

Old Norse *knorr* ‘a type of ship’.

A new explanation of the term: ‘A ship with a backwards curved stem’

One of the important ship types of medieval Scandinavia was the *knorr*, which in the Old Norse prose sources refers to an ocean-going cargo ship. The term has previously been explained in several ways; none of them fully satisfactory, however. I have recently suggested that the term originally meant ‘a ship with a backwards curved stem’. In the following, I will present the main arguments for this.

1. There is a set of terms *knarr*-, *knerr*-, etc, meaning ‘steep or backwards curved, about (the neck or stem of) people, animals or boats.

From all over Scandinavia, there is a whole set of terms that it is reasonable to connect with *knorr*, and which means ‘with a steep or backwards-tilting neck or stem’, or the like:

- **Adjectives:** *Knerren*, *knerr* (Southern Norway), *knarr*, *knärr* (Sweden), *knarreistur* (Iceland) ‘holding one’s head high’, ‘stiff in the neck’; *knärrog*, *knärrnackog* (Swedish Österbotten, Finland) ‘with a backwards tilting head’; *knerrhava* ‘on runners and skis with steep and high tips’; *knerrut* (Dalarna, Sweden) ‘haughty, with a straight posture’.

- **Verbs:** *Knärra* (*nacken*) (Dalarna, Sweden; Swedish Österbotten, Finland) ‘turn up one’s nose, be proud or haughty’, *knerre* (Norway) ‘straighten one’s neck and pull in one’s chin and then raise one’s head’ – etc.

- **Nouns:** *Knärr* (Swedish Österbotten, Finland) ‘stiffness in the neck, making one carry one’s head backwards-tilting’; *knerre* (masculine, Norway) ‘person with a straight posture’; *knärrkälke* (masculine, Swedish Österbotten) ‘a sled with steep and high runner-tips’.

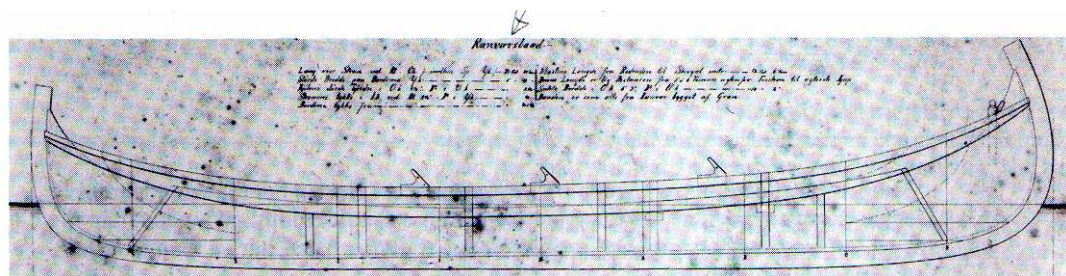
This set of terms also refers to boats. In Northern Norway, a boat with a backwards curved stem, is called *knarrstemnd* or *knorrstemnd* (adjectives). In Swedish Österbotten in Finland, a *knärrstam* (masculine) is a steep stem, with the upper end sometimes tilting slightly backwards. If a boat is *knärrog* (adjective), it is blunt in the bow, with a steep stem.

Please note that the paradigm of Old Norse *knorr* has three different vowels: *Knorr* (nominative singular), *knarrar* (genitive singular), *knerrir* (nominative plural). (The *o* and *e* are derived from the *a* through umlaut.) Thus, the above-mentioned modern Scandinavian words may easily correspond to Old Norse *knorr*. And: If we from *knorr* could construct an English adjective “knorry” or a verb “to knorr”, then modern Scandinavian adjectives and verbs like *knerren* / *knärrog* / *knerrut* and *knerre* / *knärra* would correspond to them formally.

2. Modern Scandinavian boats *knorr* / *knärr* have steep or backwards-curved stems, and they contrast with boat types that have projecting stems.

In Northern Norway and Swedish Österbotten in Finland, *knørr* has survived as a ship type term. The Northern Norwegian form is *knorr* (*knørr* in some dialects), and *-orr* (*-ørr*) is the standard

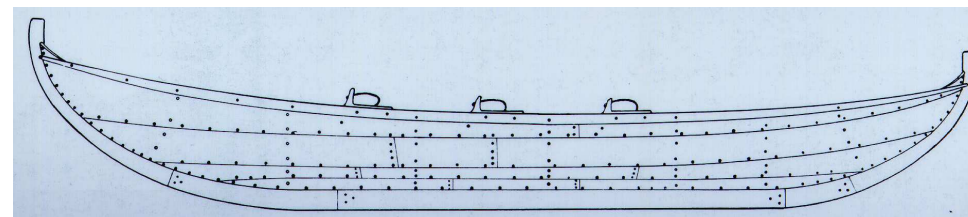
equivalent of Old Norse *-orr*. The Österbotten form is *knarr* / *knärr*, which is also equivalent to *knørr*. (But derived from Old Swedish **knarr*; *u*-umlaut was unusual in Old Swedish.)



Figur 1. 18th century *knorr* from Northern Norway.

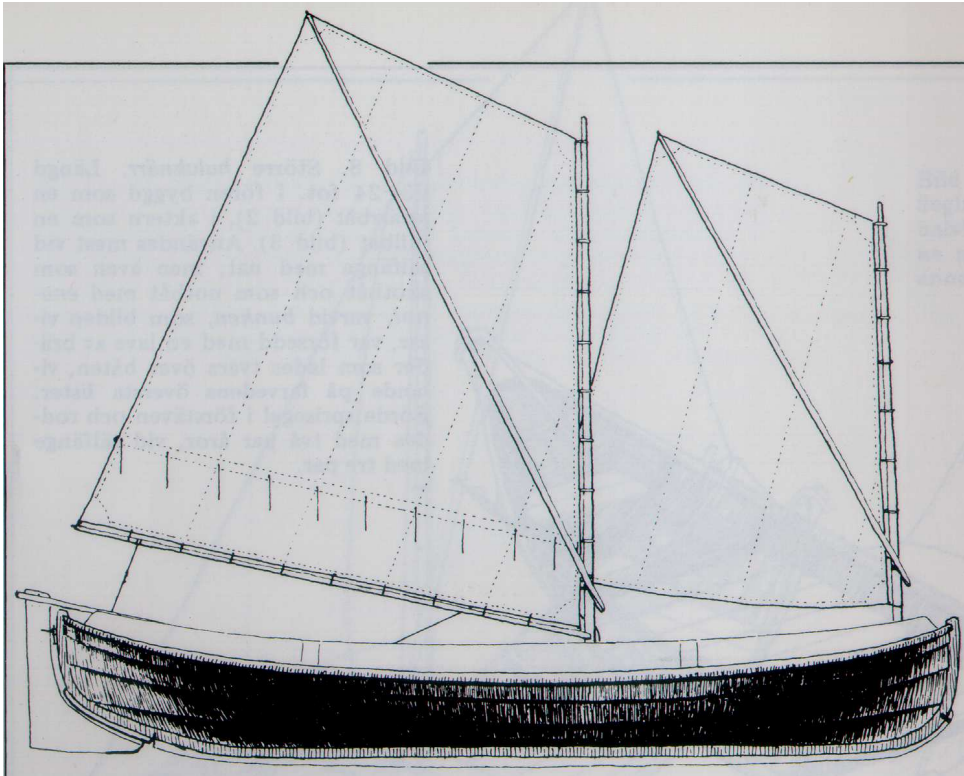
A Northern Norwegian *knorr* (*knørr*) is shown in figure 1. The backwards-curved stem is quite pronounced. Thus, it makes good sense to deduce the meaning of the term from the above mentioned set of terms with the basic concept ‘steep or backwards-curved’. A *knorr* would then originally be a ‘boat with a backwards-curved stem’. A confirmation of this seems

to emerge from a comparison with the neighbouring boat type to the south. Until the early 19th century, that probably was the *geitbåt*, which is shown in figure 2. It has a pronounced projecting stem. The term *geitbåt* literally means “goat boat”, which may be explained by comparing it to the goat, which has a pronounced projecting front part. When viewed in light

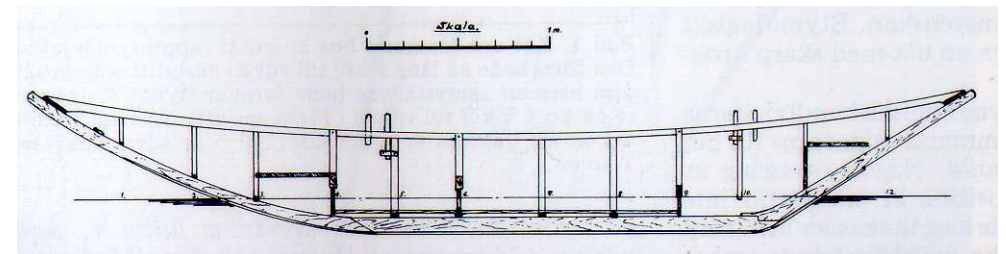


Figur 2. 19th or 20th century *geitbåt* from central Norway.

of the contrasting stems, both terms seem very characterising. In Österbotten, Finland, we find a similar circumstance. A *knarr* / *knärr* / *knärrbåt* is shown in figure 3. Its stem is quite similar to that of the Northern Norwegian *knorr*. The other local boat type of Österbotten is the *jullbåt*, shown in figure 4. The same stem contrast as in Northern Norway is apparent.



Figur 3. 19th century *knarr* / *knärr* from Swedish Österbotten, Finland.



Figur 4. 19th or 20th century *jullbåt* from Swedish Österbotten, Finland.

3. Conclusion

On the basis of this, I find it reasonable to assume that the ship terms *knorr* and *knarr* / *knärr* originally meant a ‘boat with a backwards-curved stem’. I also believe that this was the case with the ancient term *knorr*, for several reasons. First, the ancient and the recent terms correspond formally, as we have seen. Secondly, the fact that we find similar circumstances in geographic-

ally distant areas suggests common origin. And thirdly, there is a modern Northern Norwegian adjective *knarrstemnd*, which means ‘with a backwards curved stem’, literally ‘with a stem like a *knarr*’. But in Norway there is no boat type *knarr*. The word-form *knarr-* in *knarrstemnd* can only be explained as the Old Norse genitive *knarr(ar)* (of *knorr*); the genitive was used in compounds. Which means that the term

knarrstemnd originates from Old Norse, and consequently that a backwards curved stem was considered a distinctive feature of the Old Norse *knorr*.

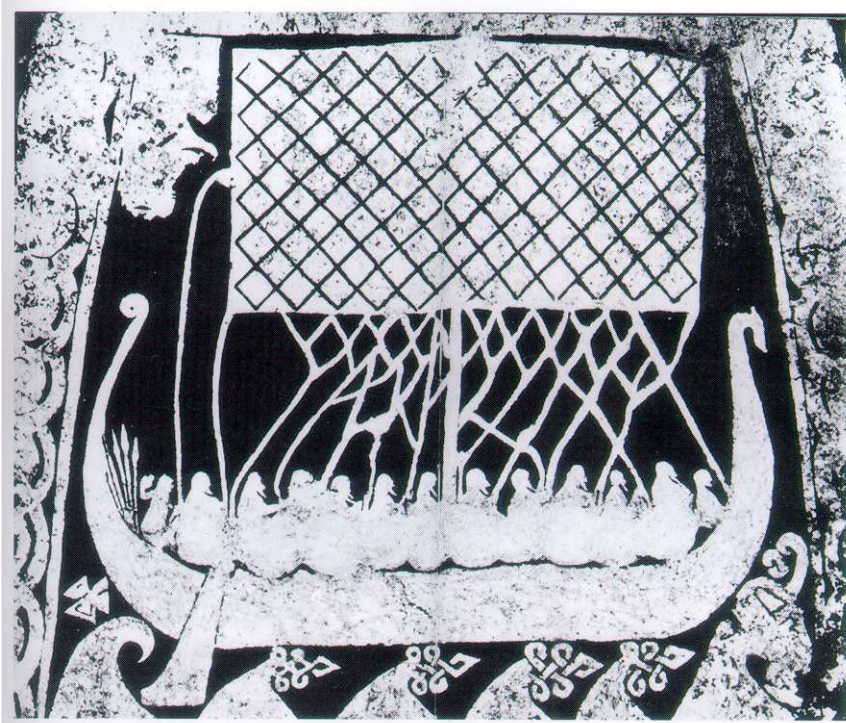
4. “Additional benefits”

This explanation of the ship term *knorr* may solve the problem that *knorr* seems to mean different things in the high middle

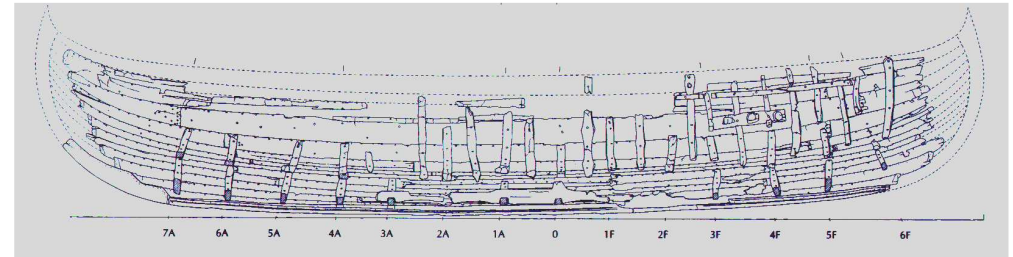
ages and in the Viking age. In the sagas of the 13th century, *knorr* refers to an ocean-going cargo ship. However, in the Viking age skaldic poetry which follows the saga prose, and on Swedish Viking age rune stones, it seems rather to refer to war ships. This shift is not a problem if the term *knorr* originally referred to the profile of the ship's stem. Then it would be neutral as far

as cargo capacity is concerned, and a war ship like the one in figure 5, from a Gotland pictorial stone, could be a *knorr*. The backwards-curved stem could have become a characteristic of the big, ocean-going cargo ship when it was developed, because it is probably easier to build a broad, chubby hull if the stem is steep or

backwards-curved. In any case, the reconstruction of the stem profile of the Skuldelev 1 ship (figure 6) seems reasonable, because it is a cargo ship and therefore probably was a *knorr* in the high medieval terminology. However, I do wonder why the stem tops should be reconstructed so short.



Figur 5. War ship on a Viking age pictorial stone from Gotland.



Figur 6. Cargo ship from around 1000 A.D., found in Roskilde fjord. (Skuldelev 1)90

For more details, such as references, and for previous explanations of *knørr*, see the article:

Heide, Eldar, 2003: "Stamnkarakteriserande skips- og båtnemningar. *Knørr* og *geitbåt*." *Norsk sjøfartsmuseum. Årbok 2002*. Oslo. 57-72

Other articles by Eldar Heide on Old Norse maritime terminology:

Heide, Eldar, 2002: "Hnykkistafr". *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 117. 97-102. (On sail and reefing.)

Heide, Eldar and Jon Godal, 2001: "Gammalnorsk *handrif* på skip – "hand-rev" eller "rekkverk"? *Norsk sjøfartsmuseum. Årbok 2000*. Oslo. (On sail and reefing and on railings.)