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Metaphors in Mountain Names  
with Particular Reference to Western Norway

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Introduction

In the summer of 1985, I toured as a lecturer in the American Midwest with Anne Svanevik from the University of Oslo and Hans Eyvind Næss from the State Archives in Stavanger.<sup>1</sup> We visited a number of Sons of Norway lodges. In Norskedalen, we met Arne Kruse. He had already collected Norwegian-rooted field names in Coon Valley, Wisconsin, and later he generously submitted audio-tape recordings of the material to the Norwegian Place-Names Archive.

The following year, I organised a conference in Oslo entitled 'Norwegian language in America', with Arne contributing a lecture on Norwegian place-names in Coon Valley. I had the pleasure of editing the proceedings, which were published in 1991.<sup>2</sup> I have met Arne several times since, both in Norway and in Scotland, such as when he was one of the key speakers at the 25<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Onomastic Sciences in

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1. My theme was 'Place-names on the Hardangervidda'.

2. Helleland 1991.

Glasgow (25–29 August 2014). I feel proud to be counted among his friends.

In August 2011, I participated as a Norwegian representative in a session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN). One evening, as I crossed Times Square, I became aware of a sizeable electronic screen showing the rock of *Trolltunga* ('the troll tongue') in Odda, Hardanger. I felt at home right away, as this rock is situated near my own place of birth.

This is not the only world-famous mountain name in Norway. In the county of Rogaland, to the south of Hardanger, we find another famous cliff bearing the name of *Preikestolen* ('the pulpit'). Its international reputation increased considerably after featuring in the film *Mission: Impossible – Fallout* (2018), in which it is scaled by Tom Cruise's character.

On the national level, however, another name has been even more focused upon. On the evening of 5 September 2019, the attention of many Norwegians was directed towards the municipality of Rauma in Romsdal, western Norway – a district familiar to Arne Kruse. That night, a large part of the rock *Veslemannen* ('the little man') came crashing down, accompanied by a loud rumbling and a cloud of dust. Although it was almost dark, it was possible to observe the drama on television. A threat which had been a daily concern for years was now more or less eliminated. The few families that used to live on the farm beneath *Veslemannen* had been evacuated several times, and now they were allowed to move back to their homes, hopefully on a more permanent basis. *Veslemannen* is a part of a larger mountain named *Mannen*, and thus the names are semantically related.

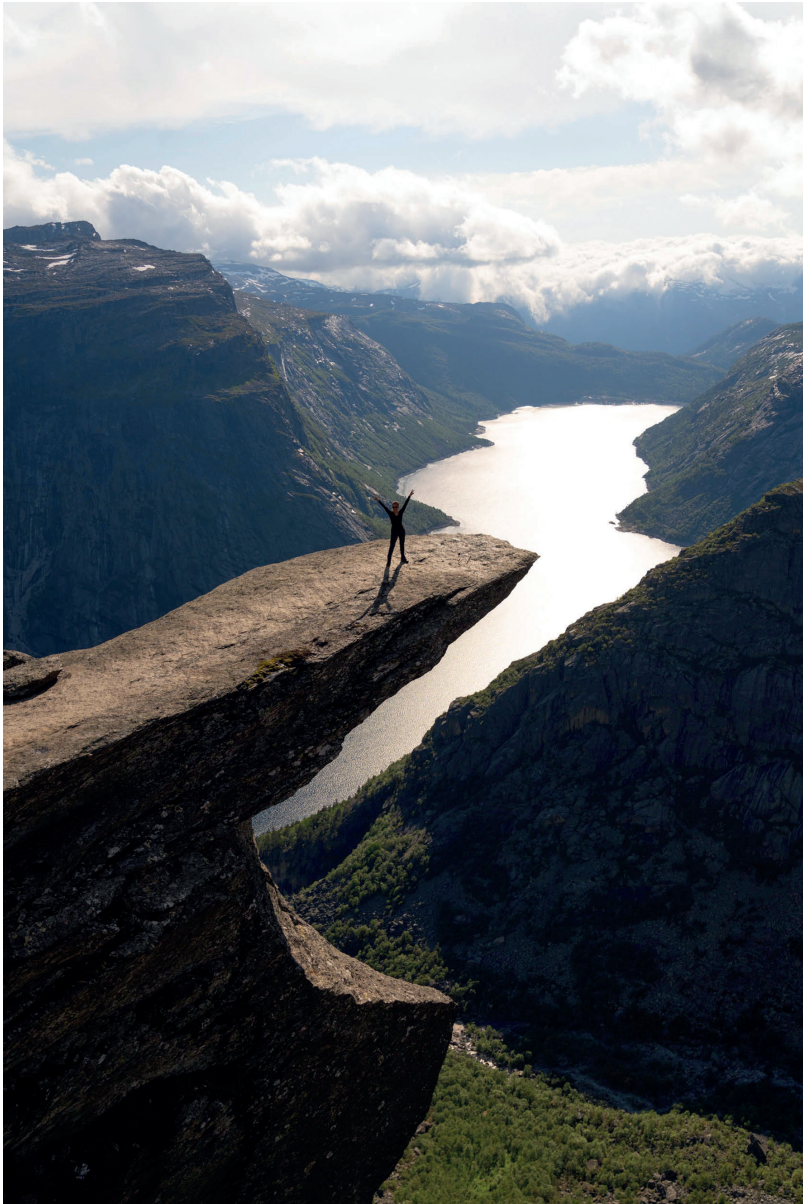


Figure 1: *Trolltunga* ('the troll tongue'), in Tyssedal, Hardanger.  
Photo: Trolltunga Studios, used with permission.

These names are not unique examples of words for a person used in Norwegian place-names. At *Norgeskart.no*, it is possible to get access to the Mapping Authority's central place-names

register (SSR), and when searching ‘Mannen’, more than fifty occurrences of this name pop up. Similar examples are *Bispen* (‘the bishop’) and *Presten* (‘the priest’), both of which are represented more than a dozen times in names referring to mountains or other kinds of natural features.

In some cases, ‘pair’ names are used for two neighbouring features, for instance *Kongen* (‘the king’) and *Dronninga* (‘the queen’) – not unexpectedly, *Kongen* is used for the larger of the two. *Skrott* in Kvam and in Jondal is related to Old Norse *skratti* (m., ‘troll’), and close to *Skrott* we find *Glynt*, cf. *glunt* (m., ‘small boy’). According to Øystein Frøysadal, the latter name should be seen in relation to the bigger mountain *Skrott*.<sup>3</sup> A glance at the Norwegian landscape of place-names will reveal a multitude of comparisons or metaphors used in the naming of natural features.

## Mountain names: general remarks

In an introductory chapter to the *Norsk stadnamnleksikon*,<sup>4</sup> I have outlined some aspects regarding the typology of Norwegian mountain names. The term ‘mountain names’ (also ‘hill names’, ‘names of elevations’) may be used in two ways – either for names referring to mountains and hills, or names containing words or word elements for such features. The first approach is based on a topographic point of view, whereas the latter is based on a linguistic one. For example, the name *Solbjørg* (meaning ‘sunny mountain ridge’) refers to a summer farm and not to a mountain, but lexically it relates to a mountain name. Originally, the name was given to the nearby mountain, but as its denotatum was transferred to the pastures and the summer

3. Frøysadal 1968: 75.

4. Helleland 1997: 49–53.

farm below, the mountain itself was renamed *Solbjørgryggen* ('the Solbjørg ridge'). A similar transition of denotatum applies to many, if not most, summer farms and settlements in Norway.

In a mountainous country like Norway, it is likely that names referring to hills and mountains are abounding, and so is the number of words used for describing various shapes of mountains – both topographical words and metaphors. Apparently, those coining the names had a number of topographic words at their disposal in reference to peaks and heights, whilst their ability to distinguish between minor nuances of these features would have been highly specialised.

Some words describe more or less the same feature, such as *noll* (m.) and *nott* (m., 'small rounded rock'); others may reflect minor nuances in shape and dimension, for instance *nip* (f.) and *nup* (m., 'protruding rock'), the latter referring to a larger type of feature than the former one. In the mountainous area of the western part of Hardangervidda, about sixty different words for convex features like peaks and heights have been found in place-names.<sup>5</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the relatively high number of words used in mountain names is small compared to the variety of words that can occur in Norwegian place-names at all. According to an electronic list of generics established on the basis of more than 200 master's theses at Norwegian universities, more than 3,500 different words are used in place-name formation, most of them as generics, including words used in metaphorical names. This vast topographical vocabulary includes many groups of words which dictionaries treat as synonyms.<sup>6</sup>

The terms were not all used simultaneously, as the naming process must have taken place over centuries. We have reason

5. Frøysadal 1968; Helleland 1970: 25.

6. Gelling 1984: 7.

to believe that most names of minor mountains have come into being after 1500, since the population decline after the Black Death led to a partial breach of the oral trading of place-names. However, it is believed that numerous names date back to the Middle Ages and even pre-Christian times, as, for instance, the mountain name of *Siggjo* on the island of Bømlo, derived from the same root as Old Norse *séa* ('to see'). This mountain is visible from a long distance on the west Norwegian coast. Along the coast, we find a number of ancient island names, originally motivated by a dominating mountain on each island – for instance, *Alden* in Askvoll, related to the Latin *altus* ('high'),<sup>7</sup> and *Huglo* in Stord, related to the German *Hügel* ('hill').<sup>8</sup>

Most mountain names, with the exception of metaphorical names, are compounds. According to some studies of locally collected place-names, the percentage of simplex names – such as *Hovden* ('the hill') – varies between ten and twenty.<sup>9</sup> That means that a majority of the name stock consists of compounds, such as *Grjothovden*, where the generic *-hovden* defines the feature type and the specific *Grjot-* ('stony area') provides further information about the characteristics of this particular *hovden* or mountain. In many cases, the specific is another place-name, as in *Seksehovden*, 'the hill at (the farm of) Sekse'. Chronologically, that means that the mountain name is younger than the name used as a specific.

## Metaphorical names

In addition to a large number of words describing natural features, those coining the names also had the possibility to

7. Sandnes and Stemshaug 1997: 68.

8. Ibid.: 226.

9. Cf. Helleland 1970: 184.

bring in all kinds of terms through comparison. Topographical features that are particularly striking or characteristic tend to evoke notions of things or figures in the nominators' mental universe. In Scandinavia, the term *samanlikningsnamn* ('comparative names') is widely used, being defined as *appellativ betegnelse der har fået stednavnefunktion på grund af det betegnede fænomens lighed med lokaliteten* ('an appellative designation that has been given a place-name function due to the similarity of the designation phenomenon with the locality').<sup>10</sup> However, the terms 'metaphorical names' and 'associative names'<sup>11</sup> are now more commonly used. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a 'metaphor' is a 'figure of speech in which a name or descriptive word or phrase is transferred to an object or action different from, but analogous to, that to which it is literally applicable'.<sup>12</sup>

As in other countries, metaphorical place-names are an important part of the place-name inventory in Norway. These kind of names have special interest, since they provide new insight into the way people are thinking in terms of their mental references. In the international onomastic literature, we find numerous parallels to the names discussed in this chapter.<sup>13</sup>

It is not unexpected that metaphorical names occur to a particular degree when it comes to mountain names. Any shape or figure in the mental universe of man may be used metaphorically in naming a natural feature, including words for tools, artefacts, animals, persons, parts of animals and persons, and so on. Even names given after other places may be motivated

10. Christensen and Kousgård Sørensen 1972: 230.

11. Zilliacus 2002: 216.

12. 'Metaphor, n.', *OED Online*, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/117328>. Accessed 11 June 2022.

13. See, for instance, the various relevant articles in the international handbook *Name Studies* (Eichler et al. 1996) and Šrámek 2004 for a more theoretical approach.

through a kind of comparison, such as *Sibir* (Siberia) for a locality which is felt as distant, cold, or isolated; and during and in the aftermath of the Six-Day War in 1967, *Golanhøgda* ('the Golan height') was given to elevations in several places in Norway, referring to the Golan Heights in Syria/Israel.

Some words, like *nakke* (m., 'neck, neck-shaped natural feature') and *skalle* (m., 'skull, skull-shaped natural feature'), are so frequently used in some areas that they have become part of the topographic vocabulary. Even *såte* (f., 'haystack'), as in *Såta*, may sometimes be recognised as a topographic designation. At first, such words may have been used as metaphors, but over the years, they have developed into topographic terms and should be considered as such. There may, however, be regional and individual differences to which degree they are accepted as topographic descriptions, and some users may still see the metaphorical element as predominant – although names like *Skuta* ('the ship') and *Geiteryggen* ('the goat back') are clearly to be considered as metaphors.

I suggest the following grouping of metaphors used as place-names:

1. Anthropomorphic beings
2. Animals
3. Body parts of anthropomorphic beings and animals
4. Buildings, furniture, tools, etc.
5. Metaphors as specifics in compound names
6. Metaphorical names with a place-name as first element

### *Anthropomorphic beings*

As mentioned above, persons in various capacities may be represented metaphorically in mountain names. *Kongen* ('the king'), *Dronninga* ('the queen'), *Prinsen* ('the prince'), *Bispen* ('the bishop'), *Homannen* ('the tax collector'), *Presten* ('the



priest'), *Prestkona* ('the priest's wife'), *Klokkaren* ('the church servant'), *Bakaren* ('the baker'), *Bonden* ('the farmer'), *Mannen* ('the man'), and *Kjerringa* ('the (old) woman') are examples from various local areas. Even representatives from the fairy-tale world like *Trollet* ('the troll'), *Risen* ('the giant'), and *Gygra* – also *Gjura* – ('the female giant') are found.

The metaphorical background of such names does not solely refer to the shape of the named feature, as it is difficult to decide if a rock resembles a church servant or a baker. It is also reasonable to think that the position and social role of the occupation in question are reflected in the naming. Through such names, those coining and using them (i.e. ordinary people) could – in a more or less humorous way – vent their frustrations with people of higher ranks.

Not all of the names reflecting persons are provided as comparisons. In some cases, the names may be motivated by ownership or because something happened to said person on the spot. This is probably the case for some of the names of *Skomakaren* ('the shoemaker'), which, according to SSR, is registered sixteen times, but only one of them in reference to a hill.

### *Domestic and wild animals*

A number of domestic and wild animals are used metaphorically in mountain names. SSR lists the most popular one (on a nationwide basis) as *Hesten*, the definite form of *hest* (m., 'horse'), with ninety-five occurrences, almost all of which refer to mountains and hills. The indefinite form *Hest* comes up with twenty hits. Generally speaking, the indefinite form is considered to be the older one.

Of the approximately ninety occurrences of *Oksen/Uksen* – the definite form of *okse/ukse* (m., 'oxen') – only twenty refer to mountains. *Kua* ('the cow') and *Kalven* ('the calf') are found four and three times as mountain names, respectively. *Geita* ('the

goat') is registered about ten times as a mountain name, whereas *Bukken* ('he-goat' or 'billy goat') is used as a mountain or hill name six times out of twenty in total. Another word for he-goat is Old Norse *hafr* (m.), which is the basis for two occurrences of the mountain name *Havren* (Høyanger and Vik in Sogn).

According to SSR, *Sauen* ('the sheep') and *Veren* ('the ram') are each found only twice as hill names. *Grisen* ('the pig') is found twelve times, but only twice as a mountain name. The male pig, *galte* (m., 'hog'), is entered approximately 150 times as *Galten* in SSR, mostly referring to skerries and shallow (dangerous) waters.<sup>14</sup> Only about 10% of the places named *Galten* are used for mountain-like features. The female pig, *purke* (f., 'sow'), occurs three or four times in the form of *Purka* as a mountain name.

The most dominant wild animal reflected in place-names is *bjørn* (m., 'bear'), most often as a specific in compounds, for instance *Bjørneheia*, composed of *bjørn* (m.) and *hei* (f., 'heath, height'), probably reflecting observation of this animal. As a simplex, it may be used metaphorically, as in *Bjørn* or in dialectal forms as *Bjønn* or *Bjødn*. *Varg* (m., 'wolf') is used in the peak name *Vargen* in Hardangervidda. Another word for the same animal, *skrubb* (m.), is used in the plural form *Skrubbane*, referring to some stones which may be compared with a pack of wolves.

*Simle* (f., 'female reindeer') is used in *Simla* to describe a big stone in Hardangervidda, while *rev* (m., 'fox') and *hare* (m., 'hare') are found in several names as *Reven* and *Haren*. Bird names like *kråke* (f., 'crow') and *ugle* (f., 'owl') are represented only in a couple of hill names as *Kråka* and *Ugla*, but they are very frequent as names of minor features like skerries and brooks (burns), often with reference to the sound of these birds.

14. Cf. Hovda 1978.



Figure 2: The mountain *Oksen* ('the ox'), situated at the inner part of the Hardangerfjord. Photo: Johannes Sekse, used with permission.

### *Body parts of anthropomorphic beings and animals*

We encounter a number of metaphorical mountain names referring to body parts and limbs of anthropomorphic beings and animals – including *Aksla/Oksla* ('the shoulder'), which is used several hundred times nationwide for mountains and rocks. One of the most famous uses of this word is *Aksla* in Ålesund. *Nasa/Nosi* ('the nose') is also frequently used for mountains. A plural form *Nasene* is also found several times in mountain names.

Some names are seemingly coined in a masculine context, such as *Kuntulven*, which contains the dialectal word *kuntulv* (m., 'clitoris'). The name refers to a rather modest but salient peak in the Hardangervidda. Another vivid imagination has given rise to *Fansklørne* ('the devil's claws'), which refers to some idiosyncratic stripes on a rock side.

The name *Hårteigen*, which refers to a characteristic mountain peak in the middle of the Hardangervidda, has been interpreted in several ways,<sup>15</sup> but to my mind, the resemblance

15. Bjorvand 2017: 27.

to the upper part of a skull is so striking that it must have motivated the name. In plain text, we can understand the name as ‘the part of the head where hair grows’, the first element being Old Norse *hár* (n., ‘hair’) and the second being *teigr* (m., ‘limited area, field’).



Figure 3: Hárteigen in the Hardangervidda.  
Photo: Johannes Sekse, used with permission.

The horse’s nose, *mule* (m., ‘muzzle’), is frequently used in names of promontories, but also as a mountain name, as in *Mulen* in Ullensvang. In *Månene* (‘the manes’), another body part of the horse is represented. *Spenane* (‘the teats’), referring to two rising spikes on a mountain, is presumably compared to a goat’s teats (if not the nipples of a woman). The well-known mountain name *Blåmanen* in Bergen is composed of *blå* (‘blue’) and *man* (f., ‘mane’) – *man* is a variant of *mån* (f.), from Old Norse *mōn* (f.). Earlier it was misunderstood as ‘the blue man (male person)’.

The abovementioned *Geitaryggen* (‘goat back’) in Hardangervidda is composed of two elements combined into one

concept, which is more precise than the two words separately. Another example of this sort is *Ulvskjåft* ('wolf's jaw') in Ullensvang, referring to a rock which looks like a jaw. *Hanakamb* ('cock's comb') and *Hanakne* ('cock's knee') are found in a couple of names in western Norway.

*Buildings, furniture, tools, etc.*

A frequent mountain name referring to a building is *Kyrkja*, the definite form of *kyrkje* (f., 'church'). A wide mountain ridge in the Hardangervidda is named *Låven*, 'the (main part of a) barn'. In Ullensvang, we find *Bygningen* – cf. *bygning* (m. 'building') – as the name of a steep mountainside which has obviously been compared with the front side of a building. Another steep mountain seems to have been associated with an attic or loft, as its name is simply *Loft*. A related meaning is found in the rock name *Rot*, likewise in Ullensvang – cf. Old Norse *rót*, n., 'the space below the roof (a house)'.

A number of natural features have been named after comparisons with objects in daily life, like *Båten* ('the boat'), being a hill-spur, and *Kamben* ('the comb'), being a mountain ridge. Another mountain-spur is called *Hudnen*, from *hun* ('the slab'), with reference to its shape. In the proximity of a summer farm in Hardangervidda, we find *Holken*, from *holk* (m., 'the wooden tub'), referring to a rounded hill. A wooden box to carry various types of food is known as *laup* (n.) in the local dialect, and this word is used in the definite form *Laupen* with reference to a rounded hill.

There are several examples of compound designations in which the first element specifies the content of the last element. At a certain point on a mountain path in Ullensvang, it is possible to see a group of big stones called *Høylassi* ('the hay loads'). Another hill in the same area is named *Smørstampen* ('the butter tub').

Among names that refer to furniture, we can also include compounds like *Gygrastolen* ('the giantess' chair'), referring to

a depression in a mountainside, and *Bispestolen* ('the bishop's chair'), referring to a chair-like rock. Another example is *Skomakarstolen* ('the shoemakers' chair'), referring to a rock which has been compared with the working chair of a cobbler. In these names, the metaphor is based on the meaning of the compound. The first element specifies or modifies the kind of chair that is used as a metaphor.

*Metaphors as specifics in compound names*

In a number of names, the metaphorical element is combined with a topographical generic, such as *Flautenuten*, where the first element is *flaute* (f., 'crossbar on a timber sledge'), composed with *nut* (m., 'mountain'). Other examples include *Kistenuten*, where the first element is *kiste* (f., 'chest, coffin'), and *Oksenuten*, where the first element is *okse* (m., 'ox'). Such names may occur as variants of the simplexes *Bjørn*, *Kista*, and *Oksen*. It should also be noted that not all the names of the type *Oksenuten* or *Kistenuten* are to be considered metaphors; the specifics *Okse-* or *Kiste-* may instead refer to various circumstances related to an ox or to a coffin without any metaphorical reference.

*Metaphorical names with a place-name as first element*

In some names, the metaphorical content is modified by an adjective, such as *Øvsta Okkli*, 'the upper shoulder', or by another place-name, such as *Hengstrynet*, 'the nose at (the summer farm of) Heng'.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, only a small selection of the metaphorical mountain names in western Norway have been touched upon. Nonetheless, the provided examples should be sufficient to

illustrate the vivid imagination of those naming them. Place-names are, first and foremost, addresses – both through their linguistic content and through the features and figures they represent. They are also a source for the study of local language, history, topography, cultural history, social history, and psychology. Metaphorical place-names contribute particularly to the three last aspects. Many traces of people's mental lives are left in the place-name inventory, and not least in metaphorical names.

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