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## The Bu of Orphir, Burn of Gueth – a Gaelic Pattern in Orkney Place-Names?

While working on Orkney place-names for my masters thesis (Sandnes 1996), my attention was drawn to 'X of Y' place-names so frequent in Scotland. In such names the generic element comes first, e.g. *Firth of Forth*, *Burn of Boyne*. This place-name pattern is very common with all kinds of generics in Orkney: *Toomal o' Ness*, *Loch of Stenness*, *The Bu of Rapness*, *The Burn of Netherbrough*. In this article I will make some comments on the origin of the 'X of Y' pattern, and also suggest reasons why this pattern has become so widespread in Orkney place-names.

W. F. H. Nicolaisen discusses the 'X of Y' place-names in *Scottish Place-names* (1976: 57-64), focusing mainly on the Burn of X names. According to Nicolaisen, these names have their stronghold in the Scottish north-east and in Orkney and Shetland. There are scattered examples in central Scotland, but hardly any in the south. Water of X and Mains of X place-names, on the other hand, are frequent in the south-west.

The 'X of Y' place-names seem to be absent both in the areas which were anglicised very early and in the areas where Gaelic prevailed up to our time. Based on this distribution, Nicolaisen concludes that the 'X of Y' pattern emerged as English-speaking Scots started translating Gaelic names, in which the generic element regularly precedes the defining element/specifying element. The preposition of substitutes for the definite article: *Allt a' Chaoruinn* (Burn the Rowan's) and the pattern Burn of X is established. In Nicolaisen's opinion, this pattern in the Northern Isles place-names is 'nothing but the exported result of this contact situation, and in this way the Gaelic original *Allt a'* or *Loch a'* or *Cnoc a'* are ultimately, although indirectly also responsible for that plethora of 'X of Y' names in Shetland,

Orkney and the eastern ('Scandinavian') half of Caithness. Independent creation must be ruled out.' (op. cit.: 64).

This explanation leaves several questions unanswered. First of all, the distribution of 'X of Y' place-names is not as clear-cut as it may seem. Bridge of X is quite frequent in central Scotland, and Mains of X are also found in the east. In the last instance, Nicolaisen is unable to point to an underlying Gaelic model. He also overlooks the fact that the pattern is also found in English names such as *Isle of Man* and *Isle of Wight*. These are generally ascribed to French models: *Île de France*, *Baie de la Seine*. It is surprising that Nicolaisen does not take French models into account, in view of the close ties between the Scottish ruling class and France. The Auld Alliance between France and Scotland persisted as long as Scotland was an independent kingdom. The French influence can be traced in Scots dialect, e.g. the adjective *bonnie*, from French *bon* and in Orkney *peddie/peerie* (French *petit*) is the common word for 'small'. Finally we should note that most of the immigrants to Orkney, according to Nicolaisen, did not come from the Gaelic-English contact areas which formed the stronghold of 'X of Y' place-names, but rather from Fife and Kinross, where the Burn of X names are absent.

In Orkney, direct Gaelic-English contact must have been virtually non-existent. The Vikings started settling the islands ca. 800 and seem to have suppressed the Pictish culture and language shortly after their arrival. The English-speaking incomers in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries met a Norse-speaking population. (The earls were English-speaking from 1379 (Sinclairs), and the last document in Norn was written about 1425.) The 'X of Y' place-names are recorded in the first Orkney rentals from 1492: *Nethirtown of Grenyng*, *Bordland of Swarthmale* and *Bull of Hove*. Do we have to see this as an imported result of Anglo-Gaelic language contact, or can the pattern be explained in other ways?

The rentals from 1500 give us interesting information about ownership and language which suggests that the pattern may be French. First of all we get to know that both *Bull of Ropness* and *Bordland of Swartmall* are the property of William Sinclair. He was the brother of Earl Henry Sinclair, obviously

a member of the social élite. The same rentals inform us that the *Bull of Karstane* belongs to Magnus Sinclair, son of William. The main point in this context, however, is the fact that we find the forms *le borland* and *le bordland de Snartmall*, which are definitely French. In the last instance, we find the pattern that Nicolaisen is looking for. To sum up, we note that the oldest examples of 'X of Y' constructions relate to high-status farms, whose upper class owners did not speak Gaelic, but were likely to speak French. In one case we find a French form which may have served as a pattern for the 'X of Y' construction. We may thus assume that the 'X of Y' construction depends on a French pattern rather than a Gaelic one, and that the usage started in the upper class. The fact that Mains of X (about the home farm of an estate) is found in a wider area of mainland Scotland than the other *of*-constructions Nicolaisen discusses may support the theory. Mains of X corresponds to Bu(II) of X in Orkney, and is also found in the areas (Fife and Kinross) where most of the Scottish settlers in the isles came from.

The examples discussed in *Scottish Place-names* constitute a mere fraction of 'X of Y' constructions actually found in Orkney. It seems possible to combine any two place-name elements in this way and in some cases both the *of*-construction and the common construction is used: *Loch of Harray* and *Harray Loch*. In my name material all but one of the *of*-constructions (*Face o' the Brae*) contained at least one element of Norse origin. This may not be significant, since two thirds of the names have Norse roots, but still it proves that the construction is not restricted to newer English names.

Out of the ca. 560 Harray names I studied, 42 are *of*-constructions. Since the construction is so widespread, it is natural to ask whether there is any Norwegian pattern that might support its use. Nicolaisen writes 'there is nothing in Scandinavian toponymy itself to suggest such a prototype' (op. cit.: 63). This is largely true for written forms. In some instances Norse phrases containing the preposition *á* ('on', 'at', modern Norwegian *på*) may have supported the *of*-construction, however. A development from *\*kvín á brekkunni* ('the enclosure in the slope') to *Queen of Breckan*,

*Queenabreckan* and from \**túnvöllr á Kirkjubrekka* (*túnvöllr* denotes the field closest to the houses, *Kirkjubrekka* is a farm name, literally 'Church slope') to *Toomal of Curcabreck* seems probable. A prepositional phrase helps to distinguish this house field from the house fields at all the other farms. This way of specifying names is common both in Norwegian and English: *Mo i Rana, Newcastle upon Tyne*. Hugh Marwick also reckons that *á* lies behind when Orcadians today say *Willie o' Skaill* and *Mary o' Ness* (Marwick 1929: 1). In old documents there are forms such as *John a Toftis* (loc. cit.). This is a parallel to colloquial Norwegian *Gunnar på Mo*.

The fact that *á* and *on* are more or less synonymous in some contexts, may have eased the way for *of*-constructions into Orkney Norn, but as I have tried to demonstrate, the underlying pattern seems to be French.

### References

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