NOTE

Two thirteenth-century by-names:  
Fukkebotere and Smalfuk  
Keith Briggs  
Martlesham

The origin of the word fuck remains obscure (Lass 1995; Read 2002). The sexual sense is recorded only from about 1500, and there is no certain connection with the surname Fuckebegger’ (1287) or the Bristol field-name fockynggroue (c.1373; OED, s.v. fuck, v.; Coates 2007). OED suggests that the verb is cognate to Dutch fokken, one sense of which is ‘to strike’. The noun fukke recorded from 1465 in the sense of ‘some kind of sail’ may also be connected. A full survey of the various theories is given by Liberman (2008).

Given the extreme rarity of medieval usages of the word, every scrap of evidence is of great value. Thus I wish to bring attention to Simon Fukkebotere and Willm’i Smalfuk who both appear in a rental of c.1290 from Holy Trinity Priory in Ipswich. This rental was in fact privately published in 1847, but this scarce publication has been little used despite its importance as a social record of a major English town in the thirteenth century (Hunt 1847). I have examined the manuscript, which is in very good condition, and can confirm the readings (Suffolk Record Office, HD1/9/4). The document is dated to the early years of the reign of Edward I (so after 1272), but before 1291, when Oliver de Ingham mentioned in it was buried (Hunt 1847).

The interpretation of neither name is completely certain. Fukkebotere looks like a by-name of the characteristic ‘Shakespeare’ type (Seltén 1969), comprising a verb-noun pair, with butter as its second element. Medieval spellings of butter with -o- do occur and exactly the form botere is recorded c.1300 (MED, s.v buter(e (n.)). Here then fukke would
have the meaning ‘knock, strike, beat, hit repeatedly’, which has been suggested as the original sense of the modern verb (OED, s.v. *fuck*; Read 2002, 256). *Fukkebotere* is thus likely to mean ‘strike butter’, referring to the knocking of butter into blocks by a butter-monger. Parallels are provided by the surnames of *Harniet Hachebutere* 1148–79, which must mean ‘hack butter’ (Walker 1962, 260), and *John Slingebotere* 1297 (Gaydon 1959, 99).

Less likely is that *Simon Fukkebotere* was a boatman, and thus that a type of ship called *fukbōt* existed. There was a ME word *fuk(ke)* ‘sail’. The word *boater* is spelled *botere* in eight medieval records in MED (s.v. *bōter* (n.)). As Ipswich was a major port in the thirteenth century, and traded with the low countries, the Dutch origin suggested for *fuk(ke)* in OED is very plausible.

*Smalfuk* is more difficult. The second element could be a spelling of the common *Fulk* or *Fouk*. The related *Fulcher* has been given as the explanation of Nicholas Fuker 1234 by Read (Read 2002, 278). Alternatively, *Willm’i Smalfuk* might have had a boat with a small *fuk*-sail.

The only other early examples in OED are the surnames *Wyn(d)fuk’* and *Fuckebegger’, both 1287. *Fukkebotere* and *Smalfuk* thus double the size of the thirteenth-century corpus, and at least *Fukkebotere* probably supports the correctness of the early sense ‘strike, beat’ for *fucke*.¹

REFERENCES


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Hindreds, and for Bedford, Dunstable, Leighton Buzzard and Luton, Publications of the Bedfordshire Historical Record Society 39 (Streatley: Bedfordshire Historical Record Society).


