

Place Names in Oral Tradition: Sources of Local Language and Cultural History

Inge Særheim

Norway

Abstract

Toponyms localize former traditions, activities and phenomena. By their semantic content they give specific information about the locations, e.g. about topography, flora, fauna, farming, hunting, fishing, travel, administration, defence and religion. The names also provide interesting information about the local language, e.g. about phonological and morphological development, dialect boundaries and the semantics of topographical appellatives. Place names have been passed on in oral tradition for a long time. They form part of the local culture and tradition. The value and reliability of toponyms in oral tradition used as sources about cultural history and the local language is discussed in this paper, mainly based on examples from southwestern Norway.

* * *

Introduction

Many place names have been passed on in the local dialect through the generations, some of them for hundreds of years. On some farms in Norway more than 500 microtoponyms have been coined, and they denote fields, meadows, rivers, lakes, bogs, forests, mountains and other topographical features. The names form part of the local tradition and culture. They provide valuable information about cultural history and the local language. The names localize different phenomena and traditions, and by their semantic content they provide information about the landscape and the local culture.

This paper deals with toponyms in oral tradition used as linguistic evidence and source of cultural history. Most of the examples are from Rogaland and neighbouring counties in the southwestern part of Norway.

Name Continuity – The Survival of Microtoponyms

In this context name continuity needs to be discussed. For how long do microtoponyms in oral tradition survive, e.g. in a farming community? This question has recently been discussed by Pihl (2014) in a doctoral thesis from Uppsala University dealing with field names. She argues that microtoponyms linked to property boundaries have better opportunities to survive than other microtoponyms.

An interesting example – or case – relating to this question is found in Kvinesdal (Vest-Agder), where seven microtoponyms are mentioned in a medieval document (diploma) from 1292, describing the boundary between two farms, Gullestad and Eikeland:

or skotbærgi ok i steindyr, or steindurum i næfsteinin, firir ouan sauðato. or steinum ok (i) varðan sëm hæst er fiállæt. þaðan i runit sëm bækræn fællr or Miaua vatni i Kældo as vatne þæðan i holma þan sëm nestr ligr Valskarða lande (DN 1 no. 81)

from Skotberg to Steindør, from Steindør til Nevsteinen, above Saueto, from the rock to the cairn on top of the mountain, from there to the stream where it runs out of Mjåvatn to Kjeldåsvatnet, from there to the small island close to Våskeland (author's translation)

According to Fintland (2005), who has coined and studied place names from Gullestad, the seven names mentioned are still known by people representing local oral tradition, some of them with a somewhat changed form. The Old Norse (ON) names and the equivalent names in modern Norwegian are: *Skotberg* – *Skotet*, *Steindyr* – *Steindør*, *Nefsteinninn* – *Nasesteinen*, *Sauðató* – *Saueto*, *Mjåvatn* – *Mjåvatn*, *Kelduásvatn* – *Kjeldåsvatnet*, *Valskarðaland* – *Våskeland*.

ON *Skotberg* (a mountain where logs have been pushed down) relates to the uncompounded *Skotet* /'skå:de/. ON *Steindyr* ('rock door', an opening in the mountain) is also nowadays called *Steindør*. ON *Nefsteinninn* ('nose rock') is now called *Nasesteinen*, with the same semantics. ON *nef* 'nose' has been replaced by the modern word for 'nose' in Norwegian: *nase*.

ON *Sauðató* ('the mountain shelf where sheep go') is also today called *Saueto*, whereas ON *Mjåvatn* ('the narrow lake') is called *Mjåvatn*. ON *Kelduásvatn* ('the lake by the mountain ridge with a source') is used in the definite form today: *Kjeldåsvatnet*. ON *Valskarðaland* has developed into *Våskeland*. This is an old farm name ending in *-land*. The first element is most likely a toponym ON **Valskarð*, containing ON *valr* m. 'falcon' and *skarð* n. 'mountain pass'.

This example from Kvinesdal shows how well some microtoponyms have survived in the local oral tradition. The seven names mentioned in 1292 are also known today, some of them with a changed grammatical form. They have been passed on in the oral tradition for more than 700 years. This indicates that many microtoponyms found in the mountains, along the seashores or in a farming community, and maybe believed to be fairly young, might in fact be very old, in some cases from medieval times. This shows how strong and reliable the oral tradition has been some places. It indicates that microtoponyms in oral tradition may be regarded as a valuable and reliable source material. From this example, e.g. the name *Våskeland* (ON *Valskarðaland*), we also learn that it is necessary in many cases to know old forms and spellings in order to be able to interpret the names.

The Grammatical Form Indicating the Age of Microtoponyms

In some cases the grammatical form of a place name in oral tradition indicates that it is quite old. Some topographical names and field names have developed from so-called oblique case (*casus obliquus*) in ON in areas where the case system has not been used after c. 1500. Farm names reflecting oblique case in Old Norse are quite common in southwestern Norway, e.g.

Bakka (from ON *Bakka*, oblique case of ON *bakki* m. ‘hill, slope’) and *Brekke* (from ON *Brekku*, oblique case of ON *brekka* f. ‘steep slope’).

Names reflecting the oblique case are also found among field names. One example is *Side* /'si:e/, from ON **Síðu*, oblique case of ON *síða* f. ‘side’, denoting a field beside a brook. This name is used as a field and farm name in Årdal (northern Rogaland) and as a farm name in Hafslo (Sogn og Fjordane).

This phenomenon also appears in topographical names, e.g. in names denoting mountains, headlands and rocks in the sea. The name *Kråke* /'krå:ke/, denoting rocks in the sea several places in Rogaland, has developed from ON **Kráku*, oblique case of ON *kráka* f. ‘crow’. *Mula* /'mu:la/, denoting headlands several places in Rogaland, relates to ON **Múla*, oblique case of ON *múli* m. ‘muzzle’. *Hobda* /'håbda/, denoting a mountain in Sirdal (Vest-Agder), has developed from ON **Hofða*, oblique case of ON *hofði* m. ‘head’.

Microtoponyms in oral tradition like these must have been formed before 1500, due to the fact that they reflect the old case system. Norwegian place names in indefinite form lost the case inflexion in late medieval times (before 1500). In some names, especially farm names, but also in some topographical names and field names, the oblique form was ‘frozen’ at that time. This phenomenon occurs especially in names from southwestern Norway (Indrebø 1926). The dative is still used in some Norwegian dialects, but only in the definite form of nouns and toponyms. In the dative-area, i.e. in the area where dative is still used, place names in definite form have a special dative form, used after certain prepositions. However, southwestern Norway is not a part of this area.

Phonological and Morphological Development and Dialect Boundaries

Place names provide information about the phonological and morphological development of a dialect and language, and about linguistic relationship and heritage, and they represent a treasure trove of words and semantics, especially topographical appellatives. In some Scandinavian toponyms we find personal names not recorded in written documents or runic inscriptions.

Place names are unique sources when studying phonological development. Quite often the different elements of compound toponyms have not been associated with the original meaning of the words represented, and the names have therefore easily been exposed to spontaneous sound changes. The farm name *Belse* (Akershus, eastern Norway) is a so-called *rud*-name, containing ON *ruð* ‘clearing’, with the male name ON *Berdórr* as the first element, i.e. ON *Berdórsruð* (Harsson 1997). The local pronunciation and older spellings, e.g. *j Bærdorsrudi* (dative) 1339, *Belsrudt* 1578 and *Bellse* 1647, indicate consonant assimilation in addition to lengthening and lowering of the vowel in the first syllable. The forms also indicate shortening and reduction of the vowel in the middle syllable and finally loss of this syllable. In the final syllable there has been vowel reduction and consonant assimilation.

Several *rud*-names with the sound combination *sr*, e.g. *Jonsrud* and *Bjørnsrud*, both containing male names (*Jon* and *Bjørn*) as the first element, are registered in 1880 with a

local pronunciation showing *t*-insertion between *s* and *r*, /'jønstru/, /'bjønstru/. These forms indicate that the combination *sr* is less acceptable in Norwegian than *str* (Harsson 1995).

Toponyms are valuable sources when studying certain grammatical innovations, e.g. definite form. The postpositive article in nouns developed in the Scandinavian language in the Viking age. Toponyms normally had an indefinite form in Old Norse, however many names received a definite form in late medieval times, e.g. *Namdalen* (ON *Naumudalr*), *Jæren* (ON *Jaðarr*) and *Smøla* (ON *Smyl*). However, many names still have an indefinite form, e.g. farm names like *Vik*, *Steine* and *Sandnes*, and old topographical names like *Sira*, *Rott* and *Bokn*. The distribution of this phenomenon differs (Haslum 2003). Most examples of the definite form in Norwegian place names are found in Trøndelag, where even several old farm names ending in ON *-staðir* have got a definite form, e.g. *Buston* (ON *Bústaðir*). In an area in southern Norway, with Telemark and a large part of Agder as the key area, many compound topographical names still have an indefinite form, e.g. *Førsvatn* and *Berghyl*.

Due to the fact that many place names preserve older grammatical endings and pronunciations of words, the local pronunciation of the names sometimes reflects that dialect boundaries (isoglosses) have changed over time. In some cases earlier dialect boundaries appear from a corpus of place names. An isogloss which is relevant to study in this context, deals with the voicing of /p, t, k/ following a long or lengthened vowel, e.g. in words like *pipe* f. 'pipe', *båt* m. 'boat' and *tak* n. 'roof', pronounced /'pi:ba/, /bå:d/ and /ta:g/. According to Haslum (2004), a corpus of toponyms collected by school children in the 1930s clearly indicates that this development earlier had a wider distribution in the southern part of Norway (Agder) than today. This coincides with the findings of Hannaas (1911: IV), who has studied a collection of words from this part of Norway (Råbyggjelag) from the first half of the 17th century.

The rounding of /a/ in front of /ng/, e.g. in the adjective *lang* adj. 'long', today represents a difference between the dialects of northern Rogaland, where /ång/-pronunciation is common, /'långe/, and southern Rogaland, with /ang/-pronunciation, /'lange/. However microtoponyms like *Langåger* /'långå:ger/ ('the long field'), *Longevoll* /'långevåd,l/ ('the long meadow') and *Longhol(en)* /'långho:d,l/ ('the long mound'), found in several places in southern Rogaland (e.g. in Klepp and Time), indicate that the rounding of /a/ in front of /ng/ earlier was common further south than today. This isogloss has moved northwards.

Microtoponyms collected from oral sources in Northwest-Rogaland since the 1980s reflect that the use of different endings in strong and weak declined feminines has had a wider distribution in this area than stated in linguistic publications and maps showing dialect boundaries (Christiansen 1969). Different endings are found in toponyms as far south as Sandve in south-western Karmøy, e.g. *Fjellsnova* /'fjelsnå:ve/ (*nov* f.) and *Ura* /'u:re/ (*ur* f.), containing strong feminines, but *Hella* /'hedlå/ (*helle* f.) and *Hola* /'hå:lå/ (*hole* f.), with weak ones. The system with one ending, /-å/, in all feminines is nowadays spreading to neighbouring areas which traditionally have had different endings in the two types of feminines.

Microtoponyms Referring to Falcon Catching

In medieval times and the two following centuries a number of falcons were caught in Norway and sent (exported) to the European continent and the British Isles where the birds were trained and used in falconry (i.e. in aristocratic hunt). This is recorded in medieval literature (diplomas, sagas, didactic literature, poetry etc.) and in post-medieval tax records and judicial documents. A number of microtoponyms in Norway – from the mountains as well as the seashores – refer to the catching of falcons. Reliable examples are compound place names with first elements like *Falkfangar-* ('falcon catcher') and *Falk(e)hytt-* ('falcon hut'), the latter referring to a special type of hut, *falkehytte* f., used by the falcon catcher. Several toponyms referring to catch sites are found in the mountains between Sør-Trøndelag, Oppland and Hedmark.

The first element of the name *Hytteheia*, denoting a mountain plateau in Suleskard (Sirdal, Vest-Agder) refers to the catching of falcons. There is an old catch site for falcons (a 'falkehytte') on this mountain, mentioned in a report from a journey in 1839 (Keilhau 1839).

The shores of Jæren (southern Rogaland) are reported in post-medieval sources to be one of the best catching sites for falcons (Pontoppidan 1753: 118). Information about falcon catching in Jæren is found in tax records from c. 1520 (NRJ 1: 690). A so-called *falkeleie*, i.e. a place where falcons were caught, was, according to written sources, situated in a farm called Kvalbein (Hå). Toponyms like *Falkhaug* ('falcon mound'), *Leiet* and *Leiesteinen* denote locations on the shore, referring to the *falkeleie* (Særheim 2013). The place name *Fuglakung* ('bird king'), which most likely refers to falcon catchers, denotes a farmyard on the neighbouring farmstead. A small bay in this area is called *Fuglaviga* ('bird bay'), most likely relating to the many birds staying there because of the seaweed (tare). This might also be a reason why falcons, especially peregrine falcons (*Falco peregrinus*), have come to this place. According to the official record of the Jæren and Dalane court from February 1st 1668, the catching of falcons in Hå had ended by that time (Tingbok Ba 42 1668, 2a–3a). The bay *Fuglaviga* used to be one of the best places to collect tare in Jæren. Earlier the tare was collected, dried and burnt, and the ash was exported, especially to Scotland, where it was used in the production of iodine.

Toponyms Referring to Ship Wrecks – *Løvebukta*

The frigate *Norske Løve* ('the Norwegian lion') was a flagship of the Danish-Norwegian navy during a war in 1666. English warships had raided the coast of Rogaland and set fire to the customs house in Nedstrand. After having crossed the North Sea in October that year, *Norske Løve* sought shelter from an autumn storm in the island of Eigerøy (Eigersund, southern Rogaland). During a hard storm (hurricane) on 21 October the ropes of the anchors broke, the ship was loose and stranded on the rocky shore. The bottom of the ship was badly damaged. The crew managed to tow the ship into a small bay, however it was not possible to save the ship, which broke down during hard storms during the winter of 1666-1667. The crew worked hard that winter to save as much as possible from the ship (cannons, equipment, the rigging etc.).

In the late 1970s marine archaeologists from Stavanger maritime museum wanted to find out more about the shipwreck. In searching for the right location some microtoponyms from the area proved to be very useful. Two small bays in southeastern Eigerøy are called *Vestra* and *Austra Løvebukta* ('western' and 'eastern lion bay'), sometimes only *Vestra* and *Austra Løva* ('western' and 'eastern lion'). These names apparently refer to the events in 1666 and denote the location where the once so proud battle ship was wrecked. The names have been passed on in the local tradition since that time. The researchers found traces of the ship in this location, e.g. iron canons, canon balls, ceramics and parts of the wooden construction.

The two bays are situated below an elevation called *Skansane* ('the entrenchment'), a toponym which according to oral tradition also refers to the events in 1666. Written sources report that the officers and the crew built a bulwark in order to defend themselves against pirate ships ('privateers') during the rescue work. The text: 'Blef Nordske Løvwia Helt' on a map from 1708 (R. Juell) indicates where the ship (with admiral Helt) was stranded.

This example shows that place names in local oral tradition provide information about historical events that go several hundred years back in time, and that the coining and interpretation of place names is useful not only for linguists. The names are valuable sources for researchers representing different disciplines.

A number of place names along the Norwegian coast contain the names of wrecked ships. These toponyms are useful when searching for shipwrecks. Examples from the Jæren area (southern Rogaland) are *Kosmosgrunnen* (Kvitsøy), *Vestasteinen* (Tunge, Randaberg), *Ofeliasteinen* (Hårr, Hå) and *Fortunholmen* (Holmane, Hå). Breaking up wrecked ships has in fact been an important income source for farms along the coast of Jæren, which is referred to in some place names, e.g. *Tynevika* (Hodne, Klepp), named after a ship called *Tyne*, and *Skibasteinen* (Reve, Klepp), a rock used to fasten ships that were broken up by the sea.

Myths of Origin 1: *Galgarinda*

A special story is linked to the name *Galgarinda* ('gallows ridge') from a farm called Orre (Klepp, southern Rogaland), mentioned in several collections of local stories (legends). This toponym supposedly refers to a stranded ship from the early 17th century. It is told in the local tradition that some people from the ship were lying 'half-dead' on the beach, however people from the nearby farm did not do anything to help them because they were more interested in the goods (cargo). When this became known to the authorities, four men from the farm were supposedly hanged in *Galgarinda*.

It is often difficult to decide the reliability of such stories. Is there some truth in it or is this fiction? Could this name refer to gallows used for other purposes, e.g. the drying of fishing seines, called *notgalge* ('seine gallows') in Norwegian?

A few years ago a legal document was found in the State archive in Stavanger where it is documented that *two* men from Orre were executed by hanging because they had taken some cargo from a stranded ship in the winter of 1613-1614, i.e. goods belonging to the King (Seldal 1999). The document apparently confirms and dates the event and the story linked to

the toponym, which has been passed on in the local oral tradition up to present day, i.e. for 400 years.

Myths of Origin 2: *Klokkeskjeret*

A special story is also linked to the name *Klokkeskjeret* ('the bell rock'), located way out in the sea by the island Håstein in Sola (southern Rogaland). There are two rocks (skerries): *Stora* ('the big') and *Litla* ('the small') *Klokkeskjeret*, also called *Stora* and *Litla klokka* ('the big' and 'the small bell'). A bay on the island Håstein is called *Klokkebaien*. According to oral tradition the names refer to an event in the 16th century when the church bells from Stavanger cathedral were taken onboard a ship sailing to Copenhagen. The bells were supposed to be recasted into canons for the castle. However, the ship ran into *Klokkeskjeret* and sank. Divers have searched for the ship and found a wreck from the 16th century, but not the church bells. Old fishermen tell that in storm with rough sea they can hear the bells ring on the bottom of the sea. When they hear the bells, they never go out with their boats.

This story is included in collections of stories (legends) from this area, and it is referred to by the county governor Bendix Christian de Fine in his book *Stavanger Amptes udførlige Beskrivelse* from c. 1745, where it is also mentioned that the rock is called '*Klokke-Skiæret*' (de Fine 1952: 40). In the book *Norriges Beskrivelse* by Peder Clausson Friis from c. 1600 it is told that 'by the island Håstein one of the king's ships was stranded (broke down) in the year 1558. Onboard were five church bells that were taken from Stavanger cathedral' (Friis 1881: 327; author's translation). In a letter (diploma) written in Bergenhus (Bergen) on 29 April 1558 it is told that the leader ('høvedsmann') Christoffer Valkendorf, on request, sends to Herr Mogens Gyldenstjerne in Copenhagen 13 bells to be recast into canons for the castle (DN 2: 866 f.).

Due to written evidence from the 16th through the 19th centuries it seems probable that at least some of the tradition linked to the name *Klokkeskjeret* is reliable. It is a mystery, however, why the church bells have not (yet) been found. The story of the ship wreck and the sunken church bells has been passed on in the local oral tradition for more than 450 years.

Final Remarks

The aim of this paper has been to show that microtoponyms in the local oral tradition, maybe believed to be fairly young, in some cases prove to be quite old. Some of them have been passed on in oral tradition for many hundred years, in some cases linked to stories about events that have taken place in the locations. The fact that myths of origin are linked to some of the names, presumably makes it easier to remember these names, even though some of the myths might be so-called folk etymology. Some names and locations have had special functions, e.g. as border marks. Toponyms in oral tradition are valuable sources about the local language and several other aspects of cultural history.

Inge Særheim
University of Stavanger
Norway

References

- Christiansen, H. (1969) *Norske Målførekart*. Oslo.
- DN = *Diplomatarium Norvegicum* 1-. (1847-) Christiania/Oslo.
- de Fine, B.Chr. (1952) *Stavanger Amptes udførlige Beskrivelse*. P. Thorson (ed.). Stavanger: Ved P. Thorson.
- Fintland, T. (2005) *Stadnamn frå Gullestad*. Unpublished master's thesis. Stavanger Katedralskole.
- Friis, P.C. (1881) *Samlede Skrifter*. Ed. by G. Storm. Christiania: Udgivne for den norske historiske Forening.
- Hannaas, T. (1911) *Ordsamling fraa Robyggjelaget fraa slutten av 1600-talet*. Ældre norske sprog minder 2. Kristiania: Grøndahl.
- Harsson, M. (1995) 'Jonstrud og Bjørnstrud. Om t-innskot mellom s og r'. *Avdeling for namnegransking (Universitetet i Oslo)*. Årsmelding 1994. 17-30.
- Harsson, M. (1997) 'Frå Berdórsruð til Belse. Korleis forklare lydendingane?'. *Avdeling for namnegransking (Universitetet i Oslo)*. Årsmelding 1996. 35-50.
- Haslum, V. (2003) *Artikkelløse stedsnavn i norsk talespråk. En studie i onomastikk og dialektologi*. PhD Thesis. Universitetet i Bergen.
- Haslum, V. (2004) 'Bløte konsonanter'. *Maal og Minne* (2004). 148-160.
- Indrebø, G. (1926) 'Kasus obliquus i norske stadnamn'. *Maal og Minne* (1926). 71-102.
- Keilhau, B.M. (1839) 'Reise i Lister- og Mandals-Amt i Sommeren 1839'. *Nyt Magazin for Naturvidenskaperne* 2. 333-400.
- Norske Regnskaber og Jordebøger* 1. (1885). Christiania: J. Chr. Gundersens Bogtrykkeri.
- Pihl, E. (2014) *Ägonamn. Namnstruktur och namnkontinuitet i två uppländska socknar*. Namn och samhälle 27. Uppsala: Uppsala Universitetet.
- Pontoppidan, E. (1753) *Det første Forsøg paa Norges naturlige historie* 2. København: Trykt i de Berlingske Arvingers Bogtrykkerie.
- Seldal, G. (1999) 'Spekemennene på Orresanden'. *Klepp historie- og ættesogelag. Årshefte*. 52-61.
- Særheim, I. (2013) 'Orresnora, Falkehytta, Mågahuset and Ørnhus. Nokre stadnamn som har bakgrunn i fuglefangst'. *Namn och Bygd* 101. 51-66.
- Tingbok = Sorenskrivaren i Jæren og Dalane. Tingbok Ba 42 1686. Statsarkivet i Stavanger.