

Norwegian Place Names

GEORGE T. FLOM

ALL PLACE NAMES are definite, designating, as they do, a particular thing: a city, a village, a farm or other inhabited place; a field, bridge, a mill, a row of poplars or some other cultural development; a valley, a mountain, a river, a bay, or any other natural feature, for which it has been found useful or necessary to have a name, as when a common noun, an adjective, a verb or a word-group is employed as a noun.

But while a noun, in changing from indefinite to definite application, will assume definite grammatical form, this does not necessarily follow in the case of the change to a name; modern English employs the definite sometimes and sometimes not. We say: The Grand Canyon, The Mojave Desert, The Florida Keys and The Blue Ridge Parkway, but we also say Crater Lake, Soldiers Grove, Green Bay, Yellowstone Falls. In English the definite form is correct with river names, and usually so with names of mountains and valleys; but it is rarely found with names of lakes, waterfalls, bays, sounds and islands. The Scandinavian languages differ from English usage in several of these kinds of names; but the indefinite is extensively evidenced in place names here also.

As is well known, the Scandinavian languages have that unusual feature of both a proclitic and an enclitic article. The latter is used with a noun, and is suffixed to it; it must always be used with a noun to make the noun definite, hence it has come to be called the substantival article. The former can be used only before an adjective followed by a noun, and before a substantivized adjective; hence it has come to be called the adjectival definite article. Both of these articles were well established in the Old Scandinavian languages. But the use of the enclitic has been greatly extended in the modern period, especially in Norwegian and Swedish, where it is

used also with a noun that is preceded by the proclitic article. Thus we have a redundancy here, in that the idea of definiteness is expressed not only in the noun but also in the adjective.

In the Aurland place names, of which I made a special study, the proclitic article occurs in the name Dann Grunnlause (grunn, 'bottom' + laus, 'lacking'), 'The Bottomless,' 'The Bottomless Pit.' It is the name of a deep narrow hole between two rocks; the bottom of the hole can't be seen; the dialectal avoidance of the adjectival article has here then led to the almost complete disappearance of this article. The pattern: article + adjective + noun + article assumes the form: adjective + noun + article. There are hundreds of names of this type, for naturally an adjective is a qualifier that occurs very often in place-names, especially field names and nature names. A few examples are: *Langajaiti* (*jait*, feminine, 'goat'), a long hill above the road near Guddvangu; *Langaroau*, (*roa, rova*, feminine, 'tail'), name of a field; *Nyestkkjen* (*ny*, adjective, 'new'—*stkk*, masculine, 'rock-slide'); *Brattemoten*, a steep uphill in the road (*mot*, n., but here a masculine, 'a place where one meets, comes to, something'); *i mote Bakken*, or *mote Bakken*, 'up a hill,' whence the noun *Motebakke*. The name *Brattemot'n*, therefore represents the two first parts of the tri-part name: *Brattemotebakken* finally *Ljta-holedn* (*ljt*, 'ugly'—*hola*, feminine, 'hollow,' also often 'hole'); it is the name of a place where there are several giant kettles.

Further changes may take place in the name-type: adjective—noun—article, resulting in a name in which the weak vowel ending of the adjective, or the enclitic article, drops out. Some examples of such reduced forms are: *Braidal'n* (*brai*, adjective, ON *breidtr*, 'broad'); *Flateddlau* (*flat*, 'flat'—*hedla*, ON *hella*) a flat stone, slab'; *Nybrunau* (*bru*, feminine, 'bridge'); *Graunesedn* (*nos*, feminine, plural *nese*, nose, mountain top'); *Svartammradn* (*svart*, 'black'—*hammar*, ON *hamarr*); *Blauskavv'l'n* (*blau*, 'blue'—*skavv'l*, 'snow-drift' ON *skaf*); or: *Kvitaberg* (*kvit*, 'white'), *Kvitesand* (*sand*, masculine, 'sand'); *Storabrae* (*stor*, 'big'—*brae*, feminine, 'snow-field, field of eternal snow'). Cf. ON *bredafonn*, 'big snowbank', and *Vettlelund* (*vettle*, 'small' ON *vesall*, 'poor, wretched'—*lund*, 'grove'). Various influences operate to shorten names in this way: phonological changes, considerations of euphony, the influence of tri-part upon two-part names, etc.

For the enclitic article in Norwegian habitation names before the modern period, I have examined the text of the *Egile saga Skallagrímssonar* (ed. Finnur Jonsson, 1924), in which a considerable number of Norwegian names of places are mentioned. The scenes of the first half of this saga are laid chiefly in Norway, and with the activities of Skallagrím, Egil and other members of the family in Norway and elsewhere and in the setting in Iceland. The names from the Egila-saga will be the names of only one document, but there is no reason to doubt that the usage as here seen would not be typical of Norwegian usage at the time.

In the Egila saga the definite form is limited to simple names. The occurrences are as follows. The name Foldin (*fold*, feminine, 'land, earth') for the region around the Oslofjord, appears once in the accusative singular form *Foldina* in Chapter XIX, 10; the name *Vik*, the Oslo Bay region (to-day called Viken), shows this monosyllabic form eleven times, first in Chapter III, 1, the dative singular, *Vikinni*, six times, as in Chapter XIX, 2, and the accusative singular *Vikina*, twice as in Chapter XLIX, 12. These complete the number of Norwegian place names in the definite form occurring in the saga. Other instances of simple names in the singular are always in the indefinite form as, e.g., *Aldi* (*aldi* masculine, 'isle, naze'), now called *Alden*, an island of Askvoll in Sunnfjord; the districts *Firdir*, nominative plural and *Fjordum* in the dative plural, present name *Fjorane* (*fjordarnir*) and *Dalir*, today generally called Gudbrandsdalen, sometimes Gudbrandsdal. Compound names are always in the indefinite form, *Haugasund*, the present Haugesund and *Alrekstadir*, now Aarestad (near Bergen).

Not very different are the writings in the early Middle Norwegian *Bjorgynjar Kalfskinn* (ed. P. A. Mumch, 1843). There are occasional simple names in the definite form. The occurrences are: on page 11: *Fletinum* (in Indviken); p. 12: *Skorene*, dative singular (in Stryn); p. 39: *Skaghanum* in Lyster, registered under Lyster near 88 (see NG. P. 25); p. 42: *Yrenne* dative singular (in Laerdal); p. 43: *Kuiginum* dative singular p. 43, and *Kuighnum*, p. 44, Laerdal. This contract form could be from the dative singular or from the dative plural: *Kuigunum*. As the present pronunciation is *kviggnadn*, dative *kviggnö* (NG, p. 69), the original nominative form of the name must have been *kvignar*; however, the name re-

mains unexplained; p. 43: *Yrinni*, dative singular (in Laerdal): P. 48: *Hvaalenom* (in Leikanger); p. 56: *hualvaghénom* dative singular, (in Sunnfjord; it is a lost name); p. 76; *Wangrinn a Worss*, and p. 4, *Vangrinn*, the same.

It is clear that the use of the definite form in habitation names began in a limited way in the Old Norwegian period in those names which stand nearest to common nouns, i.e., the simple names. Of compound names I have found only *Krangoyinni*, dative definite singular, (laerdal) part 1 here is *krang*, adjective, 'poor, wretched.' In the beginning of the Middle Norwegian period the new practice was still only infrequently in evidence.

It is not until the sixteenth century that the use of the definite article in habitation names becomes somewhat more common. And in the seventeenth century this form assumes importance about as in the later practice. It is now seen in the names of new small farms, sub-farms and cotters' places that spring up during this century, made in new clearings, in woodland parts and in hitherto uncultivated mountain areas, even on the high plateau.



Poet disliked Western place names.—We cannot but pause to lament the stupid, commonplace and often ribald names entailed upon the rivers and other features of the great West, by traders and settlers. As the aboriginal tribes of these magnificent regions are yet in existence, the Indian names might easily be recovered: which, beside being in general more sonorous and musical, would remain mementoes of the primitive lords of the soil, of whom in a little while scarce any traces will be left. Indeed, it is to be wished that the whole of our country could be rescued, as much as possible, from the wretched nomenclature inflicted upon it, by ignorant and vulgar minds; and this might be done, in a great degree, by restoring the Indian names, wherever significant and euphonious. As there appears to be a spirit of research abroad in respect to our aboriginal antiquities, we would suggest, as a worthy object of enterprise, a map, or maps, of every part of our country, giving the Indian names whenever they could be ascertained. Whoever achieves such an object worthily, will have a monument to his own reputation.—Washington Irving, *Astoria* (1836).