

# Surtur, Surtla, Syrtlingur

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ON NOVEMBER 14, 1963, a submarine volcanic eruption occurred some ten miles south-west of the Westman Islands (*Vestmannaeyjar*) under the south coast of Iceland. Within months a permanent island had formed, ca. 5000 by 4000 feet in size and ca. 500 feet above the sea level in elevation. The volcano is popularly called *Surtur*, the island *Surtsey*. The name *Surtsey* is officially recognized by the Icelandic government and appears on official maps.

A second submarine eruption occurred in the close vicinity of *Surtsey* a year later, but was not productive enough to create a permanent island. During its activity the volcano was popularly called *Surtla*. The name was used in the press and national broadcasting system, and remains attached, unofficially as of now, to the submarine bank produced by the eruption.

Late in May, 1965, a third submarine eruption occurred in the *Surtsey* area, less violent than the eruption of *Surtur*, but productive enough to form an island. The volcano, at present (September 1965) still very active,<sup>1</sup> is popularly called *Syrtlingur*. The name is currently used by the press and the national broadcasting system.

*Surtur* [syɾtyɾ]. The volcano is named after *Surtr*,<sup>2</sup> a giant of Norse-Icelandic mythology. Unlike the other giants in Norse-Icelandic mythology, who are representatives of rime, frost and ice, *Surtr* is the ruler of fire. The world of fire, *Múspelsheimr*, is located south of *Midgardr*, the world of man, and *Ásgardr*, the world of the gods. On the doomsday of the gods (*ragnarök*) *Surtr* approaches from the south, engaging the god *Freyr* in a duel, while *Óðinn* fights the demonic wolf *Fenrir*. *Surt's* fire (*Surtarlogi*) burns up the world.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> At the end of the month of August, 1965, the island was some 900 feet long, and 125 feet high. It may possibly grow together with *Surtsey*.

<sup>2</sup> Old West Nordic -ɾ [ɾ] > Modern Icelandic -ur [yɾ].

<sup>3</sup> Main sources are *Völuspá* and *Vafþrúðnismál* in the *Edda*, and Snorri Sturluson's textbook of poetics, the *Snorra Edda*. The reader not familiar with Old Ice-

We need not discuss here the multiple philological problems and controversial issues connected with *Surtr* and *Múspell*. The brief sketch above suffices to show the connection between *Surtr*, the fiery mythological giant, and *Surtur*, the volcano of 1963.

The reader not familiar with Iceland and Icelandic culture may find the naming of the volcano of 1963 rather academic, and hardly popular. Every Icelander, however, is familiar with the literary *Surtr* and can account for the connection of *Surtr*, the fire-giant, with *Surtur*, the volcano, in the fashion of our brief sketch above. Ancient Icelandic literature has been, since its creation, popular in Iceland. Even today it is, surely at least its highlights are, familiar to every Icelander. Ancient national literature, including Eddic, and even some Scaldic poetry, is read and taught intensively and extensively in all schools, thus reaching one hundred per cent of each generation in school.<sup>4</sup> Every Icelander can quote the famous line *Surtr ferr sunnan* "Surtr approaches from the south" from *Völuspá* (v. 52). The significance of this classical line in reference to the volcano of 1963 is readily understood by everybody: *Surtur*, or rather the island of *Surtsey*, is the southernmost piece of land in Icelandic territory.

Another geographical place is named after *Surtr*: a huge cave in the lava desert *Hallmundarhraun*, west of the glacier *Eiríksjökull*, is called *Surtshellir* "Surt's Cave." Landnámabók, our most detailed account of the settlement of Iceland, reports that one *Þorvaldur Þorðarson* (around A.D. 900) made a poem (a *drápa*) to the giant *Surtr* and went up to *Surt's* cave to recite his poem to the giant.

Connected with the fire-giant, although perhaps only folk-etymologically, is the popular term for charcoal, or soft coal, *surtarbrandur* "Surt's firebrand."

*Surtsey* [sýrtsei]. The name of the island is a determinative compound, the determiner being the genitive of *Surtur*, *Surts*, and the second member of the compound the Icelandic correspondent of "island," *ey*.

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Icelandic literature may turn to E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North: The Religion of Ancient Scandinavia*, London: 1964, for an introduction and read the pertinent articles in Johannes Hoops, *Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde*, Strassburg: 1911-19.

<sup>4</sup> Literacy in Iceland is 100 per cent. The term literacy may safely be understood, in the case of Iceland, as including familiarity with national literature.

*Surtla* [syrtla]. The name of the second volcano may be considered a diminutive of *Surtur*. The Icelandic suffix *-la* is, however, neither exclusively a formans of diminutives, nor is it very productive in forming diminutives in present-day Icelandic. In fact, pairs like *mús* "mouse" – *mýsla* "little mouse, mousy" are not very frequent. In the morphology of the Icelandic diminutive other suffixes, in particular *-lingur*, are of greater importance and productivity than *-la*.

We know already that the name of the third volcano is *Syrtingur*, which is a derivation from *Surtur* with the suffix *-lingur*, and may wonder why the second did not acquire that name. If volcanos number two and three had appeared at the same time, or been named together, the sequence *Surtur*, *Surtla*, *Syrtingur* would be no matter for discussion. *Surtla*, however, erupted, and was named, months before *Syrtingur*. We have to look, therefore, for factors which made a derivation with *-la* the primary choice in naming the second volcano.

Now the suffix in question is also a formans of names, in particular of hypocoristica.<sup>5</sup> Again, however, its productivity is low in present-day Icelandic. Two old names, however, must have been of ultimate influence on the choice of a *-la* derivation from *Surtur*: *Hekla*, the name of Iceland's classical volcano (last eruption 1947) and *Katla*, the name of another prominent Icelandic volcano (last eruption 1918).

Another existent name *Surtla* must be ruled out as the possible model. The *Surtla* in question is a troll woman in Icelandic folklore.<sup>6</sup> The name, now little known, and the appellatives deriving therefrom, are derived from, and connotated with, *svartur* "black." Cf. also *surtla* "black sheep" and "black coffin." The name of the volcano, *Surtla*, however, is connotated with fire, just as is the name *Surtur*, from which *Surtla* is derived.

<sup>5</sup> From medieval Icelandic and Norwegian literature many hundred by-names and nicknames are known, of which some twenty are derived with *-la*. (Cf. E. H. Lind, *Norsk-isländska personbinamn från medeltiden*, Uppsala: 1920–21.) These names refer to that with which the bearer of the name is compared, e.g. *meyla* "the maiden-like" (*mey* "maiden"), *kettla* "the cat-like" (*köttur* "cat," *ketta* "she-cat"), *Skefla* "the wry" (*skeifr* "wry"), etc.

<sup>6</sup> The name is also used as an appellative, *surtla* "troll woman" and, hence, "big, clumsy, unkempt woman."

Whether now Old West Nordic *Surtr* is derived from *svart* "black," too, or has a different etymology, is, again, a philological problem which is of no concern to us, because the name, whatever its etymology, is connotated with fire.

*Syrtlingur* [sirtlingyr].<sup>7</sup> The third name is a diminutive of *Surtur*. The suffix *-lingur* is highly productive in modern Icelandic. Diminutives derived with *-lingur* denote the smaller variety of an object, e.g. *bæklingur* "booklet" (*bók* "book"), or young or little animals, e.g. *kettlingur* "kitten" (*köttur* "cat"). The suffix is also productive as a formans of hypocoristic appellatives, e.g. *strákingur* "laddy" (*strákur* "lad").

A related semantic category is constituted by derivations with *-lingur* which denote persons who have not yet attained the status of the person denoted by the base word, e.g. *prestlingur* "postulant, priest adept, candidate of theology, young clergyman new in office" (*prestur* "clergyman"), *munklingur* "novice" (*munkur* "monk").

In the same category are derivations denoting objects which are not quite "the real thing," e.g. *mælmkingur* "metalloid" (*málmur* "metal").

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<sup>7</sup> Affixation of *-lingur* produces umlaut of the root vowel: *u* [y] > *y* [i].