



Københavns Universitet



Island Names

Gammeltoft, Peder

Published in:
The Oxford Handbook of Names and Naming

DOI:
[10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199656431.013.49](https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199656431.013.49)

Publication date:
2016

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):
Gammeltoft, P. (2016). Island Names. In C. Hough (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Names and Naming: Oxford Handbooks in Linguistics* (pp. 125-134). Oxford: Oxford University Press. DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199656431.013.49

Oxford Handbooks Online

Island Names

Peder Gammeltoft

The Oxford Handbook of Names and Naming

Edited by Carole Hough

Print Publication Date: Jan 2016 Subject: Linguistics, Semantics, Pragmatics

Online Publication Date: Mar 2016 DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199656431.013.49

Abstract and Keywords

Island names are an interesting category of names to study. Not only do they have an air of mystery and adventure associated with them, owing to their being surrounded by water and difficult to reach, but being often among the first places to be settled—and thus named—*island names* are etymologically interesting and provide us with insights into language history, migration patterns, and, not least, the mentality of our ancestors who named these places. In many areas, however, *island names* also bear witness to a less favourable side of humankind—colonialism. Alongside the great discoveries of new worlds and peoples in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries came the wish for commercial exploitation of these newfound places. Many names of islands throughout the world reflected, as some still do, the mind-set of the colonizing powers, a trait which is only being remedied now in our post-colonial era.

Keywords: island names, etymology, migration history, mentality history, geopolitics, colonialism, naming principles

NO man is an island, as John Donne put it in 1624, but he is most definitely living on one. All landmasses on Earth are, when all comes to all, surrounded by water. However, we do not consider all land to be islands—the biggest are normally referred to as *continents*. In this chapter, all landmasses are considered to be islands by definition. Thus, *island names* are here defined as names used of archipelagos, island states, islands, islets, atolls, skerries, and rocky outcrops—basically anything with (permanent or tidal) water around them, etc. Even the names of the continents will be used to highlight various aspects of *island names* and naming of islands.

Mankind has always been fascinated by islands. They appeal to our inquisitive nature, offering us something to explore, albeit just outside of reach—at least not without us transcending the water in between. We have probably all felt the lure of that narrow stretch of land just visible in the distance, wishing to go and take a look and see what may be found there. At the same time, islands offer solitude and an escape from the

helter-skelter of our everyday worlds. Sometimes, however, this solitude may be transformed into a prison—not allowing us to return to our daily lives. This is also a strong theme in mankind’s encounter with islands, detracting from islands as livable places.

When the lake of Filsø, DNK,¹ was drained in order to make room for farming land in the late nineteenth century, new islands appeared in the ever-diminishing lake. Two of these were named *Sankt Helene* and *Djævleøen*, Danish name forms of the penal colonies *Saint Helena*, SHN, and *île du Diable*, GUF.² The exact reason for these names are now lost but it is imaginable it was the barren and uninhabitable appearance of these newly emerged places that stimulated the connection with these feared island prisons that had become so infamous in the preceding decades.

(p. 126) 9.1 Why Are Island Names Worth Studying?

Islands have a tendency to be the first to be named by the first people to settle, or just set eyes on, them. This means that islands are usually among the first localities to be named, in both monolingual, multilingual, and language change areas. Thus, island names provide valuable evidence not only of language historical developments, they also allow us to get a glimpse of earlier migration patterns, the mental history of our naming ancestors, and later in history how far-flung islands became entangled in the geopolitical power struggles of colonial nations hungry for new territories to rule and administer. We shall see examples of these research areas in this chapter.³

9.2 Island Names and their Importance to Language History

Since island names tend to belong to the earliest language strata, old linguistic traits can be observed with a fair number of island names. By combining language history with historically known migrations, it is possible to indicate at which times certain linguistic traits were in force and when certain linguistic changes must have taken place.

A couple of examples of this can be explored in relation to the island names of Scandinavian origin in the British Isles. These names are the result of a large-scale

migration from Scandinavia to the British Isles, probably mainly during the ninth–tenth centuries. The island names in the Northern Isles—Orkney and Shetland, GBR, are usually either compound formations such as: *Foula* ‘Bird Island’ from Old Norse *fugl* ‘bird’ and Old Norse *ey* ‘island’ and *Vementrie*, ‘Island belonging to Vémundr’, from the Old Norse male personal name *Vémundr* + Old Norse *ey*; or they are uncompounded comparative names such as: *Wyre*, from Old Norse *vígr* ‘spear’, owing to its tapering, spearhead like shape (Gammeltoft 2005: 258–9). A couple of instances of reversed generic-specific word order are also known, always in the form *Eyin Helga* ‘The holy isle’, now *Eynhallow* but also known as a Viking Age and Medieval Scandinavian name for *Iona*.⁴

(p. 127) By surveying the island name types of the Viking Age colonies, we can establish a typology for Scandinavian island name formations in the ninth–tenth centuries. When turning back to Scandinavia, we of course encounter the same name types, as seen in the examples *Håøya* ‘High island’, NOR (Gammeltoft 2005: 257), and *Saltholm* ‘Salty islet’, DNK (Jørgensen 2008: 244). And there are also historical examples of reversed word order in the current *Helgøya* of Lake Mjøsa, NOR, which is also attested as *Eyin Helga*.⁵

It is, however, striking that a substantial number of Scandinavian island names are of a different type altogether from those in the Viking Age colonies, namely suffixed place-names with a varied and diverse stock of derivations, ranging from *k*-derivation in **Stork* (now *Sturkö*), SWE, possibly ‘The large [one]’ (SOL: 300),⁶ over *ia*-derivations, as in **Eria* (now *Ærø*), DNK, possibly ‘The curvy [one]’ (Jørgensen 2008: 344), to *s*-derivations, as in **Samps* (now *Samsø*), DNK, conceivably ‘The joined [one]’ (Jørgensen 2008: 244), and the commonly occurring *und*-derived *Borgund* (now *Borgann* and *Borgundøya*), NOR, ‘The large [one]’, **Jalund* (now *Jeløya*), NOR, perhaps ‘The howling [one]’ (NSL: 101, 243). These names belong to an earlier stratum of island names (NSL: 46–9), and owing to the complete lack of this name-type, it is possible to say that derived island names comfortably predate the ninth century. On the other hand, the instances of reversed word order can be seen in, for example, *Eyin Helga*, now where the generic + specific word order seen in historical sources is a typical trait of early Scandinavian. However, its existence in the Viking Age colonies testifies to it being a longer-lived trait than derivation formations.

At the same time, there are also differing traits between island names in the Viking Age colonies and the Scandinavian homeland. There is a greater tendency to ‘update’ the island names to newly emerged naming structures in Scandinavia, not least the reversion of the post-positioned adjective in *Eyin Helga* to present *Helgøya*, NOR, whose exact parallel is to be found in the Orcadian *Eynhallow*, GBR (NSL: 206). This seemingly did not

occur in the Viking Age colonies, thus probably retaining a more conservative form of Norse—as is visible in Iceland today.

9.3 Island Names and Migration Patterns

By testing the language origin of island name formations, a picture may be gained of the spread of peoples and their languages throughout the world. By adding language (p. 128) historical evidence to the equation, however, it is possible to say when certain languages spread to where. If we return briefly to the islands discussed above, the presence of island names of Scandinavian origin in the Scottish Isles proves that there was a Scandinavian presence in those archipelagos at some time. The time of Scandinavian presence there can be judged by examining the structure of the name formations and their content. So, if we look at two Hebridean examples: *Miughalaigh/Mingulay*, GBR, and *Eirisgeigh/Eriskay*, GBR, and look beneath their present Gaelic and Anglicised ‘varnish’, we see that they are compound formations of which the second element is Old Norse *ey* ‘island’. The first element of the former name is Old Norse *mikill* ‘large, great’; whereas the specific of the latter contains the genitive singular form of an Old Norse personal name *Eiríkr*. From this, it is clear that the word order is *specific + generic*. This proves that these names are definitely of non-Gaelic origin, since Gaelic word order normally dictates native Gaelic place-names to have a *generic + specific* word order. The fact that *Miughalaigh* and *Eirisgeigh* are compound formations puts them firmly within the later layer of Scandinavian island names. However, the occurrence of the pre-Christian Old Norse personal name, *Eiríkr*, is evidence of a formation most probably not later than the conversion of Scandinavians to Christianity. In Scandinavia, the conversion occurred from c.1000 AD and later, although it is thought that the conversion took place rather earlier in the Viking Age colonies. Thus, by looking at a couple of island names, we can state (with a fair degree of certainty) that Scandinavians had migrated to the Scottish Isles in the last centuries of the first millennium.

Migration patterns can naturally be followed throughout the world and over much greater distances. If we make a long, long leap to the other side of our planet to the Pacific Ocean, we reach the home of countless far-flung islands. Owing to the great distance of the islands in the Pacific, the languages there are very numerous but are usually divided into Melanesian, Micronesian, and Polynesian languages, all belonging to the so-called Austronesian language family. The common Polynesian word *motu* ‘island’ is a good example of how migrations can be traced. Being mostly confined to the Polynesian languages today, a mapping of all names containing this element (grey dots on Fig. 9.1)

shows that the name element is also found particularly in the Melanesian language area and to some extent in the Micronesian one as well. High concentrations are found in New Zealand (especially the northern parts), French Polynesia, and in Fiji. Being part of the Melanesian language area, Fiji may have its concentration of names in *Motu*- as a result of Tongan influence from the tenth century onwards, but since the element is virtually unknown (Geraghty 2005b)—certainly as an independent noun—it is altogether more likely that *motu* was indigenous to Fiji, which saw its first Melanesian settlement c. 2,500–2,000 BC.



[Click to view larger](#)

Figure 9.1 Map showing the distribution of island names containing Polynesian *motu* 'island'

If this is the case, then the distribution of names containing *motu* can be seen to visualize the spread of the Austronesian languages in the Pacific over three to five millennia from, probably, the Maritime South East Asia via Melanesia into the Pacific with its furthest outliers, Easter Island and New Zealand colonized after the tenth–thirteenth centuries. This articulates

well with archaeological and genetic evidence suggesting that the spread of the Austronesian culture and peoples took place in a semi-circular [\(p. 129\)](#) eastward move from Maritime South East Asia into the Pacific (Pawley 2002: 251–73; see also Anonymous 2008). The most compelling piece of onomastic evidence we have for an eastward migration into the Pacific, however, lies in the name of *Fiji*, FJI,⁷ and one of its isles. One of the most westerly islands in the archipelago is called *Naviti*, FJI, which literally means 'the east' or 'the sunrise' (Geraghty 2005a). Such a name would not make sense if it had not been named from further west of the isles, such as the Solomon Islands, SLB, or Vanuatu, VUT (Geraghty 2005a: 7). The current name *Fiji*, or *Viti*, locally thus ultimately derives from the same name, being possibly an abbreviation of **Navitilevu* 'Large Naviti'.

The important thing to note here is that only place-names can say something about what language a migrating people spoke. Therefore, with careful attention to place-names, their origins, and language historical developments, it is possible to [\(p. 130\)](#) quantify

evidence from other scientific disciplines and create a more rounded picture of (pre)historical events.

9.4 Island Names and Geopolitics

A more sinister side to migration is also visible in many island names throughout the world—and in particular in the Indian and Pacific Ocean areas—namely Western European expansionism and colonialism. With the rise of the great competing seafaring nations, Portugal, the Netherlands, Great Britain, and France, and to a lesser extent nations such as Imperial Russia and Denmark, a quest for new lands which could bring new fortunes and exotic commodities back to Europe spurred a series of explorations into unknown parts of the world which usually ended up with territorial claims to far-flung lands. One very effective way for an explorer to claim a territory for his own country or ruler was achieved by naming a place in his own language—and usually commemorating an aspect of the explorer's cultural and social background.

In this battle for new lands, islands were often given names with potent cultural and national associations, owing to their strategic importance not only as potential sources of income and goods but also as bridgeheads for further explorations and land claiming. Thus, very large or strategically important islands often have several names. For instance, *Australia*, AUS, has been known under a great number of names, such as: *Terra Australis (Incognita)* (Unknown South Land), *Nova Hollandia* (New Holland), *New South Wales*, *Notasia*, and *Ulimaroa*. The first of these names are instances of what may be called an 'exploration name' and whether it is to be considered to be a place-name or merely a descriptive label is arguable. In the seventeenth century, however, with the increase of Dutch activities in the Indian Ocean, the name *Nova Hollandia* was bestowed on the sparsely chartered continent by the famous Dutch seafarer Abel Tasman (Forsyth 1967). His choice of name can hardly have been coincidental, as it is an effective and simple way of stating the Netherlands' alleged right to this new, vast continent by naming it after one of the provinces of the Netherlands. As the British grew hungry for new colonies, Captain Cook undertook a journey into what had hitherto been a Dutch sea domain and claimed the eastern parts of Australia in 1770 in the name of *New South Wales* (Anonymous 1966), again making use of the same naming principles as Abel Tasman—naming after a region in the country under which it is claimed. Western Australia, however, retained the name *Nova Hollandia*/New Holland (until 1833). Noting the potential problems in having two names for the Australian continent, Matthew Flinders, the first person to circumnavigate Australia, proposed the name *Australia* as an umbrella term for the territories of New Holland and New South Wales, and this

eventually became the name under which we know Australia today. The two remaining names, *Notasia* and *Ulimaroa*, are best termed cartographic curiosities. *Notasia* appeared on a number of maps and in some literary works in the first quarter of the nineteenth century (Tent 2010). The origin of *Notasia* is not entirely certain (p. 131) but is thought to derive from Greek *notos* + *asia*, that is, 'South Asia' (Tent 2010). The name of *Ulimaroa* for Australia, on the other hand, has its unlikely origin in Sweden, having been used by Daniel Djurberg in his geography from 1776 (Djurberg 1776), and subsequently on a map from 1780 (Djurberg and Åkerman 1780). The name gained a certain amount of currency in other Swedish, German, Czech, and Austrian maps over the next forty years (Geraghty and Tent 2010; Du Rietz 1961: 84), but derives from some of the conversations between Captain James Cook and the Polynesian priest, chief, and navigator of Ra'iatea in 1769–70, where it is described as 'a country of great extent, called *Ulimaroa*, to which some people had sailed in a very large canoe' (Hawkesworth 1773). The name appears to go back to Māori **Rimaroa* and it seems to mean something like 'Long arm' (Tent and Geraghty 2012: 15), presumably describing the shape of the island.⁸

Not only did a continent like Australia have many names bestowed to it, as a result of the rival aspirations of seafaring nations and cartographers' misconceptions, but also smaller entities like the above-mentioned *Fiji*, FJI, had before James Cook's usage of the Tongan name form for the isles, been called as varied names as *Prins Wyllem's Eylanden* (Abel Tasman) and *Bligh's Islands*, *Sandalwood Islands*, and *Cannibal Islands* (Geraghty 2005a: 7). None of these names was in use very long. However, more often than not, island peoples saw their traditional names vanish into oblivion when their islands were 'discovered' and subsequently named by Western European explorers and colonizers. Thus, an island group like *Tokelau*, TKL, was renamed *Union Islands* by European explorers during the nineteenth century and retained this name until 1946 when the islands were called *Tokelau Island*, and subsequently shortened to *Tokelau* in 1976. *Tokelau* consists of three coral atolls, *Atafu*, *Nukunonu*, and *Fakaofu*, TKL. When *Atafu* was discovered in 1765, it was given the name *Duke of York's Island*, and when *Nukunonu* was first visited by Europeans it was given the name *Duke of Clarence's Island*. *Fakaofu* long stayed off the radar of Western explorers, but when it was finally discovered, it was given the name *D'Wolf's Island*, thus effectively alienating its inhabitants from their own islands by exchanging their traditional names for colonial ones. The same was the case with *New Zealand*, NEZ, which is called *Aotearoa* by its indigenous Māori populations. In the twentieth century, however, most of the island names reflecting exploratory and colonial efforts of the seventeenth–nineteenth centuries have now been renamed, such as the abovementioned *Tokelau*, TKL or given double name forms, as in the case of *New Zealand*, NEZ, which is also officially known under both its Māori and English names: *Aotearoa* and *New Zealand*. In other cases, a great variety of

names have been retained, both European and indigenous, as in the case of *Penrhyn*, COK, the largest and most remote atoll in Kūki 'Āirani/Cook Islands, which is also known as: *Tongareva*, *Mangarongaro*, *Hararanga*, and *Te Pitaka*.⁹

(p. 132) In a number of instances, however, the current indigenous or official name of Pacific islands and island nations are merely adaptations of Western European names, for example *Kūki 'Āirani*, COK, for *Cook Islands*; *Kiribati*, KIR, for *Gilbert Islands*; *Kiritimati*, KIR, for *Christmas Island*. Some of these islands were uninhabited at the time of discovery, such as *Kiritimati*, which is the reason why the island name has not reverted back to its original name—there simply was not one. With *Kiribati* and *Kūki 'Āirani*, where most of the islands within these nations had been settled at the time of European 'discoveries', the reasons for retaining an adapted form of a European name must be sought elsewhere. The most obvious reason is that no traditional collective name for these present-day island states ever existed.

9.5 Island Names and Mentality History

It is also possible to use island names to create a mentality history of naming. Early island names appear mainly descriptive, the earliest stratum, derived formations, seemingly only describe characteristics and not what the denotation is, as in the above *Borgund* and *Jalund*, NOR, meaning 'The hilly (one)' and 'The noisy (one)', respectively, without saying what is hilly or noisy. Later, stating the locality type becomes dominant and compounded and un-compounded names abound, for example as in the above *Eynhallow* and *Miughalaig*, GBR, clearly stating that they denote islands + what is special about them: religious significance and size. During this period comparative names are found, for example *Giltarump* and *Noss*, from Shetland, GBR, deriving from ON *gyltarumpa* 'hogs rump' and ON *noss* 'nose, nostril'. These naming possibilities live on until today.

With the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, a notable change is observable in many island names coined from then on. Where the focus of naming was previously on the feature itself, naming with the namer in focus becomes normal. This applies particularly to the so-called commemorative names, where naming focuses on people, places, or items special to the namer. Examples are *Cook Islands*, COK, or *Nepean Island* off Norfolk Island, AUS, named from Evan Nepean, the Undersecretary for the Home Office, shortly after the beginning of the First Settlement period on Norfolk (1788–1814). There is a difference between the two names in as much as the former, Cook Islands, is a truly commemorative name naming after a person of the past. The name first appeared on a

Russian Naval chart, commemorating explorer James Cook, who discovered the islands. Incidentally, Cook himself called the islands *Hervey Islands*, after Augustus John Hervey (1724–79), later Third Earl of Bristol, a naval officer who became a Lord of the Admiralty. Hervey was a strong supporter and friend of James Cook (Erskine 1953: xxi). In bestowing a name like *Nepean Island* and, for that matter, *Hervey Islands*, the naming motive is commemorative in a different way—naming after a benefactor (p. 133) or a sponsor. This will also be the reason for a significant proportion of the numerous names of regents and their nearest families in colonial settings.

Another naming principle which evolves with the Enlightenment is naming according to events of significance to the namer, or naming circumstances such as celebrating discovery on a certain day or after having been saved from a storm. Well-known examples of the former are the instances of Christmas Island, KIR and AUS, and the well-known Easter Island, CHL. The Pacific *Christmas Island* was discovered by James Cook on 24 December 1777, whereas the Australian *Christmas Island*, situated in the Indian Ocean, was named by captain William Mynors, who encountered the island on Christmas Day 1643. This island was, however, also known by other names such as *Moni* and *Selam*, and the name form *Christmas Island* did not gain currency until well into the nineteenth century (Tent 2013). *Easter Island* was named by the island's first recorded European visitor, Jacob Roggeveen from the Netherlands, who encountered the island on Easter Sunday 1722. Roggeveen named it *Paasch-Eyland*, which has subsequently been translated as Easter Island and *Isla de Pascua*, the official Spanish name of the island (owing to it being part of Chile). The current Polynesian name of the island is *Rapa Nui*.

Names bestowed according to Renaissance and Enlightenment principles exist to a large extent even today, but with the steady decline of colonialism since World War II, more and more of these names have been replaced by indigenous name forms. In a large number of cases, the old island name exists concurrently with the new, indigenous name for the island, for example the abovementioned *Union Island*, TKL, which was renamed *Tokelau Island* in 1946 (and shortened to *Tokelau* in 1976)—either as officially sanctioned dual name forms, or as unsanctioned entities living on, owing to the fact that the old, colonial form is better known internationally. It can be argued that this latest trend in island naming is a way of giving the islands back to the original inhabitants. However, there can be very little doubt that renaming island names in the languages of the inhabitants reflects the growing awareness and need for taking the local population into consideration in naming questions.

9.6 Rounding off

The name category island names are in many ways similar to all other place-names. This is only natural, as islands as physical entities are found among all other nameable entities, such as settlements, hills, mountains, fields, rivers and lakes, etc., and thus form part of the same cognitive framework of the naming community. Thus, they are bestowed in the same way as all other relevant physical entities and according to the naming principles of the day.

Island names do, however, offer us a gateway into the minds of the namers through time in a better way than most other name types. This is probably owing to the locality type of islands—being isolated in water—so that the reference is virtually always to the (p. 134) island itself and not, for example, a metonymically transferred name form from another, original, locality. The study of island names is ripe for providing insights not only into the *what* (etymology) and *why* (motivation) of naming but even more so into the *who* (namer) and *when* (time of naming) questions and particularly into the principles, trends, and ideologies behind naming. The door is open . . .

Notes:

⁽¹⁾ The country codes used in this chapter are the so-called *ISO 3166-1 alpha-3* codes, a system of three-letter country codes as defined in the ISO 3166-1 standard published by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO). See List of Abbreviations.

⁽²⁾ The location of *Sankt Helena* and *Djævløen* are known from maps and place-name registries but nowadays they are no longer remembered, owing to the fact that they are no longer islands. *Djævløen* is today a barely recognizable elevation in a field, whereas *Sankt Helena* has recently become a recognized Stone Age archaeological site known locally as *Gammeltoft Pold*, or *Gammeltoft Odde* on official maps.

⁽³⁾ Many of the examples given in this chapter are also applicable to all other types of place-names, as island names do not differ principally in type, origin, history, or usage from other place-name types.

⁽⁴⁾ This trait seems to have been in lively use in the Northern Isles, and several examples exist today, e.g. in the Shetland sea stack name *Stackingroo*, GBR, from the definite form of Old Norse *stakkr* ‘a sea rock, stack’ + *grá* ‘grey’.

(⁵) Post-positioned adjective (noun + adjective) was the standard in Common Scandinavian and is observable until the twelfth century. From the Viking Age and onwards, today's word order in Scandinavian, adjective + noun, becomes increasingly common.

(⁶) The *Sturkö* article is somewhat unclear and is not explicitly stating that this is an original *k*-derivation. However, this must be the case, as there is no other way in which the current *-k-* should occur in the name.

(⁷) The name Fiji is actually not an original local name for this archipelago but rather of Tongan origin. The establishment of a Tongan name form for these islands is owing to Captain James Cook, who learnt of the existence of Fiji through his extended stay in Tonga in the 1770s. The current form of the name, Fiji [fe:je:], reflects the Tongan pronunciation of the time. Today, Tongans call Fiji for *Fisi*. The local Fijian name, on the other hand, is *Viti*, from which the Tongan name form also originates (see Geraghty 2005a: 6).

(⁸) The place *Ulimaroa* is thought to refer to is no longer believed to be Australia but rather *New Caledonia*, NCL, or *Kadavu* and *Vitilevu*, FJI (Tent and Geraghty 2012: 10).

(⁹) The name *Penrhyn* derives from the ship *Lady Penrhyn* who landed on the island in 1788, a ship noted for being one of the ships that founded the earliest convict colony in Australia. *Tongareva* seemingly means 'Tonga floating in space', 'Tonga-in-the-skies', or possibly 'A way from the South' (see Kloosterman 1976).

Peder Gammeltoft

Peder Gammeltoft has researched place-names since 1996, focussing on place-names of Scandinavian origin outside of Scandinavia. His major contributions include a survey of the Old Norse place-name element *bólstaðr*, regional studies of place-names containing Old Norse *tóft* in the former Viking-Age colonies, island names, and managing the digitization of the Danish place-name collections. He also takes an active part in the standardization of place-names through the Danish Place-Name Commission and UNGEGN.

