

1974

The Name "Gongu-Hrolf" in the Old Norse "Gongu-Hrolfs Saga"

Hilda Radzin

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/los>

Repository Citation

Radzin, Hilda (1974) "The Name "Gongu-Hrolf" in the Old Norse "Gongu-Hrolfs Saga"," *Literary Onomastics Studies*: Vol. 1 , Article 8.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/los/vol1/iss1/8>

This Conference Paper is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Literary Onomastics Studies by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact kmyers@brockport.edu.

THE NAME "GONGU-HRÓLF" IN THE OLD NORSE "GONGU-HRÓLFS SAGA"

I. A Survey of the Old Norse Language

The Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, Icelandic, and Faeroese languages constitute the Northern branch of the Germanic languages, and are related to West Germanic languages: High German on the one hand, and Dutch, English, and other low German languages on the other. The oldest attested forms of Germanic languages are of a primitive Scandinavian type. Primitive Scandinavian, as indicated by its own name donsk tunga, appears to have originated in Denmark. Then it spread toward the north, ousting the now extinct dialects of the third branch, East Germanic. This linguistic change developed first in Norway, then in Sweden. It was gradually completed during the period from the Fourth to the Sixth Centuries A.D. East Germanic remnants are to be found in some areas.

The name "Old Norse" replaced the name "Danish" for the common Scandinavian language shortly before its split into eastern and western branches. The split occurred during the Tenth Century A.D., the late Viking period. Then the name "Old Norse" was referred to Western Scandinavian in the Icelandic dialectal variety. The greatest part of Medieval Scandinavian literature, including the Old Norse sagas, was written in the Old Norse language. With the distinction of the Norwegian language from Icelandic and Faeroese, dating from the Eleventh Century A.D., the name "Old Norse" has been discontinued except with

reference to Norn, a dialect of Old Norse spoken in the Orkney and Shetland Islands until the Seventeenth Century.

II. A Survey of the Old Norse Literature

Though no Icelandic literature was written down earlier than the Twelfth Century, it preserved dependable accounts of the earliest settlement of the country. Iceland was discovered by Norse Vikings sometime near the middle of the Ninth Century, and the first colonist, Ingólfur Arnarson from Firdir in West Norway, settled in Reykjavik in the year 874. During the next sixty years, Iceland was settled by Norsemen who like him came directly from Norway, or by Norsemen who had spent some time in the Norse settlements in the British Isles: the Shetlands, the Orkneys, the western shores of England and Scotland, and the east coast of Ireland. In the last quarter of the Ninth Century, King Haraldr of Norway tried to subdue the many independent kings and chieftains under his rule, as had already been done by kings in Sweden, Denmark, and England. Many of these chieftains and farmers left the country and went to Iceland.

Poetry

The settlers of Iceland brought two distinct types of poetry, the Eddic and the Skaldic, represented in Norway at the time of emigration.

Prose

In the Old Norse literature, the word saga is used with reference

to any kind of story, or history, whether written or oral. The heroes of sagas are most often kings of Norway, historical Germanic heroes, or legendary Germanic heroes.

The Göngu-Hrólf's saga belongs to the group of Fornaldarsögur, probably composed in the period from 1250-1350, named by C. C. Rafn, collector. Finnur Jónsson names the Fornaldarsögur "oldtidssagaer", meaning "the sagas of prehistoric times." In English the Fornaldarsögur have also been called the mythical-heroic sagas. Finnur Jónsson states that the Fornaldarsögur deal with persons who are mostly Scandinavian, some probably historical, at least genealogically connected with historical families. Other characters are unhistorical, but may in some way or other be considered together with more historical ones. This information is important for the onomastic study of the name "Göngu-Hrólf" in the Göngu-Hrólf's saga.

III. The Historical Göngu-Hrólf

The works of the Continental annalists who deal with the Normans, originally "Nortmanni" (Northmen), who began to make destructive plundering raids in northern Francia (the Frankish kingdom) in the Ninth Century, have been published in Pertz's Monumenta Germanis, even those annals that were not written in Germany. In 911, Hrólfur (the son of Rögnvald, Earl of Møre in Western Norway), who had already gained reputation as a great leader of Norsemen in Scotland and Ireland, came to the Seine. In a letter (918 A.D.) of King Charles, it is recorded that the land at the mouth of the Seine had been handed over to the

Norsemen with the explanation that Rollo (Hrólf) and his men are designated. Rollo must have died before 933.

There are four works, of Scandinavian origin, in which there are records of Gøngu-Hrólf. One, Norwegian, came to light when Munch in the year 1849 discovered the Scottish manuscript Historia Norvegiae. This record contains an account of the countries paying tribute to Norway. Mention is made of the Orkney Islands and the expeditions that set out from them. One of the Vikings living in those islands was called "Gøngurólf", because, owing to his great size, he was unable to ride a horse, and therefore always went on foot. The Landnámabok, and Icelandic source, gives information concerning the daughter of the historical Gøngu-Hrólf. Nidbjörg is the daughter of Bjolan and Kadlin. Kadlin is the daughter of Gøngu-Hrólf. From the Saga of the Orkney earls, one learns that before Gøngu-Hrólf conquered Normandy, he had already for a long time been leading the life of a Viking. From Snorri's Olafs saga helga one draws the information that when Gøngu-Hrólf was still a young man, he was banished from Norway by King Haraldr.

IV. The Relation between the Historical Gøngu-Hrólf and the Hero of the Gøngu-Hrólf Saga

Scandinavian sources are helpful in establishing the fact that the historical Gøngu-Hrólf was a Norwegian. The author of the Gøngu-Hrólf's saga relates that Gøngu-Hrólf was a Norwegian.¹ As regards the character of the hero of the Gøngu-Hrólf's saga, one may say that he

belongs to the land of fable. It is possible that the author has taken the name "Gongu-Hrólf" from one of the four Scandinavian sources. Then he has assigned the name to a fictitious person and composed a saga concerning this person, without regard for the biography of the original possessor of the name. In the authentic Scandinavian sources, one does not find any reference to the great weight of Gongu-Hrólf, and it seems to be that it was Gongu-Hrólf's size rather than his weight that prevented him from riding horseback and compelled him to go on foot. But the author of the Gongu-Hrólf saga puts more stress on the weight that compelled Gongu-Hrólf to go on foot. This heaviness does not, however, make it impossible for Gongu-Hrólf to perform the exploits that do not have the limitations of reality. The scenes of action have been moved to distant lands. Supernatural incidents are presented with much frequency, the practice of sorcery is represented throughout the saga, and the warriors in the story are acquainted with magic. The most accomplished is Grimr aegir, whose mother was a sea-monster, and who could walk on land and on water. The reference to the feet of Gongu-Hrólf is obvious since they were cut off by Vilhjálmm and preserved by Ingigerð in life-giving herbs. Mondull procures the cut-off feet, and smears the joints with ointments. Hrólf holds the stumps at the fire and soon after doing so is able to walk as if nothing had happened.

The name "Gongu-Hrólf" in the Gongu-Hrólf saga is that of the famous historic Rollo of Normandy, who had relatives in Iceland. The

author of the saga has not connected his hero with the historical person but has made him fictitious. Gøngu-Hrólf's exploits do not present historical reality.

St. John's University

Jamaica, New York

NOTES

1. All references to Gøngu-Hrólf's saga are from the Saga Manuscript 2845, 4to, in the Old Royal collection in the Royal Library of Copenhagen, Fol. 42v. (Gammel Kongelig Samling 2845), 4^o, Fol. 42v. The "Gøngu-Hrólf's saga" is also in the collection by C. C. Rafn Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda (Copenhagen, 1830).