

THE SURNAME “SUDVARG”: ETYMOLOGY, HISTORY, MEANING

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In pursuing this topic, one could easily focus on the old Norse word “varg” which means “wolf.” But “varg,” used this way, was and is a substantive that does not lend itself to taking a prefix, and therefore could not easily be conjoined with “sud” to mean “southern wolf.” So this avenue of exploration warrants quick dismissal because of simple grammatical considerations. Moreover, while it is true that “varg,” as a Norse word, is sui generis Scandinavian—which includes Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, as well as the Faeroe Islands—“varg” meaning “wolf” appears to be more etymologically tied to Norway. Since the oral history of the Sudvarg family clearly claims that “Sudvarg” is of Swedish origin, “varg” in its meaning as “wolf” likely has no bearing on the Swedish name “Sudvarg.” So let us, for this reason too, discard the idea that the “varg” of “Sudvarg” might mean “wolf,” and pursue a more fruitful course of exploration.

I believe we are best guided by the information, scant though it be, provided by Abbe Sudvarg’s father, Norman Sudvarg, which had been given to him by his own father, Lewis Sudvarg. This information, however minimal, gains considerable credibility via historical, geographical, and etymological study.

The aforementioned patriarchs claimed that “Sudvarg” means “southern wanderer” or “southern vagabond,” and that the Sudvarg people are of Swedish descent with “Viking blood.” When they came to America they emigrated from Armenia—a heritage which they spoke of as Russian. The key terms here: “Swedish,” “Viking,” and “Russian” fit together historically.

Over a 250-year period, from the end of the eighth to the beginning of the eleventh century, a time-period which defines the darkest period of Europe’s Dark Ages, Europe and Russia were subject to a vast invasion by the Vikings. Finland did not participate in the Viking raids. Sparsely populated by primitive peoples, oppressed by raids from Sweden and Denmark, this part of Scandinavia would wait another three centuries before beginning to emerge as an autonomous region—this autonomy, paradoxically, evolving as a result of Sweden and Russia warring for its control. But three other Scandinavian groups did participate in the Viking raids. The Norwegian and Danish Vikings went west to what now is the

United Kingdom, but primarily concentrated their conquest south into Western Europe. The Swedish Vikings, however, followed a route which took them north, then directly east across the top of what now is Finland, then south into the vast expanse of Russia. These invaders were called Varangians, or Rus, by the indigenous Slav tribes they invaded. Not all Slavs were vanquished, of course. The Vikings encountered entrenched Jewish Khazars, along with other tribes, on the Volga whom they could not subdue; when this happened the Vikings paid tribute and arranged trade agreements. But aside from these few exceptions, Viking warriors conquered and subdued everyone in their path—taking what they wanted and trading their loot for other goods when this was more convenient. This invasion eventually pushed as far south as Constantinople (now Istanbul), a city the Vikings never conquered, so they instead traded with it. Finally, by the middle of the eleventh century, the Rus had been assimilated into the indigenous tribes along the entirety of their invading routes, and were even assimilated as mercenaries at Constantinople (then Byzantium), serving as the revered (and feared) Varangian Guard. Since Armenia is as far south as Constantinople, it certainly makes geographical sense that the 250-year push of the Varangian Rus, or Swedish Vikings, would have gone as far as Armenia—such that, years later, Armenians emigrating to America could claim Swedish descent and Viking blood. The claim that “Sudvarg” is of Russian heritage does not contradict the claim that the Sudvarg people came to America from Armenia, given that the Armenia of today, during the Dark Ages and up until the last two centuries, was but a small area which for many years had been considered a part of the Rus territories. Even today, Armenians not possessed of nationalistic pride often describe themselves to Americans as Russian, thus to avoid confusing the geographically illiterate American.

I here make a personal observation which can be construed as a small proffering of additional evidence supporting the Swedish-Viking roots of “Sudvarg”: The two young (and comely) women pictured on pages 300-301 of the March 1985 National Geographic are “White Russians” from Vitebsk (or Vitsyebsk), which is about 325 miles south of Saint Petersburg. Actually Vitsyebsk is in the northeastern part of Belarus, just a few miles west of Russia. The jawline of these two young women is very unique; I have never observed it except on Norman Sudvarg and on his daughter Abbe Sudvarg. Can one surmise—or at least speculate—that these young girls and the two mentioned Sudvarg people share the same genealogical ancestry, carried by Viking Rus from Vitsyebsk in the far

north a full 1250 miles southeast—past the Ukraine and all the way to Armenia?

Further information can be gained on the background of the Sudvarg name by looking at its etymological constituents. The Indo-European miasma of languages traversed by Swedish Vikings moving all the way from their homeland, across to the White Sea region, then south all the way to Turkey has to be both complex and occluded, given the number and diversity of languages encountered, affected, and assimilated.

The “sud” of “Sudvarg,” meaning “south,” could have come from Sweden itself since the Swedish word for south is “söder” or “syd,” which might easily have undergone a small permutation to “sud.” Similarly, the Russian word for “south” is “yuzhno,” which also could have transmuted to “sud,” to then be conjoined with “varg,” which is a not uncommon suffix in Russian names and readily accepts a prefix. Also it is possible that the “sud” of “Sudvarg” could have been picked up from many places along the migratory route of the Swedish Vikings, given that the word “sud” means “south” in languages as diverse as Italian, German, and French. It is quite unlikely, however, that the prefix “sud” came from Armenia, given that the Armenian word for “south” is “harav.” Armenian is a relatively determinate Indo-European language, not as affected by other languages as most are, although it does bear clear Greek influence, along with some Turkish and Iranian artifacts, plus occasional Latinate traces. One would presume that the Sudvarg name was well established long before the Sudvarg emigration from Armenia to America, and therefore was likely a fixed surname long before the Sudvarg people even reached Armenia. This presumption is born out by the simple fact that presently the name “Sudvarg,” if not common, is nevertheless ubiquitous in several regions of Russia that are well north of Armenia.

As for “varg,” used as a suffix, the meaning is somewhat more difficult to decipher than the more simple “sud.” One could suggest that “varg” has a Latinate leaning since the English word, “verge,” had an earlier variation spelled, “varge,” which now is obsolete except for rare usage in isolated dialects. Both spellings have the same meaning, and come from the Latin, “vergere,” which has as its main meaning: “to move—as on a downward slope,” or, “to move in a downward direction.” Examining “varg” from a slightly different perspective, one can note that the closely related Latin words “vagari” or “vagare,” and “vagus,” all have similar meaning coalescing in: “to wander,” “explore,” or “move about.” These three Latin words are closely related in meaning and derivation, and the

Oxford English Dictionary points out that the English word “vagabond,” which derives from the Latin “vagari,” means the same in English as it does (with identical or similar spellings) in several of the Romance languages as well as in German and Swedish. In fact, not only the meaning but also the spelling of “vagabond” are identical in both English and Swedish.

Obviously there is much philological evidence to support the view that the “varg” of “Sudvarg” means “to wander.” (Or, perhaps, more specifically—though this view is contrary to my own scarcely dogmatic opinion on the matter—if one were to give more weight to the possibility that the Latin “vergere” is more likely the root word for “vagabond” than the Latin “vagari,” then the “varg” of “Sudvarg” would mean to wander downwards. Here one should keep in mind that even in the ancient oral history and lore which predate most drawn maps, “south” is often—if not always—referred to as “down” just as “north” is commonly referred to as “up.” This judgment might thereby suggest that the name “Sudvarg” is redundant: “southerner wandering south.” However, a more ambitious—and admittedly, quite speculative—explanation could suggest that there is no redundancy, but rather, given the proximity of southern Sweden to northern Germany, the “sud” may originally have been a Germanic borrowing by southern Swedes. If so, then this prefix would add specific meaning to the name, “Sudvarg,” demarcating it as, “southern Swede who emigrated south”—this “emigrated south” necessitating first a long journey north, then east, before the southerly Russian wandering began.) However, speculation aside, the more convincing (for me) investigation which notes the OED’s tracing of “vagabond” as derivative from the Latin “vagari,” and the OED’s specific assignment of the word “vagabond” to Sweden, and the ubiquity of “sud” in so many languages, all lend considerable etymological evidence by which to suggest that the surname “Sudvarg,” whatever permutations it may have endured in its travels, derives from the foreign words “sud” and “vagari,” and is of Swedish origin.

Summed up: family lore, historicity, musings about a photograph, and philological indicators all converge to support the claim that “Sudvarg” is indeed a name originally bearing Viking blood (which probably spilled much blood along its way), long persisting amidst subsequent Russian exposure, thus retaining a lineage consistent with its original roots and remaining intact to this day.

***(written: August 2006
for my wife, Abbe Sudvarg,
honoring her 48th birthday)***

(Posted Aug. 10, 2025.)

SOURCES

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