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Two Strata of Proto-Norse Loanwords in Saami: Evidence for an Extinct Norse Variety

The study of Proto-Norse loanwords in the Saami languages has provided crucial insights into early Germanic-Saami contacts. However, key aspects of these borrowings, such as their relative chronology and the precise linguistic background of their source varieties, remain insufficiently explored. In this paper, I argue that Proto-Norse loanwords in Saami can be divided into at least two distinct strata, each originating from a different source language. One stratum derives from a language closely resembling Proto-Norse as reconstructed through the comparative method, while another reflects a now-extinct early Norse variety with phonological features unattested in recorded Germanic languages.

A particularly striking phonological feature in the latter stratum is the substitution of Proto-Norse postconsonantal *j with Proto-Saami *ć, as seen in examples such as Saami *skālcō ‘seashell’ and *āvće ‘bird-cherry’ (> North Saami *skálžu*, *ávža*) from Proto-Norse *skaljö- and *hagja- (> Old Norse *skel*, *hegg*). I propose that this pattern reflects a sound change in the source variety, where postconsonantal *j developed into a stop or affricate. In addition, this language did not exhibit Sievers’s law, which vocalized *j into *i after heavy syllables in other Germanic varieties. The presence of more than 30 such loanwords in Saami, including the Saami ethnonym for Norsemen (*tāńće), suggests that this now-extinct Norse variety played a major role in the earliest Norse-Saami contacts.

The distribution of these loanwords further supports a geographically localized influence. Place-name evidence from Troms county in northern Norway, such as the North Saami island name *Sážžá* (< *sāńcā), derived from a predecessor of the Norwegian name *Senja*, suggests that this extinct Norse variety was spoken along parts of the Norwegian coast. The findings presented in this paper contribute to a more refined understanding of the phonological and dialectal diversity of early Norse and its role in prehistoric language contact in Scandinavia.