

REVIEW ARTICLE

Peder Gammeltoft

The Place-name Element bólstaðr in the North Atlantic Area

Navnestudier utgivet af Institut for Navneforskning 38

Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzels Forlag A/S, 2001.

349 pp.

ISBN 87-7876-222-7

Introduction

Peder Gammeltoft's book on the place-name element *bólstaðr* is a very welcomed supplement to the collection of Scandinavian habitative names. The book is a revised and reworked version of the author's Ph.D. thesis, and the most comprehensive collection and study of the place-name element ON *bólstaðr* so far. The place-name *bólstaðr* is of great interest having developed 'from being a local northern Scandinavian place-name type to becoming the most widespread place-name generic in the North Atlantic' (p. 13).

The study deals in particular with Norway, Scotland (Orkney, Shetland, Caithness, Sutherland, the Western Isles) and Isle of Man, but it also comprises Iceland and the Faeroe Islands, as well as some 71 *-bólstaðer* in Sweden (22) and Finland (49).

Presentation

The material is collected partly from already published works, partly from maps, and consists of 462 names, in addition to 22 late analogical formations in *-bist(er)* (appendix 1), 70 place-names 'ultimately of different origin (appendix 2) and the 71 East Scandinavian *-bólstaðer*.

Chapter 1 raises certain theoretical and methodological considerations, and discusses among other things the dating of place-names and the basis of the etymological analysis. The chapter also gives an historical background to the Viking Age.

Chapter 2 discusses the etymological origin of ON *bólstaðr*, compounded of ON *ból* n. and ON *staðr* m. The etymological analysis shows that the original meaning of *bólstaðr* is 'not altogether straightforward' (p. 32), both elements being common and attested with a great variety of meanings. A cautious suggestion is "'the place with the cultivated and settled land, farm'" (p. 32). Chapter 2 also has a discussion of the appellative *bólstaðr*, for which the general meaning seems to be "'a farm (buildings and property)'" (p. 35). This makes good sense considering the fact that onomastically *bólstaðr* was used of farms. The appellative *bólstaðr* is, however, recorded late, and the recorded meaning may not be in accordance with its original connotation(s).

Chapter 3 treats the place-names in *-bólstaðr* in Norway, starting with an introduction to the geology and geography of the areas of study. There are 108 localities in *bólstaðr* in Norway. The greatest distribution is found in Western Norway; more than half of the names being located here. After a discussion of previous research and the phonetic development of *-bólstaðr* in Norway, the material is then presented (chapter 3.3), starting with 14 simplex formations (*Bolstad*). The material of compound formations is presented alphabetically, followed by indications of topographical status, location (*sokn*, *fylke* and *Amt*), source-forms, phonemic transcriptions and discussion of etymology. The Norwegian material seem to have been coined 'within a period from the late 8th century to into the 11th century (p. 75). This conclusion is drawn on the basis of the fact that non of the Norwegian *-bólstaðr* seem to contain words relating to Christianity, whereas there is 1 certain and 13 probable references to pagan activity. Also original genitive endings in weak nouns seem to support this early dating.

Chapter 4 is a survey of the Scottish material in *-bólstaðr*, preceded, in the same manner as in the previous chapter, with a useful geographical and geological description of the area. The element has a very widespread distribution in Scotland,

with 240 names that originates, or possibly originates, from ON *-bólstaðr*. The element *-bólstaðr* has its greatest concentration in the most fertile areas Orkney (75) and Caithness (44). After a discussion of previous research, follows a discussion of the phonetic development of *-bólstaðr*. The great diversity of the linguistic situation has resulted in a variety of linguistic differences ranging (for the compounded *-bólstaðr*) from *-bister*, *-buster*, *-bster*, *-pster*, *-mster* to *-bolls* and *-bus*, only to mention some. The place-name material is then presented in chapter 4.3, following the same procedures as for the Norwegian material. The Scottish names in *-bólstaðr* seem to have been coined from the late 9th century for the islands and the early 10th century for Caithness and Sutherland. A *terminus ante quem* is possibly the late 12th century to the middle of the 13th century. This dating is based on the topographical survey in chapter 6, which shows that the names in *-bólstaðr* are typically secondary settlements.

The small Icelandic and Faeroese material in *-bólstaðr* is presented in chapter 5. The former material consists of 4 simplex formations and 16 compounded *-bólstaðr*, the latter of 3 uncertain names.

Chapter 6 is a topographical survey where the author, by means of David Olson's model for settlement, searches for characteristics determining whether a settlement is primary, secondary or peripheral. These sets of characteristics depend on how favourable the situation of the settlement is. The author looks at the following parameters: a) altitude, b) distance to the sea, c) distance to drinking water, d) gradient of slope, e) soil type and f) soil quality. Two areas have been chosen for this topographical deep-study; Sogn og Fjordane and Møre og Romsdal in Norway (47 names altogether) and Shetland in Scotland (40 names altogether). All 36 fully surveyed Norwegian settlements in *-bólstaðr* show that we deal with clearly secondary settlements, and they point to 'an application of *bólstaðr* as a general term for a farm which is the result of the splitting up of a primary settlement unit into portions'. The *bólstaðr*-settlements are 'large secondary farms to which the agricultural potential was of the greatest importance. Their secondary nature, however, often meant that the arable potential was limited and farming land was at a premium. Therefore, the actual settlement sites were

often placed on the most infertile part of the land, often as far up the hill as possible and often where the soil layer was shallow' (p. 199). The survey of the Shetland material shows fairly the same type of settlements as in Norway, with clearly secondary settlements 'established either on tracts of land distant from the primary settlement, or, less commonly, as the result of a carving up of the primary settlement's main lands' (p. 210). The farms are large to medium in size and have advantages such as 'proximity to the sea and communications, drinking water and a fair arable potential' (p. 210). However, the amount of arable land is often limited and fertility and soil type not optimal.

By means of a slightly adapted version of Kurt Zilliacus' semantic model, chapter 7 then goes on to categorize and classify the place-name material, in order to detect the motives that lay behind the coining of the names, as well as possible variations in naming patterns from region to region. The name-semantic comparison of the Norwegian and the Scottish material shows a 'significant discrepancy between the focus in naming motives' (p. 245) between the two areas. This has partly to do with the large extent of imitative naming in Norway, for example the 47 **Miklibólstaðr* and the 12 **Helgibólstaðr*.

Chapter 8 treats the East Scandinavian *-bólstaðer*, found mostly in the east central Sweden and in the Swedish influenced parts of Southwest Finland.

Chapter 9 concludes the study. It also underlines another important and intriguing difference in naming between Norway and the colonies, namely the religious aspect: Whereas the Norwegian material reflects only pagan Norse religious activity, the Scottish shows Christian influence. Chapter 9 also underlines that the specifics used in the *bólstaðr*-material in the colonies are wholly Norse, something that 'must imply that the communities which utilised this place-name element were ethnically and culturally Norse'. According to the author, there is no indication that *bólstaðr* seem to have been borrowed by Gaelic or Scots speaking communities.

The book has Appendices (cf. above), Danish summary, bibliography and abbreviations, and a useful index of place-names.

Discussion

Peder Gammeltoft's book on the place-name element *bólstaðr* gives a very solid impression. It treats a large and old place-name material from a widespread geographical and linguistic area. The author shows the necessary prudence in treating with this difficult material, as well as good knowledge of onomastic literature, linguistics and extra-linguistic matters (such as geology and geography).

As with all studies of this size, there are nevertheless aspects that can be discussed. My main objection to Peder Gammeltoft's study is that for the Scottish material, it fails to discuss explicitly some very important factors relating to the fact that we deal with names in a linguistically diverse area and an ancient area of language contact: These factors are the following:

1) The source-material. The author relies heavily on written sources, and I miss an explicit account of a) how large the amount of written sources is for the different areas in Scotland, b) what periods the written sources are from, c) what the quality is of both primary sources and secondary sources, d) how large a part of the primary sources is actually published (enough so that it is satisfactory only to rely on the published sources?), e) who the scribes were (cf. the situation in another Viking-area, namely Normandy,¹ where the scribes were among the groups of peoples who has the least 'Scandinavian blood' in their veins, and who neither understood nor recognized names and words of Scandinavian origin and therefore are to 'blame' for a great number of misspellings and scribe-etymologies) f) how late a source-form can be before it is judged as too late to be trusted for the etymological analysis. (The author gives Stewart's pronunciations from 1987; are they still reliable? And if yes; why does he not also give today's pronunciation?)

¹ Hansen, Å.K.H. (1998). *Språkkontakt i gammelt koloniområde. En studie av normannerbosetningens stedsnavn, med særlig vekt på navnegrupper -tuit*. [Language-contact in an old Viking-colony. A study of Scandinavian place-names in Normandy, with especial emphasis on the element -tuit] [Doctoral thesis.] Nordisk Institutt. Universitetet i Bergen. 312 pages.

2) What do we know about when the Scandinavian language ceased to be spoken in various areas in Scotland? According to page 163, the southern Hebrides seem to have been 'heavily gaelicised' in course of the 12th century. What does it then signify that all written forms are from long after this period?

3) What do we know about the amount of loan-words or loan-names that passed from Scandinavian to the local non-Scandinavian language(s), and what are the possibilities for linguistically Scandinavian place-names having been coined by non-Scandinavian speaking people who had borrowed words or names of Scandinavian origin into their local lexicon or onomasticon?

4) What do we know about phonological and morphological substitutions in the loan-process from Scandinavian to e.g. Gaelic, and what are the frequent spellings of different sound-combinations? Take e.g. the name *Mibost*, p. 136. This is always recorded with the form *me-*. Still, the author ascertains that 'the specific is ON *miðr*'. There are probably good reasons for this, but the conclusion would have been more credible if phonological and morphological substitutions and spellings were accounted for.

As to the Norwegian material, it is somewhat surprising to learn that the etymological analysis will be performed 'on the basis of source material and, to a lesser degree, pronunciation' (p. 13), as pronunciation is considered a very important basis for interpretation of Norwegian place-names. It is reassuring to note, however, that the etymological discussions in chapter 3 actually do pay far more attention to pronunciation than announced in chapter 1!

On p. 19 the author says that 'whenever suitable edited material has not been available, any relevant sources have been checked personally. However, if earlier researchers have satisfactorily explained the origins of sources of place-name forms, these are taken to be reliable'. It is not all together clear what this really means. Does it mean that Rygh's *Norske Gaardnavne* is judged as reliable, so that his references are trusted? A quick look at some of the *bólstaðr*-names in Rogaland *fylke* shows that for *Myklebust* (nr. 34, p. 61), the author notes *Mockelbostad*, 1563, whereas Rygh gives *Mockelbosta*. This must be a spelling error. One also wonders

why the author leaves out some of Rygh's source-forms some times without commenting on it (cf. the NRJ III 366 source-form for *Myklabust* [nr. 6, p. 57] and the NRJ II 327 and III 423 for *Myklebostad* [nr. 20, p. 59]).

These three names also show that the author sometimes relies too heavily on Rygh's *Norske Gaardnavne*. All three of them have the present-day pronunciation /'myglabåst/, and it would therefore have been more correct to follow modern orthographic rules and render all three with the same orthography.

In localising the Norwegian names, it would also have been better to use *kommune* instead of *sokn*, as the latter no longer exists.

Personally, I find it confusing that the abbreviations following each place-name (cf. Bessebostad, S, (33W) WS 643 428 or Fonnebost, S, (32V) KN 918 417, etc.) are not explained in the 'Bibliography and abbreviations' at the end of the book. Some of these abbreviations are explained on p. 14, but far from all.

Otherwise, there seem to be few misprints. Note however examples like Nor-Trøndelag and Finnmark (for Nord-Trøndelag and Finnmark) (p. 37), specific (p. 100), may checked (for may be checked) and Olaf Rygh (for Oluf) (p. 227).

Conclusion

Let not these few critical comments overshadow the fact that Peder Gammeltoft's book on the place-name element *bólstaðr* is a comprehensive, thorough and very interesting study. The author deserves credit for having approached such a large material from such a varied geographical and linguistic area! The element *bólstaðr* is not among the most common Scandinavian place-name generics, but it is nevertheless a very important generic to the study of the Scandinavian Viking-Age settlement in the North Atlantic. Of special value is the topographical survey in chapter 6, where the author so convincingly illustrates that the *bólstaðr*-settlements are typically secondary farms. The book is also well written and well disposed, and will be of great value to onomasticians, historians and others.