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Viking, week, and Widsith. A reply to Harald Bjorvand

In *ANF* 2005 (cf. 2006) I pointed out that Old Norse (ON) *viking* f. and *vikingr* m. belong to the same root as ON *vika* f. ‘sea mile’, originally ‘the distance between two shifts of rowers’ (from the root **weik-* / **wīk-*, as in the Proto-Germanic [PG] verb **wīkan* ‘to recede’). I also pointed out phonological evidence that the word “Viking” existed in the Anglo-Frisian protolanguage, possibly as early as in the 4th century, i.e. in the pre-sail era. Based on this I argued that **wīkingō* > ON *viking* f. ‘warlike sea journey’ originally meant ‘sea journey characterised by shifting of rowers’ and that **wīkingaz* > ON *vikingr* m. originally meant ‘participant on sea journey characterised by shifting of rowers’.¹ Bjorvand (2007: 1305) rejects this etymology as “unacceptable” but regrettably does not

¹ Several people have arrived at the same essential idea independently: Westerdahl i.a. 1979 and 1995: 44–45, Daggfeldt 1983, Jon Godal and I (Heide 2005). – Andersson (2007) supports this etymology. Hellberg (2008) rejects it although he does not come up with major objections, except Bjorvand’s objection 2. below. – The <v> of ON *viking(r)* etc. was pronounced /w/. Modern English *Viking* is a late loanword from ON.

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Abstract: This paper discusses objections to the etymology promoted by Heide in *ANF* 2005: Old Norse *viking* f. and *vikingr* m. belong to the same root as *vika* f. ‘sea mile’, originally ‘the distance between two shifts of rowers’; *viking* f. originally meant ‘sea journey characterised by shifting of rowers’, and *vikingr* m. originally meant ‘participant on sea journey characterised by shifting of rowers’. The objections are that there is no connection between ON *vika* f. ‘sea mile’ and the shifting of rowers and that the oldest attested meaning of the word “Viking” is ‘a name of a people’, in Old English. Therefore “Viking”, after all, originally must have meant ‘person from *Vik(in)*’ (the Norwegian Skagerak coast) because otherwise the people name is inexplicable. To support the rower shifting etymology of *vika* ‘sea mile’ Heide argues that both this word and the identical ON *vika* / PG **wīkōn* ‘week’ originally meant ‘a rotation of people relieving each other successively’ (e.g. rowers and week-gods). The people name probably simply refers to ‘the Scandinavians’, Heide argues. The only pre Viking-Age attestation of the word “Viking” has the meaning ‘seafarer’ (or ‘pirate’), in Old English.

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give the objections.² I have encouraged him to publish them but in vain. Therefore I have formulated Bjorvand's objections myself, based upon two hasty e-mails from him (June 11 and 12 2008) and his latest articles on "Viking" and "week" (2007: 1234, 1305). Bjorvand has two decisive objections:

1. There is no basis for the claim that Old Norse *vika* f. 'sea mile' originally meant 'the distance between shifting of rowers'. Accordingly there is no basis for the rower shifting etymology ("helt ubegrunnet").
2. The oldest attested meaning of the word "Viking" is 'a name of a people' (in the plural, *wīcingas*, alongside with Huns, Danes etc.; in the Old English poem *Widsith*). (Therefore "Viking" originally meant 'person from *Vik(in)* [the Norwegian Skagerak coast]' because this is the only possible explanation of a people name **wikingaz*). The meaning 'warlike seafarer' is later in the sources.

1. I agree with Bjorvand that nobody has demonstrated that ON *vika* 'sea mile' originally meant 'the distance between shifting of rowers'. This has, however, been accepted by everybody (including Bjorvand [2000: 993], until he now rejects it because of my 2005 article) and I believe that it is possible to make such a demonstration. These statements should be the starting-points:

- a. We must find an etymology that covers both ON *vika* 'week' and the other Germanic forms of this word; ON *vika* 'sea mile', Gothic *wikō* 'a turn (to perform duty)' or 'order', and Old English *wice* 'an office, a duty, function' – because they all reflect the PG feminine **wikōn*.
- b. Because we are dealing with a common Germanic word (**wikōn*) the etymology must be based upon the common Germanic meaning of the root **weik-* / **wīk-* that can be derived from comparison of the Germanic languages, i.e.: 'to recede, turn to the side, give way, yield'. (Bjorvand's explanation [2007: 1234] of ON *vika* f. as originally 'movement, course, progress' is based upon a meaning only attested in ON.)

First I have to discuss Gothic *wikō* and OE *wice*. The latter is usually spelled with a long *ī* (**wīce*, **wīce*) in the dictionaries (e. g. Bosworth and Toller 1898: 1214) but without apparent reason. Vowel length is not

² Unfortunately this is rather typical of Bjorvand's (and Lindeman's) writings. Anderson has a completely different approach to the scholarly discussion. In *ANF* 2007 he presents, in a clear and constructive way, objections to my 2006 article about the etymology of *Rus* 'eastern Viking'. I accept his objections. There is no need to assume that **Rōtsi* > *Rus* is borrowed from the first part of compounds like *rōþskarlar* with an original meaning 'men of rowing'.

marked in the manuscripts so it can only be known from later reflexions and comparison with other languages. But neither indicate an OE form **wīce*. The reason for this reconstruction may be the long vowel of the root from which the word is derived – **weik-* / **wīk-* – but this shows nothing because ON *vika* f., which has a short vowel, is derived from the same root. In addition the similar meanings of OE *wice* and Gothic *wikō* indicate that they are the same word. If so, this OE *wice* is the same word as the OE word meaning ‘week’, which is spelled the same in the manuscripts. – Gothic *wikō* is attested once, in Luke 1,8 in Wulfila’s translation of the New Testament. The passage tells of an incident where Zechariah was serving as a priest “in wikon kunjis seinis” (Streitberg 1965: 85. *Wikōn* = dative singular). *Wikō* is a translation of the Greek *táxis*, which i.a. means “an arranging”, “an order”, and “a post or place in the line of battle” (Liddell and Scott 1871: 691). The cited Gothic passage is in some (modern) Bible editions translated as ‘in the *order* of his group’ (Zechariah’s place in the order within the group); in others as ‘when it was his group’s *turn* (to perform duty)’ (see <http://www.biblegateway.com/>). In any way *wikō* refers to a rotation of people relieving each other successively. The Old English meaning of *wice* ‘an office, a duty, function’ can be seen as a development of this (as has been pointed out by Torp and others) because when it is one’s turn in the rotation one is on duty / in office. This is supported by the fact that in some Bible editions the mentioned passage is translated: ‘... when Zechariah’s division was on *duty*’ (and the like, <http://www.biblegateway.com/>). The meaning ‘week’ of PG **wikōn*, which has no accepted etymology (except that it is derived from the root **weik-* / **wīk-*, as in the verb **wikan*), can be explained in the same way if we conceive of a week as a rotation of gods “in office” one day each then “relieving” each other (Wessén 1914: 179). Tuesday is ‘*Teiwaz’s day’, Wednesday ‘*Wōþanaz’s day’, Thursday ‘*Punaraz’s day’, and so on. We are not used to conceiving of the names of the days literally like this but for those who translated them from Latin in the early centuries AD this probably was different. When a new compound is formed the meaning of the compound of course is literal, and there probably was a habit of thinking about the gods behind the names in the Gallo-Roman culture from which the names were borrowed / translated. In the north-western areas of the late Roman Empire there was a popular astrological cult of the seven week-gods, who were often depicted together in a “week cycle” around an altar-pillar (ibid: 173 ff.). – In Gothic the meaning ‘week’ of *wikō* is not attested. In this meaning Wulfila uses the Greek word, *sabbato* (ibid: 172). Accordingly Germanic

**wikōn* existed before the importation of the concept of “week”. We can assume that its meaning was ‘rotation’, as in Gothic *wikō* and behind OE *wice*. This meaning fits perfect with the traditional explanation of ON *vika* ‘sea mile’, i.e. ‘the distance between two shifts of rowers’. In all these cases there is a group of people relieving each other successively. This meaning also fits with the common Germanic meaning of the root **weik-* / **wīk-*: ‘to recede, turn to the side, give way, yield’ because the essence of **wikōn* ‘rotation’ is the situation where the person on duty steps aside for the person relieving him. Probably the original meaning of **wikōn* was ‘receding’ and the meaning ‘rotation’ was developed from it. This may be compared to the development from **weik-* / **wīk-*’s meaning ‘recede’ to the derivation **wihsala-* ‘(ex)change’ (cf. Old High German *wehsal* and ON *víxl*). When we see all this in connection there cannot be much doubt that ON *vika* ‘sea mile’ really refers to the distance between two shifts of rowers. This basis for the rower shifting etymology of “Viking” should therefore be secure.

2. Then I turn to the question of the earliest attested use of the word “Viking”, which Hellberg (2008), too, considers crucial, reasoning the same way as Bjorvand. It seems that the basis for Bjorvand’s and Hellberg’s view does not stand a closer examination. In Old English *wīcing* has two meanings: i. ‘a pirate, sea-robber’, ii. ‘a Northman’ (Bosworth and Toller 1898: 1214). In passages dealing with English affairs the latter meaning seems to be the most common, to judge from Bosworth and Toller. *Wīcingas* in the meaning ‘a name of a people’ in Widsith can most easily be taken as an example of this usage: *Wīcingas* are the Scandinavian people in general, just like in other Old English sources. (They do not usually distinguish between different Scandinavian peoples or tribes.) This is not contradicted by the fact that the clearest Widsith passage (lines 57–64, Malone 1962: 24) mentions other Scandinavian peoples or tribes as well – *Swēon*, *Gēatas*, *Dene*. There is more overlapping in the passage; it mentions both *Dene* ‘Danes’, and *Sūþdene* ‘South Danes’ and *Venlas* ‘people from Vendsyssel in Jutland’. An overlapping “Swedes”, “Danes”, *gōtar* and “Scandinavians” should be no more problematic. – The idea that *wīcingas* in Widsith does not simply mean ‘the Scandinavians’ seems to rely on an assumption that the poem reflects an era before the Viking-Age. But this is a hard claim to make. The Exeter book, which is the only surviving manuscript of Widsith, dates from the end of the 10th century (Malone 1962: 15). Of course most of the manuscript reflects earlier stages that are lost to us and versions of Widsith may have

existed before the Viking Age. But the Widsith that we possess cannot straight forward be taken as evidence of the usage of individual words before the Viking Age, two centuries or more before the date of the manuscript. Widsith mentions *wīcingas* among Migration Period peoples but this does not tell us that *wīcingas* was a Migration Period people (cf. Israelites, Egyptians, Indians, and others in the same poem). The mentioning of *wīcingas* as a people that has to be driven away (line 47) fits Viking Age England. – Which meaning of *wīcing* is primary, ‘a pirate’ or ‘a Scandinavian’? In principle both may be derived from the other during the Viking Age, when most of the pirates terrorizing England were Scandinavians and “pirates” therefore came to be synonymous with “Scandinavians”. Because of this, if “Viking” originally meant ‘a pirate’, it could get an additional meaning ‘a Scandinavian’, and vice versa. To know which meaning was primary we need a source that predates the Viking raids. Luckily we have one. In an early OE glossary *wīcingsceaþa* m. is translated as ‘a pirate’ (“*piraticum* uucingsceadan”). The earliest form of the glossary may not have had this entry but in all probability a version from around the year 700 AD had it. The manuscripts Épinal, Erfurt, and Corpus have the entry and the language of the two former belong to the early 8th century. The common source of the manuscripts Epinal, Erfurt, and Corpus is believed to date from around the year 700 or the late 7th century (Askeberg 1944: 151 ff.). Should this prove wrong then in any way the very manuscript Epinal is dated to the 8th century (Gneuss 2001: 125; Ker 1990: 151), i.e. before the (Scandinavian) Viking raids could give a meaning ‘a pirate’ an additional meaning ‘a Scandinavian’. This indicates that “Viking” meaning ‘a pirate’ is more primary than the meaning ‘a Scandinavian’. But *wīcingsceaþa* seems to show an earlier meaning as well. *Sceaþa* means “one who does harm” (Bosworth and Toller 1898: 827) but can sometimes have an intensifying function so the compound is usually understood as “pirate harm-doer”, i.e. ‘pirate’. This does not really make sense; it is tautological or pleonastic. As Hødnebo points out (1987: 5): If the whole compound means ‘pirate’, the literal meaning of the compound should be ‘sailor / seafarer who does harm’, like in the synonym *sāesceaþa* (Bosworth and Toller 1898: 811, 1214), literally “sea harm-doer”. In that case, *wīcing* alone means ‘sailor / seafarer’. This seems to be the earliest attested meaning of “Viking”. From this it is easy to explain the development into the meaning ‘pirate’ because seafarers often were not peaceful. Compare Old English *æscmann*, *flotmann*, and *scegðmann* (/skeiðmann/), which are synonyms of *wīcing* ‘pirate’ and all literally mean ‘sailor’ (ibid).

To conclude this point: Firstly: The sources do not support the theory that a “Viking” originally was ‘a person from *Vík(in)*’. There is no evidence that “Vikings” originally was a name of a people and nobody has been able to mention anything that associates the Vikings with *Vík(in)* in particular. Secondly: The only certain pre Viking-Age attestation of the word “Viking” can most easily be understood as ‘sailor, seafarer’ (alternatively ‘pirate’). This favours the rower shifting etymology of “Viking”.

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