

The Place Names of Lewis - The Norse Evidence

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It is only in recent years that we in Scotland have begun to look at our place-names in a scientific way. This is also true of Lewis and the Outer Isles, since with place-name studies, one is often handicapped by having only a little knowledge of the place-name situation. And this, as we know, is a dangerous thing. Many scholars, both amateur and professional, profess an interest in, and familiarity with the place-names of Scotland, or with a given area within it. The fact that there have been so many pathetic attempts to gather together information on, say, counties of Scotland, is evidence that the task of preparing a comprehensive study of the total place-names of an area is a very complex one.

Lewis, in this respect, has fared somewhat better than others. Perhaps, because of the interest in the Norse connection and the compact nature of the island, there has been more to attract writers on place-names. But at the same time, it must be said that until very recently, attempts to interpret the coverage of Lewis place-names, even to describe them accurately, have been sadly lacking. One of the most difficult areas of study has been the collection of individual names on the ground, and until one has a complete dossier of all place-names at one's disposal, one is really wasting time when it comes to adequate interpretation of the place-name situation.

The sources of our information are therefore of paramount importance. The written word, in the past, has often not been a reliable source for place-name data. Early sources like Dean Munro, Martin Martin and MacFarlane, although of immense value as documents in their own right, can often be misleading as regards both the spelling of names, and the emphasis which

they place on certain names. For many parts of the Gaelic-speaking area, the Ordnance Survey maps are often quoted as infallible sources. Modern research by people like Magne Oftedal, Donald MacAulay and W.F.H. Nicolaisen has shattered this myth of infallibility. Practically any native of Lewis can point to a number of cases on the Ordnance map where names have been wrongly spelt or wrongly placed. The craze for Anglicisation of Gaelic forms has meant that some of the names are unintelligible to Gaelic speakers, even locals, and it is only in recent years that some attempt has been made to provide standardised forms of the more common place-name elements. In the past, scholars have tended to base many of their premises on the O.S. map names and this has led to inaccurate assessments of, for example, the ratio of Norse : Gaelic names on the map.

The Norse place-names in Lewis have, of course, been studied a good deal in the past. W. J. Watson's treatment of them in his 'Place Names of Ross and Cromarty' is rather sketchy, and obviously not intended to be as comprehensive or as critical as his work on the mainland. MacBain (1922) tended to base his ideas more on the Ordnance map than anything else, and his ideas were coloured by the map evidence. MacIver's slim volume on the 'Place Names of Lewis and Harris' is now scarce and has many faults, but this was the first attempt to produce a reasonably systematic survey of the major place-names of the Long Island.

The Norse connection has been of great interest to scholars in the past, not only from the place-name angle but from the linguistic one as well. Scandinavian scholars were naturally concerned with the amount of Norse influence in language, toponymy and material culture, and the post-war years saw men like Borgstrom, Alf Sommerfelt and Magne Oftedal working in the islands and attempting to apply scientific collecting methods to the whole Norse problem for

the first time. Oftedal, in particular, was interested in the settlement names of Lewis, and his paper on this subject (*Norsk Tidsskrift for Sprogvidenskap* XVII, 1954) underlined clearly the need for much more basic research and collection in the field of place-name studies. He was concerned with the lack of investigation into the oral tradition surrounding place-names; with the absence of studies into various categories of names like coastal features, moorland features and settlement forms. In his paper, he attempted for the first time to analyse the derivation of each village name in Lewis, and to record the pronunciation of each name, as rendered locally. Oftedal's work was significant in another respect. It attracted a good deal of attention in learned circles, and spurred on a number of other researchers to take up the task of investigating place-names in loco, as it were. In particular, it showed that there was much to be done in the way of collecting basic information on place-name forms.

The School of Scottish Studies Place Name Survey, under W.F.H. Nicolaisen, began recording place-name forms from oral tradition in 1966, initially in Ness and Point. Much of the early collecting work was done by the late Mr. Norman MacLeod, schoolmaster of Lionel. Since then I have continued to collect material from the rest of Lewis, and have now almost completed the first phase of collecting. At this point one should also mention valuable research made by Donald MacAulay of Bernera and Mr. Hermann Pálsson of Edinburgh University, mainly on the place-names of Bernera.

What of place-names themselves? Watson gives an adequate, but by no means comprehensive list in his 'Ross and Cromarty'. MacAulay (*T.G.S.I.*, 1972) has a more detailed list of Norse elements in his recent article, but these refer to Bernera place-names and do not necessarily represent the coverage for Lewis as a whole. However, MacAulay identifies 26 basic

Norse topographic elements and 10 for man-made features, together with some 30 modifying elements, e.g. shape, size, colour, and 'structures of the type Noun + Noun'. He also lists a number of other forms. Oftedal's list of 126 village names included 99 decidedly of Norse origin, 11 Gaelic without any Norse components; 9 are Gaelic in structure but contain Norse elements; 5 cannot be classified with any degree of certainty, and 2 (Newmarket and New Valley) are English. He admits that these names were 'rather arbitrarily selected' and advises that we should not attach too much importance to Numbers (though he is at pains not to emphasise this).

Oftedal's survey and the evidence of Ordnance Survey maps, therefore, suggest that the majority of Lewis place-names are of Norse origin. In this paper, therefore, I wish to examine this evidence, and to investigate more fully the kind of place-name material which has been collected since Oftedal, Maciver and others produced their findings.

It would seem that the areas where Norse names were in the majority on the map would be our best starting-point. For this reason I have chosen the townships in Ness which provide us with a variety of types of place-name, and at the same time a variety of topography, progressing from sea-shore through township lands, in-bye grazing and finally moorland and shielings. These are Eorpie, Port of Ness, Dell and Galson, Habost, Swainbost, Five Penny Ness, Five Penny Borge and Shader. By comparing the amount of place-name information available on the six-inch map with the material we have collected from local tradition, we are in a better position to estimate the extent of Norse place-names, and name forms. It was this element of local names which was largely lacking in previous studies and which was highlighted by the invaluable work of Oftedal and MacAulay. Judgements, therefore, must be made on the total

number of names from all sources, rather than from a selection of names, which is what we get on the Ordnance maps. These, of course, by reason of scale, design and clarity, must of necessity be selective in their coverage of names.

Numbers and percentages of names in a given area, are as I said before, difficult indices of any particular influence, linguistic or otherwise. Nicolaisen, in his paper on 'Norse Settlement in the Northern and Western Isles' (S.H.R. 48, 1969) demonstrated this very clearly in his comparison of names in -dalr with settlement forms like -setr and -bolstadr. The situation in Lewis is somewhat different, however, and I would like to begin this survey by examining the place-names of one particular township- Eoropie- in some detail.

On the six-inch map, the Eoropie township section contained 26 place-names, of which 17 were coastal features. About 50 per cent of these coastal names were, according to Eoropie informants recorded by Norman Macleod, wrongly placed. Of the 101 place-names which were recorded from oral tradition, only 26 were of purely Norse origin, but of the remainder no less than 40 contained Norse elements like geodha (20, all as first element); cleit (8, including one as final element) and sgeir (5, including 4 as final element). Of the 101 names, 30 were positively without Norse elements. Significantly, about half of them were inland. On the adjacent map section, we have the townships of Knockaird and Five Penny Ness. Of the 80 place-names recorded from oral tradition here, 46 contained Norse elements, and the remainder could be said to be purely of Gaelic origin, although one or two names were of such obscure form that they could fall into either category. Again, the inland names tended to contain a higher proportion of purely Gaelic names. If we refer to the map solely, and study only the names recorded there, it gives us a false impression of the place-name situation.

Naturally, this seriously calls into question MacBain's ratio of 4 : 1 in favour of Norse place-names as a whole, at least for the Ness area; indeed, MacAulay's work in Bernera confirms the situation.

We now come to the examination of individual names, and an attempt to date them. If we examine the Eoropie list, we can pick out a score or so of names which defy interpretation by natives of the area, at least in the present day. These include:

Geodha Thóbhanaís
 Miolair or Mialair
 Cladach Sgemisgeir
 Cunndal
 Criugadh
 Tìbheal
 Gealltuig
 Cleit Alltair
 Ocaisgeir
 Giodharstan
 Colltrabh
 Tàgaisg or Càrspag
 Seadilleis
 Neih or Neif
 Heist
 Lìbìridh
 Tòrocaidh

All of these names are probably of Norse origin. For some we can give reasonable derivation, but others have become so changed over the centuries that their origins may always remain in doubt. They must, therefore, have been coined during the Norse occupation and have remained in use up to the present day. The second group, which consists of names involving elements borrowed from Norse is a very large one. In Eoropie, we find geodha, cleit, bodha, sgeir, steinn, gearraidh in the list. It is safe to assume that many of these must be early, too, but they span a much wider time-scale than the first group.

Further south, in Baile-an-trushail, we are confronted with a situation where the coastal strip is much shorter than that of Eoropie, and where the landward area is much greater. We would therefore expect to see different types of Norse forms. In a collection of 65 names from oral tradition which I recorded in 1966, I found that 36, or 55 per cent of the names were entirely of Gaelic origin. Only 3 of the remainder were entirely Norse, while the others all contained Norse elements like gearraidh (5 examples) geodha (13 examples, all first-element), gil, sgeir, and endings in -aig (vik).

Obviously in both Eoropie and Baile-an-trushail, recent names are included in the lists. Simple descriptive terms in colloquial Gaelic are abundant, often using the more common Norse borrowings, like An Gearraidh Beag, Na Buailtean, Geodha na Caillich, and Feadan Gearraidh Chama. It is most unlikely that these names are of any great antiquity, and indeed, the question of dating is, for them, of less importance than the more complex Norse-Gaelic names which often defy explanation.

Baile-an-trushail is perhaps untypical of villages in this area because of the fact that it was settled more recently than the townships further north. What seems to be the case is that the most Norse place-names can be divided into three categories:

1. The names of settlements. Oftedal has covered this aspect of Lewis names fairly well.
2. The names of major physical features. Most of these appear on the 6" or even the 1" maps, and include loch names, hill names, and the names of the larger streams.
3. Selected types of more obscure names, as mentioned in the Eoropie list. These exist in most townships in Ness, and from our studies in other parts of Lewis,

we have found them to be present in Uig, Point and Lochs. They are mostly, but not entirely, coastal. Or to be more precise, their use in the community has been perpetuated in a coastal situation where the elements of seafaring activity and agriculture have resulted in the coastal names being changed a good deal less than those on the landward area. When we consider the population movements that have taken place in Lewis in the last five centuries, and the amount of changes in herding, grazing and cultivation, it is surprising that purely Norse names have persisted in use at all. The sea-coast, on the other hand, affords a much more permanent basis for a naming system, once it is adopted, especially when we consider the continuity of settlement that characterises the seafaring townships of Ness and Point.

The village names of Lewis have, of course, been the subject of much discussion in the past. The Norse connection here is strong, and I do not intend to discuss them in any great detail. Magne Oftedal was well aware of the deficiencies of his study, and it is not the concern of this paper to go beyond the principles that he has laid out. Suffice it to say that, so far as township names are concerned, Lewis falls into the category of an Orkney-Shetland type name system, with the Norse effect maintaining its impetus long after all political connections were severed, and establishing Old Norse as the basis for the complex structure of names in Lewis. Much of the evidence would suggest that Gaelic in this Norse kingdom was in the situation of being an inferior language, i.e. subject to Norse control, and perhaps the language of the servant or bondsman. Certainly, the Norse who were, in any case, profoundly interested in naming places, made no exception of Lewis, giving practically every settlement a name in their own inimitable style, and probably replacing existing Celtic names with their own.

Naturally, this 'blanket' of Norse names extended right through the entire structure of Lewis place-names. In the second category, we see one of the clearest indications of the Norse presence - the adoption of name-forms for major physical features. Mountain names ending in fjall, loch names in -vatn, and major coastal features in -geo, -sker and -vik are typical of the situation we find when Norse settlement is of a systematic nature. These names imply involvement in the landscape to a major extent - the planting of seed, the building of boata - and indeed, the final act of settlement, culminating in the complete physical takeover of the islands.

The third series of names may be regarded as an extension of the second. Much of the physical environment has features which are intensely 'nameable', and Lewis is no exception. The variety of landscape in this island lends itself very well to the type of naming system with which the Norse were accustomed. The indented coastline, the profusion of lochs and small hills in the interior demand an intricate system of names - names which the Norse were well-equipped to apply, and which have stood the test of time remarkably well.

What of the Gaelic involvement in all this? Much of the evidence we have gathered in the past decade suggests that the majority of Gaelic place-names in use in Lewis are post-Norse, relatively late. This is true of most of the minor names, and probably of the non-Norse coastal names as well. The Norse settlement pattern may have something to do with this. Perhaps the political and social situation in Norse-occupied Lewis militated against the use of Gaelic place-names. In what was a bilingual situation it is possible that two name-forms, one Gaelic, the other Norse, were used side by side, and that Norse forms achieved supremacy in an 'official' capacity. Certainly, the fact that Norse

was the lingua franca of the Western seaboard of Britain may well have had a bearing on the situation. By the time the Norse influence waned, the place-names had become firmly part of Gaelic tradition, being incorporated into the landscape to such an extent that they achieved permanence long after Norse ceased to be a spoken language in the islands.

All this may sound like generalisation, and I admit that in this complex place-name situation, it is so. We can only guess at the facts, on the scanty evidence which exists. The lack of written sources, and of early maps makes reconstruction of the situation in Norse times a very speculative business.

To sum up, then. The Norse place-name situation in Lewis is by no means as straightforward as was formerly thought. The concentration of Norse names throughout the whole spectrum of land features and man-made features is one which is probably unique in the Hebrides. Certainly, no other island has retained Norse in minor feature names like Lewis has done, with the exception of Harris. Even attractive settlement areas like North Uist have lost any minor names of this type, although it seems likely that they did exist in Norse times (Place Names of Illerày). From this evidence, then, we can conclude:

a) that the Norse presence in Lewis was of a more permanent nature, and perhaps more intolerant of Gaelic effects than islands further south.

b) that in the immediate post-Norse period, the Norse influence on Lewis Gaelic, on custom and on the system of naming places, was still very strong.

c) that Norse place-names were adopted by Gaelic speakers to a very marked extent, even to the point of preservation when their derivation was no longer known to them.

These are fairly generalised statements and present little that is new about current thinking on Lewis place-names. But perhaps this paper, with all its inadequacies, will serve to highlight the problems that we face when dealing with the place-names of the island. Now that we have gathered most of the material from oral tradition, the next few years may see some light cast on the situation.

Sources

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