

Cow Names from Northwestern Iceland

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THE NAMING OF COWS is important to an Icelandic farmer for much the same reasons as it is in other parts of Scandinavia. One of the most important reasons is to keep track of the amount and quality of the milk each cow produces, and a convenient means of reference is, of course, a name. Furthermore, many farmers feel that cows have personalities and thus should have names, which are often descriptive of these personalities. A cow usually gets its name when it is a few weeks old, though this name may often be changed later due to an event in its life or to the development of a strong characteristic.

Studies of names of domestic animals have been carried out in the Scandinavian countries since the latter part of the nineteenth century as a contribution to the general understanding of Scandinavian language and culture.¹ Articles on Icelandic animal names include Finnur Jónsson's account of sheep names, "Dyrenavne" (*Arkiv för nordisk filologi*, vol. 28, pp. 325-340), Håkon Hamre's "Íslandske hestnavn" (*Maal og minne*, 1939, pp. 170-181), and Guðmundur Finnbogason's "Íslendingar og dýrin" (*Skirnir*, 1931, pp. 131-148).

Of the names of the various kinds of domestic animals, including horses, sheep, goats, and dogs, those of cows have on the whole been the most popular in scholarly research.² The only article which I have been able to locate, however, on Icelandic cow names is one by Finnur Jónsson, "Íslandske Konavne" (*Maal og minne*, 1931, pp. 63-71). Jónsson has collected most of his names (ca. 380 different ones) from copies of reports of cattle-breeding associations belonging to Búnaðarfélag Íslands, located primarily in the south, west, and north of Iceland. He has grouped these names in various categories, but in most cases he

¹Examples are B. Kahle, "Altwestnordische Namenstudien", *Indogermanische Forschungen*, vol. 14, pp. 150-177; Johan Nordlander, "Norrländska husdjursnamn", *Bidrag till kännedom om de svenska landsmålen och svenskt folkliv*, 1880, pp. 408-415; Ernst Nordström, "Svenska husdjursnamn i Finland under svenska tiden", *Hem och hembygd*, 1921, pp. 89-104; G. Stoltz, "Noen geitnavn fra Vestlandet", *Maal og minne*, 1951, pp. 42-50; Nils Tiberg, *Estlandssvenska husdjursnamn*, Acta Academiae regiae Gustavi Adolphi (Estlandssvenskarnas folkliga kultur, 7), Uppsala, 1972.

²For example: J. Byrkjeland, "Norske kunavn", *Tidskrift for det norske landbruk*, 1922, pp. 82-89; Anni Fagerlund, "Konamn fran Brändö i Åland", *Hembygden, Tidskrift för svensk folk- och hembygdskunskap i Finland*, 1912, pp. 151ff; Helge Fonnum, "Kunavn i en fjellbygd (Ål i Hallingdal)", *Maal og minne*, 1928, pp. 49-77; G. Stoltz, "Kunavn fra Radøen", *Maal og minne*, 1935, pp. 50-55.

has not given more information with regard to their interpretation or their provenance.

The purpose of this article is to discuss the cow names from one province of Iceland in order to establish the system of classification used there, instead of treating of the material from the country as a whole. Accordingly in the grouping of the cow names here I have deviated somewhat from the one Jónsson uses and have added a number of names which he has not included.

I have limited myself to those cow names (*ca.* 200 different ones) which I was able to gather during the summer of 1972 from the province of Norður-Ísafjarðarsýsla in northwestern Iceland which includes the town of Ísafjörður. A number of these names (31) come from lists contained in *Búnaðarrit*, the annual publication of Búnaðarfélag Íslands, but most were collected through interviews with 15 farmers from the Skutulsfjörður and Bolungarvík areas, and some additional names came from the records of the milk production of their cows. Whenever possible I attempted to get the farmers' own interpretations of the names, but in several cases I had to content myself with merely listing the name, only later making an attempt to interpret it.

The names discussed here are arranged in 12 categories. The two most common categories, and those which also contain the most names, are the ones referring to color and markings on the animal. Some names are complimentary and others derogatory. Other groups include animal or plant names, personal names, farm names, and reference to time of birth. A final category is that which refers to an event in the life of the cow. It must be kept in mind that some names are merely passed on from one animal to another, in some instances losing their original meaning. Some of these categories overlap, and a name may be included in more than one category. A number following the name indicates times noted.

(1) One type of name denotes that the cow has horns. Horns on cattle in Iceland are a relative rarity, and they are often referred to in the name. Examples are *Horna* and *Hyrna* (2, *horn* n. "horn") along with *Gráhyrna* and *Rauðhyrna* (2, *grár* "gray"; *rauður* "red"), the first elements in the last two names indicating the color of the animal. *Hnýfla*, an unusual name among cattle, probably denotes a short-horned cow (cf., *hnýfill* m. "short horn"). Occasionally a hornless (*kollóttur*) cow may be specified -- for example, *Rauðkolla* and the extremely common *Búkolla* (6) which is mentioned below under "Complimentary Names."

(2) Color, as mentioned, also forms a basis for name-giving. Light colored hair gives rise to the names *Bleik* and *Hvít* (*bleikur* "pale"; *hvítur* "white"), grayish to *Grána* (5) and *Hyrndagrána* (*hyrndur* "horned"), reddish to *Rauð* (4), *Rauðskinna* (*skinn* n. "skin; hide"), *Rauðka* (2), and *Reyður* (2), dark brown to *Kolbrún* (4, *kolbrúnn* "dark brown"),³ and darker colors, mostly black, to *Blökk* (*blakkur* "black, dark"), *Dimma* (6, *dimmur* "dark, dusky"), *Surt* (cf., *Surtur* m. "name of a black dog"),⁴ *Surtla* (cf., *Surtla* f. "name of a black ewe"),⁴ and *Svört*

³*Kolbrún* may also refer to a cow which is dark around the eyes (cf., *brún* f. "brow, eyebrow").

Cf. Sigfús Blöndal. *Íslenzk-dönský orðabók*. Reykjavík. 1920-1924. p. 821. *Surtla* may also be the name of a troll woman.

(4, *svartur* “black, dark”) with *Litla-Svört* and *Stóra-Svört*. Some thing may also be suggested by the color of a cow, and she will be named accordingly. *Héla* (4, *héla* f. “hoar frost”), *Hrönn* (*hrönn* f. “pile of crushed ice which has drifted ashore”), *Leira* (*leir* m. “clay”), *Mosa* (*mosi* m. “moss”), *Silfra* (*silfur* m. “silver”), *Sæa* (2, *sær* m. “sea”), and *Þoka* (3, *þoka* f. “fog, mist”) are white or grayish cows, *Glóð* (*glóð* f. “embers, fire”) and *Rós* (*rós* f. “rose”) reddish ones, and *Dumba* (5, *dumba* f. “fog, mist”), *Nótt* (*nótt* f. “night”), and *Tinna* (4, *tinna* f. “obsidian”) darkly colored or black ones. *Gullbrá* is light red with white beneath,⁵ and *Ljósbrá* (*ljós* “light, pale” and *brá* f. “countenance”) is probably of a light color, though my informant told me the name was taken from that of an elf. Two other names merely describe in general something about the color. *Litfríð* (*litfríður* “with pretty color in the face”) is a pretty, white cow with black cheeks, and *Þrílit* (*þrílitur* “tri-colored”) is covered with gray, white, and reddish patches. The name *Blanda* (*bland* n. “blend, mix”), described as a streaked cow, probably refers to a mixture of colors.

(3) Names indicating markings are often either derived from adjectives denoting the various types of markings or from the noun signifying their shape or location on the body. In discussing this group, names which indicate markings on the face will be dealt with first, followed by those referring to the whole head of the cow, then those concerned with the mid-regions, and finally the outer extremities.

Grön and *Kolgrön* (4, *grön* f. “lip on cow or bull” and cf. *grönóttur* “with a dark muzzle [of reddish livestock]”) have dark lips, *Snoppa* (*snoppa* f. “muzzle, snout”) has a light-colored muzzle, and *Koltrýna* (*trýni* n. “snout, muzzle”) a dark one. A cow with a dark face may be called *Kríma* (cf. *krimóttur* “dark, unclean in the face”), *Kola* (4, cf. *kolóttur* “darker around the muzzle and on the feet than other places”), or *Kolkríma*, whereas one with a white face resembling a mask is usually called *Maska* or *Gríma* (4, *gríma* f. “mask”). If the cheeks are of a different color from the rest of the head, the animal may have the name *Kinna* (2, *kinn* f. “cheek”), and *Bilda* (cf. *bildóttur* “spotted on the cheeks”) refers to one which is spotted on the cheeks. Black or white rings around the eyes give rise to such names as *Bauga* (5, *baugur* m. “ring, circle”), *Litla Bauga*, and *Hringalín* (*hringur* m. “circle, ring”). A very common marking on Icelandic cows is a white patch on the forehead. The three most common names which signify such patches, in order from larger to smaller, are *Blesa* (2, *blesa* f. “blaze”), *Stjarna* (6, *stjarna* f. “star; blaze”), and *Mána* (4, *máni* m. “moon”).⁷ Another name which falls into this category is *Krossa* (*kross* m. “cross”), a cow with a white cross on its forehead. Cows with white patches on the tops of their heads are often referred to by *Krúna* (2, *krúna* f. “crown; forehead of animals”) and *Toppa* (*toppur* m. “forelock; top”). *Eyrný* (*eyra* n. “ear”) is an animal with dark

⁵Cf. *ibid.*, p. 279.

⁶Cf. *ibid.*, p. 277.

⁷One farmer told me he gave his cow this name because at the time of its birth there was much talk about the American astronauts on the moon.

ears, and *Lokka* (2, *lokkur* m. “lock of hair”) is the name of cows with locks of hair in their ears. Finally a cow may have a head of a different color from the rest of its body, this marking resembling a hood, cap, or helmet. Names for cows with such configurations are *Gráhetta*, *Rauðhetta* (2, *hetta* f. “cap, hood”), *Hjálma* (5, *hjálmur* m. “helmet”), and *Húfa* (3, *húfa* f. “cap”). In *Gullhúfa* (3) the first element (*gull* n. “gold”) refers to the color either of the head or of the rest of the body.

Proceeding from the head to the neck and forepart of the cow, we have the names *Helsa* (*helsi* n. “collar”) and *Kápa* (*kápa* f. “coat, cloak”), signifying markings in these areas. The latter is the name of a white cow with a black front part, making the animal look as though it is dressed in a cloak.

Markings on the main part of the cow’s body have also given rise to names. *Hryggja* (6, cf. *hryggjóttur* “in cattle the back being of a different color than the rest of the body”), *Gráhryggja*, *Mön* (*mön* f. “narrow stripe”), and *Rák* (*rák* f. “streak, stripe”) have in the first two instances white backs and in the last two instances a light stripe along their backs. *Gjörð* (*gjörð* f. “girdle, belt”) has a white band around its middle as does probably *Hringja*.⁸ *Huppa* (6, cf. *huppóttur* “of cattle with a white flank”) and *Síða* (*síða* f. “side, flank”) have in most cases white flanks.

Under markings on the outer extremities of the legs and the tail are dealt with. If two or more of the legs are white, causing the cow to look as though it were wearing stockings, it may be called *Hosa* (*hosa* f. “legging”) or *Sokka* (3, *sokkur* m. “stocking”). Another cow with such markings is called *Löpp* (*löpp* f. “foot”). The color of the tail is indicated by *Grárófa* (*rófa* f. “animal’s tail”), and *Skotta* (2, *skott* n. “animal’s tail”) refers to two cows with white tails.

There are also names which reflect the type of markings in general on the cow without any reference to a particular part of the body. *Díla* (2, cf. *dílóttur* “speckled, mottled”), *Dropa* (2, cf. *dropóttur* “spotted, speckled”), *Dröfn* (cf. *dröfnóttur* “spotted, speckled”), and *Flekka* (5, cf. *flekkóttur* “spotted”) all signify cows which are speckled or spotted with rather small dabs of color. Cows with somewhat larger spots or patches on their bodies may be called *Laufa* (4, cf. *laufóttur* “decorated with leaf-shaped adornments”) or *Skjalda* (7, cf. *skjaldóttur* “of cattle with shield-like blotches”), the former, though, in most instances denoting cows with a fairly large patch of white on their foreheads. Striped or streaked cows often have such names as *Branda* (7) or *Gamla-Branda* (cf. *bröndóttur* “brindled”), *Randa*, *Randalín*, and *Rönd* (cf. *röndóttur* “streaked, striped”). *Svartabranda* was a black cow whose mother was called *Branda* and who was sired by a bull named *Svartur*.

(4) Size and shape also play a role. In this category are *Litla* (*lítill* “small, little”), *Mjóna* (*mjóna* f. “something narrow”), *Stóra* (*stór* “big, large”), and *Ögn* (*ögn* f. “bit, particle”).

(5) The time of year of birth is also important as, for example, *Góa* (2), born the first day of the old Icelandic month of *GÓA* (starting the Sunday in the

⁸It is also conceivable that the name refers to white rings around the eyes (cf. *Hringalín* above).

eighteenth week of winter and ending Monday in the twenty-second week), and *Harpa* (3), born the first day of *Harpa* (beginning the first day of summer and ending the first Friday after May 18).

(6) A cow is often named after the farm where it was born or after the farm where one of its parents is from. For example, *Krauma* was sired by a bull from *Kraumastaðir*, *Skutla* was born at *Skutulsfjörður*, and *Tunga* comes from *Þjóðólfstunga*.

(7) A fairly large category is that of complimentary names in general. These normally do not refer to anything particular about the cow but now and then may signify that the cow, for example, gives good milk or that it is even-tempered or pretty. This group includes *Auðna* (*auðna* f. “good fortune”), *Blíð* (2) and *Blíða* (*blíður* “gentle”), *Búbót* (*búbót* f. “increase of the stock in a household”), the common name *Búkolla* (6, cf. *Búkolla* above in Section 1) after the well-known cow in the folktale, *Frið* (*fríður* “beautiful”), the pet name *Gúkka* (children’s word for *dúkka* f. “doll”), *Gaefa* (4, *gaefur* “gentle, kind”), *Ljóma* (*ljómi* m. “ray, radiance”), *Lukka* (6, *lukka* f. “luck, good fortune”), *Ósk* (3, *ósk* f. “desire, wish”), and *Perla* (3, *perla* f. “pearl”). The name *Árbót* (*ár* n. “year” and *bót* f. “improvement”; cf. *Búbót* above) probably refers to an improvement or break in a bad year.⁹ *Skrauta* (7, *skraut* n. “adornment, embellishment”) normally denotes a light, mottled cow of several different colors. Other examples are *Snót* (*snót* f. “woman, girl”), *Snoitra* (*snotur* “nice, pretty”), *Sunna* (*sunna* f. “sun”), and *Von* (*von* f. “hope”). *Pennia* was described as pretty (cf. *penn* “pretty”; Danish *pæn*).

(8) The next category has reference to folklore and mythology. Those in the folklore group are generally somewhat derogatory, and together with the name *Ljótunn* (cf. *ljótur* “ugly”) and a few of those denoting temperament or referring to certain events in the life of the cow could be grouped simply as derogatory names. *Gilitrutt* (2) is a troll woman’s name and refers to impudently mannered cows, and *Gláma* appears to be a feminine form of *Glámur*, the name of a ghost, and was described as ugly about the eyes (cf. *glámeygður* “blear-eyed”). *Grýla* (2) is a term for a troll woman, and both these cows were considered unpleasant looking. Here might also be added *Íma*¹⁰ and *Brana*.¹¹ The names from mythology may all be considered of a complimentary nature. These include *Auðhumla* (2), *Freyja* (2), *Frigg*, *Gyðja* (2), and *Sjöfn*. Two names are of Latin origin: *Spes* and *Vesta*.

(9) Animals and plants have also given rise to cow names. In both cases many of them are probably to be considered complimentary names, but in the former case (animals and especially birds) a number of them undoubtedly refer to the color of the cow. For example, *Dúfa* (5, *dúfa* f. “dove, pigeon”) in at least two instances is the name of light gray cows as are *Kría* (*kría* f. “tern”), *Rjúpa* (*rjúpa* f. “ptarmigan”), and *Þerna* (*þerna* f. “tern”). On the other hand *Hrefna* (3,

⁹Cf. Blöndal, p. 40 under *árbót*. My informant told me this cow was born at New Year.

¹⁰*Íma* also means “dark, cloudy weather” and may refer to color.

¹¹Finnur Jónsson lists this under women’s names.

hrefna f. “female raven”), *Krumma* (3, cf. *krummi* m. “raven”), and *Teista* (*teista* f. “black guillemot”) are black. *Fluga* (*fluga* f. “fly”) though, was reported to have been taken for no particular reason, and the name *Kofa* (2, *kofa* f. “young puffin”) seems also to have nothing to do with the color of the cow. Plant names include *Björk* (*björk* f. “birch [betula]”), *Eyjarós* (*eyjarós* f. “willow herb [chamaenerion latifolium]”), *Fífa* (*fífa* f. “cotton grass[erriophorum]”), *Lilja* (*lilja* f. “lily [lilium]”), *Njóla* (cf. *njóli* m. “rumex domesticus”),¹² *Sóley* (3, *sóley* f. “buttercup [ranunculus]”), and *Ösp* (*ösp* f. “aspen, poplar [populus]”).

(10) Another, common category is that of personal names. These are usually given if the animal reminds the name-giver of someone in the area, either through temperament or if the cow has a physical feature in common with the person. Also the cow may take the name of its owner or the name of the girl who normally milks it. Such names are *Beta*, *Binna*, *Bryndís*, *Brynja* (3), *Dísa*, *Erna*, *Eva* (2), *Friða*, *Gunna*, *Hjördis*, *Helga*, *Hilda*, *Jóna*, *Katla*, *Klara*, *Lína*, *Milla*, *Minný*, *Monika* (2), *Palla*, *Rósa* (also used with reddish cows), *Sala*, *Sallý*, *Setta*, *Sigga*, *Sveina*, and *Vala*. The cow may also be named after its father. For example, *Gretta*, *Kelda*, and *Lena* are named after the bulls *Grettir*, *Keldur*, and *Lenin*, and *Geira* was probably sired by a bull named *Geiri*.¹³ *Gústa* and *Villa* are called after their former owners *Ágústi* and *Vilhjálmur*, as is *Bekka*, once owned by a man with the family name *Söbekk*. Feminine designations are *Drottning* (*drottning* f. “queen”), *Hjartadrottning* (with a heart-shaped patch on her body), and *Prinsessa* (*prinsessa* f. “princess”).

(11) Then there are names referring directly to the temperament of the animal itself, and a number of these are derogatory. *Bryðja* (*bryðja* f. “termagant”) is an impudent cow as is *Frekja* (*frekja* f. “impudence”). *Hvöt* (*hvöt* f. “impulse; incentive”) was described as “an active and clever cow”. *Molla* (cf. *mollulegur* “dull, languid”) and *Seinlát* (*seinlátur* “sluggish, slow”) were quite lazy. *Stássa* (cf. *stáss* n. “finery, adornment”) and *Tízka* (*tízka* f. “vogue”) were both elegant in their coloring and conduct. *Suða* (*suða* “to whine”) was always lowing and dissatisfied, and *Vina* (*vina* f. “girl friend”) was quite friendly. Also it is quite likely that the name *Súra* (cf. *súr* “peevish, surly”) refers to a bad disposition. Other names have to do with a characteristic or habit of the animal. *Drusla* (*drusla* f. “rag, tatter”) always chewed at clothes hanging on the line, *Físikusa* (cf. *físa* “to break wind” and *kusa* f. “pet word for cow”) broke wind a great deal, *Förukona* (*förukona* f. “female beggar, vagabond”) probably always wandered away from the rest of the herd, *Hlíta* (cf. *hit* f. “glutton”) always ate more than the other cows, *Hlandkolla* (*hland* n. “urine”) often got too near other cows when they urinated, getting hit on the head, and *Sparilöpp* (cf. *spara* “to save”) lifted one of her hoofs in the air whenever she was milked. Concerning *Bjalla* (2) the owner of one of the two told me he selected the name for the simple reason it sounded beautiful. But probably the name was originally given to the lead-cow

¹²Jónsson, however, assumes that this name means “night.” My informant, though, thought it was the plant name.

¹³Jónsson seems to connect the name with *geiróttur* “with a wavy pattern; marbled”. In this case, however, this meaning is unlikely as the cow is described as being of a solid brown color.

of the herd which wore a bell. Cows that give a lot of milk or good or frothy milk are *Froða* (*froða* f. “foam, froth”), *Lind* (4) and *Ljómalind* (*lind* f. “spring; source”), *Rjómalögg* (*rjómi* m. “cream” and *lögg* f. “drop”), and probably also *Rósalind*. *Þura* (cf., *þurr* “dry”) perhaps either yielded very little milk or she was named after some woman.

(12) Occasionally names refer to a specific event in the life of a cow. For example, *Dýra* (*dýr* “expensive, costly”) cost a lot of money, *Flóra* (cf. *flór* m. “dung channel in a barn”) probably lay in the dung channel of a barn at birth,¹⁴ *Kóla* (cf. *kólna* “to become cold”) had her tail frostbitten once, *Möl* (*möl* f. “gravel”) was brought to the farm on a load of gravel being hauled for the building of the farmhouse, *Tík* (*tík* f. “bitch”) was originally thought to be worthless but turned out better than expected, and *Skráma* (4, *skráma* f. “scratch, scar”) in two instances have scars where they once injured themselves.¹⁵ Two names refer to cows that almost died but were spared. *Lífjölf* (*lífjölf* f. “saving of one’s life”) was to be slaughtered but was spared because it was pretty. *Ófeig* (2, *ófeigur* “not fated to die”) in both cases were severely injured but managed to pull through.

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NECROLOGY

Word has just been received of the death of James W. Phillips, member of the American Name Society since 1973 and author of *Washington State Place Names* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1971), the fourth printing of which (1976) is reviewed in this issue, p. 241.

¹⁴Cf. Blöndal, p. 206.

¹⁵In two other instances they were of a light-gray color (cf. the moon’s designation *skrámur* “the Pale One”).