J. Mar. Biol. Ass. U.K. (2007), **87**, 1773–1775
Printed in the United Kingdom
doi: 10.1017/S0025315407060766

Human usage of mermaid's glove sponge (*Isodictya palmata*) on the Faroes

Ingvar Svanberg

Department of Eurasian Studies, Uppsala University, Box 514, SE-751 20 Uppsala, Sweden.
E-mail: ingvar.svanberg@eurasia.uu.se

There is very little documentation on the economic importance of locally available marine sponges (Porifera) in north-western Europe. From Iceland and the Faroe Islands there are records of naming and using the so-called mermaid's glove sponge (*Isodictya palmata*) especially for cleaning purposes. As late as in the 1940s, school children in the Faroe Islands gathered this sponge and used it to clean the slate.

INTRODUCTION

For islanders in the North Atlantic their capacity to manage and use the biological resources of the marine biota has been of great importance for their survival. The supply of whales, seabirds, fish, shellfish, algae and other organisms—including driftwood—played a crucial role in the local economy (Svanberg, 1997, 2003, 2007; Svanberg & Ægisson, 2006). These marine resources generated food, fodder, fuel, manure, material for tools and construction, medicine, etc.; all the necessary means for making a living on the islands. The Faroe islanders of course had a detailed knowledge about many of the species available in the surrounding landscape, no matter if they were useful or not (cf. Lévi-Strauss, 1962: 5; Ellis & Swan, 1981; Drew, 2005).

One afternoon in March 2002 when I was walking along the seashore of the village Vestmanna in Streymoy, Faroe Islands, I observed on the beach a lot of dead samples of what was called *njarðarvøttur*, i.e. 'Niord's gloves', in the Faroese language (cf. Dánjalsson, 1926: 70, 1942: 10). Until then I knew them only through hearsay from my local informants. I had, due to the local name, earlier mistaken this folk taxon for dead man's fingers (*Alcyonium digitatum* Linnaeus, 1758). But my findings on the beach made me realize that I had been wrong. I had the opportunity to examine the dead remnants of the organism *in situ* which told me that *njarðarvøttur* was a sponge, not a coral. Thanks to my now unfortunately deceased colleague Börge Pettersson my samples from the beach became correctly identified as a marine sponge, the so called mermaid's glove sponge, *Isodictya palmata* (Ellis & Solander, 1786).

Mermaid's glove sponge, *Isodictya palmata* (Figure 1), is bright orange in colour when alive, but it rapidly turns yellow-grey when washed ashore. The sponge has characteristic rows of oscules, with raised rims, along the lobes and branches. The species has been reported from the Berwick coast, Shetlands, Orkneys, Faroe Islands, Skagerak, the west and north coast of Norway, Iceland, the Kara Sea and the White Sea. Esper (1794: 103) reports the species under various other names, such as *Spongia digitata* and *Spongia lobata*, but both names are junior synonyms of Pallas and Linnaeus names, so Ellis & Solander's description of *Spongia palmata* is adopted as the valid name. The American side of the North Atlantic supposedly has a species very similar to *Isodictya palmata*. This *Isodictya deichmannae* is a possible synonym. There are a few other *Isodictya* described from the Arctic region which are not well known and may constitute further synonyms expanding the distribution to the high Arctic (Hajdu et al., 1994; Samaai et al., 1999; van Soest et al., 2000).

Figure 1. *Njarðarvøtt*, i.e. skeleton of a dead *Isodictya palmata* gathered in Vestmanna, Faroe Islands 2002. (Photograph: Börge Pettersson).

THE FOLK NAME

The name *njarðarvøttur*, recorded as early as the 1780s by J.C. Svabo (Svabo, 1959: 154, 1966: 580; cf. also Grundtvig, 1877–88: 323), is also found in Icelandic as *njarðarvöttur* (Böðvarssson, 1983: 688). In Björn Halldórsson's Icelandic dictionary from the early nineteenth century the name is explained as 'ligesom Niørds Handske', i.e. 'like Niord's glove' (Halldórsson, 1814: 108). Actually, *njarðarvöttur* has been used also in the Icelandic Bible translations. It was used already in the New Testament translated by Oddur Gottskálsson and printed in Denmark in the year 1540, and in every Icelandic Bible from the year 1584, i.e. 1644, 1734, 1747, 1813, 1841, 1859, 1866, 1912/1914, 1981 and also the one that was published on 17 October 2007, a completely new translation from the original languages (Hebrew and Greek). It just means 'a sponge' here (Matthew, 27: 48; Mark, 15: 36; John, 19: 29).

A name like this, with its Old Norse religious connotations, has of course attracted the attention of philologists. As early a writer as the Swedish scholar Richard Dybeck (1849: 23) noticed and commented on this very particular Faroese folk name and its reference to an Old Norse god (*Njorðr*) who was worshipped especially in Iceland. Niord was the god of wind, fertile land along the sea coast, as well as of seamanship, sailing and fishing.

This is not the place to speculate on the background to and etymology of this very interesting folk name; I leave that to experts in linguistics. It is obviously an ancient name indicating that the sponge had already been recognized by the locals during pagan times, i.e. already by the Viking settlers of the Faroe Islands and Iceland. The name has probably survived as part of their indigenous environmental knowledge because the inhabitants continued to keep an interest for the sponge (Hunn, 1992). I will therefore deal with some further ethnobiological aspects of this remarkable sponge that I have seen remnants of on many Faroese beaches.

TRADITIONAL USAGE

Of the thousands of marine sponges (Porifera) that exist, only about fifteen species have any economic importance, especially in the Mediterranean, the Caribbean Sea and Gulf of Mexico. Dried skeletons of the sponges have been valued for their absorbency and texture and they are used in surgery, for painting, polishing, filtering, etc. (Verdenal & Verdenal, 1987; Josupeit, 1990). There is also an increasing interest in cultivating sponges (Brümmer & Nickel, 2003). Handbooks and marine biological reports which I have consulted contain very little information about any human use of locally produced sponges in northern Europe (Arndt, 1938). From Norway we have some eighteenth century reports that a sponge locally known as *siøvot* 'sea glove' or *søevante* 'sea mitten' was gathered by fishermen and purchased by pharmacies. The species has not been identified (Strøm, 1762: 128; Hammer, 1775: 237; cf. Arndt, 1938: 1693).

While doing my ethnobiological field work on the Faroes between 1995 and 2002, I recorded that still during the 1940s *njarðarvøttur* was being used as a sponge for cleaning slates in the village school in Gjógv on Eysturoy. The texture of the dead *njarðarvøttur* is indeed reminiscent of a real bath sponge. One of my informants told me that they used to get them on the cod lines when fishing. The school children were supposed to gather the *njarðarvøttur* themselves, according to another informant.

My records are further confirmed with another document from Gjógv. In his fine childhood recollections, Mr Petur Jacob Sigvardsen (1997: 120), who also grew up in that village, writes: 'Most of the time at school I had a slate and slate pencil, as well as a *njarðarvøtt* to clean it with'. Also the Faroese author Jens Pauli Heinesen remembers, from about the same time, the use of 'an oblong *njarðarvøttur* […] to clean the slate with' in his biographical books from Sandavágur on Vágar Heinesen (Heinesen, 1981: 9; Heinesen, 1982: 43). This seems to be an old practice, since as early a writer as the Reverend Jørgen Landt (1800: 291) wrote that the species was commonly used for cleaning purposes on the Faroes.

Another old traditional practice is mentioned by Ludvig Petersen (1963: 131) in his description of the folk life of nineteenth century Sandavágur. According to him, *njarðarvøttur* was earlier used as a kind of tinder when lighting fires. From Iceland there is a record that it has been employed to clean metal (Olafsen, 1772: 446). *Njarðarvöttur* was sometimes also used as a teat on a baby's bottle (Kristjánsson, 1980: 166). According to answers on an ethnographical questionnaire on traditional child care that was sent out from the National Museum of Iceland as late as in 1963 the Icelandic *njarðarvöttur* had earlier been used to wash newborns (Þjóðminjasafn Íslands records Nos. 630, 666, 690, 737, 778, 5622).

There is reason to believe that this particular sponge has had many small but hardly documented uses in the past. Its use for cleaning slates still in the 1930s and 1940s has helped at least the older generation to remember its ancient name. The post-war generation has no immediate interest for this sponge and no longer cares about it. Only a few children playing on the beaches and some older fishermen seem to nowadays be familiar with *njarðarvøttur*.

CONCLUSION

Old traditional folk names of various taxa indicate that they have been recognized by a local population. Sometimes they are named because they have been useful for the population, sometimes they are named because they have a characteristic shape and qualities that had been perceived. A combination of both has of course benefited the survival of recognizing a folk taxon. It is an important task for ethnobiological research to record every biocultural domain that develops in the reciprocal relationships between human cultures and the natural world, including very trivial use of any animal and plant species (Rist & Dahdouh-Guebas, 2006; Svanberg, 2006). The rather recent local Faroese use of *njarðarvøttur* for cleaning slates in the classroom is a nice example of the utilization of local biological resources in former times.

I wish to thank the Reverend Sigurður Ægisson, Dr Börge Pettersson(†), Dr Hans Tore Rapp, Mr Nicholas Redman and Dr Rob W.M. van Soest who provided helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article. Thanks also to my Faroese informants for sharing their time and knowledge.

REFERENCES

Arndt, W., 1938. Schwämme. In *Die Rohstoffe des Tierreichs* 1:2 (ed. F. Pax and W. Arndt), pp. 1577–2000. Berlin: Borntraeger.

Böðvarsson, Á., 1983. *Íslensk orðabók*. Reykjavík: Bókaúgáfa Menningarsjóðs.

Brümmer, F. & Nickel, M., 2003. Sustainable use of marine resources: cultivation of sponges. In *Sponges (Porifera)* (ed. W.E.G. Müller), pp. 143–162. Berlin: Springer.

Dánjalsson, M., 1926. *Landalæra í Føroyar*. Tórshavn: Felagið Varðin.

Dánjalsson, M., 1942. List of Faroese animal names. In *The zoology of the Faeroes*, 3:2 (ed. A.S. Jensen et al.). Copenhagen: A.F. Høst.

Drew, J.A., 2005. Use of traditional ecological knowledge in marine conservation. *Conservation Biology*, **19**, 1286–1293.

Dybeck, R., 1849. Om Växter, med namn efter Fornnordiska Gudomligheter. *Runa*, **1849**, 18–23.

Þjóðminjasafns Íslands: answer on questionnaire Skrá 10: "Barnið, fæðing og fyrsta ár" (manuscript).

Ellis, D.W. & Swan, L., 1981. *Teachings of the tides: uses of marine invertebrates by the Manhousat People*. Nanoima, BC: Theytus Books.

Ellis, J. & Solander, D. 1786. *The natural history of many curious and uncommon zoophytes, collected from various parts of the globe. Systematically arranged and described by the late Daniel Solander*, 4. London: Benjamin White & Son.

Esper, E.J.C., 1794: *Die Pflanzenthiere in Abbildungen nach der Natur mit Farben erleuchtet nebst Beschreibungen*, 2. Nürnberg: Raspe.

Grundtvig, S., 1877–88. *Færøsk ordbok*. København: Dansk Folkemindesamling.

Hajdu, E., Weerdt, W.H. de & Soest, R.W.M. van, 1994. Affinities of the mermaid's glove sponge *Isodictya palmata*, with a discussion on the synapomorphic value of chelae microscleres. In *Sponges in time and space* (ed. R.W.M. van Soest et al.), pp. 141–150. Rotterdam: A.A. Balkema.

Halldórsson, B., 1814. *Lexicon Islandico-Latino-Danicum*, 2. Hafniae: J.R. Thiel.

Hammer, C., 1775. *Forsøg til en Norsk Natur-Historie*, 1. København: H.G. Sander.

Heinesen, J.P., 1981. *Lysir nú fyri tær heimurin*. Tórshavn: Forlagið Gestur.

Heinesen, J.P., 1982. *Leikur tín er sum hin ljósi dagur*. Tórshavn: Forlagið Gestur.

Hunn, E., 1992. The utilitarian factor in folk biological classification. *American Anthropologist*, **84**, 830–847.

Josupeit, H., 1990. *Sponges: world production and markets*. FAO Field Document 90/8. Rome: FAO.

Kristjánsson, L., 1980. *Íslenzkir sjávarhættir*, 1. Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfa Menningarsjóðs.

Landt, J., 1800. *Forsøg til en Beskrivelse over Færøerne*. Kiøbenhavn: Tikjøbs.

Lévi-Strauss C., 1962. *La pensée sauvage*. Paris: Plon.

Olafsen, E., 1772. *Reise igiennem Island, foranstaltet af Videnskabernes Sælskab i Kiøbenhavn*. Sorøe: Jonas Lindgrens Enke.

Petersen, L., 1963. *Sandavágs søga*. Tórshavn: Ejnars.

Rist, S. & Dahdouh-Guebas, F., 2006. Ethnoscience: a step towards the integration of scientific and indigenous forms of knowledge in the management of natural resources for the future. *Environment, Development and Sustainability*, **8**, 467–493.

Samaai, T., Gibbons, M.J. & Kelly. M., 1999. Morphological phylogenetic considerations on the relationship of *Isodictya* Bowerbank, 1864. *Memoirs of the Queensland Museum*, **44**, 517–523.

Sigvardsen, P.J., 1997. *Úr Gjáar søgu. Barnaminni*, 1. Tórshavn: Forlagið Búgvin.

Soest, R.W.M. van, Picton, B.E. & Morrow, C., 2000. Sponges of the North-East Atlantic. In *World Biodiversity Database CD-ROM Series*. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam.

Strøm, H., 1762. *Physisk og oeconomisk beskrivelse over fogderiet Søndmør, beliggende i Bergens stift i Norge*, 1. Sorøe: J. Lindgren.

Svabo, J.C., 1959. *Inberetninger fra en Rejse i Færøe 1782 og 1783*. København: Selskabet til Udgivelse af færøske Kildeskrifter og Studier.

Svabo, J.C., 1966. *Dictionarium Færoense. Færøsk-Dansk-Latinsk Ordbog*. København: Munksgaard.

Svanberg, I., 1997. The use of wild plants in the Faroe Islands 1590–1990: a contribution to Scandinavian ethnobotany. *Svenska Linnésällskapets Årsskrift*, **1996–97**, 81–130.

Svanberg, I., 2003. Musslor och snäckor som föda och agn på Färöarna: några etnobiologiska anteckningar. *Gardar: Årsbok för Samfundet Sverige-Island i Lund-Malmö*, **23**, 20–36.

Svanberg, I., 2006. Black slugs (*Arion ater*) as grease: a case study of technical use of gastropods in pre-industrial Sweden. *Journal of Ethnobiology*, **26**, 299–309.

Svanberg, I., 2007. Plant knowledge as indicator of historical cultural contacts: tanning in the Atlantic fringe. In *Travelling cultures and plants: the ethnobiology and ethnopharmacy of migrations* (ed. A. Pieroni and I. Vandebroek), pp. 227–244. (Environmental Anthropology and Ethnobiology 7). Oxford: Berghahn.

Svanberg, I. & Ægisson, S., 2006. Black guillemot (*Cepphus grylle*) in circumpolar folk ornithology. *Scripta Islandica*, **56**,101–114.

Verdenal, B. & Verdenal, M., 1987. Evaluation de l'interêt economique de la culture d'eponges commerciales sur les côtes Méditerranéenes. *Aquaculture*, **64**, 9–29.

Submitted 12 November 2007. Accepted 14 November 2007.