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Author: *John Aland, Sr. (Trans. and annotated by Sarah Foger)*

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Requested by: *John Aland, Jr. [jal23] (Department of Geography)*

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Some Notes on the Havlandic Tongue (Havske Sproget/Det Havske Nytale)

John Aland, translated and annotated by Sarah Foger

I am often asked by my more internationally minded friends why I do not compose poetry in Danish. Those same friends then accuse me of a strange sort of selling-out by offering **translations of my poems into English**, as if that were a grave transgression against Havlandic poetry. My simplest defence is that to do something (including translation) to your exacting standards, you have to do it yourself – yet this belies a bigger issue.

Aland provides the official translations for all of his poems into English, and refuses to recognise any foreign translations besides those.

The problem, I believe, is that most Havlanders grow up today believing themselves in some sense born tied to Denmark, intrinsically a part of the Scandinavian family. The clearest example offered is our language – it has recently transpired that the **Havlandic Language Council** has (shamefully, in my opinion) moved to classify Havlandic as a mere dialect of Danish, with only a token mention of its history and Old Havlandic, of course. I doubt whether there is a single person in the entire Council that understands the true history of our tongue, so I have taken it upon myself to offer some light edification.

The decision was undertaken and almost immediately retracted under strong pressure from activist groups in 1978.

Let us begin with names. The “official name” for Havlandic is “Havske **Sprog**” (“Sproget” if

we are referring to “The” Havlandic Tongue), which to any passersby would seem undeniably a crib from the Danish name for their own language, “Danske Sprog”. **And indeed, this is where it comes from.** So many other names in our fair isle have sprung from such a process — We have “-ministeret”s and “conseils-praesident”s, the language of governance dominated entirely by Danish loanwords. They would have you believe that, were it not for a few quirks of history, Auldhabn would have been **Gammelhavn**, and all would have been well. They say as much on the tourist guides, the blue-backed versions of the Bookbinders’ Privilege which they think we do not read.

Of course, like most convenient simplifications, this is a lie. The current Danmarkised state of our tongue is the product of royal intervention, the strongest relic of **the Absolutist period** we have today. Absalon II continued his father’s reign of waste and excess with one of spineless pandering to the Danish mainland, and his *Talereform* is our greatest evidence for that fact. Notice the use of “Tale” in the name of that accursed law — it is time we spoke of older things.

The Talereform wiped away Old Havlandic, consigning its books to the pyre and its teachers to less glorious professions. Yet Old

From the same Germanic language roots as the English word “speak”.

“Havske Sprog” was adapted as the official name of the language after the Language Reform Law of 1952, which also introduced English and Danish to classrooms.

“Gammel” is the Danish word for “old”, used in place names like “Gammeltorv” (Old Square) in Copenhagen. “Auld” is the Havlandic word for the same.

“Unvolden” in Havlandic, cognate of Danish “Enevælden”: Marked by enhanced royal control of government and the establishment of institutions to replace nobility.

Havlandic is not some obscure variation, nor is it the abomination towards language our Danish chauvinists paint it to be. It is, to put it simply, a different language altogether (though we share some grammatical structures and a substantial lexicon of words), one borne not of the principles of Early Modern Danish but a syncretic mix of Old and Middle English as well as to a lesser extent Old and Middle Danish. Surviving written records from that time period, including the now-famous *Book of Hans*, show that it was a fully developed and coherent language with its own borrowed writing system as well as grammatical and linguistic conventions, as well as being one of the last remaining languages to use a host of Germanic terms in their original meaning, such as the word **mod**.

Of course, even the term “Old Havlandic” is a misnomer. The majority of our textual evidence concerning Old Havlandic comes from the late medieval or **Kalmar period** of Havland’s history when it became a codified and stable language, rather than the creole or pidgin which it had been up to the 10th - 13th centuries. Thus, chronologically it should be called a “Middle” language, although its strongest influence on a lexical level remains Old English.

Within even this dialect, however, there are

“Mod”, from Old English and Old Havlandic meaning soul, spirit, mind, or similar. Became the modern English word “mood” which is used to refer exclusively to one’s emotional state.

Usually taken to mean the period of Havland when it was a colony of the Kalmar Union, from ~1400 to the Treaty of Malmö in 1524.

distinctions, most notably the Anglophone and Danophone branches of Old Havlandic. One spoken by the population descended from slaves brought from England, the other by their Viking overlords who became Danish merchants, your choice of word in Old Havlandic is so often a political rather than aesthetic one. *The Book of Hans* is filled with **famous episodes of wordplay** where an Anglophone loanword is contrasted against a Danophone one, highlighting the deeply conflicted nature of the language itself.

Two such word-pairs are "scip" vs. "kjoll" (Sc. 7, both meaning "ship") and "unlucig" vs. "ogaefa" (Sc. 11, both meaning "unlucky"). Sc.7 also features the use of the word "mod" in its original context.

Old Havlandic is also a beautiful language. Consider *Auld Dægs*, a surviving scrap of anonymous poetry that nevertheless shows us so much about the rhythmic power of this tongue:

Old Havlandic

*Auld tale tellen in
Auld tale tellen bi
Auld wye tellen me
hwæt Auld dægs lik*

Modern English

*Old stories told in
Old speech told by
Old man telling me
what old days were
like.*

Translation taken from his 1977 collection "Poems from Yesteryear".

Here we can see the Old English poetic principle of alliteration toyed with, the AA/AX structure in a line turned into A/A/A/X, with the alliterative stresses now placed at the front of each line. However, there are no intended pauses between the lines – the poem is a run-

on sentence that adds layer on layer of repeated rhythmic power above its simple frame, bursting forward with each “auld” and then retreating like the tide slowly washing onto a shore, each surge-and-retreat hiding the ground gained from the last.

Yet all of this has been lost because of the work of one foolish king. Even the name — yes, the name. Notice the use of “**tale**” as a word for language or speech in that poem (a poem that, in itself, seems to posit an even older dialect of Havlandic), and remember that we know our elder tongue as *Havske Auldtale*. When the reforms were announced, they suggest a **Nytale**, but it is in the text of the reform itself that we discover the damnable phrase:

“The Present Tongue (*Tale*) of Havland, being innumerably riddled with corruption and confusion...

Tale in Old Havlandic can mean story, speech, or (in some references) counting. In Modern English it refers to “story”, and in Modern Havlandic it refers to the same.

“Ny-” is a cognate of English “New-” i.e. “Nytale” means “New Language

Here it is, the root of our national cult of self-denigration, a cult so strong that it persists past the monarchy into the republican government, which witlessly apes the choices and titles of the mainland. I cannot write more, I am at the verge of tears.

There will be those who, upon reading this, accuse me of some base Anglo-Saxon sentiment, a fervent worship of a nation which in its present form seems little concerned with

Havlandic affairs, unlike our much closer neighbour whose hand has undoubtedly been much more clear. Yet I write not in a vacuum, but in response to our present Zeigeist – It is not my intention to denigrate the undoubtedly strong Danish and Nordic cultural roots of this nation, but to shout from the rafters those less convenient parts, the less savoury legacies of our ancestors, which we daily aim to remove from the public discourse and bury under the rug of “**ancient history**.” Havland is more than an extension of our Eastern neighbour, it is a nation with its own culture and history, one which we must interrogate and cherish as its stewards. But enough lecturing. What of Old Havlandic?

The Havlandic Minister of State famously referred to the legacy of Viking slavery as “ancient history unworthy of serious discussion” in a 1972 interview.

The stable Kalmar-era Old Havlandic scholars speak of is a product of several influences, which I have enumerated already. Yet their interactions are less clear. It is obvious that contact with Nordic languages greatly shaped the development of English on the British isles, and here too it seems to have an effect, primarily in accelerating the removal of case endings for nouns and adjectives. Thus, a “scip” is a ship whether it is used in the genitive or nominative case, et cetera. In place of these case endings word order is enforced more strictly, although unconventional phrase structures such as transposed order phrases (he who the fastest horse has, and so on) are

used, much like in modern English, for poetic or performative effect. One influence from Danish that strongly affects how nouns are used, however, is the introduction of the suffix system for singular and plural definite nouns. The Danish **common gender suffix** (“-en”) was merged with the neuter gender suffix (“-et”) into the singular suffix “-en”. Thus, “the ship” is “scipen”. The plural “-s” is appended for plural definite nouns after -en or after the root word for plural nouns. “Ships” is “scips”, “The ships” is “scipens”.

Danish once had suffixes for male and female gender nouns, but these were merged over time in dialects that became dominant. Today, there is no such distinction.

Where possible, the -en/-ens suffix is used, except where the noun already ends with e (as in *Tale*), where convention instead requires we apply the neuter definite article “Det” beforehand. “The story” is “Det tale”. “The stories” is “Det tales”. These changes as a whole again seem to facilitate a much stricter following of word order convention, and would have likely been introduced as English and Danish themselves modernised over time.

Old Havlandic makes use of many conventional writing forms that were gradually phased out of English and Danish, including several “special characters” borrowed from runes or other sources. The most common of these are **thorn** (þ), **eth** (ð), and **ae** (æ). Eth is used for voiced dental fricatives, thorn for voiceless dental fricatives, and ae never evolved into the

Many of these characters exist in historical texts featuring Old/Middle English, Old/Middle Danish etc.

simple e or a. Notably, by the time Old Havlandic was written down a pseudo-convention had been adopted where words beginning with “th-” (“thu”, “thæn”, “they”) use eth, and words ending in “-th-” (“hath”, “ruth”) use thorn, regardless of pronunciation, which varied greatly by dialect. “Th” sounds in the middle of words were codified one way or the other, as so often occurs when language is put to paper. Violations of the convention can sometimes be seen, but these are usually attributed to scribal errors. The literate population in Havland at the time was a tiny minority, and thus allowed for a great amount of personal variation.

Under this convention:

thu → ðu
thæn → ðæn
they → ðey

hath → hap
ruth → rup

Note: In writing Old Havlandic, “ð” is often mistranscribed as “d” and “þ” as “p”. This is often a cause for confusion: Consider “ðæn” (thane) and “dæn” (Dane).

Another feature of Old Havlandic is the creation of neologisms from English and Danish parts. “-mann” is a common suffix added to designate a person connected to a certain concept, hence “jarlmann” (a man working for or of the nobility), “kjollmann” (shipman, sailor, captain), and “modmann” (a thinker, philosopher, dreamer). The casual way Danish and English words are combined indicates a great emphasis on practical usage over abstract linguistic sensibility, although Danophone branches of Old Havlandic tend to prefer Nordic words where possible and vice versa for Anglophone branches. Similar to the introduction of French words into English, Danish words prevail in areas surrounding

nobility, governance, sailing, and religion, while English words suffice in areas around basic/general concepts, labour, farming, and relationships. This division, **as in English**, is not arbitrary.

French loanwords for animal names in English are used for food while Germanic words are used for the animals themselves i.e. "beef" vs. "cow". This reflects the contexts in which the words would have been used i.e. dining vs. farming.

One last note to consider when conducting our brief tour of Old Havlandic is what changes survive to the modern day, past the Danmarkisation efforts of successive governments. To the great confusion of many schoolchildren, the "-et" suffix for neuter definite nouns has been reintroduced, although only in Danish loanwords (see "ministeret"). However, successful remnants of Old Havlandic can be found in words like "auld" and "aut". A great number of tonal shifts, which are of too large a scope to cover adequately in this overview, also survive, leading to words such as "habn" rather than "hafn", which I alluded to earlier. There are more subtle influences, in word order and choices that are harder to define. If I appear to be grasping at straws, it is because not much has successfully remained past the efforts of so many determined administrations since Absalon II's ill-fated reign.

Perhaps, then, one might say that all this study is merely academic, and that we ought to consign ourselves to the fact that Havlandic as it exists today is little more than bastardised

Danish with a few loanwords. To that, I can only answer in the words of my favourite quotation in Old Havlandic:

*Modmannen seyde, "**Hwæt is forspilde is for-
æfre forspilde hwan cepmannens neimar
lok.**"*

The philosopher said, "What is lost is lost forever when the keepers stop looking."