

The Case of ‘Skriθίφινοι’ (Σκριθίφινοι)

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Introduction

This paper investigates the enigmatic ethnonym Σκριθίφινοι (Skriθiphinoi), traditionally linked to the Sámi people and first recorded in Byzantine sources. Rather than accepting its authenticity at face value, we approach the term as a linguistic artifact—one that may reveal layers of cultural, historical, and phonetic manipulation.

Scope of Inquiry

We will explore:

1. **Historical Mentions** – Tracing appearances of the term in Procopius, Jordanes, and Olaus Magnus.
2. **Linguistic Structure** – Segmenting the word to identify Greek, Latin, and potentially Northern European influences.
3. **Phonetic Anomalies** – Highlighting features that suggest anachronism or hybridization.
4. **Cultural Framing** – Examining how imperial narratives may have shaped the ethnonym.
5. **Forensic Comparison** – Drawing parallels to cases like the Vinland Map to question the term’s temporal authenticity.

1. Objective

Our goal is not to dismiss the term outright, but to understand its construction—linguistically, historically, and ideologically. By treating *Σκριθίφιννοι* as a possible hybrid or interpolated name, we aim to uncover the deeper forces that shaped its emergence and legacy.

2. Skridfinnar, Skrithiphinoi, Screrefennae, Scricfinni and Σκριθίφιννοι

According to Wikipedia [1] in Swedish translated into English:

“**Skridfinnar**, or more precisely **Skrithiphinoi**, are considered a historical designation for the Sámi people. The word is interpreted as ‘**skiing Finns**’ (in the old sense, where ‘**Finn**’ referred to what we today call Sámi). There is evidence of skis dating back to 2000 BCE and onward within the area that would become Sámi territory. The term first appears in the writings of **Procopius** in the 6th century.”

Others who mention ‘Skrithiphinoi’ include:

- **Jordanes: Screrefennae** Jordanes [5], a 6th-century historian of Gothic descent, authored *De origine actibusque Getarum* around 551 CE. While he does not use the term *Skrithiphinoi*, his mention of the *Screrefennae*—a tribe inhabiting Thule (Scandinavia)—is widely interpreted as an indirect reference. His descriptions of northern peoples blend myth, hearsay, and Roman ethnographic tropes, portraying them as primitive, isolated, and exotic. The *Screrefennae*, noted for their mobility and wilderness lifestyle, echo Procopius’s skiing tribes.

- **Olaus Magnus: Scricfinni** Olaus Magnus [7], a 16th-century Swedish ecclesiastic and historian, published the *Carta Marina* (1539) and *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus* (1555), both rich in ethnographic and mythological detail. In the latter, he refers to the *Skridfinnar* (or *Scricfinni*)—a people who “leap” or “bound” across snowy terrain using wooden implements, clearly skis. He even labels a region “Rex Scricfinorum”—King of the Skridfinnar—suggesting a recognized tribal or territorial identity. These vivid accounts embed the *Skridfinnar* firmly in the cultural imagination of early modern Scandinavia.

3. Procopius in the 6th century seem to be the source – but is it so?

I investigated Procopius, the legal adviser and close companion to the famed general Belisarius, who served during Emperor Justinian I’s ambitious reconquest campaigns around 490–507 CE in Caesarea, in what is now Israel. He died circa 565 CE. Procopius [2] composed *History of the Wars* over roughly two decades, beginning around 545 CE and completing it by 554 CE. Within this work, the ethnonym **Σκριθίφιννοι** (*Skriithiphinoi*) is mentioned [3]

Due to the racially prejudiced nature of the original text, I have chosen not to publish its translation. My focus remains solely on resolving the origin of the name Σκριθίφιννοι, which is linguistically embedded in its historical context.

Procopius 6.15.16

“6.15.16 Τῶν δὲ ἰδρυμένων ἐν Θούλῃ βαρβάρων ἓν μόνον ἔθνος, οἱ **Σκριθίφινοι** ἐπικαλοῦνται, θηριώδη τινὰ βιοτὴν ἔχουσιν. οὔτε γὰρ ἱμάτια ἐνδιδύσκονται οὔτε ὑποδεδεμένοι βαδίζουσιν οὔτε οἶνον πίνουσιν οὔτε τι ἐδώδιμον ἐκ τῆς γῆς ἔχουσιν. οὔτε γὰρ αὐτοὶ γῆν γεωργοῦσιν οὔτε τι αὐτοῖς αἱ γυναῖκες ἐργάζονται, ἀλλὰ ἄνδρες αἰεὶ ξὺν ταῖς γυναίξιν τὴν θήραν μόνην ἐπιτηδεύουσι. θηρίων τε γὰρ καὶ ἄλλων ζώων μέγα τι χρῆμα αἱ τε ὕλαι αὐτοῖς φέρουσι, μεγάλα ὑπερφυῶς οὔσαι, καὶ τὰ ὄρη, ἃ ταύτῃ ἀνέχει. καὶ κρέασι μὲν θηρίων αἰεὶ τῶν ἀλισκομένων σιτίζονται, τὰ δέρματα δὲ ἀμφιέννυνται, ἐπεὶ τε αὐτοῖς οὔτε λίνον οὔτε ὄργανον ὅτῳ ῥάπτοιέν ἐστιν, οἱ δὲ τῶν θηρίων τοῖς νεύροις τὰ δέρματα ἐς ἄλληλα ταῦτα ξυνδέοντες οὔτῳ δὴ ἐς τὸ σῶμα ὅλον ἀμπίσχονται. οὐ μὴν οὐδὲ τὰ βρέφη αὐτοῖς κατὰ ταῦτα τιθηνοῦνται τοῖς ἄλλοις ἀνθρώποις.”

We write it in both uppercase and lowercase letters.

- ΣΚΡΙΘΙΦΙΝΟΙ
- σκριθιφινοι

These forms mirror how such a name might appear in Byzantine-era manuscripts. The uppercase version was typical of formal inscriptions and early Greek texts, while the lowercase emerged later with the development of cursive and book-hand styles. Notably, the usual pronunciation markers found in Koine Greek—such as diacritics or phonetic annotations—are absent. This lack of guidance makes it difficult to reconstruct the original phonology with confidence.

Many people assume that if a word is written in the Greek alphabet, it must be Greek in origin. That assumption is understandable—but misleading. The Greek script has long served as a vessel for transcribing foreign names, places, and concepts, often reshaping them to fit Greek phonological and morphological norms. What appears Greek on the surface may, in fact, be a linguistic import or a hybrid construction.

4. Lingual Genetic Engineering

We cannot go backwards in time, but we can be at the time, or later. First, we break up the word in two like this:

- ΣΚΠΙΘΙ
- ΦΙΝΟΙ (FINOI)

And start to make observations, that rises little “red flags”.

4.1 The 1st “red flag”:

- The ΣΚΠ-/σκη- cluster is **uncommon** in native Greek vocabulary, which makes it a linguistic flare—often signaling **foreign origin**, **onomatopoeia**, or **vernacular innovation**. Three consonants in sequence — ΣΚΠ (SKR) — form a consonant cluster that is not a standalone word in Greek.

We separate the foreign ΣΚΠ-/σκη- cluster like this: **[ΣΚΠ]** ΙΘΙΦΙΝΟΙ.
Instead of brackets, we separate the ΙΘΙ cluster using parentheses:

- [ΣΚΡ] (ΙΘΙ): Unknown lingual DNA.
- ΦΙΝΟΙ.

Having flagged the possibility of foreign influence, we turn to the remaining clusters — ΙΘΙ and ΦΙΝΟΙ — in search of deeper linguistic traces.

4.2 The 2nd “red flag”:

A compelling clue emerges: the segment ΦΙΝ bears a striking resemblance to the Latin root *FIN*, meaning “end” or “boundary.” This resemblance suggests that the name may incorporate Latin elements, either directly or through transliteration, further complicating its presumed Greek identity.

We refine the segmentation to reflect this discovery:

- [ΣΚΡ] (ΙΘΙ): Unknown lingual DNA.
- [ΦΙΝ] (ΟΙ): Latin lingual DNA, with ending ΟΙ in parentheses indicating a possible Greek morphological ending.

So far, what we have is a word written in Greek letters, composed of three distinct influences:

- **Greek script,**
- **Unidentified linguistic input,**
- and **Latin lexical residue.**

The tri-layered composition of Σκριθιφινοι—Greek script, unknown middle segment, and Latin residue—suggests deliberate hybridization. It’s not a

naturally evolved Greek word, but a constructed ethnonym, likely shaped to evoke multiple cultural associations.

To trace its origin, we turn to the ΣΚΡ/σκρι cluster. This is the linguistic flare—the foreign signal embedded in Greek script.

5. Languages with Native SKR Words

A scan of languages reveals that SKR is a native and productive cluster in Northern Europe:

- **Swedish:** skriva (to write), skrika (to scream), skrapa (to scrape)
- **Norwegian:** skremme (to scare), skrå (slanted)
- **Icelandic:** skrifa, skræma — preserved from Old Norse

These languages treat SKR as a natural onset, not an anomaly. This is the most likely source of the ΣΚΡ influence. The term **Skridfinnar** may have been transliterated into Greek as **Σκριθιφιννοι**.

Conclusion

The name ΣΚΡΙΘΙΦΙΝΟΙ (σκριθιφινοι) may derive from an original ethnonym that has undergone phonetic and morphological mutation into “Skrithfinoi.” Procopius’s mention of the term likely reflects Byzantine ethnographic practices, which often relied on hearsay, military reports, and inherited Roman classifications. These descriptions were rarely neutral — they were shaped by imperial ideology and cultural framing. However, several linguistic and historical indicators suggest that ΣΚΡΙΘΙΦΙΝΟΙ (σκριθιφινοι) may not be a faithful product of its claimed era.

- The term is written in Byzantine Greek, not Koine Greek, situating its origin firmly between 545–554 CE, during the composition of *History of the Wars*. It cannot be linguistically reversed to an earlier Greek stage.
- The initial consonant cluster ΣΚΡ/σκρι (SKR/skr) is not native to Byzantine or Classical Greek, strongly suggesting foreign influence.
- Linguistic evidence points to a Northern European origin, likely Germanic or Norse, for the SKR cluster. Its presence implies a post-6th century borrowing or transcription, rather than a native Greek construction.
- The cluster ΣΚΡ- cannot be traced to Finnish or Proto-Finnic, as no Finnish word begins with multiple consonants. Finnish phonotactics favor vowel-led syllables, making SKR an unnatural onset in that language family.
- The segment ΦΙΝ (FIN) closely resembles the Latin root *finis*, meaning “end” or “boundary.” This may reflect a conceptual framing

of the Sámi as peripheral or frontier peoples in Roman and Byzantine thought.

- Had the name been based on Sámi or Suomi self-identifiers, it would likely have appeared in Greek as ΣΑΑΜΙ (Sámi) or ΣΘΟΜΙ (Suomi).

These forms could reflect semantic roots:

- *saa* (“to be given”) → Greek: δίδωμι
- *suo* (“to allow”) → Greek: ἐπιτρέπω
- *mi* (“highest authority”) → Greek: ἐξουσία
- Thus, SAA-MI and SUO-MI could be interpreted as “those who are given authority” and “those who allow authority,” respectively — suggesting a divine dimension to the ethnonyms, had they been rendered directly from native terms.

Phonetic Anachronism

Phonetically, the term *Σκριθιφίνοι* may reflect linguistic features more consistent with developments after 1500 AD, suggesting a later origin than traditionally assumed. Its phonetic structure—especially the SKR onset—feels strikingly modern, even anachronistic for a 6th-century Byzantine context. It falls outside the bounds of Koine and Classical Greek phonology and fails to align with the phonotactic norms of early medieval Northern European or Finno-Ugric languages. The SKR cluster is highly suggestive of post-medieval Scandinavian dialects.

A Call for Forensic Validation

Therefore, the first step must be to validate the age of the document—just as was done with the infamous Vinland Map [4] housed at Yale University. In that case, forensic analysis revealed the presence of 20th-century ink on a map purportedly from the 15th century, ultimately exposing it as a modern forgery. Similarly, this study will examine whether *Σκριθιφινοι* is a genuine 6th-century transcription, a later interpolation, or a hybrid ethnonym shaped by multiple linguistic influences.

Final Reflection

We do not seek to be a storm, but rather a breeze that gently caresses the cheek of historical understanding.

Sources

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