

Abstract: *Ahuen maa* and *Alandh*

The origin of the name of the autonomous Åland province in South-western Finland is controversial in both Swedish (first appearance *Alandh* in 1376) and Finnish (*ahuen maa* in the late 16th century). In the past both names were explained to be derivable from the Gothic word *ahva-* ‘river, creek’ or one of its cognates. This explanation is phonologically acceptable, although the name ‘riverland’ never did make any sense, because “rivers” or “creeks” are not characteristic of this province. In fact, there are hardly any “streams” or “brooks” in this barren and rocky archipelago. Another problem is that in the pre-Viking age, when the original sequence **ahw-* was simplified to become Old Scandinavian *ā-*, there were no “provinces” in this region which could have had names in the first place.

Explanations that have since then been presented for these names are based on an innovation suggesting that the last element sw. *-land* ~ fi. *-maa* did not originally refer to the province, but specifically to one of the largest islands in the Åland archipelago. The oldest connotation of this element, the meanings of which are largely synonymous in Swedish and Finnish, was indeed ‘large island’ as in *Lolland, Langeland, Helgoland, etc.* To correspond to the Swedish name scholars have looked for a large island with no other ancient name and with a brook or stream, which could be explained as being the island with the brook in this archipelago. The main problem with this approach is semantic: a brook is smaller than a creek and due to the uplift of the bedrock, the few creeklets that are there would have had to have been even tinier at the time of origin of this name.

As regards the Finnish name it could still, assuming that it also first meant a large island, have been borrowed from Proto-Norse, although it has also been suggested that the first element refers to what it seems to be, that is, the name for perch (*Perca fluviatilis*), which is *ahven(a)*.

The idea that the Finnish name may have an independent origin has in turn caused Lars Huldén to suggest in 1976 a reverse direction of borrowing in Proto-Norse times. Yet he failed to recognise the powerful semantic potential that developing his idea could have had. In later publications Huldén upheld this idea only as a secondary choice and reverted to prefer the option that a major island with a creeklet, practically unique in the whole archipelago, had been called ‘creek island’.

The author of this article agrees with Lars Hellberg (1987) that this explanation is unsatisfactory; rather the idea of a borrowing from Late Proto-Finnic will be developed. The respective last elements in both languages are now considered separate later additions, while the first element is considered to have been borrowed as a proper name referring to the archipelago region as a whole, functioning as a terrain name rather than as an administrative province. Allusions to this meaning are found in the oldest occurrences of the word in the Finnish language.

The article continues by demonstrating that such a meaning would correspond to a very early borrowing from a presumed Proto-Germanic original **aʒwiōz* ‘(the) islands, (the) archipelago’. There are other examples of possible Proto-Germanic borrowed names from this period (SPNK, s.v. *Aurajoki*, *Eura*, *Karjaa* and *Kymijoki*). The phonologically and semantically exactly matching later representative of the same word **aʒwiōz* is known in the form of *Öja*, further north along the Finnish west coast, and several occurrences of *Öja* across Sweden, as well as one off the coast of Iceland in (*Vestmanna*)*eyjar*, colloquially called *Eyjar*. This borrowing could either have resulted in a Proto-Finnic *e*-stem **ahvi*/**ahve-* ← **aʒwiōz* as in the case of *Kymi* ← **kwēmia(z)* or even more likely in a stem with a derivational suffix *-eh-* (< Middle Proto-Finnic **-ef-* < Early Proto-Finnic **-eš-*) **ahvef-* ← **aʒwiōz*. In both cases the original, considering the historic forms of the name, could have been re-borrowed into Late Proto-Norse around the 7th century, which would coincide with the time that the islands were being (re-?)settled by immigrants from Sweden.

The problem with this etymology is the fairly high degree of hypothesising involved. However, the supposed prehistoric Finnish original can be supported from three directions, by later representatives in two separate languages and by a plausible explanation of origin. Support for the form **ahveh-* is found in a text from 1833. The type and development of the name is analogous with that of *Pohja* in the northern Baltic region, which also developed from a terrain name into provincial and regional names by means of adding elements before or after it. Finally, this etymology also renders superfluous one supposition for which there is no hard evidence, that is, the semantic shift from ‘large island’ to ‘province/region’.

As long as no other irreproachable etymology for the Swedish name can be demonstrated, this explanation would appear to be a tempting one.