

Views on Cultic Place-Names in Denmark

A Review of Research

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By way of introduction it should be emphasised that, although interest has long been shown in the meaning of place-names, place-name research as a methodical study has only a comparatively short history.

For place-name research in Denmark the pioneer work is the paper entitled *Bemærkninger om danske og norske stedsnavnes oprindelse og forklaring* (Comments on the origin and interpretation of Danish and Norwegian place-names), which appeared in 1833. Its author was N.M. Petersen, who was at that time a registrar at the State Archives and who later became the first Professor of Scandinavian languages at the University of Copenhagen. There is, of course, much in N.M. Petersen's paper which has not stood the test of time, including his discussion of place-names which — as he says: (I translate) “contain names of the old gods of Scandinavia [. . .] or the common appellations *as* or *gud*” (Petersen 1833, 178). The reason why the paper should nevertheless be considered a pioneer work is that some of the principles formulated in it are still valid for the study of place-names. This is the case, for example, with the principle that the oldest recorded forms of a name are normally to be considered as the most reliable basis for its interpretation. It is also the case with the requirement that knowledge of phonology, history and local topography should be natural prerequisites for the interpretation of old place-names. It is also stressed that a comparison with the nomenclature of the other Scandinavian countries can be of significance for place-name research.

As far as methodology is concerned, very little progress was made in the field of Danish place-name research between the appearance of N.M. Petersen's paper in 1833 and the great advance marked by the publication of the works of the historian Johannes Steenstrup at the end of the century. There are naturally several scholars from the intervening period whose work deserves to be mentioned but in the present context I shall confine myself to naming two of them, Henry Petersen and Oluf Nielsen.

Henry Petersen, who was a museum-based archaeologist, attempted

in 1876 in his doctoral dissertation *Om Nordboernes Gudedyrkelse og Gudetrol i Hedenold* (On the cults and beliefs of the Scandinavians in the pagan period) to demonstrate that the Scandinavians worshipped Thor above all other gods. In addition to Thor, who is considered to have been the primordial god of Scandinavia and the original chief god of the people, Henry Petersen argues that it was first and foremost Odin and Frey who were worshipped by the Scandinavians. In support of his claim Petersen points *inter alia* to a number of place- and personal names (Petersen 1876, 37 ff.). Although the cited place-name material cannot in fact be used in support of Henry Petersen's thesis, in part because many of the names — *Torstrup, Frøstrup, Ondrup* etc. — are perfectly prosaic and secular, the personal-name material is not without interest and significance.

Henry Petersen would seem to be the first person in Scandinavia to have drawn attention to the fact that personal names containing names of gods or words for gods can be an important source of information about the history of religion. His attempt to exploit this source was, however, soon emulated by a Swede, Magnus Fredrik Lundgren. As early as 1878 Lundgren published a small pamphlet entitled *Språkliga intyg om hednisk gudatro i Sverige* (Linguistic evidence about the heathen religion in Sweden) and in this he exploits not only place-names but also personal names as a source of information about the heathen gods that had once been worshipped in Sweden. Two years later — in 1880 — there appeared another paper by the same author: *Spår af hednisk tro och kult i fornsvenska personnamn* (Traces of heathen beliefs and cults in Old Swedish personal names). It seems to me that these two contributions by Lundgren initiated Swedish research into cultic names (cf. Hellberg 1986, 41 f.). It was around this time, too, that Norwegian cultic names came under observation, but in the earliest articles, those written by Martin Arnesen and Oluf Rygh, cultic personal names were not brought into the discussion (Arnesen 1866; Rygh 1880).

In later years, personal names containing the names of gods or words for gods have been referred to from time to time in various general works on personal names but they have never been subjected to the thorough, modern, scientific discussion that they most certainly deserve.

In my opinion, the best treatment of this subject is that by Kristian Hald in the fourth chapter of the first volume of his *Personnavne i Danmark* (Personal names in Denmark) (Hald 1971, 36–52). In this, the relevant name material is treated in a professional and scholarly

manner and with the breadth of vision that was characteristic of all of Kristian Hald's work.

In the same chapter, Hald also touches on a phenomenon which had been noted by Henry Petersen in his 1876 dissertation, namely that personal names containing the name *Thor-*, in contrast to names containing the names of other gods, have an unusually wide distribution in the Scandinavian area (Hald 1971, 38). The names in question include *Thorbjørn*, *Thorer*, *Thorgot*, *Thorkil*, *Thormod* and *Thorsten*. Henry Petersen assumed that a person who was named after a god came under the special protection of that god and he took the many compound names with *Thor-* as first element as conclusive evidence that Thor was the chief god of Scandinavia (Petersen 1876, 39 ff.). The matter is not quite as straightforward as this, however. We know very little, in fact, about what people in the pagan period thought about personal names containing the names of gods, including that of Thor. What little late evidence we do have about this has been assembled by Elias Wessén in *Nordiska namnstudier* (Scandinavian name-studies) (Wessén 1927, 77 ff.).

As far as the distribution of personal names in *Thor-* is concerned, Hald demonstrates that they are among the most commonly occurring personal names throughout Scandinavia (Hald 1971). He also demonstrates that they are of exceptionally rare occurrence outside Scandinavia. As far as their dating is concerned, Hald points out that names in *Thor-* are not known from Primitive Scandinavian runic inscriptions. He also draws the place-name material into his study, naturally enough, in the light of the scanty nature of direct sources of information about Danish personal names before the Viking period. With the aid of the place-names, Hald is able to demonstrate that *Thor*-names, in spite of their absence from runic inscriptions, cannot have been completely unknown in Denmark during what is generally referred to rather imprecisely as the Migration period. Such names are found in a number of place-names in *-lev*, most of which (6 altogether) now appear as either *Torslev* or *Tørslev*. And this is the strange thing about it. All six place-names contain the same personal name, *Thōrir*, which is thus the personal name combined most frequently with the place-name element *-lev*. The etymology of this personal name is uncertain and disputed. Hald suggests tentatively that *Thōrir* might be an original appellative with the sense 'Thor's priest' (or 'thunder priest') and that this name *Thōrir* might have been the inspiration for the formation of all the other *Thor*-names.

It is characteristic for Kristian Hald that he often attempts to set the

results he has reached by linguistic methods in a wider perspective and his discussion of the *Thor*-names concludes with the following words: (I translate) "What is certain is that the appearance of the large number of personal names in Thōr- in the time between the Migration period and the Viking period is the most significant Scandinavian innovation in the nomenclature and the feature which most clearly distinguishes Scandinavian names from those current among the other Germanic peoples. It is also certain that there must be a close connection between this Scandinavian innovation in the nomenclature and those religious currents in the same period which led to the dominant position assumed by the cult of Thor, at least among the common people" (Hald 1971, 50).

With this last sentence the philologist Kristian Hald ventures outside his legitimate field of research but he does so cautiously and elegantly. Whether or not the latter part of his conclusion is correct, his linguistic observations remain valid. Perhaps his final conclusion is simply intended as a tentative suggestion offered by a name-scholar to fellow-researchers who have a different angle of approach to the pre-Christian religion of Scandinavia. In that case, it is not without justification. On the one hand there is a wealth of source material which is difficult to analyse and interpret. On the other hand there is the subject of the history of religion, which is so complex that it is necessary to be something of a Jack of all trades in order even to attempt to master it. In this connection I should like to quote the words of a Danish archaeologist, the present Keeper of National Antiquities, Olaf Olsen. In his doctoral dissertation *Hørg, hov og kirke* (Hørg, hof and church), Olsen described the problems he had experienced as a "cultic researcher" as follows: (I translate) "In order to write about cultic buildings in Scandinavia in the Viking period it is preferable to be historian, archaeologist, historian of religion and Scandinavian philologist all rolled into one" (Olsen 1966, 17).

As I mentioned earlier, there is one other scholar from the period between N.M. Petersen and Johannes Steenstrup whose work deserves to be mentioned and that is Oluf Nielsen. He was a Scandinavian philologist, first an assistant at the State Archives and later archivist at the Municipal Archives in Copenhagen. As a result of his daily work with medieval source material, Oluf Nielsen became thoroughly familiar with old name-forms. He exploited this knowledge in a number of studies, first and foremost in *Bidrag til Fortolkning af danske Stednavne* (Contributions to the interpretation of Danish place-names), which were published between 1881 and 1896 (Nielsen 1881–

87; Nielsen 1896–1916). These include a thorough examination of the word *vi* ‘sacred place’ as a place-name element and a section on “Spør af den hedenske Gudsdyrkelse” (Traces of the worship of heathen gods) (Nielsen 1881–87, 247–253, 257–273).

In his book *Vore Stednavne* (Our Place-Names), Kristian Hald described Oluf Nielsen’s contributions to the interpretation of cultic place-names as significant and still to be reckoned among the best that have been written on this subject in Danish (Hald 1965, 24). My immediate reaction on reading this remark was that Hald’s verdict on Oluf Nielsen’s work was much too generous but on maturer reflection and in the light of what later scholars have felt themselves called to write about the so-called cultic place-names I am now inclined to agree with Hald.

Oluf Nielsen was one of the pioneers in the field and his contribution is a reasonable and level-headed attempt to demonstrate the occurrence in place-names of various words for sacred places and names of gods. In addition to evidence for the better known gods — Odin, Thor, Frey, Tyr etc. — Oluf Nielsen finds traces in island-names such as *Læsø* and *Enø* of the sea-god *Læ*, who is identical with *Ægir*, and the goddess *Idun* respectively (Nielsen 1881–87, 268 f.). In these cases and in several others it is impossible for modern scholars to agree with Oluf Nielsen, but several of his attempts at interpretation still stand up to criticism. This is the case, for example, when he numbers among the few place-names in Denmark commemorating Balder, such names as *Boldesager* and *Baldersbæk* in West Jutland (Nielsen 1881–87, 267; cf. Dalberg & Kousgård Sørensen 1979, 120). On the other hand, when Oluf Nielsen — as so many before him — finds a reminiscence of Balder in *Baldersbrønde* near Copenhagen, he has been proved wrong by later research (Knudsen 1928). From what he writes about the name, however, it can be seen that he would have come to a different conclusion if he had had access to more of the old forms of the name, e.g. *Baldorpsbrynnæ* from 1321.

A new and significant era for Danish place-name research was heralded by Johannes Steenstrup, who left his imprint on name-research well into the 20th century in the form of a number of methodologically important works. It is characteristic of Johannes Steenstrup, who was Professor of History at the University of Copenhagen from 1882, that he exploited place-names as a source of information about various topics of historical interest. As an example may be cited some of his earliest and most closely reasoned articles on place-names, namely *Nogle Bidrag til vore Landsbyers og Bebyggelsens Historie* (Some con-

tributions to the history of our villages and settlement) from 1894, in which place-name material is exploited as a source of information about the history of settlement, and *Nogle Undersøgelser om Guders Navne i de nordiske Stedsnavne* (Some studies on the names of gods in Scandinavian place-names) from 1896, in which the place-names are made to yield information about the history of religion. These two works, together with many others, were of great significance for the development of place-name research as a scholarly discipline. The reason for this is probably to be sought not in Steenstrup's linguistic ability but rather in the attention he paid to name-typology, i.e. names that share the same generic (e.g. names in *-by* or *-sted*) or the same ending (e.g. names in *-inge*). In this, Steenstrup differed radically from his predecessors, all of whom had tended to concentrate on individual names.

In the article about the names of gods in Scandinavian place-names, Johannes Steenstrup demonstrates that human-beings never bear the names of gods in unchanged form (Steenstrup 1896). It was thus impossible in both pagan and Christian times for a man to be called Odin, Thor or Frey. When one of these names forms part of a place-name, it must therefore refer to a divine being. An examination of the place-name material leads Steenstrup to the conclusion that the names of gods only occur with generics that denote natural phenomena or heathen shrines. The names of gods are never combined with generics that originally denoted settlements.

This work, then, marks the establishment for the first time in the history of name research of criteria for the determining of the occurrence of pre-Christian elements — particularly the names of gods — in place-names. As pointed out by Vibeke Dalberg and John Kousgård Sørensen, Steenstrup's criteria imply that while the specific in Danish *Toroslunde* and Norwegian *Torshov* may well be the name of the god Thor, the specific in the Danish names *Torstrup* and *Torsted* cannot be the name of a god (Dalberg & Kousgård Sørensen 1979, 117). When Steenstrup denies that names with a habitative generic — i.e. names such as *Torstrup* and *Torsted* — can be cultic, this is not as a result of an etymological analysis of the names but on the basis of his name-typological observations, which were epoch-making but not unassailable.

In the article in question, Steenstrup demonstrates that as far as place-names in general are concerned, there was a much greater degree of regularity in the old naming-process than had hitherto been assumed, so that some generics were always — or almost always —

compounded with personal names, others with appellatives. This is a significant observation and it proved to be of great importance for subsequent research, but the passage of time has shown that the rules formulated by Steenstrup were much too categorical. For example, he assumed that place-names in *-torp* and *-sted* regularly contain a personal name, claiming that only 3–4% of these names contain other kinds of specific (Steenstrup 1896, 364 f.). Steenstrup was therefore not in the slightest doubt that the specific of both *Torstrup* and *Torsted* was a personal name and not the name of a god.

Today, however, we know that although personal names certainly do occur frequently as the specifics of names in *-torp*, it is not as frequently as was assumed by Steenstrup (cf. Hald 1965, 124). We also know that the percentage of the specifics of names in *-sted* which are personal names is only about 20 (Kousgård Sørensen 1967, 63; cf. Kousgård Sørensen 1958, 279). If we are to determine whether *Tor-* in names such as *Torstrup* and *Torsted* represents a personal name, an appellative or perhaps the name of a god, this can only be done after subjecting the name to a thorough etymological analysis and then studying it in the light of name-typology. Since the result of this process will seldom be unambiguous, it will normally also be necessary to confront the result of the analysis with the natural and cultural conditions of the site in question. Among modern scholars, there is fairly general agreement that *Torstrup* in West Jutland is most likely to contain the personal name *Thorsten* (cf. e.g. Jørgensen 1983, 134). On the other hand, there is some disagreement as to whether *Torsted*, which is the name of several localities in Jutland, contains the personal name *Thōrir* or the name of the god *Thor* (cf. e.g. Kousgård Sørensen 1958, 126 f. and Hald 1959, 409).

Johannes Steenstrup had not really grasped the fact that, in order to exploit the names as a source of information, it was necessary to subject them to a thorough and reliable linguistic analysis. For this reason it is not difficult to raise objections to his treatment of the names of gods in Scandinavian place-names. I shall content myself here with quoting a single instance of inconsistency. Steenstrup was — as mentioned — convinced that the names of gods are never compounded with habitative generics. And as far as Steenstrup was concerned, this also applied to the old god of fertility, *Njord*. Nevertheless, he demonstrated that the name of the god *Njord* was often compounded with the generic *-hēm*, which is identical with our modern word *hjem* (home). In addition to Danish *Nærum*, which may not be a name in *-hēm* but rather a name in *-rum*, Steenstrup listed no fewer than

six Norwegian names of this type (Steenstrup 1896, 382 ff.). The Norwegian names take such forms as *Nalum*, *Nærem* and *Nærum* (see Olsen 1915, 51 f., 58 f.; cf. Norsk stadnamnleksikon under *Njærheim*).

Criteria similar to those established by Johannes Steenstrup are exploited in various other works dealing with Scandinavian place-names, but they are rarely given a clear formulation and the foundation on which they are based is hardly ever discussed. To name one example from among many, in his article *Minnen av forntida gudedyrkan i Mellan-Sveriges ortnamn* (Reminiscences of ancient heathendom in the place-names of Central Sweden) from 1923, Elias Wessén demonstrates *inter alia* that Odin and Thor have left behind them numerous reminiscences in place-names, but mainly in compounds whose second element denotes the topography of the locality, e.g. *-sjö*, *-fors*, *-näs* and *-klint*. On the other hand, Wessén claims that Odin and Thor are comparatively rarely represented among the cultic names proper, i.e. compounds whose second element is *-vi*, *-harg*, *-lund*, *-åker* etc. (Wessén 1923, 6).

Even though Johannes Steenstrup had in many respects prepared the road for the development of place-name research in the direction of methodological independence, many decades were to pass before Danish name-research — finally liberated from historical research — was able to manifest itself as an independent discipline. Earlier than that, however, in 1910, Stednavneudvalget (The Place-Name Commission) had been set up and its office, which is the forerunner of Copenhagen University's Institute for Name Research, soon became the base for a comprehensive registration and collection of names. The first volume in the series "Danmarks Stednavne" was published by Stednavneudvalget in 1922.

The material which was collected by Stednavneudvalget naturally included so-called field-names or nature-names. In the course of the 20th century this category of name has developed into a new and important field of research. It is widely acknowledged that our innumerable field-names contain *inter alia* a significant body of cultural-historical material. Since the vast majority of these names are only recorded in comparatively young sources, however, it is open to doubt whether they can contain pre-Christian elements. The most recent treatment of the problem is that by Kristian Hald in his book *Stednavne og kulturhistorie* (Place-names and Cultural History) from 1966. In this he says: (I translate) "Even though it is necessary to assume that the bulk of our field-names are medieval (and many of them even younger), there is a possibility that a few of them at least go back to the Viking

period or older times and, in theory, the field-names do not need to be older than from the Viking period to contain the names of heathen gods or other words related to the heathen religion" (Hald 1966, 50).

Many scholars have, indeed, expended much energy, ingenuity and fantasy in their attempts to find cultic traces in this corpus of names. My thoughts go first and foremost to folklorists such as Axel Olrik and Hans Ellekilde, to historians such as Vilhelm la Cour and Svend Aakjær, and to the Germanic philologist Gudmund Schütte. Although all these men were considered to be reasonably well qualified within their own special fields of research, their many and persistent attempts to find pre-Christian elements in place-names must by and large be characterised as amateur scholarship. The demands which must be made of the interpretation of a name in the form of source criticism, the exploitation of old forms, a linguistic analysis etc. were only fulfilled by them to a limited extent. The reasons why I have nevertheless chosen to devote some time to these men are several. Most of them were productive writers and assiduous lecturers. They published their articles in respected journals and, since it was rare for more cautious and recognised name-researchers to venture to criticise their work in public, they became identified in the eyes of the man in the street and of scholars in other disciplines with the discipline of name-research.

A favourite topic for several of these authors was to describe the history of an area on the basis of its place-names. From among all the names in the district, they would select now one and now another. Sometimes they would add a little non-onomastic source material and gradually they would reconstruct — on an exceptionally fragile foundation — a picture of the cultic past of the region. As an example of this genre I might mention Axel Olrik's treatise from 1911 entitled *En oldtidshelligdom* (An ancient shrine). It is one of the earliest and most down-to-earth attempts (I translate) "to follow the history of an individual place" (Olrik 1911, 1).

Olrik's subject is the area around Sevel in the north-west of Jutland, where he had observed that several ancient trackways crossed each other. Not far from Sevel, at the point where these old trackways cross, there is a lake with the name *Hellesø*, which he correctly explains as "The holy lake" (Olrik 1911, 7). Axel Olrik then turns his attention to the river which is now called *Hellegård Å* but which was referred to in older sources as "*Å hin hellige*". So far so good, but when Olrik links the two names together and uses them in support of a theory that there was a so-called "helligsted" or holy place near Sevel, then this is pure speculation. There is, as Olrik himself indeed points out,

no less than 7–8 km between the two localities and they do not seem to have any connection with each other.

In the neighbourhood of Sevel Axel Olrik finds several noteworthy place-names, including a field-name *Lundene*, to which he ascribes cultic significance, and a *Harildsbakke*. The first element in this *Harildsbakke* he takes to be a compound of the appellative *hargh* with the meaning 'heap of stones serving as a sacrificial altar' and a *hillæ* with the meaning 'mound'. *Harild* must thus, according to Axel Olrik, be explained as "The mound with the sacrificial altar" (Olrik 1911, 9 f.). This last-mentioned interpretation can hardly be correct. According to Kristian Hald, the name is more likely to be an old appellative **harald(i)*, consisting of the appellative *har* 'stone' and the derivative suffix *-ald(i)* (Hald 1966, 56). As it is also quite unreasonable to ascribe a cultic content to the simplex nature-name *Lundene*, there is little left to support Axel Olrik's theory that there was a holy place near Sevel. In reality, there is only the name *Hellesø*, and this name is not indeed without interest for the present topic, since it is probably — as proposed by John Kousgård Sørensen — a noa-name which has replaced an older name for the lake upon which a taboo had been placed (Kousgård Sørensen 1978, 63 ff.). The old taboo-name has probably survived in the parish-name *Sevel*. This is a derivative of an Old Danish adjective *sæwal* 'round' (Kousgård Sørensen 1987, 55 f.).

From among the many books and articles written on Danish place-names, there are two substantial works which it is relevant to mention in the context of the history of religion. The author of these is S.K. Amtoft, who was employed at the office of Stednavneudvalget from 1918 to 1958. The first work, *Stednavne som bebyggelses- og religionshistorisk Kildestof* (Place-names as a source of information about the history of settlement and religion) from 1941, I would describe as a very personal and critical but in fact respectable and sober survey, dealing with a number of aspects of the history of place-name research. As far as the book *Nordiske Gudeskikkelser i bebyggelses-historisk Belysning* (Scandinavian gods in the light of settlement history) from 1948 is concerned, I can only characterise it as a peculiar and fantastic philosophical construction, and in holding this view I am obviously not alone. I can refer *inter alia* to a contemporary reviewer, Svend Aakjær, who concluded his review with the following words: (I translate) "One lays down the book with an acknowledgement of the author's perspicacity and ingenuity: *Se non è vero, è ben trovato*. If it is not true, it is a good invention!" (Aakjær 1948, 264).

My survey has now brought me close to the period around 1950,

during which Danish name-research established itself as an independent discipline. The credit for the development of the subject in the direction of independence must go first and foremost to Kristian Hald, who began to work in the office of Stednavneudvalget in 1924 and who later became Professor of Scandinavian languages at the University of Copenhagen. Kristian Hald is probably the modern name-scholar who has paid most attention to the cultic name-material. In addition to the works already named, I should like particularly to draw attention to his paper from 1963 entitled *The Cult of Odin in Danish Place-Names*. While this paper attempts to demonstrate all the information about Odin that can be derived from names, his other contributions to the subject "place-names and the history of religion" are rather to be characterised as general surveys. This is the case, for example, with his chapter on "Hedenske Kultminder i Stednavne" (Reminiscences of heathen cults in place-names) in his book *Vore Stednavne* from 1950 (second edition 1965) (Hald 1950, 219–225; Hald 1965, 248–255).

Another Danish treatment of cultic reminiscences in place-names is similarly to be described as a general survey. This is the contribution made by Gunnar Knudsen, the director of Stednavneudvalget's office, to the volume on *Religionshistorie* (The History of Religion) in the series "Nordisk Kultur". Gunnar Knudsen's survey is, however, marred by some uncertainty in linguistic matters. This is betrayed, for example, in his treatment of compounds containing the names of the gods Tyr and Thor (Knudsen 1942, 33 f.). As many writers had done before him, Gunnar Knudsen assumes that the names of gods as specifics in place-names sometimes appear in stem-form and this means, in the case of *Tyr* and *Thor*, without genitive -s. If that were so, both *Tibirke* and *Tisvilde* might contain the name of the god *Tyr*, while the name of the god *Thor* might be the specific of both *Torø* and *Toroslunde*. It has, however, been demonstrated on several occasions — most recently by Thorsten Andersson — that there are no certain examples in which the name of a god appears in a place-name without a genitive ending (Andersson 1979).

Several of the name scholars who are still active have treated cultic name material from time to time (see e.g. Kousgård Sørensen 1957; Dalberg & Kousgård Sørensen 1979, 9–21, 117–136; Kousgård Sørensen 1985 and Holmberg 1986). It must nevertheless be admitted with Kristian Hald that we still lack a thorough and critical survey of the Danish "cultic" names (Hald 1966, 5). Danish place-names containing pre-Christian elements, in spite of their small number, form an important source of information about the history of religion. In the

greater part of the 20th century, however, this material has regrettably been left mainly to the attention of fantasists.

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