

# Shetland and Orkney Island-Names – A Dynamic Group

Peder Gammeltoft

## 1. Introduction

Only when living on an island does it become clear how important it is to know one's environment in detail. This is no less true for Orkney and Shetland. Being situated in the middle of the North Atlantic, two archipelagos whose land-mass consist solely of islands, holms and skerries, it goes without saying that such features are central, not only to local life and perception, but also to travellers from afar seeking shelter and safe passage. Island, holms and skerries appear to be fixed points in an ever changing watery environment – they appear to be constant and unchanging – also with regard to their names.

And indeed, several Scandinavian researchers have claimed that the names of islands constitute a body of names which, by virtue of constant usage and relevance over time, belong among the oldest layers of names (cf. e.g. Hald 1971: 74-75; Hovda 1971: 124-148). Archaeological remains on Shetland and Orkney bear witness to an occupation of these archipelagos spanning thousands of years, so there can be little doubt that these areas have been under continuous utilisation by human beings for a long time, quite a bit longer, in fact, than our linguistic knowledge can take us back into the history of these isles. So, there is nothing which prevents us from assuming that names of islands, holms and skerries may also here carry some of the oldest place-names to be found in the archipelagos. Since island-names are often descriptive in one way or another of the locality bearing the name, island-names should be able to provide an insight into the lives, strategies and needs of the people who eked out an existence in bygone days in Shetland and Orkney.

## 2. Types of island-name formation

In Scandinavia the very oldest layers of island-names are generally recognised to be simplex or derived constructions, such as the Norwegian names *Golma*, which is possibly a so-called *a*-derivation of Old Norse \**galm* 'scream, noise' (NSL 1997:179) and *Lovunda*, possibly an *und*-derivation of Old Norse *lauf*, 'leaf, foilage', (NG 16: 154). Derived names

do not have an explicit generic, so the meaning of such names appears to be akin to ‘The Noisy (One/Island)’ in the case of *Golma* and with *Lovunda* carrying an original meaning of ‘The Foilaged or Wooded (One/Island)’. A little later, in the Common Scandinavian period a new type of construction appeared, namely compound formations. That is, a construction consisting of a specific + generic. This new type of construction even seems to have been found so appropriate that the majority of place-names today conform to this structure. This new name construction was successful event to the extent that a number of originally un-compounded and derived place-names have been supplied with a epeexegetic or descriptive element, so as to conform to the general specific + generic structure.

The typical generics in island-names of Scandinavian origin are *ey*, ‘island’, *holmr*, ‘islet’, *sker*, ‘sea-rock’ and *stakkr*, ‘stack’ etc. (cf. NSL 1997: 47-49), as in e.g. the Orkney example of *Egilsay* (Egilzey c. 1350) which is a compound of the genitive singular form of the Old Norse man’s name *Égill* and Old Norse *ey* ‘island’, i.e. ‘The Island belonging to Égill’. This type of formation is current not only in Scandinavian, it is also very much present in the Scots naming system. Since Scots word-order generally conforms to that of Scandinavian, it may be difficult to determine whether a name of an island, holm or skerry is of Scandinavian or Scots origin, in particular if the name contains elements which are cognate between Scandinavian and Scots or have been borrowed from the former into Scots, as have *holm*, *stack* or *skerry*. One type of compound place-name construction, however, is unequivocally Scots in origin is the periphrastic *of*-construction, the so-called “X of Y-constructions” (Sandnes 2009: 327-330; Nicolaisen 1976: 57–64), a type of formation yielding names such as *Stack of Okraquoy* (Stack of Okraquoy 1881), Cunningsburgh, Shetland.

A few of the names of islands, holms and skerries in Shetland and Orkney are, however, un-compounded. Un-compounded place-names are either coined as ordinary descriptive names, or describe the localities by means of comparison. For instance, the isle of *Noss* (Nws 1490) in Bressay, Shetland, or parts of it, must have been seen by the namer(s) as being comparable with a nose. Similarly, the islet of *Giltarump* (Giltarump 1882) in Sandsting, Shetland, was felt to be comparable in shape with the backside of a hog, in Old Norse *göltarumpa*.

### 3. Island-names in Shetland and Orkney

Of the possible island-name types I have just mentioned: derivations, compound and simplex formations, names of Scots derivation are only

either simplex names or compound formations, as is, in fact, island-names of Scandinavian origin. This is contrary to the situation in Scandinavia, where a substantial number of the island-names are derivations, a fact which betrays the general high age of this type of place-name formation. Thus, we have in the Shetland and Orkney island-name material a substantial difference from the corresponding material in Scandinavia – the lack of derived place-names. Although this furnishes us with a means of dating the period of productivity for this name-type in Scandinavia, it does not give us anything – in terms of name-formation – with which we may determine a Scandinavian or Scots origin of an island-name. Since we have no extant knowledge of the language spoken prior to the Scandinavian invasions, we cannot say anything about the composition of any possible pre-Norse names.

I undertook a field-trip to Shetland and Orkney in 2007 with the aim of collecting the names of all present and former place-names of islands, holms and skerries and registering their source forms. The total number of names collected was 1147. The greatest number of names was found in Shetland, with no less than 850 names, almost three times the number for Orkney where I collected 297 names. The difference in numbers must undoubtedly be sought in differences in geology. Where Orkney geology predominately consists of Old Red Sandstone, which weathers relatively easily, the Shetland geology is much more mixed, but with an abundance of hard rock types like gneiss and granite.

With regard to the formation language of the place-names investigated, there are also considerable differences. As mentioned earlier, it can be difficult to ascertain whether an Island-name is of Scandinavian or Scots origin, but to the best of my ability, it appears that the number of island-names of Scandinavian origin in Shetland, totalling 511, clearly outnumber the ones of Scots origin, tallying 336. In Orkney, however, Scots origin place-names are seemingly slightly more frequent at 170 examples in comparison with the 127 which are of Scandinavian origin. Additionally, Shetland also seems to have three island-names of pre-Scandinavian origin, namely Unst, Yell and Fetlar (Gammeltoft 2005: 134).

Not only is the proportion of Scandinavian and Scots constructions different from Shetland to Orkney, the range of languages of origin also differing. This means that the island-name body of Shetland and Orkney contain a number of individual manifestations which result in clear internal differences in the appearance of the island-name material of the two archipelagos. The majority of names are, however, of similar types. Of

similarities must be highlighted the typical Scandinavian types, compound formations such as the Shetland names of *Housay* (Houssa 1665) in Whalsay and Out Skerries, ‘House(like) Isle’, *Linga* (Linga 1605) in North Yell, ‘Heather Isle’ and the Orcadian names of *Braga* (Braga 1903) in Stromness, ‘Grassy Isle’ and *Hunda* (Hinz ey c. 1350) in South Ronaldsay, ‘Dog Isle’. A slightly old fashioned type of compound formation of post-positioned adjective is also found among the place-names of Scandinavian origin. Most famous is *Eynhallow* (Eigin helga c. 1350) in Rousay ‘The Holy Isle’, where specific adjective Old Norse *helga* ‘holy’ is placed *after* the specific *eyin*, definite form of Old Norse *ey* ‘island’. This type of construction is also found in Shetland, particularly among stack-names, like *Stackana Gruni* (Stackana Gruni 1880) in Lunnasting, literally meaning ‘The Green Stacks’. This type of formation was relatively common in Viking-Age Scandinavia, but became obsolete in the High Middle Ages and names of this type were often remoulded to fit the standard specific + generic pattern. An example of this is the river name of *Helge Å* in Scania, Sweden, which is a compound of East Scandinavian *helgi* ‘holy’ and *ā* ‘stream’ (DSÅ 3: 65). However, the earliest forms of the names are *Āin helga* (c. 1240) with post-positioned adjective. In common is also the comparative place-names of Scandinavian origin, like the aforementioned *Noss* in Bressay, ‘The Nose(-like Island) and *Wyre* (Vigur c. 1350) in Rousay, Orkney, deriving its name from Old Norse *vigr* ‘spear’ – i.e. ‘The Spear(-like Island)’.

The Scots origin island-names in both Shetland and Orkney are generally also compound formations. Typically, they are either specific + generic formations, such as *Green Isle* (Green Isle 1880) in Nesting, Shetland,<sup>1</sup> although the archetype Scots formation is of the periphrastic type, i.e. generic + of + specific, as in *Holm of Califf* (Holm of Califf 1880), Tingwall, Shetland and *Skerry of Vasa* (Skerry of Vasa 1903), Shapinsay, Orkney. The specifics in these constructions are place-names themselves, often local settlement names.

Where we do see the differences, however, is in the treatment of pre-Scandinavian elements in the material. There can be little doubt that there are elements of pre-Scandinavian origin in the Shetland and Orkney island-

---

<sup>1</sup> The old name for *Green Isle* was *Holm of Bullister*: Bullister with the Holm thereof 1782; Bullister & Holm 1789; the Grazing Isle called Holm of Bullister 1790; Holm of Bullister 1806; Holm of Bullister 1858; Green Isle 1880, is also a purely Scots formation of the generic + of + specific type, i.e. a so-called x-of-y formation.

name material. In particular the island-names of *Unst* (Aurmtr c. 1300; Aumstr c. 1387-95), *Yell* ([Alasund c. 1300]; j Iala 1405) and *Fetlar* (i Føtalare 1490, Fetlar 1558) are good candidates. Although the earliest known forms of the names, namely *Ömstr*, *í Ála* and *Fetlar*, do carry meanings as such, it is difficult to see why meanings like ‘Corn-stack’ (ON *ömstr*), ‘Deep Furrow’ (ON *ál*) and ‘Shoulder-straps’ (*fetlar*, plural of *fetill*) should have relevance in the naming of islands. Instead, they seem to be adaptations of Pictish names to Old Norse. The name Orkney (Orcades 2<sup>nd</sup> c.; Orkardensis c. 1190; Orknøyum 1329) is also a fine example of an island-name containing a pre-Scandinavian element. It is recorded as *Orcades* by Ptolemy, long before to the Scandinavian invasions, and there can be little doubt that the *Ork-* in *Orkney* must derive from the same place-name source as *Orcades*. The name *Orkney* is itself a Scandinavian formation (Lockwood 1980: 21), but utilises a pre-Scandinavian element. The same is probably true of the name of *Shetland*, but more on this below.

#### 4. Language shift and island-names

The island-name material of Shetland and Orkney is very diverse in character, and not just a name-material containing the oldest layers of names. True, there are extremely old elements – i.e. Pictish and early Old Norse – present among the island-name material. However, they are far from being the only ones. For instance, a very significant, in Orkney even dominant, element is the later Scots component. It is evident that Shetland and Orkney island-names have not remained unchanged since they were coined. In fact, if you look at the same group of names in Scandinavia a similar picture emerges just much weaker. This is owing to the lack of language shift.

Language shift places the existing place-name material under pressure, as several elements in the language being given up may be unpronounceable or seen as unsuitable by users of the emerging language (Thomason 1997: 181ff.). The known (and assumed) language shifts that have occurred in Shetland and Orkney, namely language shift from Pictish to Scandinavian in the first place and then later from Scandinavian to Scots have yielded vastly different pictures. The first language transfer, Pictish to Scandinavian is only faintly visible in the island-name material. All we have is a handful of outright transfers and specifics of possible Pictish origin. Either language contact was only very slight, or Pictish must have been rather ‘incompatible’ with the Scandinavian tongue. The latter language shift, from Scandinavian to Scots, seems to have been much more successful

and substantial numbers of island-names existing in the Scandinavian period have been transferred to into Scots. The reason for this is probably that the period of language shift was – for all we know – very prolonged and both Scandinavian and Scots existed side by side for centuries before Scots finally gained the final footing. Language change does not, however, account for all island-name changes. There is also some evidence that factors, such as socio-economic changes in relevance and utilisation of islands and islets, as well as purely linguistic changes resulting from constant updating and reinterpretation of name forms, account for the dynamics in the island-material and the renaming of islands, islets and skerries which may be found in the material.

In the following I shall briefly explore the strategies in action with place-name passing from one language to another, as well as show examples of transfers from Pictish to Scandinavian and from Scandinavian to Scots. Additionally, I shall also give some examples of renaming resulting from different motives. As I see it, and as Berit Sandnes points out in her contribution to this volume (Sandnes 2010), it is possible to establish a set of Onomastic strategies for the transfer of place-names from one language to another. The onomastic strategies operate at different levels and with differing results.

The minimal requirements for a transfer of a place-name from one language to another are phonological and morphological adaptation. This adaptation is necessary for the language loan (in this case a place-name) to function the new language. All linguistic loans from one language to another undergo adaptation of this type. Often, however, loans undergo further adaptation. If one or more elements of the borrowed place-name bear a resemblance with existing items of language, substitution of the original lexemes with similar sounding lexemes in the borrowing language may take place. Alternatively, a name may be given an epexegetic element to specify the type of locality the borrowed place-name refers to, for instance *Lake Aral*, *The River Rhine*, etc. This type of names is particularly frequent on maps. If the bilingual language proficiency is sufficiently high, then place-names may sometimes be translated partially or fully, e.g. the English language variant of *The Black Forest* for German *Schwartzwald*, etc. Such translations are not terribly common – they rely partly on place-names being transparent enough to be translated and not least on a sufficiently high level of bilingualism. If the bilingual language proficiency is not sufficiently good, or if the sounds of the borrowed names are too incompatible with that of the receiving language, an efficient and much used strategy is to name the

localities anew in one's own tongue. As such, this is not an adaptation, but rather an extra-adaptive one.

Examples of language change Pictish > Norse (> Scots) are difficult and nigh on impossible to ascertain, but – owing to the unlikely nature of the semantic content of the names of names like *Fetlar* and *Unst*, i.e. that of 'Shoulder-straps' and 'Corn-stack' in Old Norse, we do presumably here see examples of substitution of similar sounding lexemes having occurred in relation to the transfer from Pictish to Scandinavian. However, this is all assumptive, as we know very little if anything at all of the Pictish language and we have no evidence of what was before the Old Norse name-forms. It might also to be assumed that, in particular a name such as *Damsay*, in Old Norse recorded as Dami(n)sey (Damisey c. 1300; Daminzey c. 1350) '(The) Lady's Isle' and possibly also the old name for the Mainland of Orkney, *Hrossey* (Hrossey c. 1300)<sup>2</sup> 'Horse Isle', that an original Pictish element, e.g. \**ros* 'moor, plain' might hide itself behind the specifics of these names. If this is the case, then we may see these names as being original island-names having had their names substituted by similar sounding Old Norse lexemes *and* with an epexegetic locality-specification added to the original. The same may well be the case with the names of the archipelagos, Orkney and Shetland, although it is also possible that we see a partial translation reflected in these names – particularly if we take the Gaelic forms of these localities into account, as will be discussed in the following.

Parallel to the above names *Damsay* and *Hrossey*, the Scandinavian name of *Orkney* may either be an adaptation of an original Pictish *Orc-* to Old Norse *Orkn-* with the addition of an epexegetic element, Old Norse *ey* 'island', or the name may be a translation of Gaelic *Innse Orc* 'Boar (people) Isle' or a corresponding native Pictish name (Lockwood 1980: 25-26). The Gaelic name form is actually in direct correspondence with the Scandinavian *Orkney*. We have no older name for *Shetland* (Hetlandensis c. 1190; Hiatlandi 1299; Hietlandie 1266; Hietlandie 1379; Hiatlandi 1405; Hietland 1412; Hetland 1431), but the corresponding Gaelic name is *Innse Cat* 'Cat (people) Isle', and it is not inconceivable that the specific is an, albeit heavily adapted, form of the same specific as occurs in the Gaelic name. The specifics betray that the original form of the specific of Shetland must be akin to \**Hjat-*, and not *Hjalt-* as is often claimed (Jakobsen 1936: 127-128; for opposite view, see Lockwood 1980: 33). Not only do the

---

<sup>2</sup> The present name, *Mainland*, is first recorded in 1557 in the form *Maineland*. The island was also known under the name of *Pomona*.

earliest forms of the name in Old Norse never sport an *-l-*, the foreign language forms of the name are also always *l*-less, as is e.g. seen on a map of Scandinavia from 1576 (figure 1). The earliest recording of a medial *-l-* in the specific is 1405, and not growing common until the sixteenth century.



Figure 1. An early map of Scandinavia shows the archipelago of Shetland in the left side. The name on the map is *Hetlād*, i.e. *Hetland*, showing no medial *-l-* in the specific, as would be expected if the origin of the name was Old Norse *\*Hjaltland*.

Whereas the onomastic strategies used in the transfer of possible Pictish names to Scandinavian seems to have made heavily use of additional adaptation strategies, the place-names which have been transferred from Scandinavian to Scots have generally only undergone slight modifications to phonology and morphology, such as

- ON *Flatey* ‘Flat Isle’ > ISc *Flotta* (flately c. 1350)
- ON *Innholm* ‘Inner Islet’ > *Inn Holm* (Inn Holm 1882)
- ON *Sandfriðarey* ‘Sandfrið’s Isle’ > ISc *Samphrey* (i *Sandffriarøø*, 1512)
- *etc.*

In the above cases, it is clear that the Old Norse form has undergone very little change, from virtually next to nothing as in the case of *Inn Holm* in Dunrossness, Shetland, to some vowel and word-final modifications as in *Flotta* in Whiteness, Shetland. *Samphrey* in Delting, Shetland has undergone a medial development, which makes the change appear relatively thorough, but the change is mostly owing to the loss of -ð-.

In some cases, we do, however see what appears to be additional substitution of similar sounding lexemes as part of the transfer strategy, as in, for example:

- ON *Fiskholmr* ‘Fish Holme’ > Fish Holm (Fiskholme c. 1524; Fischolm 1601, Fisholme 1610)

Here, it is evident from the earliest source form that Fish Holm in Delting, Shetland, is an original Scandinavian compound formation of Old Norse *fiskr* and *holm*. However from the 17<sup>th</sup> century and onwards the original -sk- was replaced by -sh-, in spite of the fact that this the original -sk- was fully pronounceable. There thus seems no other reason for the change than a wish to ‘update’ the name to better known Scots elements.

Outright translation of island-names is difficult to prove. This strategy does not seem to have been applied to any large extent in Shetland and Orkney. The reason for this is unknown, but it is conceivable that the close proximity between the Scandinavian and the Scots (and English) languages has made it irrelevant to apply this naming strategy. Either the Old Norse name was easily adapted to use in Scots, or one resorted to the extra-adaptive strategy of renaming. A not inconceivable number of, particularly islets and skerries have been subject to outright renaming, some of which are rather late Scots to Scots name changes, as in the case of *Lady’s Holm* in Dunrossness, Shetland, first recorded as *Cross Isle* (Croce Ile 1587). Here, the name change has been from an early Scots coinage, Cross Isle. In other cases, there are some evidence of parallel forms co-existing side by side, as in the Shetland name of *Egilsay*, which is recorded in 1704 as: Holm of Islesburgh called Egalsha. The parallel forms must have been equally strong in the eighteenth century to warrant the identification of the islet with both its names. The current name of the locality is, by the way, the original Scandinavian sourced name and not the later Scots competitor. In some cases we see original Scandinavian names being substituted by Scots variants - seemingly without any formal linguistic reason for this.

- Green Holmes (Eday, Orkney) < Stromeholmes of Ethay (1618)

- Holm of Sandwick (Whalsay and Out Skerries, Shetland) < Claitholm afore Sandwick (1581)
- Isle of Nibon (Northmaven, Shetland) < Isle of Nibone called Swarta (1683)
- Isle of Stenness (Northmaven, Shetland) < Holm of Stenness called Sailla (1787)

It is inconceivable that names such as *Stromeholmes*, *Cletholm*, *Swarta* and *Sailla* should be inpronouncable or even unsuitable. Instead, the reason for name change must be sought elsewhere. One could be that the rise of the new and powerful name-type was seen to be more appropriate. One thing which makes the generic + of + specific formation type ‘user friendly’, is the fact that the specific is always a nearby place-name, thus enabling the user of the place-name to locate the place mentally in relation to a bigger and more well-known locality. There can be little doubt that a name like *Holm of Sandwick* enables the user to locate the islet more closely than the earlier name of *Cletholm*, and likewise are location of the names of Isle of Nibon and Isle of Stenness more easily established by their present forms.

## 5. Rounding off

It is my hope that this overview of the names of island, holms and skerries in Shetland and Orkney has shown that these names form a complex and varied body of place-names worthy of further study. Not only does this article offer a glimpse into the elusive Pictish-Scandinavian linguistic situation, but also into the much more quantifiable Scandinavian-Scots linguistic situation. Additionally, this material provides excellent comparative material for Scandinavian and Scottish name studies, as the island-names of Scandinavian origin in many respects, but far from all, conform to naming patterns of Scandinavian island-names in Scandinavia as well as in the rest of the British Isles, in other words conforming to general Scandinavian naming patterns of the Viking Age. However, in relation to Scottish name studies, island-names may offer explanation of the rise of the periphrastic of-construction in Scots, and to other small conundrums of naming practices in Scots.

## References

- DSÅ = Kousgård Sørensen, John. 1968-1985. *Danske sø- og ånavne*. 8 vols. Copenhagen: Kommission hos Akademisk forlag.
- Eliason, Stig & Ernst H. Jahr (eds). 1997. *Language and its ecology. Essays in memory of Einar Haugen*. Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Gammeltoft, Peder. 2005. 'Islands great and small: a brief survey of the names of islands and skerries in Shetland'. In Gammeltoft, Peder, Carole Hough and Doreen J. Waugh (eds.) 2005. *Cultural contacts in the North Atlantic Region: the evidence of names*. Edinburgh: NORNA, Scottish Place-Name Society and Society for Name Studies in Britain and Ireland, 119-26.
- Hald, Kristian. 1971. 'De danske ønavne'. *Namn och Bygd* 59: 71-84.
- Hovda, Per. 1971. 'Til norske elvenamn'. *Namn och Bygd* 59: 124-48.
- Jakobsen, Jakob. 1936. *The Place-Names of Shetland*. London and Copenhagen: Nutt.
- Lockwood, William Burley. 1980. 'On the Early History and Origin of the Names Orkney and Shetland'. *Namn och Bygd* 68: 19-35.
- NG = Rygh, Oluf. 1897-1936. *Norske Gaardnavne*. 19 vols. Kristiania: W.C. Fabritius & sønners bogtrykkeri.
- Nicolaisen, W.F.H. 1976. *Scottish Place-Names*. London: Batsford.
- Sandnes, Berit. 2009. *From Starafjall to Starling Hill. An investigation of the formation and development of Old Norse place-names in Orkney*. <http://www.spns.org.uk/Starafjall.pdf> (accessed 16 September 2010).
- Sandnes, Berit. 2010. 'Naming patterns in Norway and the Northern Isles – similarities and differences'. In Millar, Robert McColl (ed.) 2010. *Northern Lights, Northern Words. Selected Papers from the FRLSU Conference, Kirkwall 2009*. Aberdeen: Forum for Research on the Languages of Scotland and Ulster, 3-14.
- Thomason, Sara Gray. 1997. 'On mechanisms of interference'. In Eliason, Stig and E.H. Jahr (eds), *Language and its ecology. Essays in memory of Einar Haugen*. Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 181-207.