

Medieval Anglo-French and English names for the osprey

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There is general agreement that the English ornithonym *osprey* is to be traced through Old French forms such as **osfraie* to the *ossifraga* of classical Latin. According to Pliny, as reflected in Lucretius, this piscivore (*Pandion haliaetus*) was thought to drop its prey in order to shatter the bones, although this behaviour is more accurately associated with the lammergeyer or bearded vulture. Two sets of consonant substitutions mark the passage of the designation through Old and Middle French and in the adaptation into Middle English. The stages of this transformation have not, however, been fully analysed. The *Oxford English Dictionary*'s explanation of the etymology of *osprey* was revised in 2004 (see further below), while the comparable entry for French *orfraie* dates from the period 1971-1994. In 2015, attention was recalled by David Trotter to a list of Hebrew names of birds and their explanatory Anglo-French or Norman French glosses, which was first published, but little noticed, in 1985. This brief text, to be examined below, will throw important light on the putative developments outlined in our reference works, while also exposing further complexities in the interplay of synonyms and homonyms in several medieval languages of terms for the osprey.

Lightly edited, the two-part etymological comment from the *OED* is as follows:

Apparently < an unattested Anglo-Norman **ospreit* ... < post-classical Latin *avis prede* bird of prey (a1250, 1307 in British sources) < classical Latin *avis* bird ... + *praedae*, genitive of *praeda* booty, prey ... An alternative etymology derives the word from an unattested Old French, Middle French **osfraie*, with alteration of *f* to *p* perhaps after prey n. (compare also Middle French *orpres* (1377) < classical Latin *ossifraga* ossifrage n. Middle French *orfres* (1377), Middle French, French *orfraie* (late 15th cent.), in the same sense, are also apparently < unattested Old French, Middle French **osfraie*, with assimilation of *s* to *r*.¹

A comparable entry for French *orfraie* from *Le Trésor de la langue française* reads:

1377 *orfres* [var. *orpres* ...] «sorte d'aigle piscivore» ... Forme altérée d'un a. fr. **osfraie*, sans doute par assimilation du *s* au *r* suivant, issu du lat. *ossifraga* ... la var. *orpres* att. ici doit être rapprochée de l'angl. *osprey* généralement considéré comme issu de l'a. fr. **osfraie* peut-être ... sous l'infl. des représentants du lat. *praeda* (*proie**).²

Etymological notes in the *Middle English Dictionary* are generally more succinct, in the case of *osprai* (var. *hosprai*): “AF [Anglo-French]??; cp. surn. *Walterus Ospriet* (1198) ... ; from ML [medieval Latin] *avis prede*.”³

To list the terms that interacted over time and space with a view to pointing up contrasts, we have Classical Latin *ossifraga*, hypothetical Old French **osfraie* and **orfraie*, the Anglo-French personal name *Ospriet* (1198), later medieval Anglo-French *orfres* and *orpres* (1377), Middle English *osprai* and *hosprai*, modern English *osprey*, and, in the wings, Medieval Latin *avis prede* “bird of prey”.

The understudied evidence earlier alluded to comes from the Valmadonna manuscript, dated to 1189, in the margins of whose folio 143 are Anglo-French or Norman glosses on the names of unclean birds as listed in Leviticus 11, 13-19.⁴ Among these is רפרוא, transcribed, with some doubt as to concluding vocalism, as *owrpr(e)*. This form displays what might be called the non-etymological *-p-* in place of *-f-* and, as importantly, has *-r-*, not *-s-*, in the initial syllable. These two consonant substitutions then date from as early as the late twelfth century. The development may reflect a moment of collective uncertainty in the Anglo-Norman sphere (at this time the Jews of England were members of the Norman community) as to the “correct” form, or be the product of a perceived need to dissimulate between newly phonologically proximate words (see further below). Some two centuries after the evidence of the Valmadonna manuscript (and before 1377), variant forms of a word for the osprey are found in a poem on hunting and falconry by Gace de la Buigne, a Norman and royal chaplain who followed King Jean to captivity in England. The form *orfres* figures in one manuscript, *orpres* in another, suggesting a continental form on the one hand, an insular one on the other.⁵

Such a conflicted situation may have been created by the phonological proximity of the French derivative of a specialised term of medieval Latin: *aurifrigius*.⁶ This designated an embroidery technique with gold thread or wire, supposedly of Phrygian origin, and came to be used of other rich decorations on clothing and other fabrics. The term evolved as *orfraie* in Old French and was adopted in English as *orphrey* (earliest attestation in a translation from French of about 1330).⁷ To return to the osprey, the passage of **osfraie* (< *ossifraga*) to *orfraie* would seem to have been by analogy with *orfraie* (< *aurifrigius*).

In its entry for *osprey* the *OED* (followed by the *MED*) cites without comment an apparently related Latin term with an English gloss from about 1450: “aurifrisius: an hosprai.”⁸ *Aurifrisius*, otherwise unattested, seems a Latinate version of a French **orfrai(s)e*, with some influence from *aurifrigius* (Frisia having replaced Phrygia as origin?). Have the editors confused the braid with the bird? Since the osprey figured in heraldic devices, the distance from richly decorated apparel to the raptor is not great.⁹ But the truth of the matter seems to lie in something like a back-formation or one grounded in a folk etymology. With the near-homonymity in the vernacular language of the decorative term and the ornithonym, *aurifrigius* subsequently came to be used of the fish-eating raptor in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, as evidenced in Conrad Gessner’s *Historiae animalium*, in which this shore bird is described as having one foot talonned and the other webbed.¹⁰ After the above British glossary entry of about 1450, the next attestation of a word for the osprey is from 1475 in the following listing: “goos, teele, mallard, ospray & also swanne.”¹¹ To summarise, the development from Old French **osfraie* to *orfraie* is judged to be the result of analogy rather than of the assimilation of an *-s-* to *-r-* (*OED*, *TLF*) or the linguistic phenomenon of rhotacism.

On balance, there is evidence for an unconscious resistance in some parts of the francophone world, including Britain, to the substitution of *orfraie* for *osfraie*. This took the form of a re-semanticisation, in which medieval Latin *avis prede* “bird of prey” was calqued into Anglo-French as *os* (= *ois[el]* “bird”) + *preie* (“prey”; cf. Mod. Fr. *proie*). Here, the generic shores up the specific. Thus *osprey* can not be said simply to “derive” from *avis*

prede. This process of reinforcement and realignment is evident as early as the Jewish glosses of 1187 (*owrpre*) and is reflected in the variants found in Gace's poem, *orfres* and *orpres*.

Many bird names survive from Old into Modern English (along with the collective *sǣ-fugol* "sea fowl"). Among the recognisable antecedents of *gannet* and *tern* in the poem *The Seafarer*, we find OE *earn* "eagle", which the marine context encourages us to identify as the osprey.¹² But *earn* would not survive into later English, being supplanted by *eagle*, from French *aigle*, just as any other, undocumented OE term for the sea eagle or osprey was replaced by the complex of terms reviewed here.¹³ Curiously, the name *osprey* established itself without any reference to the raptor's diet, fish.

In conclusion, the antecedents of English *osprey* entered the phono-semantic gravitational fields of two other compounds, *aurifrigius* and *ave prede*. The surviving form reflects conservatism in its initial syllable, in the face of what appears a trend toward homonymity between terms for a marine raptor and rich clothing decorations, but its overall semantics were also fitted into a new phonic exoskeleton provided by calquing another, more general and common medieval Latin phrase into Anglo-French, which in turn fed into Middle English. *Osprey* illustrates how the terminology for what would seem an unequivocal bit of everyday reality on the shores of Britain could be multiplied and subjected to the pushes and pulls of interlanguage contact, the unconscious forces of analogy, assimilation, and dissimulation, in the multilingual insular speech world of the Middle Ages.

Notes

1. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd edn, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015; *OED Online*, accessed March 2016, *s.v.* *osprey*.
2. Paul Imbs, ed., *Trésor de la langue française [TLF]*, Paris, Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1971-1994. *s.v.* *orfraie*, citing Walther von Wartburg et al., eds, *Französisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, Bonn, F. Klopp, 1928-2002, vol. 7, p. 435. No etymology has yet been proposed by the *Dictionnaire étymologique de l'ancien français*.
3. Kurath, Hans, et al., eds, *Middle English Dictionary*, Ann Arbor, Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 2001, *s.v.* *osprai*.
4. Malachi Beit-Arié et al., *The Only Dated Hebrew Manuscript Written in England (1189 CE) and the Problem of Pre-expulsion Anglo-Hebrew Manuscripts*, London, Valmadonna Trust Library, 1985, Appendix 1, p. 29. Some items of the list are reviewed by David Trotter in "'Trové l'avum mis en tist': Comment réduire notre ignorance du lexique de l'anglo-normand", in Oreste Floquet, and Gabriele Giannini, eds, *Anglo-français: philologie et linguistique*, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2015, pp. 134-150, at pp. 141-142, who summarises earlier scholarship on the etymology. These Anglo-French glosses will be incorporated in the online edition of the *Anglo-Norman Dictionary*. The most extensive study of the surprisingly early vernacular French glosses on "difficult" Hebrew words remains Raphael Levy, *Le Trésor de la langue des juifs français au moyen âge*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1964.
5. Åke Blomqvist, ed., Gace de la Buigne, *Le Roman des deduis*, Karlshamn, E. G. Johansson, 1951, v. 3585.
6. Jan-Frederick Niermeyer, ed., *Mediae latinitatis lexicon minus*, revised edn, Leiden and New York, 1976, *s.v.* *aurifrigius*.

7. *OED Online*, accessed March 2016, s.v. *orphrey*; *TLF*, s.v. *orfraie*.
8. Thomas Wright, and R. P. Wülcker, eds, *Anglo-Saxon and Old English Vocabularies*, London, Trübner, 1884, vol. I, p. 56, l. 8. The second element of the compound may also have been affected by French *frise* “frieze” in the sense of a band of painted or sculpted decoration. Further complicating the French picture is the influence of *effraie* “a fright” on *orfraie*, so that the latter term was also used of a small owl. One might speculate that osprey and orphrey were thought related because of the coloration of the bird but aside from golden irises the raptor has brown and white plumage.
9. From about 1500: “Who next hym folowyd but Lyberalyte, Syttyng on a dromedary ... On hys helme for hys crest he bare an ospray,” O. I. Triggs, ed., *The Assembly of Gods*, London, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1896, p. 813.
10. Conrad Gessner, “Liber III, qui est de Avium natura”, *Historiae animalium*, Tiguri, C. Froschouerum, 1551-1558. Among less fabulous maritime hawks he names French *orfraie* and English *osprey*.
11. John Russell, *Booke of Nurture*, in Frederick Furnivall, ed., *Early English Meals & Manners*, London, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1904, p. 26.
12. Anne L. Klinck, “The Seafarer”, *The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition and Genre Study*, Montreal, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992, vv. 19-26. The context also prompts the identification of the *anfloga* “lone-flier” of v. 66 as the albatross. The only recorded compound with OE *earn* is *is-earn* “kingfisher”; Antonette DiPaulo-Healey et al., eds, *Dictionary of Old English*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1986-. It should be noted that Old Norse *ari* “eagle” (cognate with OE *earn*) left no documented trace in Norman French.
13. Joseph Wright, ed., *English Dialect Dictionary*, London and New York, H. Frowde and G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1898-1905, has no entry for *osprey* and we may assume the term to have had a geographical distribution restricted to the shoreline of lakes and the sea. *Fish-hawk* was otherwise a common term, but has no recorded antecedent in OE, where *fisc-hafoc* might be posited.

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