ABERDEEN: A TOPONYMIC KEY TO THE REGION

W.F.H. NICOLAISEN

To have been asked to talk to you on the place names of the region gives me particular pleasure because the occasion affords me the opportunity to try an experiment which I have been tempted to carry out for some considerable time: To take a single name and observe and interpret it from as many angles as possible and thus establish its locus not only in its relationship to other names in the onomasticon of which it is a part but also in its historical setting. So that you do not think that this is a rather long-winded way of saying that one wants to discover its etymology, let me immediately remove even the possibility of such a misunderstanding by stating at the outset that the place name on which I want to focus this discussion – *Aberdeen* – is a compound consisting of a generic *aber* meaning "river mouth or confluence" and a specific which is undoubtedly the river name *Don*. Translated into Modern English, *Aberdeen* therefore means "*Don*-mouth". It is as simple as that, and if the etymology of the name *Aberdeen* were our only objective, the challenge would now be over because the mystery has been revealed.

I have, however, on several occasions stressed – and will stress it over and over again as long as anybody is willing to listen – that for a truly onomastic study of names, i.e. for one that regards them as names and not simply as linguistic items with some peculiar additional properties, their etymology is the necessary beginning and not the ultimate end of the exercise. It is the *conditio sine qua non* which makes all other onomastic research possible, for it is not enough, indeed misguided though tempting, to be satisfied with having reduced names to the words they once were. There is so much more to names than that. The starting point of our exploration is therefore the unchallenged and unchallengeable etymologisation of the place name *Aberdeen* as "*Don*-mouth" (Let me hasten to add in parenthesis that the name of the *Denburn* has been proposed as the specific in this name but I do not regard this suggestion as a serious challenge, and hope that the reasons for this rejection will become clear in the following).

Instead of chasing its etymology, then, or its lexical meaning I want to employ the name *Aberdeen* as a key, maybe as a whole door, to the nomenclature of the region in which this conference is being held. This seems to be appropriate not only because it is the name of our meeting place and the name of the major city in the Scottish north-east but also because it has been affected by at least three languages – Pictish, Gaelic and Scots – and can therefore be a lodestar in guiding us through the major linguistic and onomastic stratification of this part of the world. For these reasons, *Aberdeen* is a name worth conjuring with, and it has the additional advantage of

being, as far as Scottish place names go, fairly well documented; by that I mean that it has been frequently recorded since the first half of the twelfth century. Indeed, the major evidence at our disposal, apart from its modern pronunciation in both English and Gaelic, are hundreds of early spellings to be found in a variety of sources of the medieval and post-medieval periods. From a historical perspective, this is primarily a silent record that speaks to us visually, and it has to be further borne in mind that most of these visual representations are embedded in much of the record in the official Latin of the time, i.e. in alien, artificial surroundings, and that these spellings were often written (perhaps perpetrated would be a better term) by scribes not familiar with the name in its local setting, including its pronunciation, and were more often than not derived from earlier written sources establishing a kind of scribal onomastic convention. In such texts, frequently charters of one kind or another, place names, and to a certain extent personal names, are usually the only vernacular intrusions and are sometimes, especially when used adjectivally, made to conform to their Latin textual environment. All this is possibly not as much of a handicap as it may sound but it is nevertheless worth remembering that much of our toponymic evidence is considerably removed or screened from any direct contact with the genuine, local pronunciation of its time, with the various intervening factors serving as effective buffers.

Another point worth making is that, even if we follow the golden rule of all onomastic research and give special status and credence to the earliest recorded spellings available, the earliest mention of the name in the third decade of the twelfth century is separated from the time at which the name is likely to have been coined and first used, by several hundred years. 1136 or 1137 may look pretty impressive in a general north-eastern Scottish context, and there are many names for which the earliest surviving record is much, much later, but such exceptionally early dates lie, after all, at the beginning of the interface between Gaelic and Scots in the area and anything we want to claim to be Pictish about the name must by that time have been filtered through at least 300 years of Gaelic and perhaps been interfered with by other linguistic influences, such as English and Latin, and possibly French. Any conclusions which we draw from the existing written record, which is in itself of course incomplete and depends largely on accidental survival, must take these matters in to account in order to be honest. This is something that all name scholars know, of course.

And yet, you may be relieved to hear, the picture is perhaps not as gloomy as I may have overcautiously painted it, as my comments on the written record will, I hope, persuasively show. There are obviously many ways in which that record can be arranged, the one that most immediately suggests itself being a purely chronological one. This I have provided in FIG.1. It should be borne in mind that this is not a complete inventory because such a compilation would have run into hundreds or even thousands of early spellings, but a representative one culled from the files of my projected *Dictionary of Scottish Place Names*. Despite that selectivity, one can

FIG. 1 Aberdeen: Early Spelling History

12th century
Aberdon a1124
Abbirdonensis 1136
Abberdeon 12c
Aberden 1137
Aberdon c1150
Abbirdone 1157
Abbirdein 1157
Aberden 1163
Aberdon 1163-4 (bis)
Abirdon 1164 (bis)
Aberdon 1172-4
Ab er doen 1172-85
Abyrden 1172-94
Abredeon 1173-80
Aberdon 1173-84
Abirden 1175
Aberdoen 1178
Abyrden 1179-82
aberdon 1187-1203
Aberdon 1196-7
Aberden 1198
Abirden 1198-9

13th century
Aberden 1214-22
Abirden 1214-48
Abberden 1218-22
Abberden 1234
Habirden 1236
Haberden 1239
Abirden c1260
Aberden 1266
Abeirden c1272
Aberdene 1273
Aberdon 1287
Aberden 1287
Aberdene 1274-1307
Abberdene 1290
Haberdene 1290
Aberdene 1290

Aberden 1292
Abirdene 1296
Aberden 1296
Abbirden 1297

14th century
Aberdene 1306-29
Aberdene 1319
Abirden 1319
Abirdene 1323
Aberden 1326
Aberdin 1330
Abryden 1331
Aberdene 1336
Abreden 1341
Abirdene 1341 (bis)
Abberden' 1342
Aberdeine 1342
Abirdene 1342
Abredene 1342
Habirden 1345 (bis)
Abreden 1348
Abbirdene 1353
Abirreden 1354
Aberden 1357
Aberdene 1360
Abirdon 1362
Abirdone 1362
Aberdeen 1362
Abriden 1363
Abirden' 1371
Abirden 1371-90
Abirdene 1373
Abbirden 1391
Abirden 1391

15th Century
Abredene 1405
Abredon 1406
Abirden 1411
Abirdon 1417
Abbirdene 1426

Aberden 1433
Abirdeyn 1445
Abreden 1449
Abirdene 1451 (bis)
Aberdene 1453
Abyrdene 1457
Aberdene 1458
Abirdeyn 1461 Abbir
Abbirden 1461
Abirden1461
Abirdene 1461
Abbirdene 1461
Aberden 1465
Abbirdene 1469
Abbirteyn 1470
Abyrdene 1482
Abberden 1492
Abyrdene 1492
Abyrdeyne 1492
Abirdene 1494

16th century
Abberdene 1500
Aberdeine 1500
Aberdone 1500-01
Abbyrdene 1510
Aburdyne 1524
Abirden 1525
Aberdon 1526
Abyrdon 1526
Abirdeyn 1527
Aberdene 1532
Abardyn 1535
Aberdyne 1537
Abyrdyne 1543
Aberdeine 1556
Obyrdin 1561
Abirdene 1589 (bis)
Aberdeyn 1591
Aberdone 1595
Abirdeyne 1596

17th century
Aberdein 1627-8
Aberdeine 1632
Aberdeene 1639
Aberdein 1641
Aberdone 1688
Abbertein 1696
Aberdein 1697
Aberdeen 1698

justifiably claim that all the major spelling variations are included and that their proportional distribution is just about right, too, although there has been a·tendency on my part to put greater emphasis on the earliest spellings since they are of the greatest interest to the historical and etymological aspects of the Dictionary.

One of the most valuable facets of this list is that it marks the end points so very nicely – there are *Aberdon* and *Abberdeon* at the very beginning of the written record, and there is *Aberdeen* at the end of the historical range here presented. Unfortunately, here tidiness ends, and the chronological order as it has come down to us and is presented here does not reflect that exact sequence of the changes in written tradition nor of the changes of pronunciation behind the written tradition. Neither is it possible to say that the spelling of the name has been completely stabilised since 1698, with *Aberdeen* not only dominating the choices available but excluding all others. Nevertheless, these circa 130 examples are a fair representation of the evidence that the record makes available to us.

What can we read out of this evidence? Let us look to begin with at the first element, the generic *aber*: (FIG.2). Of the spelling variations on the list, *Aber-* is by far the most common, with 60 examples; the only other spelling to rival it, *Abir-*, is found in 32 instances, while *Abyr-* occurs nine times. It is, I think, permissible to regard the -*y*- as a contemporary allograph of -*i*-, and no special significance should therefore be read into this variation; we might be quite justified in adding these two spelling variants together, giving us a total of 41. One of the major differences between the *Aber-* and *Abir-/Abyr-* spellings seems to be that while the former occurs from the beginning of the record till the end of the seventeenth century and beyond – from the twelfth century to the present day – the latter appear to peter out in the sixteenth century. It is improbable that these three spellings actually imply different pronunciations; they are more likely to be thought of as scribal conventions in particular documents or sets of documents, and the same is probably true of the *hapax legomena Abeir-*, *Abur* and *Abar-*. That the initial vowel was always short in the centuries surveyed is indicated by the ten spellings with a double -*bb*-, and the strongly trilled and almost vocalic nature of the final -*r* is confirmed by the eleven spellings in *Abre-* and *Abri-*, practically all of which are confined to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Metathesis of the -*r*- is , of course, a very common feature in

FIG. 2 Aberdeen: Chronological Typology of Early Spellings

	(centuries)							(centuries)					
ABER	12	13	14	15	16	17	-DEEN	12	13	14	15	16	17
Aber-	12	10	9	2	7	7	-don	10	1	2	2	2	
Abir-	4	4	10	8	5		-done	1		1			
Abyr-	2		2	3	1		-doen	2					
Abeir-		1					-deon	2					
Abur-					1		-den	7	12	14	6	1	
Abar-					1		-dene		8	10	9	4	
Abber-	1	3	1	1	1	1	-dein	1		1			3
Abbir-	3	1	2	4			-deyn				3	2	
Abbyr-					1		-deine			1		2	1
Abre-	1		6	3			-deyne				1	1	
Abri-			1				-dien			1			
Abirre-			1				-dyne					3	
Haber-		2					-din			1		1	
Habir-			1	1			-dyn					1	
Obyr-				1			-tein						1
Apar-		1					-djon		1				
							-den'		1	1			

Scottish English and by no means limited to place names. It is certainly found, together with the other features already mentioned, in many other *Aber-* names, particularly *Arbroath* which is especially well documented (*Abbrebrodoghe* 1305, *Abrebrothok* 1306-7, *Abrebroth* 1320, *Abrebrothot* 1410, 1443, *Abbribroth* 1447). The singleton spelling *Abirre-* of 1354 seems to have it both ways, while the two *Habers* and the two *Habirs* of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries demonstrate French influence, not on the pronunciation but on the scribal habits. *Obyr* of 1561 is found in the *Black Book of Taymouth* which in many respects appears to have close connections with Gaelic, the modern pronunciation in that language being *Obar Dheathan*. The spelling *Apardjon* found in the thirteenth-century *Orkneyinga Saga* is also likely to reflect that pronunciation.

This brings us to the representation of the second element, the river name the

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mouth of which is indicated by *Aber-* (FIG 2). From the beginning of the record this is clearly divided into two parallel spelling traditions, one *Aberdon*, *Aberdone*, *Aberdoen*, and the other *Ab(b)erdeon*, *Aberden*, *Aberdene*. The former is preserved in the Latinised adjective *Aberdonensis*; the latter is, of course, the ancestor of the modern name *Aberdeen*. Watson derives the former (*Aberdon*, etc.) from a Pictish form of the river name corresponding to Old Welsh *Duion*, and the latter (*Aberdeon*, etc.) from a Gaelic *Deathan* for the same river.[1] This phonological interpretation is supported by the chronological evidence. Both spelling traditions are strong in the twelfth century but whereas *-don(e)* spellings occur only sporadically in later centuries, *-den(e)* – by far the largest proportion of all spellings encountered – continues in strength until the end of the sixteenth century. One is clearly a diminishing, the other an increasing tradition. Pictish, after all, must have been dead for at least two to three centuries when the first *=don* spelling is to be found in the surviving written record, while Gaelic must have been powerful at the time and must have continued to be spoken, side by side with the incoming English, for another five hundred years or so. The two *-doen/-deon* pairs of the twelfth century, at the very outset of our written corpus, most clearly mark the beginning of the dichotomy. Until the great vowel shift of the fifteenth century, *-den* must have reflected a [de:n] pronunciation, and *-dene*, after the loss in pronunciation of the final *-e*, is likely to have become more and more attractive for the spelling of the same pronunciation, in contradistinction to [dEn]. Apart from a few early forerunners, *-dein*, *-deyn*, *-deine*, *-deyne*, *-dien*, and certainly *-dyne* spellings only occur after the great vowel shift when, in all varieties of standard English, [de:n] had become [di:n], a pronunciation most appropriately represented by *-deen* in modern English orthography. One cannot help wondering whether spellings that contain an *i* or a *y*, especially *-dyne*, reflect the north-east Scots development of [e:] to [ai] as in *quyne* referred to by Derrick McClure in another paper. The occasional *-din* (1330, 1561) and *-dyn* (1535) are difficult to assess, as to whether they really indicate short vowels and therefore a different pronunciation or are variants of *-dyne*; and *-tein* (1696) appears to display occasional Gaelic influence. One cannot discount either analogical changes in the pronunciation and spelling in the wake of the change from [de:] to [di:] in the nearby sister river to whose banks and mouth the city expanded and largely shifted in the post-medieval period.

The overall impression derived from the spelling history of the river name, then, is that the *-don(e)* set of spellings based on the Pictish form of the name is not very visible after the twelfth century, whereas the *-den(e)* group of spellings based on the Gaelic form gains in influence and finally dominates the scene, with the pronunciation changing from [de:n] to [di:n] under the influence of the great vowel shift; the *-dyne* type spellings are possibly a reflection of the Scots of the north-east. If one were to indulge in chronological speculation, which I am not tempted to do, of course, one might say that one might expect the name to occur as *Aberdon* or *Aberden* in the twelfth century, as *Aberden* or *-dene* in the thirteenth century, as *Aber-* or *Abir-den* or *-dene* in the fourteenth century, as *Abirden* or *-dene* in the

fifteenth century, as *Aber-* and *Abir-* with a variety of river-name spellings in sixteenth century, and culminating in *Aberdeen* at the end of the seventeenth century. Altogether, at least five languages – Pictish, Gaelic, English, Scots, and French — have left their mark at one time or another on the spelling of the name *Aberdeen*, and the *Apardjon* of the *Orkneyinga Saga* adds a Scandinavian touch which is otherwise completely lacking in native renderings in an area in which no Norse name can be reliably documented.

So much for the spelling of the river name *per se*; what does it stand for? How can, in fact, a single name like *Aberdeen* serve as a key to the whole region? Let us begin again with *Aber-* whose ultimate etymology is *ad-ber* from the root *bher-* "to bring".[2] It could therefore be somehow translated as "out-bring", a meaning which in the cases of our *Aber-* place names is obviously applied to the "bringing out" of water at the mouth of a river or a confluence. The word *aber* is known as a common noun in Welsh and goes back to an Old Welsh *aper*. In Gaelic it is only found in place names such as *Loch-abar* "Lochaber" and *a'Chomraich Abrach* "Applecross" but even in these instances one cannot be sure that they are not adaptations from pre-Gaelic Celtic. Anyhow, there can be no doubt about the large majority, if not all, of the Scottish place names which have *Aber-* as an initial generic being not Gaelic but of *p*-Celtic origin. Since Pictish is the term applied to the variety of pre-Gaelic *p*-Celtic spoken in this part of the world between, let us say, 200 and 900 A.D., it is tempting to call the type of name of which *Aberdeen* is our prototype simply Pictish but, as two relevant distribution maps show,[3] it is not quite as simple as that.

Whereas place names containing *pet* "a piece or share of land (*Pitmedden*, *Pittodrie*, *Pitcaple*, *Pitfichie*, etc.) nicely conform in their distribution to what one might term our classical notion of Celtic-speaking Pictland – the north-east of Scotland bounded roughly by the Firth of Forth in the south and the Moray Firth in the north – *Aber-* names are also found in southern Scotland where the brand of p-Celtic spoken until the superimposition of Gaelic and Anglian is usually termed Cumbric, the major onomastic expression of which are the place names containing the element *cair* "a fort", as in *Cramond*, *Carluke*, *Cathcart*, *Carfrae* and *Caerlanrig*, but also in the Cumberland names *Carlisle*, *Cardew* and *Cardurnock* which, according to Kenneth Jackson, were probably "given by British immigrants from Strathclyde who reoccupied Northern Cumberland in the tenth century.".[4] Politically, this toponymic evidence is most likely associated with the kingdoms of Rheged and Strathclyde the latter of which had its capital at Dumbarton and its ecclesiastical centre in Glasgow. To the south of this area, names beginning with *cair* do not occur again until the Welsh borderland has been reached (there is a *Caradoc* in Herefordshire) and in Wales proper, as in *Cardiff*, *Carmarthen*, and the like. The distribution of *cair*-names is therefore clearly Cumbric and Welsh but, what is more important to our enquiry, decidedly *non*-Pictish.

What makes the late Frederick Wainwright's book title *The Problem of the Picts*[5]

so applicable to the name *Aberdeen* and the other north-eastern *Aber*-names, such as *Aberdour*, *Arbroath*, *Aberfeldy*, *Abernethy, and Abertarff*, is the fact that some examples of this name type also occur in what is supposed to be Cumbric territory, as exemplified by our *cair*-names. Thus we have *Aberlady* in East Lothian, *Aberlosk* and the now obsolete *Abermilk* in Dumfriesshire, and *Abercarf* in Lanarkshire, and it is unlikely that such names were given by a few stray Pictish settlers in that part of the world. At best, we can therefore say that *aber* has a preponderantly north-easterly distribution, a scatter which implies that it was employed more productively – was more fashionable if you like — in the naming of places by the Picts than by the Cumbrians, as far as the *p*-Celts in Scotland were concerned. They also share with *Car*-names, of course, Welsh counterparts such as *Aberystwyth* and *Abergavenny*.

It is worth remembering, however, that *Aber*-names are not our only problem children in this respect, apparently contradicting the self-contained neatness of the distribution pattern of the *Pit*-names. The terms *pert* "a wood, a copse" which we know best from such place names as *Perth* and *Larbert*, *lanerc* "a clearing" as in *Lanrick* and *Lendrick*, and *pevr* "radiant, beautiful" as in *Strathpeffer* and *Inverpeffray*, also occur occasionally in Cumbrian territory as, for example, *Pappert Law* in Selkirkshire, *Lanark* in Lanarkshire, and the two *Peffers* in East Lothian.[6] Whereas we can make the same claim for these three terms as for *aber* with regard to a predominantly "Pictish" distribution, the reverse seems to be true of the generics *penn* "end, head", *pren* "a tree" and *tref* "a settlement". These are strong in the south and rare in the north-east as, for instance, the older *Peanfanel* recorded by Bede for *Kinneil* or *Prinlaws* in Fife and *Kinpurnie* in Angus, and are therefore primarily to be regarded as Cumbric.[7] Even more tantalising is the distribution of names containing *tref* which in Modern Welsh still means "town or home" and is prolific in place names in Wales and Cornwall. The peculiar characteristic of *tref*-names in Scotland is that names in which this generic occurs as a first element (*Tranent*, *Traquair*, *Trabroun*) are found exclusively to the south of the Forth – Clyde line, while names in which it is the second element are also common north of that line, like *Cantra* (Inverness-shire) or *Menstrie* (Clackmannanshire), sometimes of identical derivation such as *Trostrie* (Kirkcudbrightshire) and *Troustrie* (Fife). Like the *Pit*-names, these north-eastern -*tref* names often have Gaelic specifics, such as the common *Fintr(a)y* "white settlement" or *Clinterty* and the like, "sloping settlement", and also Moray, from an earlier Gaelic *Moirthreabh = *mori-treb- "sea settlement". As in the case of the many *Pit*-names in this area (*Pitmedden* comes to mind), part-translation is the most likely explanation for some of these names, while others may have been coined during a Pictish-Gaelic bilingual period in the ninth and tenth centuries.[8] The type *Fintr(a)y* would thus correspond exactly to the type *Pitmedden*. This is hinted at by an admittedly much later seventeenth-century entry in the *Register of the Great Seal* which says of the Aberdeenshire name "*Cantres* vulgo voc at. *Fintries* in parochia de Kingedward" (*Cantres* commonly called *Fintries* within the parish of Kingedward).

There is a hint regarding a similar process in at least one *Aber*-name: The Kincardineshire place name *Inverbervie*, on the Bervie Water near the sea, is recorded in 1290 as *Haberberui*, undoubtedly an *Aber*-name. It had already been on record as an *Inver*-name (Gaelic *inbhear* "confluence", from *in-ber*- "carry in") at least four times in the same century before that date (*Inuirberuyn* 1204-1214, *Inuerberuyn* 1232-1237, *Inirbervyn* 1266, and *Inuerberuy* 1287), and the single *Haberberui* is therefore clearly a relic from pre-Gaelic times, establishing a sequence *Aber*- to *Inver*-. One wonders how many of the *Inver*-names in the former Pictland had suffered a similar fate before the written record starts in the twelfth or thirteenth century but leaving no trace of an older *Aber*-. Hypothetically this might have been the case in all those names in which the river name which forms the specific cannot convincingly be said to be of Gaelic origin. For example, such Aberdeenshire names as *Invererran* (not recorded till the sixteenth century), *Inverey* (on record only since the fifteenth century), and especially *Inverugie* (*Inuirugin* 1202-4) and *Inverurie* (*Ennroury* 1172, and *Nrurin* in the Pictish Chronicle) may well fall into this category; and, as *Inverbervie* shows, although the river name *Bervie* is derivable from the Old Irish *berbaim* "I boil", this, too, may be a translation or an adaptation of an earlier *p*-Celtic name, as it is unlikely for *Aber*- to have been attached to a Gaelic name of the watercourse. At any rate, part-translation cannot be ruled out in a period of prolonged bilingualism, so that even names like *Inverallochy*, *Invermarkie* and *Invernochty* may have pre-Gaelic antecedents, and the number of *Aber*-names in this region be considerably higher than our late and accidental written record would lead us to believe.

Enough of speculation, however; our own current concern has to be with the status of confirmed *Aber*-names, such as the ones already mentioned as well as *Aberbothrie*, *Aberchirder*, *Abercrombie*, *Aberfoyle*, *Abergeldie*, *Aberlemno*, *Aberlour*, *Abernyte*, *Aberuchill*, *Aberuthven*, *Abriachan*, *Arbirlot*, and *Arbuthnott*. It must seem perhaps superfluous to be told that all these names designate places near streams, especially those close to their mouths or to their confluences with other watercourses. This apparently redundant observation does, however, point to the somewhat complementary nature of the two distribution patterns of *Pit*-names and *Aber*-names, respectively, within the Pictish settlement area. Just over twenty years ago, the geographers Whittington and Soulsby published "A Preliminary Report on an Investigation into *Pit* Place-names", in which they offered the results of an examination which they, as geographers, had undertaken of the *Pit*-names of Fife and the adjacent parts of Angus, analysing each individual site so named, with a view to gathering information about "the preferred habitat of the Pictish people".[9] On the basis of the data collected, they came to the conclusion that the Picts generally did not favour the coastal zone and also avoided the floors of river valleys, and that because of the largely coastal area below and the adverse exposure conditions above, *Pit*-names are almost entirely restricted to a distribution between an altitude of 50 and 650 feet. Other factors such as distance to other sites with *Pit*-names, soil quality, shelter, good drainage, slope value, and a

southerly component in the aspect of the chosen site also come into play. Altogether, the coiners of *Pit*-names emerge as inland people who would prefer to settle on loamy soils in well-sheltered and well-drained positions. Whittington largely confirms these conclusions in a later more extensive and more sophisticated study covering the whole of "Pictland".[10]

The distribution of *Aber*-names naturally does not follow this pattern, particularly with regard to altitude and the proximity to river beds or coastal areas, and probably one should add a rider to Whittington's (and Soulsby's) very valuable findings to the effect that there were also Picts who did not indulge in the kind of agricultural activities that many of the specifics in *Pit*-names imply and who preferred to live near water courses, especially near their mouths and confluences. An important con sideration in this respect is the fact that all the *Aber*-names, or certainly a very high proportion of them, must be pre-Gaelic and therefore pre-850 or even centuries older (although I am not prepared to put this kind of compound formation too early in the period which we tend to assign to the historical Picts), while many, if not most, of the *Pit*-names were coined by Gaels who had adopted *Pit-* as a place-name element or even as a lexical item, in the ninth and tenth centuries, or perhaps even later.[11]

Certainly there cannot be any doubt about the *Aber*-names within the rough boundaries of "Pictland" with justification being called Pictish, as long as one also recognises their wider distribution and affinity with Cumbric and Welsh, i.e. with the rest of the *p*-Celtic area of Britain. In contrast to the *Pit*-names which are only to be found in Pictland and a little beyond and which therefore can make certain claims for a separate Pictish toponymy and consequently for a separate Pictish language, *Aber*-names demonstrate that Pictish is likely to have shared many features with British Celtic as a whole, and is therefore not as isolated as the *Pit-* names appear to suggest. The non-Celtic component of Pictish is, of course, another thorny problem which does, however, not concern us in this context because there is no evidence that it affected Aberdeen and its hinterland.

This brings us to the last aspect of the name *Aberdeen* to which this discussion is intended to draw attention – the derivation and meaning of the river name which forms its specific and by which it is differentiated from all other *Aber*-names in Scotland (this does not mean that repetitions might not occur as the two *Aberdours* in Aberdeenshire and Fife show). It cannot come as a surprise that the river name which makes the uniqueness of the name *Aberdeen* possible, the *Don*, is, like the generic *aber*, also pre-Gaelic. W.J. Watson convincingly etymologised it as an early Celtic (which to us means Pictish) *Dēvonā*, a river-goddess name derived from the work *dēvos* "a god", a cognate, for example, of Latin *deus*.[12] The ending *-onā* is very common in Early Celtic names, both of rivers and of divinities, in Britain as well as on the Continent. For instance, in Gaulish, the major Continental form of Celtic known to us, the famous horse goddess *Eponā* would be a well-known example.

As far as Scottish river names are concerned, -onā is not confined to Pictland, and we find it in such names as the *Devon* in Perthshire and the *Black Devon* in Fife, both from *Dubona "black one"; the *Lavern Burn* in Dumfriesshire, the *Levern Water* in Renfrewshire, the *Lowran Burn* in the Stewartry, all from *Labarona "the talking one"; the three *Levens* in Argyllshire, Dumbartonshire and Fife, from *Lemona "elm (river)"; the *Lyon* in Perthshire from *Līmonā "the flooding one"; the *Burn of Brown* in Banffshire, from *Brutona "the boiling one"; the *Ythan* in Aberdeenshire, from *Iektona "the talking one"; the *Leithen Water* in Peeblesshire, from *Lektona "the slow flowing one"; the *Nethan* in Lanarkshire, from *Nektona "the washing one"; the *Conan* in Ross-shire, the "wolf river"; and several others including the *Almonds* in West Lothian and Perthshire, from *Ambona "water", the *Calneburn* in East Lothian, the *Kale Water* in Roxburghshire, the *Caddon Water* in Selkirkshire, all from *Kalona "hard water", and, best known of all, the several *Avons* from *Abona* which means simply "river". Our *Dēvonā* is therefore in excellent company as far as its morphological make-up as a complex name is concerned.[13]

Dēvonā also shares another characteristic with some of these names. For the *Avon*, for instance, there is an unextended parallel in the river and loch name *Awe* in Argyllshire (from *Abā); for *Labarona we have the parallel *Labarā in the *Burn of Aberlour* in Banffshire; and for the *Līmonā (the Perthshire *Lyon*) we find, a little further afield, a *Līmā in the *Lymes* of Devon and Dorset. The unextended "twin" of the *Don* or *Dēvonā is, of course, the *Dee* or *Dēvā which also means simply "goddess" or, in its metaphorical sense, "divine river". What is special about the relationship between *Don* and *Dee*, however, is that they are rivers which flow in close proximity to each other and enter the North Sea only a very short distance apart.

That two such rivers should be designated by related but contrasting names – morphologically speaking — is also not unknown from other parts of Scotland. One only has to think of the *Black* and *White Cart* in Renfrewshire and the *Blackadder* and *Whitadder* of Berwickshire in which the English colour adjectives *black* and *white* are used to make both the connection and the distinction. A Gaelic equivalent would be the *Findhorn* and the *Deveron* in which the Gaelic adjectives *fionn* "white" and *dubh* "black" have been added to otherwise identical river names. What is particularly fascinating about the *Blackadder* and the *Whitadder* is that they seem to have also had connective names at a much earlier, perhaps ever pre-Celtic, stage, insofar as one of them appears to have been the *Adara and the other the *Adaria (*Adara, by the way, is also the origin of the river name *Oder* on the German-Polish border).[14] The similar morphological contrast *Dēvā* (*Dee*) – *Dēvonā* (*Don*) is, however, also documented in precisely the same way elsewhere in Scotland, in the river names *Dee* and *Doon* in the south-west of the country. In both these instances, as well as the others referred to, the namers and users of such river names were aware of, and continued this awareness, of close connections between the rivers concerned, whether they occurred in the same geographical neighbourhood or one was the

tributary of the other. There is no *Don* without a *Dee*, and vice versa.

What singles out the *Don* (and the *Doon*) from the other names in -*onā* which usually refer to physical qualities of the watercourse concerned is the fact that it and its twin *Dee* unmistakably express the belief that the river has divine characteristics. I have tried to be very guarded and circumspect in my formulation because I am disinclined to assert or even suggest that the Picts indulged in river worship. Nevertheless, even if one is reluctant to do so, one cannot ignore the fact that two closely associated rivers are called "goddess" or "the holy one", i.e. *Dēvā* and *Dēvonā*, especially when they are not isolated instances. Mention has already been made of the *Dee* and the *Doon* in south-west Scotland, and there is, of course, also the *Dee* that for a long way forms the boundary between England and Wales and flows into the Irish Sea below Chester, and which is actually recorded as *Dēvā* by Ptolemy and others in the second, fifth and seventh centuries. In addition, we have at least two other names derived from *Dēvā* in Wales, a river *Dee* in Ireland and watercourses called *Deba* and *Dēvā* in Spain, all within ancient Celtic territory. Of the Welsh *Dee* at Chester, it is said that it was dedicated to or identified with the goddess of war,[15] and in general it has to be concluded that the Celtic people must have believed in the presence of a divinity in the water. I am, however, not aware of any account of any rituals associated with such a belief either among the Picts or the Celts in general. Anne Ross, in her study of the pagan Celts, has provided us with several examples of springs as significant places in the belief system of the Celts,[16] and most of us share the somewhat befuddled Tam o' Shanter's conviction that witches cannot cross running water. Further afield, the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* furnishes an abundance of examples of ways in which water and water goddesses play important roles in the magico-religious cults of primitive people, as well as among the Babylonians, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Hebrews and Indians, whether in seasonal rites, as rain charms, in purification ceremonies, as a means of divination or as an ingredient in the overall response to the sacred and mysterious.[16] As part of this cosmogony, water gods play an important role.

The *Dee*, the *Don* and other cognate rivers in Britain and on the Continent may well be indicative of any or all of these practices, rituals and beliefs, but apart from the names themselves, I have no specific evidence for such an assumption; in particular, this group of names does not allow us to pinpoint precisely any places along their banks where associated rites might have taken place or which were regarded as especially holy. It is not unlikely that the mouth of a river or a confluence might have been deemed special in this respect and that, if this is so, the original settlement called *Aberdeen* was not only founded near the mouth of the *Don* for economic and strategic, i.e. pragmatic, reasons but also because the "*Don*-mouth", the mouth of the goddess, was regarded as a sacred place. It would then have found its Christian successor in St. Machar's activities and foundation.

By the time the names of our two Pictish rivers, and particularly of the *Don*, were

adopted and adapted by the Gaels, neither their original meaning nor any practices associated with it will have been remembered as the consequence of intensive Christianisation of the region. Among others, the crosses on some of the symbol stones testify to that. For the Gaels, as for us, *Deathan* and *Dé*, or *Don* and *Dee*, were simply lexically meaningless names of rivers, serving the usual identificatory functions of names very satisfactorily.

To sum up: In chronological sequence, the starting point for the name *Aberdeen* is a Celtic-Pictish river name *Dēvonā* meaning "goddess" and closely associated with the river name *Dee* (*Dēvā*). It must have been in existence in Roman times for the Roman camp at Kintore is referred to by Ptolomy in the second century A.D. as *Dēvanā*, a town of the Taexali, and by the Ravenna Geographer in the fourth century as *Devoni*.[18] Some time later during the Pictish period, most likely after the withdrawal of the Romans, a settlement was formed on the estuary of the river and called by the Picts *Aber-don* "*Don-mouth*". In naming this place, the Picts used a term, *aber*, which they shared with other insular Celts, especially in southern Scotland and in Wales. Their language was therefore *p*-Celtic or British, and not *q*-Celtic or Goidelic. The spelling and pronunciation of the name have been affected by all the languages that have been spoken in this region since the Roman occupation: Pictish, Roman Latin, Gaelic, Scottish English and Scots, and we also encounter a Scandinavian form in the *Orkneyinga Saga* and traces of French-influenced scribal habits in some medieval spellings. The name *Aberdeen*, then, a splendid toponymic ruin in the modern linguistic landscape, can therefore serve well as a remarkable toponymic key to the history and prehistory of this region.

NOTES

1   William J. Watson, *The History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland.* (Edinburgh 1926) 211-212.
2   *Ibid.*, 458.
3   W.F.H. Nicolaisen, *Scottish Place-Names: Their Study and Significance.* (London 1976) 153 and 163.
4   Kenneth H. Jackson, "Angles and Britons in Northumbria and Cumbria." In: Henry Lewis (ed.), *Angles and Britons* (Cardiff 1963) 81.
5   Frederick T. Wainwright, *The Problem of the Picts* (Edinburgh 1955).
6   A detailed discussion of these elements is to be found in Nicolaisen, 164-166.
7   *Loc. cit.*
8   Nicolaisen, 166-170.
9   G. Whittington and J.A. Soulsby, "A Preliminary Report on an Investigation into Pit Place-names." *Scottish Geographical Magazine* 84 (1968) 117-125.
10 G. Whittington, "Placenames and the settlement patterns of Dark-Age Scotland." *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 106 (1977) 99-110.
11 See Nicolaisen, 156.

12 Watson, 211.

13 For a fuller discussion of this name type see Nicolaisen, 177-179.

14 See Nicolaisen, 184-186.

15 Eilert Ekwall, *English River-Names* (Oxford 1928) 118.

16 Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (London 1967) 20-33. For the potential veneration of rivers she mostly cites river names like the *Dee, Clyde, Severn, Boyne*, and *Shannon*. See also her *Everyday Life of the Pagan Celts* (London 1970) 164 and 166.

17 James Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*. 12 vols. (Edinburgh 1908-1921). See particularly under "Picts" (X, 1918, 1-6) and "Water, Water-Gods" (XII, 1921, 704-719).

18 A.L.F. Rivet and Colin Smith, *The Place-Names of Roman Britain* (London 1979) 338.