

SOME FURTHER THOUGHTS ON SCANDINAVIAN PLACE-NAMES IN LEWIS

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Having studied the Norse content of place-names in the Hebrides for some years now, I constantly ask myself whether the subject has been exhausted. At intervals, new light emerges, fresh snippets of information appear, hitherto unrecorded names are pried out from the abundant resources of oral tradition which is a remarkable feature of the life of the islands. We have now collected well-nigh all of the traditional place-name information for Lewis, which, with its continuity of settlement from the Norse period, renders it unique, and provides us with a vast amount of information which bears further study both as regards lexical items and historical phenomena.

It is now nearly twenty years since the first recordings of these collections were made. Many of the informants who provided the names for their townships are now dead, including such doyens of tradition as Norman Macleod, the teacher at Lionel (am Bard Bochd) and Angus Cambell (Am Puilean), Swainbost, whose book 'Suabadh ri Iomadh Rubha' has become something of a minor Gaelic classic.

When the oral tradition in which this body of onomastic information exists is of such richness and vitality, it is no wonder that it excites interest from many branches of scholarship. Not only do the names themselves provide us with valuable onomastic data, but the fabric of community life is often illustrated in graphic detail simply by the highlighting of various elements in the names, whether these are descriptive or commemorative.

The collection of names from oral tradition in Lewis extends to some 5,000 items, many of these, for obvious reasons, being coastal. The Lewis landscape exhibits a duality of function as far as man is concerned. It is basically a sheet of peat-covered plateau, fringed by a fairly narrow coastal strip where the vast majority of settlements are located. The townships depended heavily on the coast, and the seas

which lay beyond, for their livelihood. Hence, the nomenclature of the coast is complex and detailed, and much of the archaic element, as far as names are concerned, is to be found in this zone of intense human activity and highly detailed topography. When we recorded the place-names, it was found that the oral tradition had preserved a remarkable number of Norse names, or Gaelic names containing Norse elements.

This phenomenon, although surprising at first glance, is nothing new. As Nicolaisen has said, 'Names may well function quite satisfactorily as names without lexical meaning, whereas words can not. On the other hand, although names are often lexically opaque, this need not be so; but whether or not names mean anything particular as *words* to those who use them has nothing, or very little, to do with the way in which names mean or function.' (Nicolaisen, 1979-80, 106).

The function of these coastal names is clear. They are at least in the present day, simply labels for particular elements in the coastal topography, many lexically opaque, or meaningless to the user. A man fishing for lobster along a rocky coast, for example, is unconcerned about the meaning of the name. All that he is worried about is the safety of himself and his boat, and the names serve as indicators of position. It may well be that some names give an indication of the danger of the feature, such as *Geodha Grannda* 'nasty geo', or *Sgeir Bhiorach* 'sharp skerry'. It may be that, in addition, he may be interested in the resources of the features which are expressed in the names, like *Sgeir nan Crubag* 'crab skerry', or *Geodha a' Sgadain* 'herring geo', but his knowledge of the area, passed down through the generations will include such detailed information, irrespective of the place-names, useful as they may be as an aide-de-memoire.

Few of the men that we interviewed in Lewis were aware of the significance of the Norse element in their place-names. Some, however, acknowledged the fact that since many of the names were obscure as far as their meaning was concerned, they must have been coined by men who spoke a non-specified language, other than Gaelic, or else the terms involved had been in use in Lewis Gaelic and had passed out of currency. In any case, the stock of lexical items which are associated with place-names of the sea-coast tend towards obsolescence. This is natural enough in a business where the echo-

sounder and the Decca navigator have replaced more traditional techniques of judging distance, depth of water and the presence (or otherwise) of fish. Nevertheless, a substantial element in the population in the mid-1960s were sufficiently conversant with the place-names and the terminology, onomastic or lexical, to give a practically comprehensive account of the coastline in terms which would have been current several centuries ago.

At the Northern Studies Annual Conference in Stornoway in 1974, I read a paper entitled 'The Place-Names of Lewis – The Norse Evidence' (Fraser, 1974). This was in many ways a cursory examination of the material, but it was an attempt to place the onomastic record, at least insofar as oral tradition was concerned, in the entire scheme of Norse settlement. Perhaps in no other part of Norse Scotland outside the Northern Isles have the place-names of the Norse period been so well-preserved. Certainly the fact that there has been no serious disruption of the population in much of Northern Lewis since the Norse period is a major factor to be considered here.

I now want briefly to examine a selection of place-name elements from the traditional material. Some of these have been analysed before, but it is useful to look at them in a local context, very much in the way in which Donald MacAulay examined the place-names of Bernera (MacAulay, 1972).

One of these is the word known in Gaelic as *gearraidh*, or as it is pronounced in Lewis *geàrraidh*. Various derivations exist for this term. Dwelly defines it as follows (Dwelly, 1967):

1. 'a point or knuckle-end or land, often used in place-names in *Uist*, as Hougharry, Tigharry, *gearraidh dubh*, etc.'
2. 'Green pasture land about a township'
3. 'The land between the *machair* and the *monadh*, the strip where the houses stand – Lewis'
4. Fenced field
5. Enclosed grazing between the arable land and the open moor
6. Common grazing and arable land between the moor and the crofts, and
7. Place where the shielings are built.

The last two are derivations supplied by mainland speakers of Gaelic.

There is obviously a link here in ON *gardr* 'enclosure', expressed in the Northern Isles as *garth*. The O.Ir. *gort*, diminutive *gortín* 'garden', is an obvious parallel, and place-names now on the fringe of the Gaelic-speaking are found in *gart*— e.g. Gartmore, Gartnavel LAN, and so on. The Argyll form, a diminutive, *goirtean*, applies to a small enclosed field. This extends as far north as southern Skye, so it is clearly a term which has arrived in the North and West of Scotland from two distinct linguistic sources. Indeed, Watson, (1926, 198) suggests that 'the number of names in the Glasgow area which begin with *gart* is notable, and may be due to British influence, though of course, *gort*, *gart* of Gaelic and *garth* of Welsh both mean 'field', 'enclosure'.

The Lewis examples exhibit considerable variety in their forms, suggesting not only various applications but also a very wide range in terms of dating. The forms *Smeiligearraidh* in Swainbost, *Foidrigearraidh* in Habost, *Milleagarraidh* and *Asmaigearraidh* in South Dell, *Misgearraidh* in North Dell and *Thognagearraidh* and *Beagnagearraidh* in Lower Shader all exhibit original Norse forms. Clearly the retention of *gearraidh* as a current element in Gaelic has helped to retain these largely Norse names in the area, while others, less clearly recognised and with more opaque meanings, may have fallen out of use. One could therefore argue that *gearraidh* is a direct borrowing from Norse simply because the Gaelic dialect has found it acceptable in phonetic terms, and that a division of land exists to which the 'label' can be applied, whether this is a definite enclosure, or a rather vague area between arable and common grazing. Now, the usual practice is to label new or recent grazing enclosures by using names like *An Gearraidh Mór* in Ballantrushal, and *An Gearraidh a Deas* in Tolsta.

The term *Sgeir* 'sea-rock', 'skerry' is one of the most prolific terms applied to coastal features found throughout the Gaelic-speaking area. Dwelly is more specific in that he defines *sgeir* more accurately, describing it as a 'rock in the sea nearly or quite covered by neap-tides and quite covered by spring-tides'. In this, he is accurate enough, although it has been recorded as a rock-feature, in fresh-water lochs.

The term can apply to rocks which are attached to the shore, or which lie off the coast. A township like Eoropie which has a highly-indented and extended coastline, has a number of these in a Norse form, such as *Langaisgeir*, *Sgeimisgeir*, *Héisgeir*, *Ocaisgeir*, *Maisgeir* and *Isgeir*, together with the conventional examples in a Gaelic word-order like *Sgeir nam Faochag*. Neighbouring Five Penny Ness has *Lethsgeir*, *Theirbisgeir* and *Flaosgeir*, together with *Sgeir am Beal Linn*, *Sgeir Gharstair*, *Sgeir Odhrain* and *Sgeir Mhurchaidh*.

Another term *geodha*, is the word for a creek or cleft in a cliff-face. The word is common in the Northern Isles and the north-west mainland, Skye and most of the Outer Isles, but is absent in most of the islands to the south, where it is replaced by *sloc* 'pit'. *Gjá* in Old Norse is again a standard term for this kind of feature. As with *sker*, it is found both in the Norse word-order and as a Gaelic borrowing in Ness, but the Norse forms are rare to the south, since they have been preserved in the oral tradition in Ness. (See Fraser, 1978).

In Eoropie we find *Cruigeadh* and *Rairmiga*, and in Five Penny, *Mucasga*, *Sioraga*, *Blianaigsa*, *Sioltaga* and *Sanndaiga*, alongside *Geodha nan Ialtag*, *Geodha an Duine* and *Geodha nan Each* in Eoropie, with *Geodha nan Seann Duine*, *Geodha nan Calaman* and *A'Gheodha Ruadh* in Five Penny.

Clearly, both *sgeir* and *geodha*, because of their abundance in the nomenclature of the coast, are terms which have been in daily use as part of the economy of the community. They reflect not only the dangerous nature of the coast, but also the resources which it offers.

The Norse names have, perhaps, remained current in Ness partly because of their immediacy and frequency of use, but also because of the fact that many of them may have been understandable lexically. In other words, a name like *Màsgeir* (sea mew skerry) may well have been translatable in Gaelic as *màs* 'buttock', and *Sioltaga* could have survived because local Gaelic speakers would find the first element recognisable as *siolag* 'sand-eel', whatever the original Norse meaning may have been (perhaps *sild* 'herring'). The descriptive nature of many of these terms, like *Geodha a' Still* in Five Penny (splashing geo) and *Geodha na Cloinne* nearby (children's geo), is very evident. Fish,

birds and animals figure prominently in the list. For Eoropie, Port of Ness, and Sgigersta, for example, the names refer to rock pigeons, choughs, seagulls, terns, bats, whales, herring, and cod.

Other Norse topographical terms which are found in the oral tradition of Ness are less prolific than those I have already mentioned. Of the coastal names, *cleit* from ON *klettr*, is notable, however, giving *Filiscleitir* in Sgigersta, and *Gicleitir* in Five Penny Ness, while Gaelic forms are *Cleir Alltair*, *Cleit a' Mhiosgain* and *Cleit Còrn* in Eoropie, and *Cleit an t-Sealgair*, *Cleit Suain* and *Cleit Arsgaidh* in Five Penny. This is a rock term – a cliff face, or a strong surface, and is sometimes found inland as well. Elsewhere in Lewis and Harris it occurs as a settlement name, like *Breaclete* in Berneray and *Diriclete* in Harris.

Also in this group are *vík* 'bay', found in *Grotavaig*, and *Poll Spainabhaig* in Five Penny/Swainbost; *steinn* 'stone', (*Steinis* in Eoropie), *berg* 'rock', as in *Líbiridh* and *Biorabrat* in Eoropie, and *Bratabiridh* in Swainbost.

Of all the Norse elements which are found inland, the most significant, apart from *vátn* 'loch', is perhaps *gróf* 'pit', 'ravine', a term generally applied to a water-course not large enough to be termed a river. These are usually peaty, boggy streams, frequent in North Lewis. The term is found throughout Lewis, but is most common in Ness. *Bhotagro* in Five Penny, *Meagro*, *Geaslagro* and *Ciapagro* in South Dell, *Malagro* in Lower Shader, and *Disgro* and *Starragro* in Five Penny Borge are typical.

The process of assimilation, with many of these terms, has been a significant factor in the nomenclature of the area. Some, like *gearraidh*, *geodha*, *cleit* and *sgeir* have been adopted as standard terms in the vocabulary. These four elements in particular, have parallels in the Northern Isles as *garth*, *geo*, *clett*, and *skerry*. Others, such as ON *hofdhi* 'promontory' give localised forms – in this case *tòbha*, a word for a prominent headland, very similar in extent and position to the Gaelic *rubha*. Many of the Ness townships have promontory land, and *tobha* occurs simply as a descriptive term for the grazing land on the cliffs, added to the name of the township concerned. Hence, we have *Tobha Ghabsuinn*, *Tobha Dhibidal*, *Tobha Tholstaidh* and on North

Rona, *Tobha Rònaigh*. Obviously, *tobha* has been assimilated to some extent, although *rubha* is used in parallel. the use of *aird* 'promontory land' is an added complication. Occasionally we find terms which can all mean 'point' or 'promontory' being used in conjunction, sometimes three-element names like *Gob Rubha na h-Airde*, when *gob* 'beak', 'point' is a term used to describe that part of the promontory which juts into the sea at a definite point.

However, a number of these topographic terms, such as *grof*, *bakki* (slope), *vík* and others have remained as onomastic items, not entering into the Gaelic of the island, despite being important items in the nomenclature. The interface between Gaelic and Norse is somewhat vague when we come to interpret what this means. One of the keys to the problems may well be the fact that we are dealing with what Nicolaisen calls 'a toponymically bare landscape' at the beginning of the Norse settlement period. The complete lack of identifiable pre-Norse place-names in Lewis tends to support this. The suggestion is that the incomers used very basic onomastic material for their place-names – mostly descriptive, paralleling forms in Orkney, Shetland and Norway. In fact, they were using, in a very primitive and immediate way, a stock of place-name elements with which they were familiar and which suited their new environment – an environment not all that dissimilar to their homelands.

By about 1250, Gaelic was beginning to be the language of new onomastic coinage in Lewis. How did this affect the existing Norse names? Was there a gradual replacement of Norse names by Gaelic ones? Clearly, much would depend on the local situation, the local economy, contacts with the mainland, and with groups of Gaelic speakers outside the island. But where a community is inherently conservative in its customs, its life-style, and moreover, its language there must have been strong resistance to change. Over the generations, the meaning of individual Norse place-names becomes obscure, but opaque or lost meanings do not necessarily mean that the name is discarded. Names, and not only place-names, 'can pass from one language to another, in some instances several times, mainly through the device of phonological adaptation.' (Nicolaisen, 1974, 106).

The terms which I have discussed briefly in this paper form by no means the whole picture of names from the oral tradition of North Lewis. I have selected the various categories in order to highlight the transmission from one language to another which expresses itself in the place-name record. For the Norse settlers of Lewis, this record has stood the test of time because of the continuity of the settlement, combined with the linguistic conservatism of the population. But perhaps the overwhelming factor is a cultural one. The sense of isolation, of independence, of one-ness with a severe and unyielding landscape is to my mind the key to this survival. In the tradition-bearers of Ness, at least as far as their place-name story is concerned, and perhaps largely unconscious of their Norse roots, we find a light from the past which has not failed.

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