a nickname *Katt* ‘The Cat’, but they may also be disparaging.

The majority of the many more recent names beginning with *Katt-* refer to small, insignificant localities, often with a derogatory meaning. A prominent group consists of names which compare the localities to a cat or to different parts of the cat’s body, especially the tail.

Place names, then, are indeed a place for cats. But most of these names do not present the cat in a particularly favourable light, in spite of the fact that it must have been of great use, and probably a source of great delight, to its master and mistress – even if the cat has of course always been its own master.

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