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THE ETYMOLOGY OF THE WORD *ÞEGN*: A CASE STUDY OF A HAPPY MARRIAGE BETWEEN LINGUISTICS AND HISTORY?



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Who were the thegns and why studying them?

- *Thegns*: presumably the elite in the late Viking Age in both England and Scandinavia.
- The *elite* (< Fr. *élite* [lit. “chosen”]) are “...all those who enjoy a high social position (...) [which means] the possession of wealth, power and knowledge as well as recognition by others” [tous ceux qui jouissent d’une position sociale élevée (...) [ce qui signifie] la détention de la fortune, du pouvoir et du savoir ainsi que la reconnaissance par autrui].

(Feller, Laurent. 2006. “Introduction.” In *Les élites au haut moyen âge. Crises et renouvellements*. Ed. F. Bougard et al. Turnhout: Brepols. Pp. 5–22.)

- Mentioned in the corpora:
 - 1,793 times in Old English (+ 314 related words and compounds),
 - 237 times (+ 137 related words and compounds) in Old Norse,
 - 46 times in the runic inscriptions,
 - 150 in Old High German and Old Saxon.



Empirical problems with thegn's application in sources

- In **Old English** conceivably different groups are called *thegns*: (after Nicolle, David. 1992. *Arthur and the Anglo-Saxon Wars*. Vol. 154. Men-at-Arms Series. Oxford: Osprey Publishing)

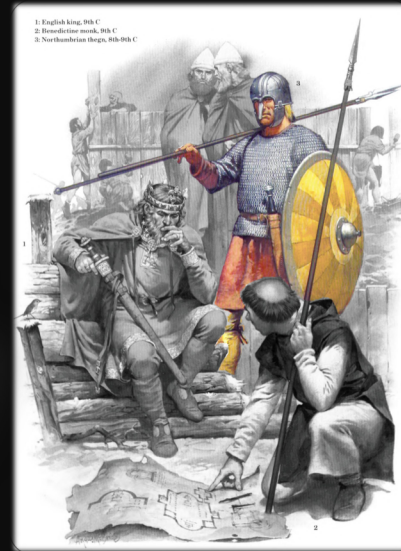
1. Kings' *ministri* – rich magnates, [more or less] closely connected to the monarchy.
2. Petty landholders (*taini*) in the *Domesday Book*.

- In **Old Norse**: *thegns* in the runic inscriptions are not connected to a higher authority:

Ulfr and Ôzurr raised this stone in memory of Áslakr, a very good þegn, their father, very brave and valiant.



The *Domesday Book*



A king's minister



Study questions for the paper:

- 1. What could have the original meaning of the word *þegn* been?**
- 2. If all its subsequent meanings are derived from one ancestor, what do they tell us about the possible implications of this evolution?**



Traditional etymology and evolution of the word **þegn**

- Germanic *þegn* < PIE **tek-no-*, “to give birth to”;
- Cf. Ancient Greek τέκνον < τεκεῖν (aorist infinitive) < τίκτω (1st person singular of present infinitive *τίκτειν*)

(Liddell, Henry G., and Scott, Robert. 1846. *A Greek-English Lexicon, Based on the German Work of Francis Passow*. New York: Harper & Brothers. Pp. 1476; 1497).

• Possible semantic evolution:



Svend Aakjær (1894-1963)

(1) “child” → (2) “boy/young man” →
 (3) “servant/retainer” → (4) “warrior,
 member of a *comitatus*” → (5)
 “attendant nobility” → (6) “knights and
 barons” → (7) “noble, chivalrous,
 courageous person.”

(Aakjær, Svend. 1927. “Old Danish
 Thegns and Drengs.” *Acta Philologica
 Scandinavica* 2: 18–19)

• Possible similar gender-age lexemes for the social categories

- Latin *puer* (“boy”)
- Old English *cniht* (MnE *knight*)
- Old Church Slavonic *отрокъ* (“lad”;
cf. *παῖς/παιδίον* and *ghulām*)
- Old Norse *sveinn* and *drengr* (“young
man”)



Shortcomings of the traditional etymology

- In later prose Old Norse *þegn* is synonymous with *maðr* (“man”):
 - *Eiðsivapingslög* 3.4
 - ❖ ...þa skall hon gjællða iii mækr biskupi en kononge *þægn gilldi* ok ætir þatt hæiðins morðz gjolld (AM 68 4°)
 - ❖ ...þa skal hon gjallda biscupi .iij. mækr. en kononge halft *mannz gilldi*. oc hætir þat hæiðins mannz gjolld. (NB 317 4°)
 - *Jóns saga helga*:
 - ❖ ...svá erum vér Íslendingar yðrir *þegnar* sem þeir, er hér eru innanlands (AM 219 fol.)
 - ❖ ...svá erum vér Íslendingar yðrir *menn* sem þeir, er hér eru innanlands (AM 234 fol.)
- Ebbe Hertzberg: a *thegn* is a “...free and independent practitioner of all rights of a person, fully vested with liberties” (...*fri og uafhængig udøver af alle en fuldtberettiget persons rettigheder*).

(Hertzberg, Ebbe. 1890. “Efterskrift angaaende tvivlsomme ord i Norges gamle love.” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 6: 266)



Perhaps, *þegn* means “[young] man” first and “[young] man in the service of a lord” second? (cf. PGmc **karilaz* – “old, mature man,” but *húskarl*)



Guus Kroonen's revisited etymology

- If *þegn* < PIE **tek-no-*, then:

1. Accent of the **first** syllable, Grimm's law: **tek-no* > *****þehna-*** (cf. PGmc **hertan* and Latin *cor*).
Verner's law: PGmc velar fricative **χ* > voiced **γ* if preceded by a non-accentuated syllable (cf. Latin *iuvencus* and OE *geong*).

BUT

2. Accent of the **second** syllable, Kluge's law: **tek-no* > *****þekka-*** (cf. PGmc **bakkon-*, **likkon-* and Latin *tango*, *lingo*). Even if Kluge's law is wrong, *τέκνον* is stressed on the first syllable.

Therefore, the etymology *þegn* < **tek-no* must be rejected.



Guus Kroonen's revisited etymology

- PGmc **pegna-* < PGmc **pegjan* (“to request”):

ON *þiggja* and OE *þicgan* “to receive, accept”; OS *thiggian*, OHG *dicken*, *digen*, and MHG *digen* “to ask, beg, endure”; OIr. *ad-teich* “to ask,” Bret. *tizaff* “to receive.”

- “Both in Germanic and the other IE branches, the original meaning seems to have been ‘to reach out the hand’ <...>, whence both ‘to request and ‘to accept’”

Kroonen, Guus J. 2013. *Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Germanic*. Leiden – Boston: BRILL. P. 536.



***Þegn* never meant “child” or “young man” and *ab initio* denoted a “retainer,” i.e. one who requests and accepts patronage and protection in exchange for service.**



Earliest attestations in the sources

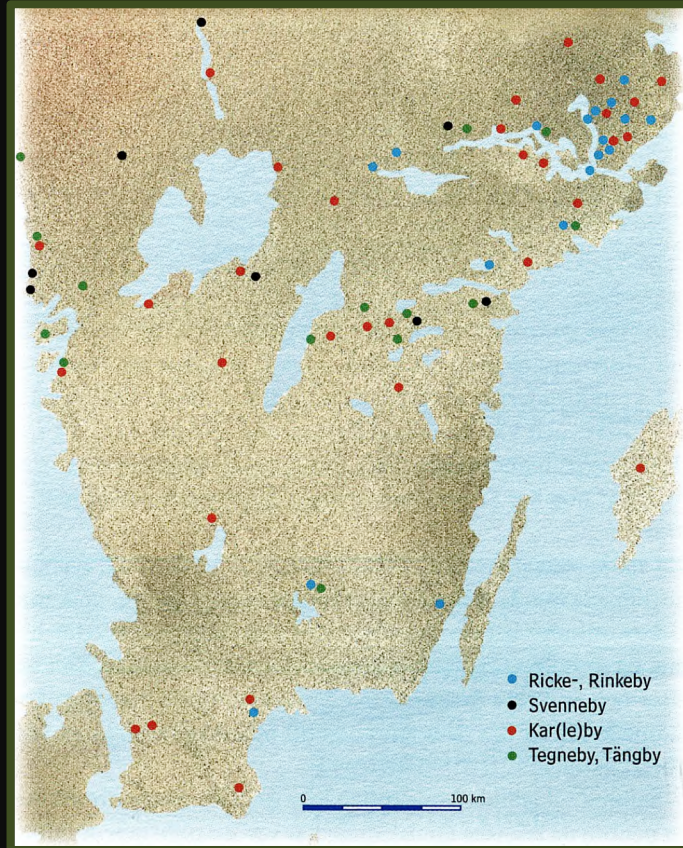
- **Épinal-Erfurt Glossary** (before 709?): *þegn* = *adsaeculam/adsexulum* (classical Latin *assecula*);
- **Laws of King Ine of Wessex** (c. 694): a house of a “king’s *thegn*” is protected against breach by a fine of 60 shillings;
- **Laws of King Wihtred of Kent** (c. 695): a “king’s *thegn*” can “purge himself with his own oath on the altar”;
- **Beowulf** (c. 725?): *þegn* = [warrior] companion,
- **Heliand** (c. 800–850): *cuninges thegan* (lines 1199 and 3184); **Otfrid von Weissenburg** (c. 790–875): “God’s *thegn*” (*i.e.* disciple).



Earliest attestations in the sources

Old Norse – ?

- 14 *ÞægnabyR*:
apparently,
“settlement of
warriors.” Cf.
Svenaby, *Karleby*,
and *Rinkeby*



(after: Larsson, Mats G. 2002. “Rinkar,
Tegnar, Karlar, Svenner.” *Populär Historia*,
no. 3: 67)



New etymology – same problem?

If *þegn* should be interpreted as “retainer/servant/warrior” and not broadly “man,” what are we to make of the later Old Norse usage in the latter sense?



Possible semantic parallels

1. Frankish *leudes/leodes*:

“With the Franks, however, the importance of the king as the ultimate source of legal authority develops quite early, so that the OHG *liut* (originally expressing the idea of the freeman) can so far have lost its force that in the Frankish word *leudesamio*, sworn to the king by his subjects, it appears to mean little more than ‘obedience’ even though it is used in apposition with *fideltas*. <...> What had earlier been a personal relationship – reciprocal as in the feudal bond and applied only to those who were on close terms with the king, the *leudes* – has here [*i.e.* mid-9th century] been converted into a more impersonal relationship between the ruler and his **subjects of free birth**, in which no such reciprocity is involved. Exactly how such a change could be brought about has been shown by reference to the views of Jonas of Orléans which were accepted by the synod of Paris in 828–9, <...> for he maintains that the subject owes obedience to royal power because it is divinely ordained and that resistance to its orders is tantamount to resistance to the commands of God himself <...>. It is in clerical circles, then, and as a result of theocratic ideas that the personal and reciprocal relationship still obtaining in 802 is changed into the impersonal and unilateral bond of 854”

(Green, David H. 1965. *The Carolingian Lord: Semantic Studies on Four Old High German Words: Balder, Frô, Truhtin, Herro*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp. 85; 228–9)

2. Russian “serf” → “subject”

- **From 1460s, the nobility calls itself “serfs”** (*Rus. холопы*) in the official petitions.
- **1702: new formula, “Your Majesty’s humble slave”** (*Rus. Вашего Величества нижайший раб*).
- **1786: new formula, “loyal subject”** (*Russian верный подданный*)



Thegns as subjects

- **The earliest attestation – 1017x1020, S985:**
+ *Cnut cing gret Lyfing arcebisceop 7 Godwine bisceop 7 Ælmaer abbot 7 Æpelwine scirman 7 Æpelric 7 ealle mine pegnas twelfhynde 7 twihynde freondlice.*

[“King Cnut greets Archbishop Lyfing and Bishop Godwine and Abbot Ælmaer and Æthelwine the Sheriff and Æthelric and all my thegns, ‘two-hundreders’ and ‘two-hundreders’, in friendship.”]

(*cf.* S1461: *Dyssa þinga is gecnæwe ælc dohtig man on Kænt, 7 on Supsexan on ðegenan 7 on ceorlan.* “[Everyone of standing in Kent and Sussex, both *thegn* and *ceorl*, is aware of this agreement.”])

- **Óttarr svarti, *Höfuðlausn* (c. 1023):**
Gegn, eru þér at þegnum þjóðskjöldunga góðra haldið hæft á veldi Hjaltlendingar kenndir.

[“Trustworthy one, you hold fittingly onto the power of good kings of the people; the Shetlanders are known to you as your thanes.”]

- ***Fagrskinna*, cap. 40 (13th century):**
Magnus the Good is acknowledged King of Norway *at villd allra þegna bæðe ríkra oc óríkra, oc allra múgsens* [“with consent of all subjects, both rich and not, as well as all the crowd.”]

(*cf.* Ebbe Hertzberg’s definition)



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***THANK YOU FOR YOUR
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