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Norwegian *ármaðr* – Swedish *ari* – Gothic *airus*

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# Norwegian *ármaðr* – Swedish *ari* – Gothic *airus*

STEFAN BRINK

The medieval royal administration in Norway and Sweden had two officials with cognate titles ON *ármaðr* and OSw *āri*, both related to Gothic *airus* ‘emissary, messenger’. The stem *ār-* in these words denote an itinerant official: in the religious sphere, an angel, in the prophane sphere of the medieval royal administration in Sweden, an emissary, a king’s representative. The Norwegian *ármaðr* is probably a later developed composition, where the *ár-* has lost this “itinerant” semantic content and resulted in a term for a “stationary” royal official in the local administration.

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There are two terms found in the Middle Ages representing a king’s administrator in Norway and Sweden, which from a linguistic point of view seem to be related, namely ON *ármaðr* and OSw *āri*. Some scholars have assumed that the two had the same background (since both contain the stem *ār-*) or at least had some “functional” similarity, as regards to the duties and functions of these royal officials.<sup>1</sup> As I will show, the words are etymological cognates, but they had two different roles in the royal administration.

In the King’s Book in the Law of the *Hælsing(i)ar* (HL; Sw *Hälsingelagen*), two paragraphs regulate the treatment of the king’s emissary, who acted as the king’s representative in the northerly part of Sweden where the *Hælsinge* Law was used.<sup>2</sup> One mentions of how this emissary and his retinue should be received and accommodated and given hospitality or billeting (Kgb 10), the other stating that he is the King’s representative at thing assemblies in the *land* (Kgb 6):

*Swa ær mælt wm konungx aræ friþ [...] æn i garþi þær sum han a wæzlu* (Kgb 10).

(This is said about the peace of the king’s *ari* [...] but at the farm, where he enjoys (or actually ‘owns’) *wæzla*.) (My transl.)

*þæssær næmpdur agha giöræs fora konungx aræ þa han þingtær i hælsingæ landi a. konungx vægna* (Kgb 6).

(These *næmpdir* shall be named before the King’s emissary (*ari*), when he holds thing in Hälsingland on the King’s behalf.) (My transl.)

<sup>1</sup> So, e.g., Johannes Kjellström, *Helsingelagen tolkad*, Almqvist & Wilksell: Uppsala 1909, 19, and intimated by Åke Holmbäck & Elias Wessén eds, *Södermannalagen och Hälsingelagen* (Svenska landskapslagar 3), Geber: Stockholm 1940, 296–7 and Anders Broberg, ‘Diskussionsreferat’, in Mats Mogren ed., *Faxeholm och nordsvensk medeltid. Ett idéseminarium i Söderhamn 11–12 april 1991*, Länsmuseum: Gävle, 85.

<sup>2</sup> *Codex iuris Helsingici = Helsingelagen; Codicis iuris Smalandici pars de re ecclesiastica = Kristnu-balken af Smålands-lagen; et, Juris urbici codex antiquior = och, Bjärköa-rätten*, C. J. Schlyter ed. (Corpus iuris sueo-gotorum antiqui. Samling af Sweriges gamla lagar, på kongl. maj:ts nådigste befallning utgifven af d. C.J. Schlyter 6), Berlingska boktryckeriet: Lund, 1844 (henceforth HL).

The word used for the billeting is *væzla*, an OSw *hapax legomenon*, hence never found in any other Old-Swedish provincial law. For anyone with knowledge of medieval Norwegian laws, it is easy to connect this word to the well-known *veizla* institution.<sup>3</sup> Of course, it is the same word and institution, indicating a very important link between the HL and Norwegian legal language and customs.<sup>4</sup>

In these paragraphs the word for this King's emissary is also mentioned, namely OSw *konungsari*.<sup>5</sup> The second element in this compound *ari* is unique for the HL and has no counterpart in any other provincial law in Sweden.<sup>6</sup> This King's official is probably mentioned in a letter from 1324, issued in Umeå, northern Sweden: *Johannes Ingimarsson, officialis domini regis swecie super terram helsingie*,<sup>7</sup> (Johan Ingimarsson, the Swedish king's official over the land Hälsingland).

Many historians have seen this *ari* in conjunction with the ON *ármaðr*, the name of a king's steward in Norway, of which there has been a long discussion in Norway regarding this official and his role in the administrative organization during the Middle Ages.<sup>8</sup>

To sum up this discussion, the *ármaðr* designated the earliest representative of the Norwegian king as his steward or bailiff, who managed royal estates in Norway and those of jarls in the Orkneys. They were the king's local representative, endowed with the power to act on behalf of the king in administrative and judicial affairs; in principle they oversaw almost the entire local administration and collected taxes and other revenues on the king's behalf. The *ármenn* were also to house the itinerant king and bishop during their journeys. There seems also to have been some overlap in the duties of an *ármaðr* and those of the *umboðsmaðr* or *lénsmaðr* (see below). It seems

<sup>3</sup> Halvard Bjørkvik, 'Veitsle', in John Granlund et al. eds, *Kulturhistoriskt lexikon för nordisk medeltid från vikingatid till reformationstid* 19, Allhem: Malmö 1975, 632–34; *A Lexicon of Medieval Nordic Law*, Jeffrey Love, Inger Larsson, Ulrika Djärv, Christine Peel & Erik Simensen eds, Open Book Publisher: Cambridge, UK 2020, 382 (Henceforth LMNL).

<sup>4</sup> Stefan Brink, 'The Hälsinge Law between South and West, King and Church, and Local Customs', in Stefan Brink & Lisa Collinson eds, *New Approaches to Early Law in Scandinavia* (Acta Scandinavia 3), Brepols: Turnhout 2014a, 37–56.

<sup>5</sup> See Harald Hjærne, *Helsingelif under Helsingelag* (Föreningen Heimdals folkskrifter 8:68), P. A. Norstedt & söner: Stockholm 1901, 27; Kjellström 1909, 19–21; Holmbäck & Wessén 1940, 296–97; Elias Wessén, *Svensk medeltid. En samling uppsatser om svenska medeltidshandskrifter och texter 1: Landskapslagar* (Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademiens Handlingar. Filologiska serien 9), Almqvist & Wiksell: Stockholm 1968, 114–15; Gerhard Hafström, 'Konungsären', in John Granlund et al. eds, *Kulturhistoriskt lexikon för nordisk medeltid* 9, Allhem: Malmö 1964, 96–7; Brink 2014a, 47–9.

<sup>6</sup> Holmbäck & Wessén 1940, 296.

<sup>7</sup> *Svenskt diplomatarium: Diplomatarium Suecana* 1–, Kungl. Vitterhets historie och antikvitetsakademien/Riksarkivet: Stockholm 1829– (Henceforth DS). There is an online diplomatarium, *Svenskt Diplomatariums huvudkartotek* (SDHK) (<https://sok.riksarkivet.se/sdhk>) with new signa for every letter (SDHK+nr). References here are to DS+nr, which can be found in the SDHK, and also in the printed *Svenskt diplomatarium*. Here DS 2475.

<sup>8</sup> Halvard Bjørkvik, 'Embedsintægter', in John Granlund et al. eds, *Kulturhistoriskt lexikon för nordisk medeltid* 3, Allhem: Malmö 1958, 609; Per Sveaas Andersen, 'Sysselmann', in John Granlund et al. eds, *Kulturhistoriskt lexikon för nordisk medeltid* 17, Allhem: Malmö 1972, 652; Knut Helle, *Norge blir en stat, 1130–1319* (Norges historie 3), 2nd edn, Universitetsforlaget: Bergen 1974; Per Sveaas Andersen, 'Ármann', in John Granlund et al. eds, *Kulturhistoriskt lexikon för nordisk medeltid* 20, Malmö: Allhem 1976, 446–50; Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Norsk historie 800–1300. Frå høvdingmakt til konge- og kyrkjemakt*, Det norske samlaget: Oslo 1999; Hans Jacob Orning, 'Den materielle basis for den norske kongemaktens utvikling i høymiddelalderen', *Historisk Tidsskrift* 84 (2005), 455–69; Sverre Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom. Strate Formation in Norway c. 900–1360*, Museum Tusulanum Press: Copenhagen 2010; Hans Jacob Orning & Bjørn Poulsen, 'Holding Royal Office and the Creation and Consolidation of the Elites in Scandinavia c. 1050–1250', in Bjørn Poulsen, Helle Vogt & Jón Viðar Sigurðsson eds, *Nordic Elites in Transformation, c. 1050–1250, vol. 1: Material Resources*, Routledge: Abingdon 2019, 212–47.

that there have been one *ármaðr* for each *fylki* in Norway, where they had some function at the thing assembly. It is an open question regarding the *ármaðr*'s social standing; however, it seems he normally was of lower birth, some sources indicate he was of a servile status,<sup>9</sup> and shows a lot of similarities to the *bryti* in medieval Denmark and Sweden.<sup>10</sup> Along with the *lendir menn*, they were often in conflict with local nobility whose interests rivaled those of the king or bishop. During the later medieval centuries, the *ármenn* were gradually replaced by the more esteemed and higher-ranked sheriffs (*sýslumenn*). The position had vanished entirely by the sixteenth century.<sup>11</sup>

It is not easy to understand the function and duties of the local administrators in medieval Norway. The afore mentioned *lénsmaðr* was often referred to as a deputy to the sheriff (*sýslumaðr*) and acted on his behalf, particularly by serving in court proceedings. He also had the authority to arrest criminals. Some sources indicate there should be no more than two *lénsmenn* in any given district (*fylki*). The most important function of a *lénsmaðr* was collecting incomes, namely taxes and fines, which then coincides with the duty of the *ármaðr*.<sup>12</sup>

Hans Jacob Orning has tried to summarize the functions of the *ármaðr* and the other local administrators in medieval Norway in the following way:

Around the year 1100, the dominant system was one of *ármenn* and *brytar* who were, at least originally, part of the retinue of the king and who were under his direct rule, combined with the elite men in an essentially horizontal alliance with the king (*lendir menn* and *stallari*). Around 1200, the system gave way to a uniform, one-tier, royal system of *sýslumenn* and *umbozmen* (and later *advocati*), heralding a more professional administration. The change in officeholders also marked a clearer definition of royal districts, which grew larger. At the same time, informal systems of *veizlur* and hospitality gave way to more formalized systems of payment, including the new military taxes. The standardization of royal office marked the strengthening of royal status and offices, and as kings were no longer dependent on men of servile status the *ármenn* and *brytar* disappeared.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, whereas the Norwegian *ármaðr* was a steward on a farm or estate, the Hælsingian *ari* was an emissary, who travelled around the King's realm, as his official. The Norwegian *ármaðr* was a "static" local administrator for the king; the Hælsingian *ari* was an "itinerant" king's representative. The function of the *ari* was therefore more similar to the Old Norse *árr* m. (also *qrr*) 'angel, messenger',<sup>14</sup> a word often found in religious language.

<sup>9</sup> Tore Iversen, *Trelldommen. Norsk slaveri i middelalderen* (Historisk institutt. Skrifter 1), Historisk institutt, Universitetet i Bergen: Bergen 1997, 167–80.

<sup>10</sup> Stefan Brink, 'Bryten', in Olof Karsvall & Kristofer Jupiter eds., *Medeltida storgårdar: 15 uppsatser om ett tvärvetenskapligt forskningsproblem* (Acta academiae regiae Gustavi Adolphi 131), Kungl. Gustav Adolfs Akademien för svensk folkkultur: Uppsala 2014b, 7–82; Stefan Brink, *Thraldom. A History of Slavery in the Viking Age*, Oxford University Press: New York & Oxford 2021, 148–60.

<sup>11</sup> LMNL, 37.

<sup>12</sup> LMNL, 225.

<sup>13</sup> Orning & Poulsen 2019, 234.

<sup>14</sup> Jan de Vries, *Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 2nd edn, Brill: Leiden 1962, 14.

These words, with a stem *ār-*, are to be etymologically seen in context – but not as identical<sup>15</sup> – with e.g. the Gothic *airus* ‘emissary, messenger’,<sup>16</sup> as well as Old English *ār*, Old Saxon *ēr*, with the same meanings.<sup>17</sup> These words for a messenger and emissary we find used for a messenger within the Christian religious context, as a term for an ‘angel’. This probably hints at the possibility that the Hælsingian *ari* (and also ON *árr* m.) is older than *ármaðr*, where the *ár-* has seen a semantic shift or development. The word *ari* (< PGmc *āran-*) is to be understood as an *an-*derivation to a PGmc stem *ār-*.<sup>18</sup> The etymology and the background to these words, and also the related ON *ørendi*, Sw *ärende* ‘errand’, with a long and a short stem-vowel, is problematic.<sup>19</sup>

To sum up: We have in the early Scandinavian languages two words, *árr* m. (also *qrr*) ‘angel, messenger’ and *ari* ‘emissary’, which have a close etymological affinity with Gothic *airus* ‘emissary, messenger’; hence etymologically and semantically cognate words found in all three branches of the Proto-Germanic language. These words denote an itinerant person: in the religious sphere, an angel, in the profane sphere of the medieval royal administration in Sweden, an emissary, a king’s representative. The Norwegian *ármaðr* is probably a later developed composition, where the *ár-* has lost this “itinerant” semantic content and resulted in a term for a “stationary” royal official in the local administration.

#### Abbreviations used in this article:

HL = The *Hælsinge* Law (Sw Hälsingelagen)

Kgb = Konungabalken (The King’s Book)

ON = Old Norse

OSw = Old Swedish

PGmc = Proto-Germanic

Sw = Swedish

<sup>15</sup> Which, however, was the opinion by Hjalmar Falk & Alf Torp, *Etymologisk ordbog over det norske og det danske sprog*, vols 1–2, H. Aschehoug: Oslo 1903–1906, 6.

<sup>16</sup> Sigmund Feist, *Vergleichendes Wörterbuch der gotischen Sprache mit Einschluss des krimgotischen und sonstiger zerstreuter Überreste des gotischen*, 3rd edn, Brill: Leiden 1939, 26–7.

<sup>17</sup> Ferdinand Holthausen, *Altenglisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Germanische Bibliothek 1:4:7), Carl Winther: Heidelberg 1934, 6; de Vries 1962, 14.

<sup>18</sup> Emil Olson, *De appellativa substantivens bildning i fornsvenskan. Bidrag till den fornsvenska ordbildningsläran*, Gleerup: Lund 1916, 20.

<sup>19</sup> Falk & Torp 1903–1906, 1007; Feist 1939, 26–7; Elof Hellquist, *Svensk etymologisk ordbok*, 3rd edn, Gleerup: Lund 1948, 1443–4, 1446; de Vries 1962, 14, 682; Vladimir Orel, *A Handbook of Germanic Etymology*, Brill: Leiden 2003, 9; Guus Kroonen, *Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Germanic*, Brill: Leiden & Boston 2013, 14.