Pre-Christian Sacral Personal Names in Scandinavia during the Proto-Scandinavian Period

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Abstract

This paper deals with personal names from the Proto-Scandinavian period that refer to religious concepts such as gods or holiness. Such names fall into four categories. The first one contains *ansuz* 'as; heathen god' and the second one *albiz* 'elf'. The third is made up of names cognate to the adjective *hailaga-* 'holy', and the fourth of names cognate to another adjective, *wīha-* 'holy'. Finally, it is argued that names of individual gods do not occur in Proto-Scandinavian personal names, although they do become very popular during the Viking Age.

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1. Introduction

The old Germanic personal names are, from a social and ideological point of view, characterized by three main features: religion, heroism and family bonds. The religious aspect seems to be an inherited, Indo-European feature, which the Germanic languages share with Greek and other Indo-European languages (Andersson 1998: 1–6). The purpose of this paper is to give an overview of the sacral personal names in Proto-Scandinavian times, that is, during the period that precedes the Viking Age, roughly speaking from around the birth of Christ to A.D. 700. By 'sacral personal names' I mean names that contain words which in their normal meaning refer to religious concepts. Examples of such names are *Thorsten*, containing the name of the god Thor, and *Helgha*, formed from the adjective *helagher* 'holy'.

It might be appropriate to begin with a few words on the general structure of the Germanic system of personal names. A basic feature is the dithematic or two-component names. These names are compounded with two elements (words), which can be combined quite freely. Some elements are, however, restricted by certain rules as to their occurrence. They might be restricted with respect to gender or to their position in the name. It is important to remember that although there are some compound words hiding among these names, usually there is no semantic connection between the first and the second part. A name like *Thorsten*, compounded from *Thor* and *sten* 'stone; hillfort' is thus not to be understood as 'the stone of the god Thor' but as a more or less arbitrary combination of two collateral elements. These dithematic names are a heritage from Indo-European times and they were thus already well established during Proto-Scandinavian times.

2. Pre-Christian sacral personal names during Proto-Scandinavian times

The personal names of the Proto-Scandinavian period are known through runic inscriptions which to a considerable degree are made up of personal names. Some names are also recorded in literary sources and some can be abstracted from place-names. All of these sources have their problems. As to the place-names, we are confronted with the eternal question of which first elements are personal names and which are not. Turning to the runic inscriptions, the reading of them always

involves an element of decipherment. Even when a reliable reading of the runes can be established, it is not always easy to identify and delimit the personal names. As we know little about the context of the origin for these inscriptions, and as our knowledge of the society that created them is also limited, interpretations of the names depend heavily upon the approach of the individual researcher; in terms of how he or she sees the function of the texts and the contexts in which they came into being.

An influential person in this respect was the German Wolfgang Krause. He regarded the inscription of runes as a ritual act and the person who performed this act as a rune-magician. This had a pronounced impact upon Krause's understanding of personal names, which he preferred to give interpretations in terms of magical abilities or ritual functions. I will give one example. On the Vånga stone in Sweden, we can read the name **haukoþuz**, probably meaning 'to be like a hawk' (Peterson 2004: 8). According to Krause (1966: 148), this is – as he puts it – obviously a descriptive byname of a rune-magician, who expresses his supernatural forces with the sharp eye of the hawk. It is hardly surprising that Krause's strongly theory-dependent interpretations have met with scepticism or even mockery among the highly rationalistic historical linguists of Scandinavia. This is of course a research-community of which I myself am a part. I think it is fair to say that we have discussed these old names from an etymological and word-semantic point of view, but have usually avoided the contextualisation of the names and the inscriptions. Although Krause certainly exaggerates the magic and ritual aspects, it is possible that we might have underestimated the importance of ritual in connection with the creation of these runic inscriptions.

3. The names

My survey is based on Lena Peterson's excellent Lexicon of Proto-Scandinavian personal names (2004), published on-line by the Institute for Language and Folklore at www.sofi.se. This lexicon lists and interprets personal names that occur in sources from around the year zero to around A.D. 700. The sources used are the Proto-Scandinavian runic inscriptions, place-names in *-lev* or *-löv* – which usually contain a personal name as their first element – and finally the Scandinavian names in the Old English poem *Beowulf*. I have extracted all the names that are given a religious interpretation, and these names are presented in the list below. I might add that all interpretations are taken from the Lexicon.

Sacral personal names from the Proto-Scandinavian period
B = Beowulf, P = place-name, R = runic inscription

*albiz 'elf', Old Norse, *alfr* m. 'elf'

Alba; short form of e.g., *Albigaizaz/-harjaz* P
Albigaizaz/-harjaz; **gaizaz* 'spear', **harjaz* 'warrior' P
Albiharjaz; B
Albiz; 'elf' or from *Aþawulfaz* P

*ansuz '(heathen) god'

Ansugastiz; *gastiz* 'guest; stranger' R
Ansugīslaz; **gīslaz* 'arrow shaft'? R
Ansulaibaz; *-laibaz* to Old Norse *leif* f. 'inheritance' B

From adj. *hailaga- 'holy'

Hailaga; a substantivization B

From adj. **wīha-* 'holy'

Hrōþiwīha; **hrōþi-* 'praise, commendation' + a substantivization? P
Þunrawīhaz; *þunra- 'thunder' + a substantivization? P
Wīhaz; a substantivization? R
Wīwa; 'the one who consecrates'? R
Wīwila; a derivation with the diminutive ending **-ilan* to *Wīwaz* R
Wīwjō; a feminine derivation to *Wīwaz* R
Wīhastainaz; **stainaz* 'stone' B

As the list makes clear, the material can be grouped neatly into four categories. First, there are names that contain designations for supernatural beings. Here we find **ansuz*, that is *áss* 'heathen god', and, perhaps more surprisingly, **albiz*, corresponding to Old Norse *alfr* and modern English *elf* . In the Norse tradition, the *alvar* constitute a collective of supernatural beings, clearly subordinated in relation to the mighty Æsir and Vanir. In late Icelandic tradition they appear as a variety of pucks or gnomes. However, the fact that the designation **albiz* occurs in Proto-Scandinavian personal names might suggest that earlier on, they held a more advanced position in the beliefs of the Scandinavians. This is actually indicated in written sources as well, where *æsir* and *alvar* are sometimes mentioned together as two equal groups.[1]

On the other hand, the simplex name *Albiz* has to be taken into consideration. According to a well-known rule, designations for or names of supernatural beings do not occur as simplex names or as last (main) elements of compound names. There are two exceptions to this rule, however: *Alfr* (including the feminine variety *-ælf*) and *Dís* (see Janzén 1947: 259–261). As an explanation for why *alfr* and *dís* occur as the main elements of personal names, it has been suggested that they were deities of a lower kind, even partly human in nature. They were not venerated in the same way as the gods and their names were not put under taboo (Andersson 1993, 45–46, cf. Mundal 1990, 310–313). This is one possibility. Another is that the names *Albiz* and the Viking Age equivalent *Alfr* might not be identified with the mythological *alfr*. Instead, they could be derived from a compound name, *Aþawulfaz* (Janzén 1947: 62–63, Peterson 2004: 22).

Beside these theophoric names, we also find formations based on the adjectives **hailaga-* and **wīha-*. These words are usually translated 'holy, sacred', but most probably there was a difference in meaning between them, a difference that is difficult to pinpoint today. Perhaps *wīha-* had a more delimiting, spatial quality, while **hailaga-* had more to do with peace and healing (Vikstrand 2001: 234–236). Only one name can be connected with **hailaga-* and that is *Hailaga*, where the adjective in its definite form is used as a noun and a name. This name corresponds directly to Old Norse *Helgi* and might be understood as 'the holy one' or 'the healer'.

The group of names originating from **wīha-* is larger but also more problematic. It is not certain that all names here actually are cognates of this word. Etymologically, one has considered two different word roots of IE **weik-*. The first one has the meaning 'to separate' ('aussondern') and can be found in a group of words for 'consecrate' or 'holy'. Well known is the ON *vé* 'sanctuary, holy place'. Used as a noun and meaning 'holy person', this **wīha-* 'holy' might be behind the three first names on the list. The second root IE **weik-* means (roughly) 'fight, struggle' and can be found in Icelandic *víg* n. 'a fight, a struggle'. If we assume that this is the root we are dealing with, the meaning of *-wīha* in the three first names would be 'fighter, warrior' (Janzén 1947: 115 with references, Pokorny 1959: 1128–1129, Peterson 1994: 149). Turning to the following three names – *Wīwaz, Wīwila, Wīwjo* –, there is the problem with the intervocalic /w/. I would like to cite Lena Peterson (1994: 147), who writes, "This is an extremely tricky group of names, which I would prefer not to have to go into, but they cannot be left out." This also summarizes my feelings towards them. However, John Kousgård Sørensen (1989: 9) has rather convincingly argued that *Wīhaz* on the Eikeland-fibula (*ek wiz wiwio writu runor asni*)

should be understood as *wīha- 'holy', used as a noun with the meaning 'priest, holy man'. In the inscription, this word could be used either as a title or as a personal name. A close parallel is provided by the Gothic *weiha* 'priest'. This *wīhaz is also well attested in a number of Viking Age personal names such as Ǫlvér, Guðvér and Þórir. Further, Kousgård Sørensen (1989: 15) explains *Wīwaz* on the Norwegian Tune-stone as an original *Wīha-wīhaz 'priest at a vé' – *vé*, of course, meaning 'sanctuary'. Although there are problems with this interpretation as well (Peterson 1994: 148–149), it has a certain elegance about it that makes it attractive.[2]

Beyond all the difficulties one might nevertheless conclude that *wīha- 'holy' occurs in one personal name from Proto-Scandinavian times. That is in Beowulf's *Wīhastainaz, corresponding directly to Old Norse *Vésteinn*. Finally, *Wīwila* in the Veblungsnes-inscription corresponds to Old Norse *Vífill*, a name that has also been interpreted as originating from a religious title (Müller 1968, Sundqvist 1998: 95). An Old Swedish equivalent seems to occur in a couple of Swedish place-names. Today they appear in the landscape as *Vivelsta* and *Vivelsjö*, but they might have developed from a *Vivils-Husa (Hellberg 1979: 129–130, Vikstrand 2001: 393–394). If that is correct, a personal name can be ruled out, and one must conclude that the names contain the religious title *vífill.

Yet another name should be discussed in a religious context. That is **alugod**, which occurs on a clasp from Værløse in Denmark. The name is normalized by Peterson as *Alugōdaz* or *Alugōdu*. As its first element it contains the much debated word *alu*. Usually, it is translated as 'protection', but no consensus prevails as to its meaning (see Høst Heyerdahl 2006: 171–183, Widmark 1991: 48). The word occurs in a number of inscriptions, both alone and in different phrases resembling formulas. It seems to belong to a ritual language and – irrespective of its actual meaning – most probably has religious associations.[3]

4. Do names of gods appear as first elements in Proto-Scandinavian personal names?

During the Viking Age, personal names containing the name of a god become a distinctive trait for Scandinavia. It is, however, most uncertain whether such theophoric names existed already during Proto-Scandinavian times. A key role is played by the name *Þunrawīhaz*, corresponding to Old Norse *Þórir*. Lena Peterson (2004: 32) writes that this name contains as a first element the word *þunra- 'thunder', later associated with the god Thor. She adds, however, that the name "possibly" could be understood as originating from a common noun – an appellative – meaning 'priest of the god Thor'. This later opinion can be traced back to the Danish scholar Kristian Hald (1971, see also Kousgård Sørensen 1989). Hald's opinion was that the name should be understood as an originally meaningful compound formed from the god's name *Thor* and the above discussed *wīhaz 'religious leader, priest'. This word or title was, according to Hald, initially used of a religious leader and later developed into a personal name. Following this interpretation, we would in fact have personal names containing the names of gods already during Proto-Scandinavian times. I am not, however, convinced that this is the case.

Aside from *Þunrawīhaz,* an element *þunra- occurs in two further Proto-Scandinavian names. These are *Þunragautaz* and *Þunrawulfaz*. If *Þunrawīhaz* contains the name of the god Thor, it has to be asked how the other two names are to be understood. As I see it, the form of the compounds, with the first element in its stem form, strongly suggests that it should be conceived as the common noun *þunra- 'thunder'. It is a well-known rule that when names occur as a first element in other names, they are in the genitive case. Thorsten Andersson (1993: 44) has suggested that the ambiguity of the word *þōr- – both a name of a god and a common noun – could have motivated stem composition in this case. Lennart Elmevik (2007: 80–81) has pushed this line of argument even further, suggesting that the god's name could also be found in place-names with stem composition, such as *Torlunda.* I do not find this convincing. It is of course true that personal names like *Thorir* and place-names like *Torlunda* can and have been associated with

the god Thor, but this is the result of later reinterpretations. The fact that the names have stem composition and that this form has become established in the onomasticon shows that it is not the god Thor that the name-givers primarily had in mind.

In my opinion, the name of the god Thor cannot be attested with any certainty in Proto-Scandinavian personal names. The same goes for the name of the god Freyr, which later on, during the Viking Age, frequently appears as an element in personal names. The only Proto-Scandinavian name in which it might appear is *Frēawaru* in *Beowulf*, corresponding to a Proto-Scandinavian *Fraujawaru* (Peterson 2004: 37). This name has been apprehended by Elias Wessén (1927: 76) as a meaningful compound, signifying 'princess, daughter of a king'. He does not elaborate this interpretation, and it is not mentioned by Peterson. However, both Wessén and Peterson interpret the first element of the name as the noun **frauja-* 'lord, master', and this is probably correct. This is the same word that the name of the god Freyr is derived from, but it is not the name itself – a small but important distinction.

In this context one must also mention the name *Wulþuþewaz*. This is inscribed on the chape of a sword-sheath found at Torsbjerg in Schleswig. The chape belongs to a famous deposit of arms from a defeated army and is dated to around A.D. 200. It is a widely believed that the name *Wulþuþewaz* contains the name of the Old Scandinavian god *Ullr* in its Proto-Scandinavian form **Wulþuz*. The last element is *þewaz* 'servant' and the name should, according to this opinion, be understood as 'the servant of the god Ullr'. This opinion goes back to old interpretations by influential scholars like Otto von Friesen (1920: X) and Wolfgang Krause (1966: 54). In such a compound, however, the name of the god ought to be in the genitive (Tveitane 1979: 149, Andersson 1993: 52). Rather, this name is a dithematic Germanic variation-name, containing the same element *Wulþu-* that is well known from West and East Germanic personal names, such as Gothic *Gulduradus* (= **Wulþu-*), Lombardic *Vuldotrada* and OHG *Vuldebert* (Andersson 1993: 51 with references, 53).

The Torsbjerg chape was found on old Scandinavian territory, but it belongs to the armour of a defeated army. On archaeological grounds it is possible to trace the origin of this army to be from the land between the Elbe and the Rhine; that is, from a West Germanic area (Ilkjær & Lønstrup 1981: 57–58, 61). Thus, the person to whom the chape belonged was most probably not a Scandinavian but a person of West Germanic origin. This almost excludes the possibility of *Wulþuþewaz* containing the name of the god Ullr, as he is known only from Scandinavia.

My conclusion, then, is that names of gods do not occur in Proto-Scandinavian personal names. As such names are well attested from the Viking Age, when they are one of the most popular name types, their rise and gain in popularity must have been a rather rapid process during the centuries preceding the Viking Age.

Notes

1. E.g., Vǫluspá 48: *Hvat er með ásom? Hvat er með álfom?*

2. Ottar Grønvik (1987 s. 54 f.) believes that *wiʀ* on the Eikeland-clasp stands for *Wīwaʀ*, that is the same name as on the Tune-stone. It is formed to the root **weik-/*wik-* with an adjectival suffix Gmc *-wa-*. The meaning is 'the one who consecrates'.

3. It might be added that Elmar Seebold (1994 s. 62 f.) interprets the latter element as the word *gud*, although with in an older meaning of 'sacrifice'. He sees in the inscription not a personal name but a phrase expressing good wishes (Heilswunsch), in which *alu* has the meaning 'festival', developed from an older sense of 'beer'.

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