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# The literal heritage of the Vikings

## Was there a strong Nordic influence on the English language?

BY EBBA WALLIN FOGELQVIST

If you ever contemplate English words, you may realize there is sometimes a Scandinavian sound to them. If you take a closer look at a text in Swedish, you might be able to understand a few of the words. And if you – an English speaker – attempt to learn a foreign language, Swedish is among the easiest to pick up. How can this be explained?

English originates from Proto-Germanic and has the same roots as other Germanic languages such as Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian.

### Germanic settlers came

In the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries Britain was populated by Germanic settlers – the Angles and the Saxons – and their dialects merged into what today is known as *Old English* or *Anglo-Saxon*.

“Tuesday,” “Wednesday,” and “Friday” are days of the week named for the Anglo-Saxon gods *Tiw*, *Wodan*, and *Friga*. Similar, but not the same, are the equivalent Norse gods *Tyr*, *Odin*, and *Freya*. The similarity of the names points to the shared cultural and linguistic origin. “Thursday” or *Þorsdagr*, however, means Thor’s day and is directly attributed to the Norse god *Thor*. Now, why is that?

A *viking* was, in Old Norse, someone who went on an overseas expedition. Britain became a target for such expeditions by Scandinavian pirates, and by the late 8<sup>th</sup> century it was an extremely popular destination to raid and invade (with the Danes coming with the greatest force). With their expansion, followed their language *Old Norse* which gradually merged into the English language. (Back then Old Norse was just one language with different dialects, but in time those turned into Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian.) The words were not many at first, but over the next few centuries around 1,000 Old Norse words had been assimilated.

A language normally takes on loan-words for new concepts and things, but

interestingly in this case many words for day-to-day objects that were already in the language were adopted. Hence, many of the words with Scandinavian origin are among the most common and fundamental in English.

### War and nouns

The words are often related to war, society, culture, animals, landscapes, and farming. “Husband” comes from *húsbóndi* which means occupier and tiller of soil. “Law” derives from *lag*, and the origin of “bylaw” is *bylög* that means village-law. “Berserk” comes from *berserkr* which probably means “bear-shirt.” These shirts were supposedly worn by warriors who fought in a trance-like fury and often went into battle without armor. A related word is “skirt” which derives from *skyrtu* - now referring to the lower part of a woman’s dress but back then meaning a kind of long shirt or kirtle. “Window” is another interesting word originating from *vindauga* which, imaginatively, means “wind-eye.”

Some other nouns that need no further explanation are “birth” from *byrðr*, “skull” from *skulle*, “leg” from *leggr*, “wing” from *vængr*, “freckles” from *freknur*, “skin” from *skinn* (meaning animal hide), “bull” from *boli*, and “reindeer” from *hreindyri*.

Further examples are “sky” from *ský* (cloud), “steak” from *steik*, “cake” from *kaka*, “knife” from *knifr*, “bag” from *baggin*, “loan” from *lán*, “fellow” from *felagi*, “mistake” from *mistaka* and “anger” from *angr*.

### Adjectives and verbs

Many adjectives deriving from Old Norse describe “bleak” (*bleikr*) landscapes and weather. “Flat” (*flatr*), “low” (*lagr*), and “rugged” (*rogg*) are all of Scandinavian origin. So are “ugly” (*uggligr*), “weak” (*veikr*), “sly” (*sloegr*), “ill” (*illr* - meaning bad, evil), “wrong” (*rangr*), “same” (*same*) and “likely” (*líkligr*).

Among verbs that derive from Old Norse are “raise” from *reisa*, “trust” from *traust*, “want” from *vanta*, “take” from *taka*, “get” from *geta*, “ransack” from *rannsaka* (to search the house), “slaughter” from *slatra*, “die” from *deyja*, “crawl” from *krafla* and “scare” from *skirra*.

### Other influences

The influence of Old Norse can also be found elsewhere – in names. The “-son” ending on family names - instead of the Anglo-Saxon “-ing” - is a heritage of the Vikings.

Widespread are also the places that carry Scandinavian names and although Vikings also inhabited Scotland and Ireland, they are particularly prevalent in the northern and eastern parts of England.

This is due to the *Danelaw* which was a treaty between the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings established in 878 AD. It split the country along a line roughly from Chester to London and gave the Anglo-Saxons control over the south and west and the Vikings the north and east. The Danelaw didn’t even last a century but it left a heritage of more than 11,500 place names directly from Scandinavian (e.g. Grimsby) or names that were mixed Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon (e.g. Grimston). These were given by either Viking settlers or people under their influence.

### Some place names

As mentioned before, “by” means village, and it’s not uncommon for place names to have the suffix “-by.” There are more than 600 places with this ending and it’s believed these were uninhabited areas with good land where the Vikings settled first. If the place name ends with “-thorpe” it’s probably from a later colonization and a secondary settlement where the land wasn’t as good. Other suffixes that indicate a Scandinavian origin are “-kirk”

(originally *kirkja*, meaning church), “-thwaite” (referring to an isolated piece of land or clearing) and “-toft” (probably meaning a small farmstead). Just to give a few examples, the following are places that testify about the Viking influence: Selby, Whitby, Copmanthorpe, Ormskirk, Threkeld, Slaithwaite, and Lowestoft.

## Yorkshire has preserved many Nordic words

It may not come as a surprise that the Viking heritage seems most evident in the Yorkshire dialect – which is spoken in an area that was part of the Danelaw – as it contains more Old Norse words than standard English. Some of these words are “haver” from *hafre* which means oats, “nieve” from *nefi* (fist), “brig” or “brigg” from *briggja* (bridge), “fell” from *fjall* (meaning hill or mountain slope), “beck” from *bekkr* (stream or brook), “keld” from *kelda* (spring or well), “tarn” from *tjarn* (lake or pond) and “crake” from *kraka* (crow).

## Grammatical changes due to Old Norse

What’s interesting - and very unusual - is that Old Norse also seems to have contributed to important grammatical changes to the English language. If you compare sentences in English, Swedish, and Norwegian you will notice that their structures are strikingly similar. In fact, modern English grammar and syntax are closer to modern Scandinavian languages than to Old English – and Old English resembles its cousins German and Dutch more in terms of vocabulary, grammar, and syntax. Some linguists will go as far as to argue that English should be classified as a Scandinavian language!

English has, since the Old Norse, been influenced by a number of other languages such as Latin and French and it has in fact become too much of a hybrid to easily be classified. One also has to take into account that Old English and Old Norse share the same Germanic roots which means it can be difficult to know whether a word was already in the vocabulary or added or just modified by Vikings. However, the heritage of the invading Scandinavians is a fact and it was carried on for a millennium. Old Norse words are deeply imbedded in the English language

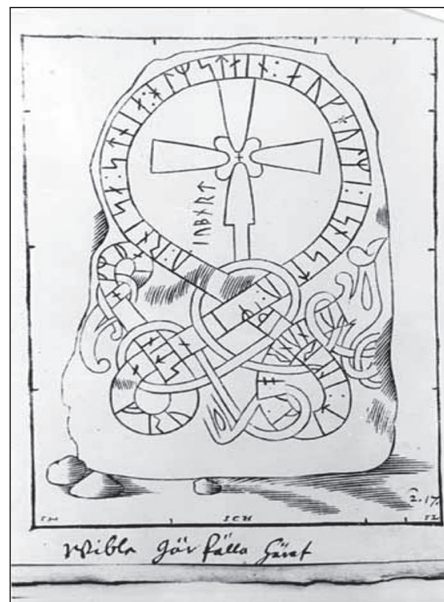


*This runestone (#U 91), is found in Järfälla (Stock), and erected in the 11th century, as shown by the Christian cross. (Photo by E. Thorsell).*

*The text says “Gunvor and Kättilfrid had the stone raised. Holmsten and Holme raised the stone for Frösten”.*

*The stone was copied in a drawing in 1682 (see below) by researcher Johan Hadorph, who collected drawings of all stones in the area.*

*Then it was forgotten for a long time until 1886, when it was blasted to be used for the building of stables, but then rescued and still stands in the parish.’*



and intertwined in everyday conversations all over the world today. The linguistic legacy remains - and Thursdays and surnames are far from the only reminders of it!

## Further reading:

*The nightmare for England lasted 200 years – The Vikings are coming!* (Swedish).

(Englands mardröm varade i 200 år - Vikingarna kommer!) In the journal *Världens Historia*, issue 10, p. 31, (2009).

A good general book about the Vikings is *The Age of the Vikings*, by Anders Winroth (2016), available on Amazon.com

Several web sites about the Vikings (in English) including runestones are found on p. 26.

## Endnote:

- 1) [https://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Upplands\\_runinskrifter\\_91](https://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Upplands_runinskrifter_91) (In Swedish, but try Google Translate).

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## Editor's note:

An interesting and fun *novel* about a Viking hero is: Frans G. Bengtsson’s **The Long Ships**. “(From the introduction): It resurrects the fantastic world of the tenth century AD when the Vikings roamed and rampaged from the northern fastnesses of Scandinavia down to the Mediterranean. Author Bengtsson’s hero, *Red Orm* [Röde Orm] – canny, courageous, and above all lucky – is only a boy when he is abducted from his Danish home by the Vikings and made to take his place at the oars of their dragon-prowed ships. Orm is then captured by the Moors in Spain, where he is initiated into the pleasures of the senses and fights for the Caliph of Cordova. Escaping from captivity, Orm ends up in Ireland, where he marvels at those epicene creatures, the Christian monks, and from which he then moves on to play an ever more important part in the intrigues of the various Scandinavian kings and clans and dependencies. Eventually, Orm contributes to the Viking defeat of the army of the king of England and returns home an off-the-cuff Christian and a very rich man, though back on his native turf new trials and tribulations will test his cunning and determination. Packed with pitched battles and blood feuds and told throughout with wit and high spirits, Bengtsson’s book is a splendid adventure that features one of the most unexpectedly winning heroes in modern fiction.” (Available at Amazon.com).