

Indo-European Mythology and Poetics

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Indo-European
Mythology and Poetics

Kennings

kennings in Old Norse poetics

ON *kenning* (pl. *kenningar*) ‘knowledge, acknowledgment’

- Accepted definition of *kenning* by scholars of Old Norse:
“bipartite substitute for a noun of ordinary speech” (Meissner 1921:2)

ON *vág-marr* ‘sea-horse’ = ON *skip* ‘ship’

- Base-word (*Grundwort*) and determiner (*Bestimmung*):

A: *°marr* ‘horse’ is the base-word (*Grundwort*)

B: *vág°* ‘sea’ is the determiner (*Bestimmung*)

Kennings in Old Norse poetics

Some more examples:

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- *doǵg hræva* 'dew of corpses' = [BLOOD]
- *vegr mána* 'path of the moon' = [SKY]
- *eiki Óðins* 'oaks of Óðinn' =

Kennings in Old Norse poetics

Some more examples:

- *dogg hræva* 'dew of corpses' = [BLOOD]
- *vegr mána* 'path of the moon' = [SKY]
- *eiki Óðins* 'oaks of Óðinn' = [WARRIORS]

Kennings in Indo-European poetics

- Kennings are not ONLY attested in Old Norse, or Germanic poetry in general.
- They are a widespread feature of IE poetic language.

kennings in Indo-European poetics

- What is a kenning?

“A bipartite figure of two nouns in a non-copulative, typically genitival grammatical relation (A of B) or in composition (B-A) which together make reference to, 'signify', a third notion C”

(Watkins 1995:44)

kennings

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kennings

What is a kenning?

- A bipartite figure of two nouns:

A – B: [HORSE – SEA]

[DESCENDANT – WATER]

kennings

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- A bipartite figure of two nouns:

A – B: [HORSE – SEA], [DESCENDANT – WATER]

- **in a non-copulative, genitival gramm. relation:**

A – of B: [HORSE – of SEA]

[DESCENDANT – of WATER]

kennings

What is a kenning?

- A bipartite figure of two nouns:

A – B: [HORSE – SEA], [DESCENDANT – WATER]

- in a non-copulative, genitival grammatical relation:

A – of B: [HORSE – of SEA] (Gk. ἄλὸς ἵπποι)

- or in a non-copulative compound:

B-A: [SEA-HORSE] (ON *vág-marr*)

kennings

What is a kenning?

- A bipartite figure of two nouns:

A – B: [HORSE – SEA], [DESCENDANT – WATER]

- in a non-copulative, typically genitival grammatical relation:

A – of B: [HORSE – of SEA], [DESCENDANT – of WATER]

- or in a **non-copulative compound**:

B-A: [SEA-HORSE]

- which together **index, make indexical reference to, signify a third notion C:**

A of B = C

[HORSE – of SEA] = [SHIP] (Gk. ἄλως ἵπποι, ON *vág-marr*)

[DESCENDANT – of WATER] = [FIRE] (Ved. *aráṃ nápāt-*, ON *sævar niðr*)

KENNINGS \neq MERISMS = SYNTAX

Big **difference** between kennings and merisms:

- The syntax of kennings is non-copulative

A of B: [HORSE – of SEA]

- The syntax of merisms is copulative

A and B: [MEN and CATTLE]

KENNINGS + MERISMS = CONNECTORS

Main **similarity** between KENNINGS + MERISMS:

- Both are COMPLEX figures or CONNECTORS

= they have INDEXICAL function as a whole

= they point to, refer to another ENTITY

[A – B] = [C]

[HORSE – of SEA] = [SHIP]

[MEN and CATTLE] = [MOVEABLE WEALTH]

KENNINGS: generative structure

- The generative structure of a kenning like:

[HORSE – of SEA] = [SHIP]

- is therefore (noun phrase):

[A – of B] = [C] [HORSE – of SEA]

- or in composition:

[B-A] = [C] (SEA-HORSE)

BUT ALSO : $[A_{\text{noun}} - B_{\text{adjective}}] = [C]$

KENNINGS: [A_{noun} – B_{adjective}] = [C]

- Not all kennings are noun+noun phrases
- Some kennings are noun+adjective phrases

E.g. ON *fagra-hvél* “fair-wheel”

or Latin *rota candida* ‘white wheel’

for [SUN] !

- **Most important feature of kennings: the relation between A and B**
must be **NON-COPULATIVE** (never A and B “~~wheel and white~~”)

Kennings [$A_{\text{noun}} - B_{\text{adjective}}$] = [C] vs. [Epithet + Noun]

Compare the following kennings for [SUN]:

- Latin *rota candida* ‘white wheel’
- ON *fagrahvél* ‘fair-wheel’

Are ‘white’ and ‘fair’ ornamental epithets?

- No, because [WHEEL] by itself does not refer to the concept [SUN].

Only thanks to the new information conveyed by the adj the kenning works:

- [$A_{\text{noun}} - B_{\text{adjective}}$] = [C]

Warning

- NB: in our kennings [A – of B] = [C]
[C] does not always have to be a SINGLE word.
- Some kennings can not be translated with a single word:
e.g. Swedish *mån-gata* ‘moon-street, moon-road’ [B-A]
is a kenning for “**the roadlike reflection of moonlight on water**” [C]

A mån-gata



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e.g. Swedish *mån-gata* ‘moon-street, moon-road’ [B-A]
is a kenning for “the roadlike reflection of moonlight on water” [C]
- Definition has more words than the kenning, but one SINGLE concept.

[A – of B] = [C]

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FUN WITH KENNINGS

[A – of B] = [C]

[A – of B] = [C]

Example 1

- Greek:

Od. 707–10:

[...] οὐδέ τί μιν χρεὼ
νηῶν ὠκυπόρων ἐπιβαινέμεν, αἴ θ' ἄλός ἵπποι
ἀνδράσι γίγνονται [...]

“He had no need to go on the swift-faring ships,
which are horses of the sea for men”

- Old Norse:

Rm. 16^{5–8}:

*seghvigg ero sveita stoccin,
munat vágmarar vind um standaz*

“The sail-horses are dripping with sweat,
the sea-horses will not withstand the wind.”

[HORSES – of SEA] !

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Example 2

- Old Norse:

Þjóð. Yt. 43:

*Ok Vísburs / vilja byrði
sævar niðr / svelgja knátti*

“And the kinsman of the sea swallowed
the ship of the will [= BREAST] of Vísburr”

- Vedic:

RV 3.1.12cd:

*úd usríyā jānitā yó jajāna
apām gárbho nṛtamo yahvó agníḥ*

“The begetter who gave birth to the ruddy (cows
of dawn), the embryo of the waters, and the best
of men is the young Fire.”

[DESCENDANT – of WATER] !

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[DESCENDANT – of WATER] = [FIRE]

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of dawn), the [FIRE], and the best
of men is the young Fire.”

(1) First kenning

Fo réir Choluimb 12:

*Do-ell Èrinn, indel cor,
cechaing noib nemed mbled,
brisis tola, tindis for,
fairrge al druim dánae fer.*

“He turned away from Ireland, having made covenants (?),
he traversed in ships the sanctuary of the whales,
he broke desires, he was illuminated (?),
a brave man over the back of the sea.”

Beowulf 8–11:

*weox under wolcnum weorðmyndum þah
oð þæt him æghwylc þara ymsittendra
ofer hronrade hyran scolde,
gomban gyldan þæt wæs god cyning.*

“He grew under the skies, flourished in glorious deeds,
until each of the neighbouring peoples there
over the road of the whales had to obey,
pay tribute. That was a good king.”

[SANCTUARY/ROAD – of the WHALES] !

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[PLACE – of the WHALES] = [OCEAN]

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“He turned away from Ireland, having made covenants (?),
he traversed in ships the [OCEAN],
he broke desires, he was illuminated (?),
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“He grew under the skies, flourished in glorious deeds,
until each of the neighbouring peoples there
over the [OCEAN] had to obey,
pay tribute. That was a good king.”

(2) Second kenning

Ennius *Annals* 266S:

Hastati spargunt hastas: fit ferreus imber.

“The spearmen throw their spears: a rain of iron arises.”

Vergil *Aeneid* 12.283–4:

*Diripuere aras, it toto turbida caelo
tempestas telorum ac ferreus ingruit imber,*

“They tore the altars down: a very storm of spears rose angrily to heaven, a rain of iron fell.”

Beowulf 3116–8:

*þone ðe oft gebad isernscure
þonne stræla storm strengum gebæded
scoc ofer scildweall*

“He who often endured shower of iron,
when the storm of arrows, impelled by bow-strings,
shot over the shield-wall.”

[RAIN – of IRON] !

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[RAIN – of IRON] = [ARROWS/SPEARS-ATTACK]

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[RAIN – of IRON] = [ARROWS/SPEARS-ATTACK]



(3) Third kenning

Iliad 2.84–6

ὥς ἄρα φωνήσας βουλῆς ἐξῆρχε νέεσθαι,
οἱ δ' ἐπανεστήσαν πείθοντό τε ποιμένι λαῶν
σκηπτούχοι βασιλῆες: ἐπεσσεύοντο δὲ λαοί.

“He (= Nestor, king of Pylos) spoke, and led the way forth from the council,
and the other sceptred kings stood up and obeyed the shepherd of men;
and the men were hastening on.”

RV 3.43.5ab:

kuvín mā gopám kárase jánasya
kuvíd rájānam maghavann ṛjīṣin

“Will you indeed make me your shepherd of the people?
Will you indeed (make me) king, you bounteous possessor of the silvery drink?”

Beowulf 2977–81:

Let se hearda Higelaces þegn
bradne mece þa his broðor læg
ealdsweord eotonisc entiscne helm
brecan ofer bordweal ða gebeah cyning
folces hyrde wæs in feorh dropen.

“He let, the hard thane of Hygelac,
when his brother lay dead,
the old ogrish sword, the giantish helm
break over the shield-wall; then the king bowed down,
the shepherd of the folk, was struck in his life.”

Tigernach Annals 618.3:

Aedh Bendan / don Eoganacht iar Luachair,
mairg do sétaib dianadh rí, / cénmair tír díanad buachail.

“Aod Bennán, of the Eoganacht behind Luachair.
Woe to treasures when he is king! Happy the land when he is (folk-)shepherd.”

[SHEPHERD – of MEN/PEOPLE/FOLK] !

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[SHEPHERD – of MEN] = [KING]

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“Aod Bennán, of the Eoganacht behind Luachair.
Woe to treasures when he is king! Happy the land when he is [KING].”

(4) Fourth kenning

RV 1.124.3ab:

*eṣā́ divó duhitā́ práty adarśi
jyótir vásānā samanā́ purástāt*

“This **Daughter of Heaven** has appeared opposite, dressed in light, in the same way (as the others), from the east.”

Ness. 1853:1

*Saulyte, Dievo dukte,
Kur taip ilgai užtrukai?
Kur taip ilgai gyvenai,
Nuo mūsų atstojusi?*

“Sonne, (**Himmel-)**Gottes Tochter, wo hast du dich so lange aufgehalten? Wo hast du dich so lange verweilt, seit du von uns geschieden bist?”

[DAUGHTER – of HEAVEN] !

RV 1.124.3ab:

*eṣā divó duhitā prāty adarśi
jyótir vásānā samanā purástāt*

“This Daughter of Heaven has appeared opposite, dressed in light, in the same way (as the others), from the east.”

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[DAUGHTER – of HEAVEN] = [SUN(-LIGHT)] ?

RV 1.124.3ab:

*eṣā divó duhitā práty adarśi
jyótir vásānā samanā purástāt*

“This [SUN(-LIGHT)] has appeared opposite,
dressed in light, in the same way (as the others), from
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“Sonne, [SONNEN-LICHT)], wo hast du dich so
lange aufgehalten? Wo hast du dich so lange verweilt,
seit du von uns geschieden bist?”