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Rus ‘eastern Viking’ and the *viking* ‘rower shifting’ etymology

In Heide 2005 I argued that Old Norse *viking* f. and *vikingr* m. belong to the same root as *vika* f. ‘nautical distance unit’, originally ‘the distance between two shifts of rowers’ (from the root **wīk-* ‘receding’). The feminine *viking*, which may be compared to Modern English *-ing* derivations like *running* or *cycling*, would then literally mean ‘shifting’, and originally refer to the shifting of rowers on sea-voyages. From this word denoting an activity, the masculine *vikingr* referring to a person performing this activity could be derived. I also argued that Old Frisian forms like *witzing* indicate that a word “Viking” existed in the Frisian-English proto-language before the migration to England in the mid-5th century, because the palatalization of *k* before front vowels is that old. (The modern English form is a late borrowing.) In that case, the word Viking originated in a pre-sail culture, which fits the ‘rower shifting’ etymology. A long-distance sea-journey undertaken by rowing would be dominated by the shifting of rowers. Therefore possibly it could be referred to as “shifting”, like “fishing” in Scandinavia is referred to as “rowing”, because in pre-engine times, a fishing trip would be dominated by rowing.

Here I would like to add a point to this reasoning. The terms *Russia*

Abstract: This paper supplements the etymology for Viking suggested by Heide in ANF 2005: Old Norse *viking* f. and *vikingr* m. belong to the same root as *vika* f. ‘nautical distance unit’, originally ‘the distance between two shifts of rowers’, and *viking* f. originally refers to the shifting of rowers on sea-voyages. The supplement is that this etymology parallels the etymology of *rus*, the term for the Vikings in Eastern Europe. *Rus* is derived from the Old Swedish genitive *rōps*, in the borrowing process separated from compounds and made into a word of its own. The nominative of *rōps* is *rōper*, which essentially means ‘rowing’.

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and *Russian* originally did not refer to Russia’s Slavic people, but to the Scandinavian ruling class of the oldest Russian state (cf. Melberg 1951: 195 ff.), in the oldest Russian sources called *rus*. Thomsen’s (1877: 92 ff.) etymology of this word is generally accepted by serious scholars: *Rus* is a borrowing from Old Swedish through Finnic, cf. Modern Finnish *Ruotsi* ‘Sweden’. The

origin is the Swedish genitive *rōþs*¹, in the borrowing process separated from compounds and made into a word of its own. The dental (*b*) is reflected in the Finnic forms, and according to Melberg (1951: 196, referring to Jacobsohn 1918: 309-12), the “early Russian form seems to have been *ruts-* and not *rus-*, to judge from the testimony of Finno-Ugrian tongues that must have adopted the word directly or indirectly from Russian – the Zyrian *rōtš* and Votjak *džuts*”.

The nominative of the Swedish *rōþs* is *rōþer* m., which has a basic sense ‘rowing’ (derived from the verb *rōa* ‘to row’), and the derived senses ‘warlike sea journey’, ‘fleet of conscripted warships’ (= OSw *lēþunger*, ON *leiðangr*), and ‘the coast areas that fit out the conscripted warships’ (cf. present day *Roslagen* in Uppland. After Söderwall 1884 II: 263). People associated with *rōþer* / *Rōþer* could be called *rōþskarlar*, *rōþsmæn*, *rōþsbyggjare* etc. (Thomsen 1877: 96, Granlund 1969), literally ‘men of rowing’ (‘...of the sea journey districts’). The semantic development of *rōþer* is parallel to what I suggested for *viking*:

1. The original meaning is ‘rowing’,
2. from this meaning a secondary meaning ‘warlike sea journey’ is derived, and
3. a word for ‘sea-farer’ is formed.²

The differences are that in the first stage, *viking* would not literally mean ‘rowing’, but ‘shifting at rowing’, and that in stage 3, the word for sea-farer is formed in a different way. From the feminine *viking* is formed a masculine *vikingr* instead of **viking(ar)karl* or the like. (But the masculine with the sense ‘pirate’ is derived from the feminine with the sense ‘warlike sea-journey’, cf. Heide 2005: 45-46.) A fourth step is also parallel: Both *rus* and *vikingr* came to be the neighbouring

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peoples’ term for the Scandinavians that came to them across oceans in ships. The term *vikingr* / *wīcing* / *witzing* seems to be a North Sea word; Old Swedish has no example of it referring to Vikings going east from Sweden (cf. Hellberg 1980: 54 ff., 80). The explanation for this is probably that the Vikings of the east were called *rōþskarlar*, *rōþsmæn* / **ruots-* / **ruts*.

¹ I mark the vowel length, like in standardized Old Norse, although it was not done in Old Swedish.

² Norwegian has a development parallel to this: *Ror* m. (< *rōðr*), originally ‘rowing’, has a secondary meaning ‘fishing, fishery’ – which is a peaceful sea journey, in contrast to the Old Swedish version – and from this sense, a term for people performing fishing is formed: *Rorsfolk* n. pl., *rorskar*, *rorsmann* m. sg. (Aasen 1873: 612).

Conclusion: If we accept the ‘rower shifting’ etymology for *viking(r)*, the development is parallel in eastern and western Europe. Then Viking as well as *rus* originally means ‘man of rowing’ or ‘man of rowing journeys’. In the west, it is on phonological grounds possible to date the feminine *viking* (**wīking[ō]*) to the 5th century or earlier, and in that way connect it with pre-sail sea-faring technology. In the case of the eastern *rōþr*, we can go straight to this dating, because the essential meaning ‘rowing’ indicates that it was in pre-sail times that *rōþr* became a word for ‘sea-journey’. (Later rowing on the Russian rivers could hardly generate such a semantic development in the Swedish homeland.) The phonology of the root **ruots-* in the different Finnic languages suggests an equally early dating of the borrowing from Swedish (Melnikova and Petrukhin, 1990-91: 207).

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