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Place-Names in Orkney as Evidence for Language Contact

From several hundred years of contact between speakers of Norn and Lowlands Scots in the Northern Isles, a unique dialect emerged. Orcadians and Shetlanders are well aware of the Norse elements in their dialect, and the Norn language in the Northern Isles has recently been discussed by Michael Barnes.¹

My own interest in language contact in Orkney evolved from onomastic studies. For my masters degree at the University of Trondheim, Norway, I carried out a study of place-names of Norse origin in the Mainland parish of Harray. In this material, the evidence of language contact is ever-present. I am still working with West Mainland place names, now for a PhD thesis in which the place-names or onomasticon will be studied from a language contact point of view. In this article I would like to draw attention to some general aspects of place-names as evidence for contact between Norn and Scots, and the mixture of elements from the two languages in place-names.

Why use place-name material as source material?

Working with place-names, one is struck by their continuity. There is possibly a closer connection between the place and its name than between other objects and the nouns we use for them. In Norwegian, the old word "skjermhue" 'peaked cap' has recently been replaced by the English term, which for some reason we always use in the plural form, *caps*. Such changes are rare in place-names. Once a name is coined, it is usually retained, even if the name is no longer understood. This may be the case for native names which reflect an older stage of the language, made up of elements that have become obsolete, like

Hawick < OE *haga wīk*.² In many cases the onomasticon even survives a language shift. This is true for the Norse names in Orkney after Scots became the only language. (On the other hand, the Norse invaders seem to have ignored the pre-existing Pictish names completely, replacing them with their own.)

In Orkney, major names like the names of islands, farms and hills nearly all go back to the Norse period, and they lived on in the Scots-speaking period to such an extent that the onomasticon can still be seen as more Norse than Scots. It is fascinating for Norwegian visitors to the Isles to discover so many familiar names, and likewise Orcadians are able to understand some of our Norwegian place-names (my family name, for instance). Of course a lot of Norse words survived in the dialect as well, as we can see from Marwick's *Orkney Norn*³ or Gregor Lamb's *Orkney Wordbook*,⁴ but the spoken language is definitely Scots.

The onomasticon should not be seen as a static unit, however. If we include field-names, they have been coined continuously until this century. For instance, the field named *The Camp* in Harray is a reminder of a military camp from the Second World War. Today fields are not named anymore, and the old names are vanishing fast. The only new, significant naming seems to be of houses, which only occasionally follow the old principles of naming, which involve describing the location in some way. More often than not, house names are flights of the owners' imagination, with no descriptive significance.

Place names are unique in reflecting the development of the language. One aspect of onomastics is to establish the original form, the etymology or meaning of the names. This is a necessary starting-point, but as I see it, still just a start. A description of the development to the present form should be regarded as equally important, though this may be more evident when one studies material from a language contact area. The onomasticon reflects linguistic development in the sense that they "freeze" a language at different stages, i.e. Old Norse, Norn - Scots contact and Scots. In some names the Norse form is still transparent, the present form having

changed little. The youngest stratum of names is purely Scots. Then there is a large group of names born of the language contact situation, which contains both Old Norse and Scots elements or reflects how Scots struggled to come to terms with the Old Norse elements.

Norse names and Scots names

It is not precise to talk about Norse names in Orkney today, since Scots is the only living language. This means that all names of Old Norse origin only survive in a Scots-speaking context, as loans into Scots, and to a greater or lesser extent, they have been adapted to this language. Still we can divide the place-names into three groups according to linguistic origin:

- 1) Names that consist of Norse elements only, e.g. *Russo* 'horse burn', *Breckan* 'the slope'
- 2) Names that contain only Scots elements, like *The Camp* above
- 3) Names containing elements from both: *Stanywoo* (woo < á 'burn'), *Park of Breckan*.

Norse names were coined from the time when the Vikings first arrived in the islands, probably in the eight century, and as long as Norse or Norn was spoken, which for West Mainland may mean well into the 18th century. The latest recordings of spoken Norn are from West Mainland:

So late as in 1756 or 1757, as a respectable native of this country was travelling from Kirkwall to Birsá, he had occasion to lodge all night in a house in Harra; where to his surprise, he heard two old men for an hour or more, converse together in an unknown tongue, which, on inquiry, he found was the Norse language.⁵

The testimony of Stenness writer John Smith (aged 42), during the 'Pundlar Process' (recorded in 1757), seems to confirm that Norn was not completely extinct by 1750, though definitely on its death bed. Smith remembers "the Norn or the Norse

language to have been vulgarly spoke by a good many People in the Mainland of Orkney; and he knows some People, particularly three or four in the Parishes of Harray and Firth, who speak that Language pretty fluently.."⁶

Names containing Norse elements, on the other hand, can be coined until this day. A lot of Norse words were borrowed into the dialect, and these loan words have been used to coin names a long time after Norn died out. Common elements in Orkney names include the Norse loans *breck* 'slope', also used of infertile land between the old townships, *quoy* 'enclosure' and *geo* 'narrow inlet'. I have found no records of the farm *Ness* near Loch of Harray before 1832, and the name may be rather young, even if the origin is obviously from the Norse appellation *nes* 'headland'. As the word was borrowed into the dialect, and is still understood, the name could well have been given by Scots speakers.

When a new name is coined, an existing name is often incorporated. In Orkney this often means a name of Norse origin. If a farmer cultivates a field on slope called Breckan, he may call it Breckan Park. The generic, *park* in this case, is in the spoken language, but a long-established name is used to specify this particular park. We see then, how Norse elements may find their way into names, through loan words or the use of established names, long after Norn ceased to be spoken.

A more rare instance mainly pertaining to house-names, is that of conscious Norse naming. A saga-reader might call his house *Thorfinn* or *Orffjara*. Such names are easily recognized as copied names. However I was somewhat confused to learn that the house *Kirkatoft* in Evie was named in this century, when a gospel hall was converted into a dwelling house. I had interpreted the name as Norse *kirkjutopt* 'site of a kirk', which is much in line with the facts about the house! The puzzle was only solved when the owners informed me that the name was given by the Orkney folklorist Ernest W. Marwick, who certainly had a knowledge of Norse.

All place-names coined after Norn died out are obviously Scots, but these too have a long history in Orkney. For the long bilingual period, after the Scots started settling, Scots names must have been coined, along with Norse ones. We can hardly

pinpoint the first individual settlers, but records from the 14th century show that the Scots were becoming an important group. In a letter to the king of Norway in 1321, Robert the Bruce complains about the ill-treatment of Scots in Orkney.⁷ Nearly fifty years later, in 1369, one of the four Orkney documents in Norse⁸ clearly states that the Scots, although still few in numbers, have become quite influential. The document in question is a settlement between Hákon Jónsson, sysselmann or Governor for the Norwegian King and the Scottish bishop of Orkney, William. Hákon is able to decide the terms of the agreement,⁹ one of these being that "the lord bishop shall have good native men of Orkney and Hjaltland in his service" and that "the *rikest* (i.e. richest, most powerful) men in the Orkneys and Shetland should be first and foremost in all councils henceforward...". At first glimpse, this would seem to imply that the Norse inhabitants still had the upper hand. What it definitely shows is an increasing Scots influence, which is underlined by the massive majority of Scots names in the list of witnesses. Only six or even fewer of the 24 names appear to be Norse. For political reasons Hákon's supporters obviously found it convenient to stress their nativeness, whatever their background. These 'rich' and politically powerful Scots must also have been landowners, which means that Scots place-names could certainly have been coined from the 14th century, i.e. 100 years or more before the chronological limit suggested by Nicolaisen.¹⁰

Unfortunately we are normally unable to date the coining of names, and sometimes we are not even able to tell whether a name has Norse or Scots origin. A Norse name may have been adapted to Scots in such a manner that it can no longer be recognized as Norse. The field name *Iron* has no connection with the metal, rather it reflects Norse *Eyrrin* 'the sand or gravel'. And even such a straightforward English name as *Newhouse* may have originated as the Norse equivalent *Nýhús*. In my opinion names can be safely classified as Norse coinings if they contain remains of Norse articles or case endings, i.e. Norse morphology. Since *quoy* 'enclosure' is borrowed into the dialect, names like *Sinclair's Quoy*, *Scott's Quoy* are likely to be coined by Scots speakers, but when we

find the forms *Queena* (definite) or *Queear* (plural), we may conclude that they were given by Norn speakers with a command of the morphology.

How did the Scots speakers come to terms with the Norse place-names?

We have already stated that the Scots seem to have retained most of the old names. Documented instances of *renamings* are extremely rare, one being *Midgarth* > *Kingshouse* in Harray. The change of name can be related to Scottish ownership - Elizabeth Urving obtained the land from Earl William Sinclair in 1503¹¹ - but is still most unusual.

A few examples of adaptations of names have also been given above. (I am not very fond of the term 'corruption', since the purpose is making the names speakable or understandable, not trying to distort them. Though for some haphazard written forms, both older ones and more recent map spellings, the term is possibly appropriate.) Adaption of names is carried out in a number of ways; only a few will be discussed here. As a starting point, all names must be possible to pronounce in the dialect. This may call for phonetic adaption. Some sounds or combinations of sounds are not acceptable in Scots, e.g. rounded *y*, *x* and *tj*. The common onomastic element *tjörn* 'loch, pond', may thus become *Shun* or *Chin*. On the other hand, the Norse /ø/, like in French *deux*, unfamiliar in standard English, was adopted in the dialect. The dialect also seems to follow a Norse pattern of stressing the first syllable of names. The dialect form is *Stromness*, even if Englishmen tend to say *Stromness*.

Morphologic adaption, i.e. replacing Norse articles with English ones, is quite common. This change has already taken place in the first rentals, and requires some bilingual ability. The translator, possibly the scribe, must be able to identify the Norse articles in order to substitute them. For the farm *Stews* in South Ronaldsay, *Stowis* in the 1492 rental, the Norse plural dative form *Stufum* is recorded in a document from 1329.¹² For most other similar farm names (Norse

element(s) + English article), no purely Norse form is recorded, but we must assume that a translation has taken place. There are also examples of parallel versions of the same name, one with Norse, the other with English articles: *Lunan* and *The Loons* (used in Orkney of wettish areas), *Breckan* and *The Breck*.

Scots and Norse are related languages, with many similar words. A phrase like "The bairns are oot o' the hoose noo" translates more easily into Norwegian "barna er ute av huset no" than into standard English! It means that in some cases the Scots in Orkney must have understood Norse names right away, especially dialect speakers who had already adopted many words of Norse origin (cf. *Nýhús* - *Newhouse* above). In addition, bilingualism must have been rather common in the contact period. One possible strategy would thus be to translate names. Name translations can very rarely be proved on the basis of recorded forms, however. The most surprising instance is the change from *-yord* to *-land* in six Sandwich farm-names: *Eriksyord*, *Brekisyord* etc. in the 1503 rental are recorded as *Eriksland*, *Brekisland* in the 1595 rental. In Norse *jörðr* means 'soil, land', and Norse *land* = English land, so the two terms are partly synonymous. It seems that for some reason the neutral *-land* has replaced the Norse word, but such a change is still most unexpected.

Two narrow inlets side by side in Evie are called *Hundy Geo* and *Dog Geo*. *Geo* 'narrow inlet' from Norse *gjá* is the standard term in Orkney dialect, the interesting point here is that *Dog* is a translation of *Hundy*. A similar case of a Norse name and its Scots translation side by side are the hilltops called *Starra Fiold* and *Starling Hill*. In this case, the whole name has been translated, and the two names are applied to tops only some hundred yards apart.

Obviously bilingualism can be used creatively. Two languages give the speakers a wider choice, a chance to make new distinctions, by absorbing elements of the other language. There was an extensive loan of words and the sound /ø/ has been adopted as well as the stress pattern. It was probably the bilingual situation that enabled the Orcadians to distinguish between the present participle /-ən/ (from Norse *-andi*) and

verbal nouns /-in/: "The peedie lass is swimman noo, she loves swimmin".¹³ (In written older Scots the present participle was -and throughout. This was also a loan from Old Norse, via North England.¹⁴)

The bilingual situation also seems to have created new onomastic categories. A number of Orkney fields are described in relation to other features, e.g. *Abune the Dyke*, *Above the Boats*, *Tween Burns*. This pattern is common pattern in Norwegian field names, so-called 'preposition names', but it is not mentioned in *A History of English Field-Names*.¹⁵ (Unfortunately I am not familiar with field-names in other parts of Britain. Possibly preposition names exist elsewhere, being excluded because they are not regarded as 'proper names', but if they are a typical feature of the north and west of Scotland, they may be a result of contact with speakers of Norse. I would be pleased to get further information on this point!)

Another typical feature in Orkney place-names are *of*-constructions. There is an abundance of names like *Burn of Lyde*, *Moss of Hatamo*, *Bu of Orphir*. I have discussed these names before,¹⁶ and will only briefly revise my conclusion here. There is no direct model for these names in Norse. Still I am reluctant to see them as based on the Gaelic pattern, like Nicolaisen does.¹⁷ Names of this type are first recorded in 1492 in the first Orkney rental, such as *Bordland of Swarthmale* and *Bull of Kerston*. The more extensive rentals from 1500 give us interesting information about ownership. *Bull of Ropness* and *Bordland of Swartmall* are the property of William Sinclair, brother of Earl Henry Sinclair, whereas *Bull of Karstane* belongs to William's son Magnus. In addition, we find the forms *le borland* and *le bordland de Snartmall*, which are definitely French. Here we actually find the pattern that Nicolaisen is looking for. Since the oldest recorded examples of X of Y- constructions all relate to high-status farms, whose upper class owners did not speak Gaelic, but were likely to speak French, my conclusion is that the it depends on a French model rather than a Gaelic one, and that the usage started in the upper class. Certain constructions with prepositions in Norse could have effected the spread of the

pattern.

Even if we exclude a Norse model for the of-construction, the Bu(II) of X-names (e.g. Bull of Kerston) is a definite product of contact between Norse and Scots culture. In Orkney Bu of X is used of the major farm of an estate or area, Mains of X is never found. Both in the saga and in Norwegian the noun *bu* means 'property, farm', and in Orkney it is originally used in this sense rather than as a farm-name element: *i Aurfuru til buss jarls* 'in Orphir to the earl's farm or property'. The Orkney historian J.S. Clouston points to the fact the Bus always belonged to earls, whereas Marwick underlines the property element.¹⁸ In later usage, the element should be seen as a title or a specialized term for a certain type of farm, rather than a proper name. Incoming Scots favoured the term *bu(II)* for the principal farms of their estates, which were often created by amalgamating several of the small odal holdings that were consequently worked as a unit, "labourt in ane bow". It is interesting to see how the Scots borrowed for their new manors this old Norse term carrying the connotations of a major farm, belonging to somebody powerful.

When names turn into riddles

The adaptations described above all require an amount of bilingual ability; they involve translation or other active use of the language. When names are not understood at all, other quite creative ways of adapting names may occur. I am going to present two of these here. First what Nicolaisen¹⁹ has called "secondary reinterpretation": Unfamiliar names are changed into elements which are understood, though they in no way describe the location.

A brilliant illustration can be seen in the late 19. century rendering of a Norse myth about *Oðinn* and his helper *Hermodr* going to *Hel* (the underworld) to have *Baldr* released.²⁰ The adapted version runs like this: *Oddie* was going to *Huli* to find *Ballie*, with a servant named *Har Mowat*. The Norse gods have all become Orcadians, and *Hermodr* has even got a quite common Orkney surname!

In place-names we see the same, words meaningful in Scots are preferred, even if they do not relate at all to the place in question. *Iron* from Norse *eyrinn* was mentioned above. In Evie and Birsay there are sea-stacks called (*The*) *Standard* /'stændər/, adoptions of Norse *standarr* 'the standing one'. A more intriguing example perhaps, is *Loch of Gin* on a map. It may come as a disappointment that this is nothing but an attempt to come to terms with the unfamiliar *tjörn* 'loch, pond'. Another name easily associated with strong drink is *Brandyquoy* (actually a playground for children next to the palaces in Kirkwall). This was once the enclosure belonging to a man *Brandi*, or possibly cleared by burning. A similar desire to see meaningful elements in the names explain hypercorrect spellings such as *Bull* for *Bu* (above), and *Kirkwall*. The -g of Norse *Kirkjuvágur* 'Kirk bay' was no longer pronounced, and the spelling had for some time been *Kirkwa*. The second element was then interpreted as the Scots form of wall, and the "correction" made.

Adaption may, to some extent, account for the total lack of Pictish names in Orkney. The islands are recorded as *Orchades* by Ptolemy, the Vikings changed it into *Orkneyjar* 'seal islands'. This differs from the above examples in that the adapted name makes perfect sense; selkies still play around the Orkney shores. Other Pictish names may survive in a similarly disguised form, but there is no way of telling, as long as we do not know the original names.

In Norway, amateur magicians favour the formula "hokus pokus", which is based on Latin "hoc est corpus", read at Eucharist. This is surely a creative way of coming to terms both with the Latin formula and the mystery of transsubstantiation. Some Orkney names have also become little rhymes, a stagnant pool is called *Purtna Lurtna*, a sea-mark *Yimma-Yamma*, a well *Kellian Hellian* and a field *Cupster Nelster*. Some of the names remain complete riddles, whereas in other names one or both Norse elements can be identified. For instance *Kellian Hellian* reflects Norse *Keldan helga* 'the holy well', and we see how the elements have been adjusted to one another. The same development can be seen in what Jakobsen²¹ calls 'fragments of Norn': e.g.:

kwarna farna? 'where are you going?' and /bødəna kōməna rontənəkomba/ 'the boat has come around de Kaim'. When names and other words are treated in this way, it proves that Norse morphology is no longer productive. It is no longer understood, and turns into riddles. Still a memory of the language and morphology persists, a somewhat vague idea that Norn had peculiar endings to the words.

Hopefully this sample shows that the place-names of Orkney should be recognized as linguistic material of great importance. Not only can they be seen as a major source to the lost Norn language, all the more important due to the scarcity of other evidence. In addition they bear witness to the creativity of the people who lived in the isles, both the people who first coined the names and the ones who used them and transformed them to their present form.

Notes

- 1 Barnes, Michael 1998: *The Norn Language of Orkney and Shetland*. Lerwick.
- 2 Nicolaisen, W.F.H. 1976: *Scottish Place-Names*. London, pp. 3.
- 3 Marwick, Hugh 1929: *The Orkney Norn*. Oxford.
- 4 Lamb, Gregor 1988: *Orkney Wordbook*.
- 5 Barry, G 1867: *The History of the Orkney Islands*. Second ed. Kirkwall, p. 223, footnote.
- 6 *Court of Session Records*, Orkney Library, 333Y.
- 7 *Diplomatarium Norvegicum* (DN) V 68. Christiania/Oslo 1847- (English translation in *Records of the Earldom of Orkney* (REO). Edited by J. Storer Clouston. Edinburgh 1914.)
- 8 DN I 404, 1369, REO VIII.
- 9 Thomson, William P.L.: *History of Orkney*. 1987. Edinburgh, p. 96.
- 10 Nicolaisen, op. cit, p. 63.
- 11 REO p. 415
- 12 DN II 170, *Stufar* in REO:V
- 13 Cf. Marwick, op cit. p. xxxi.
- 14 Jones, Charles (ed.) 1997: *The Edinburgh History of the Scots Language*. Edinburgh., p. 180.
- 15 Field, John 1993: *A History of English Field-Names*. London.
- 16 Sandnes, Berit 1997: 'The Bu of Orphir, Burn of Gueth - a Gaelic Pattern in Orkney Place-Names?' In: *Northern Studies* vol. 32, pp. 125.
- 17 Nicolaisen, op. cit., p. 64.
- 18 Marwick, Hugh 1952: *Orkney Farm-Names*. Kirkwall, pp. 241.
- 19 Nicolaisen, W.H.F. 1987: 'Semantic Causes of Structural Changes in Place-Names.' In: Hallberg et al. (eds.): *NORNA-rapporter* 34.

- Uppsala, pp. 9.
- 20 Robertson, John D. M. 1991: *An Orkney Anthology. The Selected Works of Ernest Walker Marwick*. Edinburgh, p. 318.
- 21 Jakobsen, Jakob 1928: *An Etymological Dictionary of the Norn Language in Shetland*. I. London, p. XCI.