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An Etymological Excursion Among the Shire Folk

Abstract

A discussion of Hobbit names and their roots in Germanic and Celtic names and words.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Hobbits—Names—Etymology; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Languages

AN ETYMOLOGICAL EXCURSION AMONG THE SHIRE FOLK

by Paula Marmor

Note: Abbreviations such as ED and AS indicate references.

Passages in *LOTR* are given as III, 314 (HM hardcover).

The names of the Hobbits may first be divided into two types: those represented by Celtic words and those of Germanic origin. The Celtic is their older language, from the time of their first settlements in Eriador, including Bree (I, 13). The Germanic terms represent the tongues of men, originally akin to the language of Rohan (Anglo-Saxon) but soon developing into the Westron (modern English).

That these two elements were mixed before the founding of the Shire is shown by the names of the two brothers who led the first group of Hobbits west into the land beyond the Brandywine, Marcho and Blanco. Marcho is Welsh, from march, horse; Blanco is the A-S blanca, from the Old Norse blakkr, horse or steed (ED). These two present an interesting parallel with Hengest (or Hengist) and Horsa, the two Saxon brothers who traditionally led the first Germanic people into England, especially when one considers that *hengest* and *horsa* are both Anglo-Saxon words for horse. Hengest was the founder of the kingdom of Kent, and quick perusal of an encyclopedia will show that the geography of that portion of England is similar to that of the Shire: the North Downs above, more hill country to the west, a body of water to the east (the Brandywine in one case and the Straits of Dover in the other) and marshy fen country to the southeast. Of course there are those scholars (the kind that don't believe in Elves) who insist that Hengest and Horsa are mythical figures. The White Horse carved on the Berkshire Downs is supposed to be their symbol (ED) and considering their names it is possible that they were created to fit their trademark. The White Horse was later used as the banner of several Anglo-Saxon kings (DC) (sound familiar?). But that isn't all! If one goes back to the premise that the Shire represents southeast and south-central England, with the Straits of Dover and the Channel as the Brandywine, one is led to conclude that the Buckland represents Brittany. This is further supported by the fact that Brittany (according to some Arthurian legend) was settled by a band of people led by one *Conan Meriadoc!* (AB, 33, 93) (Curiouser and curiouser.) Buckland, in turn, is the A-S *bocland* or *bookland*, duty-free estates granted by deed by the old Kings of Britain (see Anglo-Saxon laws, EA, vol. 1, p. 845). (Now you know why I called this an excursion.)

The Germanic Hobbit names are actually different stages of development, words preserved in various states of evolution. The older names are the Frankish and Gothic names still in use among the Tookes and Bolgers (Peregrin, Fredegar, Isenbold; see App. F, part II: On Translation, II, p. 41). These names (as well as the names used in Rohan) are usually two unconnected words: Fredegar "peace, spear" (ED, W); Isenbold "iron, bold" (ED). Some of the names used in Europe at this time (the early Middle Ages) were Latin, as Peregrin, foreign, used of a stranger or a wanderer (W, AS). Some of the names in use among the Shire folk were worn-down forms of these names, as Tobold, for Theobald, A-S Theodbeald, "people, bold" (W) (Theod is also found in *Eoethod*, "Horse-people" or "Horse-nation" OEH); Harding, for Hardwine, Strong Friend (ED).

Most of the other Hobbit names are either descriptive (Hamfast, "stay-at-home," Hending, "friendly," from *clit* hende, amiable, ES), geographical (Holman, one from the Holm, a flat land between the twistings of a river or a small island in the

stream. ES. Geographical names are often passed down and soon have no significance), or the apparently meaningless Frodo, Drogo, Odo. (Leaving out the jewel- and flower-type girls' names.) But lo! These names are not meaningless. In Anglo-Saxon times (and among the Saxons after the conquest) it was common to give nicknames for the older names, as Sicca for Sigmund, Betta for Beorhmoth (AS). For the origins of Frodo, see Lin Carter's *Tolkien: A Look Behind The Lord of the Rings*. Odo and Otho are variants of a Germanic root meaning "prosperity" (AS p. 78); compare the Bolger name Odovacar. Drogo is an old word meaning "carrier," replaced in the Middle Ages by Drew (ES, AS). Falco is a name with origins beyond recorded Germanic history. Weekley (ED) considers it the origin of Falcon; Smith (AS) rather connects it with Fulc, Folc, people. (Compare the Rohan name Folcwine.) Many of these short names are descriptive, as Longo and Largo. A recorded Anglo-Saxon nickname which would prove interesting is *Baga* or *Bagca*, meaning "fat one" (apropos). This would give a clue to the formation of last names in the major families of the Shire.

The Oldbucks (later Brandybucks) reckoned their descent from Bucca of the Marsh (Bucca is both A-S and Welsh, although the latter is more likely, as the majority of names used in the Marsh and Buckland were Celtic, that is, of the old tongue, brought north by Stoors from the Angle who hadn't learned the Westron as long before. III, 413). This Bucca was a famous character round-about, and references to "Old Bucca's grandson" or "Miss Peony over at Old Bucca's place" would devolve into the name Oldbuck in no time. In like manner, a rather influential Hobbit, say one Baga of the Hill, would leave his mark on his family. The Saxon word for Baga's people would be Bagings (cf. Eorlingas, Helmingas), which would probably become Bagins with a few years. (Bofin may have formed the same way from the lost middle-English name Bofa, of uncertain etymology, although it might be a cognate with boy. ED) Bagins may also have contained a jesting reference to Bag, for badger; Bagshot is a name occurring in England, meaning Bag's Holt, badger's wood or thicket (ES). In either case, Bag End is probably for Baga's End. (Unless a particularly fat resident of Bag End was named Baga as a double jest...)(*sigh*) (The Brock of Brockhouse and Brockenborees also means "badger" — this is similar to the naming of Hobbits as Grubbs and Maggots, not to mention Hornblower, a dialectal English name for the hornworm. W)

The Tookes may have come from an old word *took*, from French *estoc*, a short sword. (ED) This would be a logical name for a particularly adventurous Hobbit. The name may also be a short form for Theogar, Theogund, etc. (Compare Tobold from Theobald; Togo is a name that occurs in the Shire.)

A bilbo is a Spanish sword, from Bilbao, not a likely Hobbit name. But Bil, sword, is found in those old Germanic names, as Bilihar and Biligarda (AS, p. 79). Bilbo may then be shortened from Bilbert or Bilibald. (Bilibald Bagbins? I don't believe it. Not a word...)

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