

Notes

The wolverine: an animal-name from a personal name?

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Arngart (1979) has noted that the OED fails to find an etymology for “wolverine” (first recorded 1574), and proposed that the word is derived from “wolf” with a suffix *-ren* related to the word “run” but here meaning something like ‘course, line, kindred’. This is obviously highly speculative and would be without parallel in animal names, but I think Arngart was right to take his motivation from several place-names containing an element *Wlfrun-*. At first sight this is simply the OE feminine personal name *Wulfrūn* (Okasha 2011: 53), but A. H. Smith had already pointed out that it occurs rather too frequently in the names of streams, raising suspicious that some other word might be involved. The Yorkshire examples are two places called Wormald, which have early spellings *Wlfrunwell* and *Wournewall*’ (PN WRY 3 59, 72). The point was taken up by Dodgson in his work on Cheshire place-names, where he prefers to derive the names Ollerpool (*Woluernepoole* 1260–90) and *Wolwern Brook* 1621 from the personal name, but notes Smith’s observation that an appellative is possible and perhaps likely (PN Ch 1 37, 2 245). Another example may be *Wolronnesmere* recorded in a 1480 feoffment from Creeting in Suffolk (Suffolk Record Office C/3/10/2/6/1/11).

This stalemate was not resolved. A solution not considered by Arngart would be to explain both the animal-name and the place-names with a single hypothesis: that the personal name *Wulfrūn* has been applied to an animal. This process is commonplace amongst English bird-names; examples are guillemot, jackdaw, jenny wren, magpie, robin, and martin (Lockwood 1984: s.vv.). It is not known for wild mammals, but has certainly happened with names of farmyard animals such as *hobby(-horse)* and *hobbin* (both from Robin), and probably names for the ass such as *dicky*

and *cuddy* (OED s.v. **hobby** n.¹; cf. also the discussion under **monkey**, n.).¹ There is the French parallel of *renard* ‘fox’,² and there is in principle no reason to reject the idea that the same process was used (perhaps only locally) in English. It could arise through the personification of animals in folk-tales.

A stream called *Wlfrunwell* or a pool called *Woluernepoole* would be thus the abode of a wolverine, the animal familiarly known as *Wulfrun*. But we should allow the possibility that the species so designated was not the same as the modern (North American) wolverine; it might have been another member of the weasel family or even some other aquatic animal.

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References

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 Lockwood, W. B. (1984), *The Oxford Book of British Bird Names* (Oxford: Oxford UP)
 Okasha, Elisabeth (2011), *Women’s Names in Old English* (Farnham: Ashgate)
 Rey, A. (1998), *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française* (Paris: Dictionnaires le Robert)

¹ The old idea that “rabbit” derived from Robert is now discredited (OED s.v.).

² Rey (1998: s.v. *renard*) states that the habit of giving human names to animals is typically northern French and Flemish, and dates it back to 1150.