

# Norse origins of the Hodgson surname: Reply to a dissenting view

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## Introduction and summary

Based on my research on the geographical distribution in *The Hodgson Surname* (1993), I published an article on 'Surname History: A New Technique' in the February 1997 issue of *Family Tree Magazine* (Vol. 13, No. 4). I argued in the book and article that the surname distribution evidence supported the thesis that Hodgson derived from Norse forenames.

Mr. Peter Christian published a critique of my argument in the June 1997 issue of the same magazine, with a rejoinder by me. In 2001 Mr. Christian placed a revised and expanded version of his critique on the Web ([www.spub.co.uk/surnames.pdf](http://www.spub.co.uk/surnames.pdf)). Both versions of his critique are titled 'What Surname Distribution Can't Tell Us'. He follows the esteemed etymologist P. H. Reaney in arguing that Hodgson is derived from the nickname Hodge, which in turn derives from Roger.

Pressure of work and other projects have prevented me from replying to Mr. Christian's 2001 essay until now. Here I take the opportunity to reply at length to his argument.<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Christian is an expert on family history and I much welcome his critical interest in my thesis on the origin of the Hodgson surname. Scholarly debate is very welcome and helps put new ideas to the test. Furthermore, Mr. Christian's argument is quite detailed and it usefully provokes new questions and searches for additional evidence.

However, I find his response to be flawed and unconvincing. Despite throwing everything at hand at the thesis of Norse origins, I argue below that he fails to dent it. Some of my responses are as follows:

- I deny Mr. Christian's charge that I ignore the evidence of surname etymologists. Etymologists give different explanations of the Hodgson surname and we must choose among them.
- Although distributional evidence from post-1539 parish registers is not ideal for our purposes, and we lack vital evidence from earlier centuries, the distributional evidence that we do have should be given taken into account.
- Mr. Christian himself uses piecemeal surname distribution evidence to attempt to refute my argument, but nowhere gives the overall distributional picture any practical weight.
- Mr. Christian argues that because the derivation from Roger and Hodge is the 'accepted view' then we must treat it as valid. But if we must accept a consensus view as true simply because it is accepted by the consensus, then science would never be able to make any progress.

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<sup>1</sup> I am very grateful to Joan and Peter Hodgson for comments on an earlier version of this essay.

- The Hodgson surname is much more densely concentrated in Cumbria and Lonsdale than elsewhere. Mr. Christian provides no evidence or explanation why the forenames Hodge or Roger were more common in these areas than elsewhere. By contrast, forenames such as Oddgeir and Hrodgeir would have been more frequent, because these were areas of Norse settlement, where the Norse language endured for centuries.
- Mr. Christian doubts that Oddson could evolve into Hodgson, because the addition of an 'h' and 'g' would be 'impossible'. I point out that my fuller argument is that Hodgson evolved from Oddgeirson, which may help to explain the 'g'. I give examples of several place names, recorded as beginning with 'O' in the *Domesday Book*, that later acquired a leading 'H'. It is also possible that Hodgson derives from the Norse name Hrodgeir.
- In discussing the evolution of the Hodgson surname, the existence of different languages in the North of England for several centuries, general illiteracy, and the lack of standardised spellings, all have to be taken into account.

Henceforth I follow his arguments sequentially, by quoting extensively from the 2001 version of his essay. It should be noted that both versions of Mr. Christian's critique preceded the publication of the Hodgson DNA evidence in *Hodgson Saga* in 2005. He cannot be blamed for failing in 2001 to take the DNA evidence into account. But he should do so now.

### **Who is discounting evidence?**

Note first Mr. Christian's choice of title: 'What Surname Distribution Can't Tell Us'. Sure, there are many things that surname distribution evidence cannot tell us, including tomorrow's weather. Alone it cannot adequately explain the origin of a surname. To explore such issues, we have to scrutinize *all* the relevant evidence available, including the views of etymological experts, alongside historical, geographical, DNA and surname distribution evidence. In practice, however, Mr. Christian disregards the evidence on surname distribution and even of some etymologists. Nowhere in his article does he allow the fact that the Hodgson surname is historically (and currently) most densely concentrated in Cumbria to have any impact on his argument. My approach is much more inclusive in its acceptance of evidence than his.

Mr Christian claims that 'the subtext' of my 1997 article is that 'the time has come for the genealogist to take over the business of surname study from the etymologists. In his the book, the formulation is even stronger, and he seems to be attacking the professional competence of Reaney and others.' This is untrue. Nowhere do I claim or imply that genealogists (or even researchers into surname distribution) should 'take over' surname studies from etymologists. Note his rhetorical tactic here. He implies that I am being overly selective and one-sided in my choice of evidence, whereas in fact it is his approach to evidence that is unduly restrictive.

### **The alleged problem of the 600-year gap**

Mr Christian acknowledges that my surname distribution evidence is 'interesting, but to call it decisive is surely an overstatement'. He points to the gap in time of over 600 years between the Norse invasion of Cumbria and my earliest distribution evidence in sixteenth-century parish registers. Unfortunately, there is no earlier and equally comprehensive surname distribution evidence.

Nevertheless, the 600 year gap is not enough to dismiss this evidence, for several reasons. First, there was relatively little population mobility in medieval times. Consequently, surname distribution would have changed little. With the stirrings of the Industrial Revolution in the

eighteenth century, there was increasing mobility. But even after the extensive migrations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Hodgson surname remains most densely concentrated in Cumbria. To confirm this, the reader is invited to inspect the map on the [www.hodgson-clan.net](http://www.hodgson-clan.net) website showing the distribution of the Hodgson surname in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and compare it with the maps showing its distribution in 1881 and 1998. Even after 1100 years, the Hodgson surname is still most heavily concentrated in Cumbria. This persistent evidence of a dominant locus in Cumbria should not be ignored.

Second, I do not argue that the Hodgson surname was formed in the tenth century. I argue that the Norse invasions led to a Norse culture with Norse names and naming practices, which survived until the fourteenth century when true surnames began to be widely established. Scholars uphold that in some areas of England, Danish or Norse were spoken as the main language until the thirteenth century (Bugge, 1921). There is evidence of surviving Scandinavian names and naming customs in the North of England in the fourteenth century.

I wish I had surname distribution evidence from the fourteenth century. This is the earliest possible date when any widespread surname distribution would occur. But note that this gap is not 600 years. It is between the fourteenth century, when surnames became widespread, and the sixteenth century, when the first systematic distribution evidence becomes available. The gap is not 600 but 200 years. And these two centuries were marked by very limited geographical mobility, as were the preceding 400 years. Consequently, the existence of a gap has much less impact than Mr. Christian upholds.

### **Considering other surnames**

Mr Christian claims that if I ‘could show that there were several indisputably Norwegian names and no name of other origin with the same distribution, then the case would be much stronger.’ There are two requests here. The first is show that several Norse names have a similar (Cumbrian) distribution. I think that this is a valuable and important challenge and I would welcome any present or future evidence that bears upon it. But this particular project does depend on *agreement* on a list of names that are ‘indisputably Norwegian’. I would welcome his suggestions: that is a request from me to him.

Mr. Christian’s second request is for me to show that no non-Norse surname has the same (Cumbrian) distribution. But it would be beyond the bounds of the research efforts of thousands of researchers to consider all possible non-Norse surnames, derive data on their distribution, and show that none has a predominantly Cumbrian distribution. We have recent distribution evidence on many surnames ([www.britishsurnames.co.uk](http://www.britishsurnames.co.uk)) but these cover a fraction of all British surnames.

Even if all known non-Norse surnames were appraised, and none had a predominantly Cumbrian distribution, there is always the possibility that another would turn up. Mr. Christian is asking me to establish a universally negative proposition, concerning non-existence. We know from the philosophy and practice of science that such negative propositions cannot in principle be proven.

But I am willing to facilitate matters and make a major concession to Mr. Christian. Instead of considering all surnames, I am willing to admit (at least) one, which I believe is not necessarily etymologically of Norse origin, and it has a Cumbria-centred geographical distribution similar to the Hodgson surname. In my 1996 booklet on the *Lonsdale Trail* (downloadable from the [www.hodgson-clan.net](http://www.hodgson-clan.net) website) I addressed the Atkinson surname. I accept the conventional explanation that ‘Atkin’ derives from ‘Adam’s kin’. None of these

words is specifically Norse. The more recently available Web evidence on surname distribution ([www.britishsurnames.co.uk](http://www.britishsurnames.co.uk)) confirms that Atkinson has its highest concentration in Cumbria.

The case is more complicated, however, because in the *Lonsdale Trail* and on the [www.hodgson-clan.net](http://www.hodgson-clan.net) website I hypothesise that the appellation 'Atkin' may have derived when the pagan Norse invaders inquired of the indigenous British and Christian population as to their origins. These Christians would have claimed Biblical descent from Adam. Hence although the Atkinson surname is not specifically and etymologically Norse, it may owe part of its origin to the Norse invasions. Consequently, unless the request is refined, dividing all surnames into those of Norse and non-Norse origin may in practice be difficult, in part because of cases such as this.

Available DNA evidence cited on the [www.hodgson-clan.net](http://www.hodgson-clan.net) website shows that Atkinsons are more likely to be indigenous British than Norse, and their DNA profile differs greatly from the Hodgsons. Taking this DNA evidence together with the Atkinson preponderance in Cumbria, I suggest that this is consistent with the survival of a clan organisation in that region (Fraser 1971). This would indicate a Balkan-style mixture of different family groups in Cumbria for several centuries.

While county-level data show a distributional similarity between Hodgsons and Atkinsons, clan territoriality may have created a different distributional picture, visible when comparing parish with parish. Unfortunately the Atkinson parish-level data is not yet assembled. But the outcome would not affect my basic hypothesis concerning the Hodgson surname. A key point here is that the request concerning surname distribution evidence has to be defined more exactly.

For these reasons I do not believe the discovery of a non-Norse surname of Cumbrian origin would have the decisive impact that Mr. Christian claims. There is such a name, and it does not undermine the thesis that Hodgson has Norse roots.

### **Bringing surname distribution evidence back in**

Although Mr. Christian ends up giving no weight to my surname distribution evidence, note how, in his two requests in the preceding section, he has subtly given other distribution evidence much more credence, including the imagined power to refute my argument. Having opened the door to the kind of evidence he selectively disregards elsewhere, he again gives distribution evidence credence in the following words:

But even a cursory glance at reference works raises some questions about the value map itself: I've no doubt it is accurate for the period of parish registers, but earlier distribution includes some other areas: Black's cites Hodgsons in Ayr and Lanark in the 15th Century; McKinley's book on Lancashire surnames quotes two Hodgsons in Crosby, well to the south of Mr Hodgson's map, in 1346; Lower's dictionary refers to a Hodgson family from 15th Century Northumberland.

In this passage Mr. Christian accepts the validity of the evidence of Hodgson surname distribution in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But in practice he gives it no weight in the endeavour to determine the origins of the Hodgson surname. Furthermore, Mr. Christian has doubts that a similar distribution existed earlier. To substantiate these doubts, he suddenly grants extraordinary powers to miniscule and incomplete surname distribution evidence.

His surname distribution evidence consists of 'Hodgsons in Ayr and Lanark', 'two Hodgsons in Crosby' and 'a Hodgson family' in Northumberland. No such evidence should be disregarded, but it consists of a handful of persons. My surname distribution map is based

on data for nearly two thousand Hodgson marriages. Evidence for a dozen further Hodgsons can in no way puncture a distribution map based on two thousand. It can in no way undermine the conclusion that the surname was and is most predominant in Cumbria.

If there were hundreds of Hodgsons in Ayr, Lanark or other parts of Scotland in the fifteenth, sixteenth or seventeenth centuries then that would be a strong challenge to the claim of Cumbrian predominance. But we know from parish registers evidence (in the International Genealogical Index) that the Hodgson surname was extremely rare anywhere in Scotland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Mr. Christian is asking us to entertain the conjecture that there were a sufficient number of Hodgsons in parts of Scotland in the fifteenth century to overturn the claim of Cumbrian predominance. To sustain this conjecture we would need evidence of hundreds of Hodgsons, not two or three. Furthermore, we would have to explain how almost all these Hodgson families mysteriously disappeared (or were unregistered) in the early era of parish registers.

Consider the other straws that Mr. Christian is so keen to grasp. Evidence of 'a Hodgson family from 15th Century Northumberland' is no problem for me. My surname distribution map includes data for 81 Hodgson marriages in Northumberland, constituting 0.3 per cent of all known marriages in that territory. One more Hodgson family would make little difference to the overall pattern.

### **The Hodgsons of Crosby**

Consider the 'two Hodgsons in Crosby, well to the south of Mr Hodgson's map'. Actually, the centre of Crosby is less than 15 miles south of the lower limit of my surname distribution map in *The Hodgson Surname* (and about 8 miles south of the slightly enlarged map in *Hodgson Saga*). This may be a long way for Mr. Christian, but it is not for me.

Assume for the sake of argument that there were not two but hundreds of Hodgsons in Crosby in the fifteenth, sixteenth or seventeenth centuries. Crosby is among a cluster of settlements close to Liverpool, including Aigburth, Croxteth, Formby, Greasby, Kirkby, Raby and Toxteth, which place-name experts believe to be of Norse origin (Ekwall 1922, 1960). The *-by* suffix in Crosby is clearly Scandinavian. 'Crosby' means 'farm by the cross'. All these place-names in the Liverpool area originate from Norse settlement in the tenth century (Ekwall 1922, Wainwright 1975). The existence of hundreds of Hodgsons in this area would support rather than undermine the idea that their surname has Norse origins!

Mr. Christian is inconsistent in his treatment of surname distribution evidence: he accepts the veracity of my map but gives it no evidential weight. On the other hand he regards distribution evidence of a dozen Hodgsons as being of sufficient significance to 'question' (and in practice discount) the Cumbrian predominance of the surname. Furthermore, with his evidence of early Hodgsons in Crosby he shoots himself in the foot. Crosby was a Norse settlement.

### **Evidence ignored?**

In his section 'evidence ignored' Mr. Christian accuses me of committing that sin. He claims that the thesis of Norse origins 'is based on ignoring all the evidence for the contrary view.'

Not so. The evidence to which Mr. Christian refers is etymological. Taking this as a whole, the problem is that there are a variety of different etymological claims concerning the origin of the Hodgson surname, and some of these contradict others. We cannot adopt two different explanations that logically contradict one another. If we plump for one such explanation

rather than another, we are not ‘ignoring evidence’. We are fulfilling our scientific obligation of maintaining consistency.

I do not *ignore* the claim that ‘Hodgson is derived from Hodge, a nickname for Roger, which itself was originally introduced into this country by the Normans’ (as Mr. Christian upholds). It is different from my claim that Hodgson derives from Oddgeirson, and I plump for one rather than the other (at least for Cumbrian and Lonsdale Hodgsons). I do not accuse Mr. Christian of ‘ignoring’ my theory, and he should not accuse me of ‘ignoring’ his favoured Hodge/Roger theory (as promulgated by Reaney 1958, 1967).

Mr. Christian then writes that his ‘modern view’ of the origins of the Hodgson surname ‘represents a consensus’ and ‘any hypothesis which cannot refute or offer an alternative explanation for that evidence, must be regarded as very weak.’ Here he confuses evidence with explanation. Neither the Hodge/Roger nor the Oddgeirson theory are themselves evidence. They are *explanations*, each claiming (rightly or wrongly) to be *based* on evidence. The ‘consensus’ view is an explanation rather than evidence.

*In treating the consensus status of an explanation as evidence, Mr. Christian is inferring that the widespread belief in a proposition is itself evidence of its truth.* Sure enough, the consensus status of any proposition obliges us to take it very seriously. But if this consensus status were sufficient to undermine any alternative view, then science would not make any progress. We would still believe that the Earth is flat or thunder is created by Thor’s hammer.

I am fully aware that my thesis of Norse origins is a challenge to the ‘modern’ or ‘consensus’ theory. But this does not *itself* mean that my view is ‘very weak’ or wrong. And it does not mean that I am ignoring evidence.

In a footnote Mr. Christian refers to the earlier surname studies, which I cite as entertaining the possibility that Hodgson derives in part from the Norse name Odd. He claims that these early ‘speculative’ studies ‘are now completely worthless, except where they cite original source material.’ But some of these studies do refer to early names such as Odd and Oddy and there is fourteenth century evidence of names such as Odson, Odeson and Odesone. Reaney gives no source evidence clearly confirming that Hodgson is derived from Roger (or Hodge). So is Reaney’s study ‘completely worthless’?

## **Anglo-Saxons**

Mr. Christian writes:

Mr Hodgson’s sole argument against any other hypothesis, e.g. of Anglo-Saxon or Norman origin, is based on the fact that his distribution patterns do not match known settlement patterns of these groups. This is a rather odd argument in both cases. For the Saxons, it implies that any Saxon-derived surname must be distributed throughout the area occupied by the Saxons.

Since Mr. Christian wrote the two versions of his essay, DNA evidence has also appeared to support the thesis of Norse origins. Hence the surname distribution evidence is no longer the ‘sole argument’.

Furthermore, I do not see it as ‘rather odd’ to claim that surnames of Norse origin are more likely to be preponderant in areas of denser Norse settlement. However, specific conditions must pertain to sustain such a view. To bridge the gap between Norse settlements in the tenth century and the spread of surnames in the fourteenth century, Norse forenames must have retained some predominance in the intervening period. This implies a limited degree of geographical mobility and limited inter-mixings with other cultures, languages or dialects.

These special conditions apply to Cumbria. It was a poor, rugged and remote region, with difficult communications, and populated by territorial clans (Fraser 1971). Over several centuries, these special conditions preserved names and practices derived from the Norse.

My thesis does *not* necessarily imply ‘that any Saxon-derived surname must be distributed throughout the area occupied by the Saxons’ because the Saxons occupied an agriculturally richer area of England where travel was easier and mobility was greater. Furthermore, the Saxons were in England several centuries before the arrival of the Norse. There would have been a much greater intermixing of names and dialects. All one could rightly claim is that any Saxon-derived surname must be distributed throughout the area where Saxon names were significant in the fourteenth century.

Mr. Christian continues: ‘In any case, this seems to be a misunderstanding: Mr Hodgson seems to have taken Reaney’s point that there is a Anglo-Saxon equivalent of Roger to mean there is the possibility of an Anglo-Saxon etymology.’ I make no such statement and there is no such misunderstanding. The claim that Hodgson is Anglo-Saxon in origin was not made by Reaney but by the late Father Brendan Hodgson in unpublished papers in the 1980s. Because these papers were unpublished drafts, I did not refer to them explicitly. I am pleased that Mr. Christian also rejects the thesis of Anglo-Saxon origins. We agree on this.

### **Norman components?**

Mr Christian claims that ‘to talk of “Norman” origin is also misleading: the theory is that the ultimate source of the Hodge component is Norman, not that Hodge or Hodgson are actually Norman names.’

But nowhere do I claim that anyone regards Hodge or Hodgson as Norman names. Mr. Christian argues that Hodgson derives from Hodge, which itself derives from Roger, and Roger is Norman. Hence the origination or starting point in this argument is the Norman name Roger. To deny that this is a claim of Norman ‘origin’ would be both unwarranted and extraordinary.

Mr. Christian continues:

The only real distributional issue here is the distribution of the forename Roger, for Hodge could arise, and therefore so could Hodgson, in any area where the name Roger was in use. Bardsley quotes an example from the 1379 Yorkshire Poll Tax, where one servant refers to her master as Roger, while another refers to him as Hodge.

I have no quarrel with the idea that Hodge was a nickname often derived from Roger. But this does not mean that the ‘only real distributional issue here is the distribution of the forename Roger’. Furthermore, if we had systematic evidence of the medieval distribution of the forename Roger, it is unclear how Mr. Christian would interpret it. If Roger were more common in the South of England would Mr. Christian treat this as evidence against his argument, because Hodgsons are in reality more common in the North?

In the 1539-1700 period, Hodgsons were more than 2 per cent of the population in Cumberland and above 0.5 per cent in some other northern counties. Outside this northern zone, Hodgsons were about 0.02 per cent of the British population in 1881 ([www.britishsurnames.co.uk](http://www.britishsurnames.co.uk)). I assume that this all-Britain density was no greater in the 1539-1700 period. Obviously, 2 per cent is 100 times greater than 0.02 per cent. This gives us a ball-park estimate that Hodgson was 100 times more common in Cumbria than elsewhere.

Accordingly, if there were evidence that the distribution of the forename Roger from the year 1066 to the fourteenth century was 100 times, or even 10 times, more common in

Cumberland than in England as a whole, then I would accept this as an extremely severe challenge to the thesis of Norse origins. It would give the Hodge/Roger argument hugely enhanced credence. But we have no such evidence. Furthermore, there is no explanation why the Norman name Roger became so extraordinarily popular in Cumberland: my hunch is that it would be extremely unlikely. The onus is on Mr. Christian to provide the distributional evidence to the contrary.

From the point of view of the thesis of Norse origins, the appropriate conjecture would be that Norse names such as Odd, Oddi, Oddr, Oddgeir and Hrodgeir were together 100 times, or even 10 times, more common in Cumberland than in England as a whole, from the tenth to the fourteenth centuries. Given our knowledge of surviving Norse culture and dialect, such a ball-park conjecture is highly plausible.

We should again remind ourselves that even as late as the fifteenth century regional dialects in England were very different from one another, to the point that some could be regarded as different languages. Norse words and names would still be prevalent in Cumbria and Lonsdale, but much less evident elsewhere.

### **One swallow does not make a summer**

Instead of presenting systematic evidence on the distribution of the forename Roger, which he regards as the ‘only real distributional issue’, Mr. Christian notes that ‘Reaney cites an example of the surname Hodge in Cumberland in 1212.’ From this *one* example Mr. Christian infers: ‘Clearly, both the forename and surname Hodge were in use in Northern England in the medieval period.’ But the argument here is not whether these names were ‘in use’ in the North. The issues are whether there were a sufficient number of them to account for the preponderance of the Hodgson surname, and whether they were in turn derived from Roger. *One* example of the surname Hodge in Cumberland in 1212 proves nothing either way.

Yet Mr. Christian places so much weight on this one Cumbrian Hodge to write: ‘the Cumbrian example shows there is no difficulty whatsoever in supposing that Cumbrian Hodgsons are derived Cumbrian Hodges.’ But the difficulties disappear only if the evidence to the contrary is ignored. Furthermore, he provides no example of the *forename* Hodge in Cumbria.

He also finds two Crosby men named ‘Roger Hodgson’ in early times ‘which at least suggests the possibility that these might show a patronymic rather than surname use of Hodgson.’ But these cases show little more than that both the forename Roger and the surname Hodgson were in early simultaneous use in at least one area. It shows neither that Roger was generally as common as Hodgson, nor that the latter was derived through Hodge from the former.

### **The ‘overwhelming’ case**

Mr. Christian regards the case for the ‘accepted’ view that Hodgson derives from Roger via Hodge to be ‘quite overwhelming’ and consisting of ‘three key points’ which are found in ‘standard reference works’.

The first of these points is that the ‘name Hodge is well attested as a nickname for Roger’. I have no problem in accepting this.

His second ‘key point’ is that in the derivation of Hodge from Roger, the ‘R’ is replaced by an ‘H’. Similarly, ‘Richard, Robert and Roger all have associated rhyming nicknames starting with both “h” and “d”’: Dick, Hick, Hob, Dob, Hodge, Dodge.’ I have no reason to doubt these arguments.

His third 'key point' starts with the claim that common English male forenames and nicknames derived from them, have given rise to derivatives with -s and -son. I agree with this, with the caveat that the -son derivation is neither universal nor automatic, and it is in fact much more common in the North of England, in the areas of greatest Scandinavian settlement (Crystal 1995, p. 26).

Our differences arise with the final part of the third 'key point' where Mr. Christian writes:

So either Mr Hodgson must argue that Hodge and Hodgson are quite unrelated, or he needs to show that Hodge, too, and all its derivatives match his distribution map. If the former, then he needs to explain how, of all these related forenames, Hodge alone manages to avoid having a form with -son derived from it.

Given my agreement on the other points, the 'quite overwhelming' case against my argument must lie in these two sentences, so we must look at them closely.

Mr. Christian presents me with some dilemmas and I must respond accordingly. I do not deny that some Hodge forenames or nicknames existed in the North of England. Furthermore, it is possible that some cases of Hodgson may have derived from Hodge. But my hypothesis is that derivation from Oddgeir and similar Norse names was more important, particularly in areas where Hodgson was more common. Furthermore, even in cases and areas where Hodgson derived from Hodge, it is not necessarily the case that the Hodge *always* derived from Roger. We cannot entirely rule out the Scandinavian alternative names.

In sum, Hodge and the surname Hodgson may be related in a minority of cases. Hodge may not have avoided having a -son attached to it, but I suggest that most Hodgson surnames, particularly in the Cumbrian heartland, derive from Norse personal names.

Evidence of the distribution of the *forename* Hodge at the time when surnames were emerging would be important in assessing the likely frequency that Hodgson derived from Hodge. If the forename Hodge was very common in Cumbria and the North of England, then the likely frequency of such a transformation would increase. But we have no overall distribution evidence of this type, and no particular evidence of any Hodge forename in Cumbria in the relevant period.

On the contrary, if the forename Hodge was more common *outside* the areas of Scandinavian settlement (and principally in the South) then its transformation into Hodgson would be much less likely, simply because the filial form -son is much less common in these regions. Until we have such distribution evidence, this issue cannot be resolved. As things stand, Mr. Christian's case is far from 'overwhelming'.

I gratefully acknowledge that Mr. Christian's argument has persuaded me to accept the possibility of hybrid origins. While I believe that most Hodgson surnames derive from the Norse names Oddgeir or Hrodgeir, I accept that it is possible that some may derive from Hodge.

Appreciation of the ethnic, cultural and linguistic heterogeneity in the North of England in the 902-1400 period is crucial here. From available evidence I estimate that about 75 per cent of all Hodgson surnames were established (in 1200-1400) in predominantly Norse areas of settlement, particularly Cumbria and Lonsdale. In these Norse areas the derivation is much more likely to be from Oddgeir. With currently available evidence, I would put the Hodge-derived Hodgsons at less than 20 per cent. I am willing to revise this estimate if further relevant evidence comes to light.

## The surnames Hodge and Hodges

Was the forename Hodge was more common *outside* the areas of Scandinavian settlement (principally in the South) in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries? In the absence of adequate forename evidence, consider the two *surnames* Hodge and Hodges. Etymologists claim that Hodge and Hodges also relate to Roger. I do not challenge this view.

The earliest comprehensive surname distribution evidence available on Hodge and Hodges is from the 1881 census ([www.britishsurnames.co.uk](http://www.britishsurnames.co.uk)). This is long after the fourteenth century, but it is all that we have at present, and it is not irrelevant. In contrast to Hodgson, Hodge was in 1881 most common in mid-Scotland and the South-West of England. Hodges had two major clusters, around the rivers Severn and Medway, far from the North of England.

If Hodges derives from the forename Hodge, then this points to significant earlier clusters of the forename in the South. If the surname Hodge derives from either Hodges or the forename Hodge, then we add further Hodge forename clusters in mid-Scotland and the South-West of England. None of these clusters is in an area of major Scandinavian settlement. On this basis, my conjecture is that the forename Hodge, and the surnames Hodge and Hodges, were much less common in areas of Viking settlement. We await more evidence to confirm or refute this conjecture.

## The Rogerson surname

Consider the data for the surname Rogerson, which we all agree means ‘son of Roger’. Given that it is a ‘-son’ name, we would expect it to be more common in the North of England. The 1881 data for Rogerson on the [www.britishsurnames.co.uk](http://www.britishsurnames.co.uk) website confirms this. In the South, where the Norman cultural influence was greater, and the forename Roger was likely to be more common, ‘-son’ names are less common and Rogerson emerged in lesser numbers.

Rogerson is also found in Cumbria, and in the Dumfries and Galloway region in southwest Scotland! Is this the distributional evidence that Mr. Christian needs to show that the forename Roger was prominent in areas of Norse settlement?

A closer look at the Rogerson map suggests a different story. The two highest 1881 densities of Rogerson were in Central Lancashire and the Dumfries and Galloway region. While all of Cumbria was heavily settled by the Norse, place-name and other evidence show that Norse settlements in Dumfries and Galloway were confined to a southern coastal strip. Furthermore, the map shows a higher density of Rogersons in Northumberland (which had little Norse settlement) than in Cumberland.

The facts in the preceding paragraph indicate that the Rogerson surname formed an uncanny and near-perfect *fringe* around the heaviest areas of Norse settlement in Cumberland. This fringe was on the north, north-east and south of the Norse heartlands. The Pennine Hills completed the enclosure on the eastern side.

In Cumbria, inside the fringe, Norse names were prominent from the tenth to the fourteenth centuries: we may assume that Oddgeirson was more common than Roger. Roger was more common outside than inside. It was a name brought over by the Norman elite. In these fringe areas, people would have been more exposed to Norman cultural norms. Some sons were named Roger rather than Oddgeir. Because of the external cultural and dialect pressures in these fringe areas, it is even possible that some people altered their surname from Oddgeirson to Rogerson. Such a transformation would have been less likely in the internal Norse areas, with their enhanced hostility to the Norman elite.

The fringe-like distribution of the Rogerson surname confirms rather than undermines the linguistic differences between the Norse heartlands and the surrounding areas. It does not undermine the thesis of Norse origins of the Hodgson surname. Furthermore, it teaches us to take surname distribution evidence seriously.

### **Is Hodgson uniquely of Viking origin?**

Mr. Christian's table 1 takes the names Richard, Robert and Roger, and considers the way that their nickname forms have taken a leading 'H-' or a 'D-' in each case, giving us Dick, Hick, Dobb, Hobb and so on. The table also gives us nine patronymics in '-s', nine in '-son' and eight diminutives in 'in' or 'kin'. Out of all these possibilities, Mr. Christian asks: 'Can Hodgson, uniquely of all these surnames, be of Viking origin?'

My answer is that we do not know for sure, but there is a possibility that more of these names may have emerged in a North of England culture with Viking names and naming practices.

Dixon and Dickson are very common names in the North of England. In the 1881 Census data they show their highest concentrations on either side of the Anglo-Scottish border. Dixon is the more frequent spelling and is particularly prevalent in Cumbria. Reaney (who we should never ignore) notes a 'Thom *Dicson* 1307 of Black Castle Douglas' in the Dumfries and Galloway region in Scotland. This area was heavily settled by the Norse.

Robert and Roger are not of Scandinavian origin. It is well known that Richard was Norman French – it was the forename of some English kings. But the forenames Rikard or Rikhard have a long history in Viking cultures. The first element Rik- is from the Old Norse adjective *ríkr* meaning mighty, distinguished or rich. The second element *-harðr* is from the Old Norse adjective *hörðr* meaning hard or strong.

The Dixon surname DNA project has gathered 38 samples of Y-DNA (which is less than the Hodgson surname DNA project). Furthermore, while the Hodgson project is confined to Hodgson and Hodson descendants only, the Dixon project covers 10 variants, including Dickason, Dickerson, Dickinson and others.

With such a small sample and so many variants, it is difficult to establish strong conclusions. But I can report that the proportion of Viking DNA in this 'Dixon' sample of 38 is about the same as for Hodgsons. *It is thus possible that Dixon and some of its variants are of Norse origin.*

### **Crucial linguistic steps**

Mr. Christian writes that:

given that Mr Hodgson is trying to establish an etymology for his surname, it is very unfortunate that he pays so little attention to the crucial linguistic step in his argument. No one will dispute the Norwegian settlement of Cumbria, the introduction of the forename Odd, or the existence of a patronymic Oddson. But Mr Hodgson's argument in fact depends entirely on the question of whether Oddson could and would have developed into Hodgson. If so, then his other arguments and the counter-evidence will have to be weighed up; if not, then any remaining evidence is entirely irrelevant — the argument must fail.

The Norse forename Oddgeir is generally overlooked by Mr. Christian, but I'll leave that point until later. Mr. Christian calls for 'linguistic proof' and regards my argument that Oddgeirson or Oddson could acquire a leading 'H-' as 'patently ridiculous'. He insists that qualified linguistic specialists would not accept such nonsense.

I would like to ask the group of linguistic experts that Mr. Christian holds in such high esteem to explain the following changes in place names, documented by Eilert Ekwall (1960). Hodstock in Nottinghamshire was recorded as Odesach in the *Domesday Book* of 1086. In the same document, Hognaston, Hopton and Hopwell in Derbyshire were originally Ochenauestun, Opetune and Opeuelle, respectively. In Staffordshire, Hopewas was recorded in 1086 as Opewas. Huddersfield in Yorkshire was originally Oderesfelt, and so on. If place-names starting in O- can later acquire a leading H-, then why not surnames as well? Or is that ‘patently ridiculous’?

Mr. Christian adds in a footnote:

An additional ‘h’ is sometimes found, variably, in the spelling of words and names from French. This happens because a French-derived ‘h’ is not pronounced and it is therefore sometimes mistakenly added in writing where it does not belong. This cannot apply to Oddson.

I would not dismiss this possibility so readily. Norman French was the language of the upper classes and the educated elite in England until the thirteenth century, when surnames were beginning to be formed. Can we rule out the possibility that, among the literate elite and the clerks at the time, some had acquired the Norman French inspired habit of adding a silent H? Later the H would have been pronounced. We cannot rule this out as one possible way that the H was acquired.

A possibility I overlooked earlier is that Hodgson derives from the Norse name Hrodgeir, which is related to the name of the Old English king Hrodgar in the ancient tale of *Beowulf*. Here the leading ‘H’ in Hodgson is acquired directly from the Norse.

### **The ‘damning evidence’**

Mr. Christian considers this his *coup de grace*:

But it’s not just that Mr Hodgson fails to examine the linguistic evidence, the problem is that the evidence, when examined, is damning — I think it is fair to say that, linguistically, the development of Oddson into Hodgson is not just improbable but quite impossible.

His argument for this forceful assertion is as follows:

One of the fundamental findings of historical linguistics is that sounds don’t just change at random in individual words, they change in regular ways in whole groups of words at about the same time. And it is simply not the case that ‘d’ changed to ‘dg’ in medieval English, either in general, or in some specific set of circumstances. The most obvious proof of this is that the adjective odd, which is related to the forename Odd, is not pronounced hodge in Modern English or any dialect of it. Modern words with ‘dg’ either developed this from ‘g’ in a much earlier period (before the earliest Anglo-Saxon documents), or owe it to their French origin.

I wish Mr. Christian had considered my argument more carefully. As a linguistic expert he will know that many Norse forenames consist of *two* syllabic elements, such as Gunnar, Ragnar, Thorstein and so on. Oddgeir and Hrodgeir are no exceptions. They are Norse equivalents to Roger. The surnames Oddgeirson and Oddgeirsson exist in Scandinavia today, as Google will confirm. Hrodgeir and Hrodgeirson are less common.

Of course, Oddgeir was (and is) sometimes contracted to Odd, Oddi or Oddr, but the complete Oddgeir name should not be neglected. If modern Norwegian were a guide, then the pronunciation of Oddgeir would be something like ‘Odd-gire’, to rhyme with ‘fire’. The stress would be on the first syllable, the ‘g’ would be hard rather than soft and the ‘r’ would be

almost silent. So Oddgeir would sound almost like ‘odd guy’, with the stress on the first word. Try saying ‘odd-guy-son’ with a stress on the first syllable. It is not difficult to imagine that this might have got recorded as Hodgeson or Hodgson.

Taking these issues together, it becomes much more plausible that Oddgeirson could eventually evolve over centuries into Hodgson. When I originally developed my argument in the early 1990s I consulted with some highly educated Norwegians with linguistic knowledge. They found the link between Oddgeirson and Hodgson to be highly plausible. Among them was Professor Francis Sejersted, then Chairman of the Nobel Peace Prize Committee. My own researches led to the alternative possibility that Hodgson derives from Hrodgeirson. But as far as I am aware this alternative is not proposed by any etymologists.

### **‘Another striking objection’**

Relentless and unforgiving in his pursuit, Mr. Christian writes:

Another striking objection, arising from evidence Mr Hodgson himself cites, is that Odeson and Odson are both recorded in the 1379 Poll Tax for Yorkshire. But there is also a Hodgeson in that tax assessment, and there are the earlier attestations of Hodgson in Lancs cited by McKinley. But if Oddson is supposed already to have changed to Hodgson by 1379, what are these Oddsons doing? The fact is that the ‘d’ in a name such as Oddson simply could not have changed in this way in this period, and the co-existence of Oddson and Hodgson in the same source is good documentary evidence of the fact that it did not.

Contrary to this depiction, nowhere do I suggest that the evolution of Oddgeirson into Hodgson was uniform in every family and village. Nowhere do I assume that all Oddsons were transformed simultaneously into Hodgsons. The transformation would have been non-simultaneous and uneven.

Furthermore, Mr. Christian overlooks an obvious explanation for the simultaneous presence of Hodgsons and Oddsons. In the fourteenth century, almost all the population were illiterate. Many that could write were inconsistent in their spelling, and many common words could be spelt in different ways. The documentation of the 1379 Poll Tax for Yorkshire was not carried out by one clerk. Mr. Christian overlooks the obvious possibility that Oddson and Hodgson were pronounced in a very similar way, but recorded with different spellings.

Of course, for Oddson and Hodgson to be pronounced similarly, the leading H- must be given a light stress. If twentieth century cockneys can drop an H-, then it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that a fourteenth century Yorkshireman could give it a light touch. And it always has to be stressed that a clerk coming from elsewhere would have had great difficulty with the Yorkshire dialect – then still practically a separate language. Furthermore, there would have been major differences in dialect, even between settlements that were close to one another. Hodgson in one village could easily appear as Oddson in another.

Spoken language is primary, not written language. Even in the modern era of standardised spelling, there are UK English words with multiple legitimate spellings, and several spelling differences between US and UK English. Behaviour and behavior are not different words. Generally, in the fourteenth century, Oddson and Hodgson were essentially the same. But I am not ruling out the possibility that some Hodgsons outside Cumberland derived their name from Hodge. But these were at most a small minority.

Mr. Christian believes that the ‘most obvious proof’ that Oddson and Hodgson are from a different source ‘is that the adjective odd, which is related to the forename Odd, is not pronounced hodge in Modern English or any dialect of it.’ First, my argument does not require that both the words ‘odd’ and ‘Odd’ spoken in Cumbria by Norse descendants were

subsequently pronounced ‘hodge’. My argument is that most Hodgson surnames derived from Oddgeir, not Hodge. Second, it is quite possible that the name ‘Odd’ and the adjective ‘odd’ were eventually pronounced in different ways. Third, we have negligible evidence of any dialect around the thirteenth century – modern English dialects offer us only a little guidance – so we cannot draw any firm conclusions.

The ostrich and the sparrow are both birds and descended from dinosaurs, even if one of these living species cannot fly. Generally, Oddson and Hodgson may both derive from Oddgeirson, even if one lacks an ‘H’.

## Conclusion

My argument has survived all of Mr. Christian’s hammer blows. He has thrown everything at it, and it remains intact. But his argument has raised some interesting questions and has promoted some important nuances of clarification. I only wish he had considered my thesis more carefully and charitably.

Near the end, for example, he boils down my argument to this: ‘So, on the one hand, then, we have a theory, based on a single, unproven assumption about distribution ...’. My extensive surname distribution evidence is characterised as an ‘unproven assumption’. I did not *assume* the data – I gathered it extensively. It appears that Mr. Christian is unwilling to give this evidence any weight.

It is not simply that Mr. Christian disregards the evidence of Hodgson surname distribution. His entire treatment of etymological development is unilinear, as if surnames and other words evolved in the same way in every part of England, and all principles that apply to one region apply equally to all the others. There is no recognition in his etymology of the political, ethnic, cultural, linguistic diversity in England in medieval times.

I take all evidence seriously. In the spirit of Karl Popper – the most important philosopher of science of the twentieth century – I now consider possible evidence that might falsify my theory. If it were shown that there was a greater density of Hodgsons in a county outside Cumbria, in any century from the thirteenth to the seventeenth, then my theory would suffer a very serious blow. If it were shown that the density of Roger or Hodge forenames was relatively high in Cumbria from the tenth to the fourteenth centuries, then my theory would at least require severe modification. I have changed my mind in the light of evidence in the past, and I believe that I am capable of doing so again.

As surname distribution has no effect on him, what kind of evidence does Mr. Christian believe would falsify the ‘accepted’ theory that he so energetically and loyally endorses?

There are big doses of speculation, both in the theory that Hodgson derives (through Hodge) from Roger, and in my thesis of Norse origins. We can do little more than guess how the medieval recorded words, in our scanty surviving records, were spoken at the time. In the absence of such crucial evidence we should approach the issue of explaining surname origins with apt open-mindedness and humility.

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