

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

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# NAMES AND NAMING

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## CHAPTER 7

# RIVER NAMES

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### 7.1 THE CHARACTER AND IMPORTANCE OF RIVER NAMES

RIVER names constitute an important body of linguistic and historical material, owing to their considerable age, wide linguistic range, and role in society.

*Floden Vattenfall är en av språkliga spår i den hydrografi som landskapet* (Thorselius 1927).

Names of rivers provide the most important evidence of an early linguistic European community. They can bear witness to human thought, activities, and conditions in very remote ages, and naturally to early stages of language development (lexicon, phonology, morphology, and semantics).

*Names like Scottish 'The god-don', English 'Goddess' 'Goddess river', Norwegian 'Hildegund' 'Hildegund river', 'Hil' 'Hil river', 'Gjess' 'Gjess river', and Swedish 'Hilja' 'Hilja river' reflect human attitudes towards, and feelings for, watercourses. Gerdie (1969) quotes the Swedish Martinus Rhon: 'Vatten är överhugget i generationer, det vatten materiellt vatten symboliskt, det är vatten i vatten och vatten är vatten' Studies of river names which seek to demonstrate the earlier distribution of different peoples or tribes and their languages, for example, are of great interest. The title of an article by Gerdie (1969) is illustrative: 'Thorselius, Rhon, Hilja and the Indo-Germanicization of Europe'. A much discussed question concerning some parts of Europe is whether a Germanic or Celtic origin for river names is to be assumed. A case in point is that in Yorkshire, which has been considered Celtic, but also Scandinavian.*

Hydrographic research in a country like Sweden has concerned itself to a very great extent with lake names; there can be as old as river names and contain the same words or roots. River names formed from names of lakes are common in Sweden. In Denmark and Norway, too, much research has been done on lake names. For topographical reasons, in areas of Europe such as England and Germany more attention has been paid to river names than to lake names.