

Linguistic patterns in the place-names of Norway and the Northern Isles

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1. Introduction

Considering the Vikings' massive cultural influence on the Northern Isles, the material evidence for Old Norse culture is surprisingly scarce. The buildings of the Norsemen are easily overshadowed by Neolithic structures. The Norse language lingered on for nearly a thousand years but was dead by the end of the eighteenth century. What remains are some loan words – as well as a rich legacy of place-names which is the most tangible evidence of Shetland and Orkney's Norse past. This essay will explore place-names from different angles: as linguistic sources, as indicators of the age of settlements and as evidence for contact between the Northern Isles and Norway.

2. Some fundamentals in place-name research

Our data are place-names, which can roughly be defined as lexical items pointing out localities. Names are thoroughly dependent on the language in which they are formed in the sense that they are coined of elements current in the formation language. Names may be simplex such as *Twatt* < ON *þveit* 'clearing'. However, most names are compounded of a generic that defines the kind of locality in question in broad terms and a specific, which singles out the locality in question. *Stromness*, compounded of the generic *nes* 'headland' and the specific *straum-* is thus an archetypical name. From a functional point of view, the specific is crucial as it helps the name fulfil its function, which is to identify a specific locality. If all headlands were merely called *Ness*, there would be no identification.

This essay will deal mainly with generics, however. They are important on a number of levels. For speakers, they may help visualise and classify the locality. An Orcadian will probably deduce that a name containing the generic *bister* (< ON *bólstaðr*) denotes a settlement and possibly that *ness* is close to the sea or a loch. For research purposes, generics are essential because they are limited in number. A small number of generics enter into a large number of names, which make them an ideal basis for systematic research. Moreover, some generics are limited to or

typical for certain periods. For instance, the word *tveit* that enters into the Orkney place-name *Twatt* is not recorded as a common noun in written Old Norse (ON). For this reason, we do not know its exact meaning – but we do know that names coined with this word have to be older than ca. 1200. The fact that certain name elements can be dated makes it possible to suggest chronologies for names, which are probably also valid for the settlements bearing these names. This is of great interest for the study of the development of settlement.

3. Place-name chronologies – generics

Iron age | *Viking Age* | *Middle Ages*

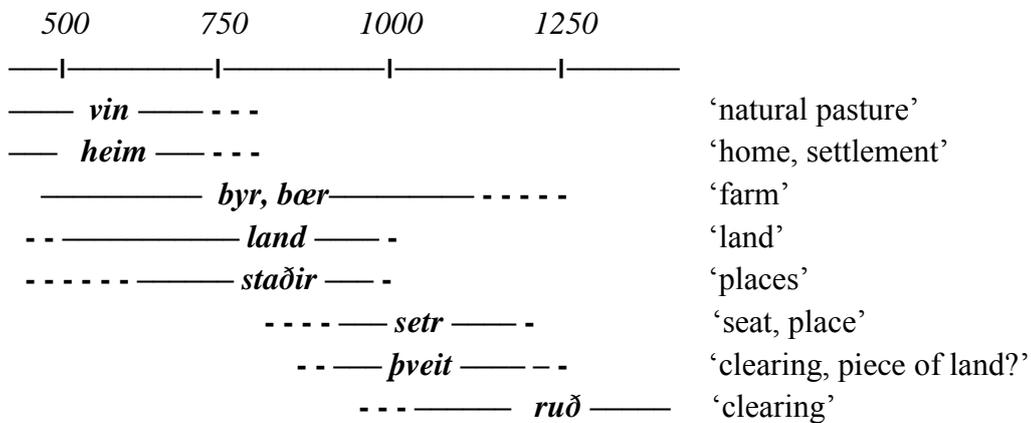


Fig. 1: An Old Norse chronology of place-name elements

As can be seen from figure 1, the productivity of the elements *-vin* and *-heim* appears to have ceased by the beginning of the Viking Age. The generics used in Viking Age habitation names are of special interest to studies in the Northern Isles, considering that this is the period for the Norse settlement. The typical Viking Age generics include *byr*, *land*, *staðir*, *set* and *þveit*. If we look at the place-names in the Northern Isles, it becomes clear that the Norse settlers brought with them generics they were used to and the naming patterns current in Norway.

In *Orkney Farm-names* (1952) Hugh Marwick discusses the most frequent generics in Orkney place-names, which he divides into four chronological groups:

- *bær/byr* (primary)
- *bólstaðr, garðr, land* (secondary)
- *setr, kví* (younger, post 900)
- + *bú, skáli, staðir* (chronologically problematic)

As we see, Marwick's chronology includes most generics from the Norwegian table. If the two chronologies are compared, we realise that his attempt at presenting a chronology may be somewhat problematic. In the Old Norse chronology, a number of elements are seen as more or less contemporary. Using the same elements, Marwick suggests a chronological stratification. He wants to see *byr* as primary, though the element was certainly current throughout the Viking age. *Bolstaðr*, on the other hand, is seen as secondary, although the element must also have been productive in place-name formation when the Vikings settled. Finally, *setr* and *quoy* form the youngest stratum, post 900. This date is crucial in Marwick's chronology as it is based on taxation: the oldest types are scatted or taxed, the youngest group is not. According to the *Orkneyinga Saga*, taxation was carried out by Harold Fairhair ca. 900. Marwick accepts this dating, which modern historians have shown to be improbable. The unification of Norway is ascribed to Harold, and this kept him more than busy at home. Systematic taxation requires a well-functioning administration which can hardly have been established before the eleventh century. (For more details on Orkney place-name chronology, see Thomson 1995.)

To sum up, chronologies should be used with care. The generics appearing in the chronologies are merely words found suitable to denote habitations during a shorter or longer period. It is normally safe to assume that settlement names containing *bólstaðr* (presently *bister*) and *staðir* (*-ston* in Orkney and *-sta* in Shetland) go back to the Norse period.

But other elements remain productive for a long period and cannot really be used in chronologies. This pertains to *garth* < *garðr* 'farm' and *quoy* < *kví* 'enclosure' which were borrowed into the local dialect and remained productive for centuries. Other words are common to ON and Scots, *land* being the most important example.

4. Topographical generics

In addition to the generics in the tables and other elements that indicate habitation or cultivation, many Old Norse place-names, even those denoting habitations are coined with generics that denote topographical features. This

means that many settlement names relate to the surrounding landscape rather than stating explicitly that the named object is a settlement.

The topographical generics have not been studied systematically in the same way as the habitation generics. This may partly be due to an interest in chronologies and the development of settlement. The dating of topographical elements (and thus settlement bearing such names) is problematic. Most topographical elements are productive for a very long period. In Norway, an element like *nes* is possible in place-name formation from the Viking Age until today. Moreover, a name with a topographical generic may initially have denoted a topographical feature. If a settlement is established in a named locality, the name may easily be transferred to the settlement. This means that even if we the name can be dated the settlement cannot. Such name transfer explains why 19th century crofts get apparently Old Norse names after the language had died out. Crofts called *Breckan* or *Wasdale* have been named after the location where they were built.

As stated above, it is generally accepted that topographical generics are “quite common” in Norway. They also occur in Scandinavian Scotland, but apart from *dalr* in Nicolaisen’s distribution maps (2001:122 f), little systematic study has been carried out. To get some more concrete data, I have undertaken a small-scale comparative study of settlement names recorded in medieval sources (prior to 1525) in Norway and the Northern Isles. 11 parishes in Orkney - West Mainland and North Isles and 13 parishes around the coast in Southern and Western Norway were selected for the study. The study shows that topographical generics are common in both areas, entering into 149 out of 256 Norwegian names (58%) and 85 out of 225 Orkney names (38%) in the selected parishes. Moreover, recurrent topographical generics rather than infinite variation seems to be the trend, with the same elements being popular in Norway and Orkney.

| Orkney | | Norway | |
|---|--------|-------------------------------|--------|
| <i>nes</i> ‘headland’ | 15.3 % | <i>vík</i> | 12.1 % |
| <i>haugr</i> ‘mound’ | 12.9 % | <i>nes</i> | 8.7 % |
| <i>dalr</i> ‘valley’ | 9.4 % | <i>ey</i> ‘island’ | 8.7 % |
| <i>klettr</i> ‘isolated rock (or hill)’ | 7.1 % | <i>vágr</i> ‘(narrow) bay’ | 7.3 % |
| <i>vík</i> ‘bay’ | 5.8 % | <i>dalr</i> | 4.7 % |
| | | <i>berg</i> ‘(vertical) rock’ | 4.7 % |
| | | <i>eið</i> ‘isthmus’ | 4.7 % |

Fig. 2: The most frequent topographical generics in Orkney and Norway. The percentage refers to the total number of topographical generics in each area.

Three of the generics occur on both the Norwegian and Orcadian top five-lists.

Thus, patterns emerge even for topographical generics, though not necessarily chronological. If we consider the semantic contents, we see that coastal features are extremely prominent in settlements along the Norwegian coast, even more so than in the northern islands of Orkney.

In Norwegian onomastic tradition, it is generally accepted that topographical names may belong to the oldest stratum of names. This is most striking for simplex names. They are primary by form - only one farm on a *nes* 'headland' or in a *vik* 'bay' can be called just *Ness* or *Wick*. Even compound names may be of considerable age, though this cannot be proved by the names themselves. The dating of such names relies on extra-linguistic factors. Many of the farms with topographical names are heavily scattered. I have formerly carried out a small study of Orkney farms scattered above average in their area, the assumption being that many of these large units are also old units. It is methodologically problematic to assume that all large farms are old units, but it is certainly more likely to find the oldest farm within this group than without. The study showed that a little more than half of the large farms have topographical names. In a group of very large farms, scattered twice as much as the second largest unit in the area, five out of six carry topographical names (Sandnes 2006.)

It can be stated beyond doubt then that a large number of the oldest Norse settlements in the Northern Isles bear topographical names. One reason why this should be emphasised is the fact that in some Scottish studies, *bólstaðr/bister* names have become a necessary condition for ON habitation. In *Scottish Place-names*, Nicolaisen (2001:119) suggests that the extent of *bister*-names can actually be seen as the extent of Norse settlement in Scotland, and this has become widely accepted. Considering that such a large number of settlements bear topographical names, this is a rather problematic assumption. For even if Old Norse habitation names are proofs of Norse settlement, the implication does not work the other way: the lack of such names does not prove that there was no permanent Norse settlement. This is not really an issue in Orkney and Shetland where we permanent Norse settlement is a fact, but it is important to bear in mind in areas where Norse settlement may have been more scattered.

5. Generics: conclusions

If we sum up our discussion of generics, the overall impression is one of similarity. To a great extent, we find the same generics – denoting habitation, cultivation or topographical features – in Norway and the Northern Isles. Apparently the Norse settlers coined names in the Atlantic colonies much the same way as they would have done back home, which may not come as a surprising conclusion. However, if the Norse settlers had been more like the Europeans settling in America, they might have transferred some of their old names directly. If this was the case, we would expect to find instances of the pre-Viking Age *-vin* or *-heim*-names in the Northern Isles. Rather than exporting their names, it appears that the Norse settlers brought the elements and naming patterns productive in the country that they left.

On a detail level, differences can be pointed out. Many scholars have noted that generics which are quite rare in Norway become immensely popular in the Northern Isles, e.g. *bister* < *bólstaðr*. Additional Orkney examples are *quoy* < *kví* ‘enclosure’ and *breck* < *brekka* ‘slope’, the latter also developed a specialised meaning ‘untilled land’. However, minor variation on the lexical level does not change the overall picture of similarity and can be observed everywhere. For instance *tveit* and *bolstad* are limited to certain areas in Norway and *quoy* is much more frequent in Orkney than in Shetland. Lexical variation can probably be interpreted as an indication of the development of local or regional naming fashions.

Shetland also differs from Orkney in having a few potential pre-Viking names ending in *heim*: *Sullom* and *Sodom* (< *Solheimr* ‘sun settlement’ and *Suðrheimr* ‘south settlement’). These could be transferred names. But just *Solheim* and *Suðrheim* are regarded as potentially late *heim*-names in Norway, too. They seem to become what Nicolaisen calls “ready-made names”, names suitable for any settlement. The specific compounds may have lived on after *heim* ceased to be productive as a generic. *Vin* is recorded as a specific in *Winja depils* ‘pasture ponds’, but not as an independent generic. Though the evidence is scarce, the existence of these ancient elements may suggest that the Norse settlement started somewhat earlier in Shetland than in Orkney, which makes sense from a geographical point of view.

When looking at potentially pre-Viking Age names, it is interesting to note that no Pictish name stratum can be identified in the Northern Isles, though some Norse-looking names may actually be adaptations of Pictish names. We know from the sagas that the Vikings had a habit of adapting

names: *Scilly Isles* is rendered as *Syillingane* with an ON plural morpheme and *Jerusalem* becomes *Jorsal* ‘horse hall’. The only certain example of an adaptation of a pre-Norse name is *Orkneyar* ‘Seal Islands’ which is recorded as *Orchades* on a first century map by Ptolemy, reflecting Celtic *Innse Orc*. Similarly, the Old Norse name *Hetland* for Shetland may be an adaptation of *Innse Chat*.¹ Other adaptations cannot be proved, as long as no pre-Norse source forms are available.

6. The Scots element

Even if many of the same place-name elements are found in Norway and the Northern Isles, the nomenclature of the Northern Isles differ fundamentally by containing an additional Scots element. Place-name scholars in the Northern Isles have often been more concerned with the Old Norse stratum than the Scots element and there is a tendency to label all names containing ON element as Norse names. For instance, Marwick treats names such as *Bu of Rapness* as ON names. *Bu* is certainly an ON word, but the *of*-periphrasis is equally clearly a Scots construction. How do we come to terms with such seemingly mixed names?

When studying place-names in the Northern Isles, it is important to bear in mind that the Old Norse language is dead and that Scots is the only living language. This means that names of Old Norse origin exist only as loans in the Scots dialect and have been more or less adapted to Scots phonology and morphology. From a synchronous point of view all place-names in the Northern Isles are Scots. In addition to originally Old Norse loan names, a large number of names are originally coined in Scots. It is thus impossible to imagine a nomenclature without traces of Scots anywhere in the Northern Isles

7. Identifying the linguistic origin of names

As suggested above, the problem of identifying the linguistic form is particularly acute in names containing elements from ON as well as from Scots, such as *Breckan Park* and *Bridge of Twatt*. For English names of the *Grimston* and *Carlton* types, hybrid formations have been suggested (i.e. a Scandinavian specific and an English generic). In my opinion, hybrid

¹ The saga form *Hjaltland* appears to be a secondary adaptation. The earliest ON recordings of ‘Shetland’ are *Hetlandensis* c. 1190, DN II 2; *Heclandensi* 1221, DN XIX 134); *Nicolao Ihatlandensi* 1226, DN I 9; *af Hiatlandi* 1299, DN I 89; *Hiatlandi* 1308 DN V 109; *Syettelandie* 1312, DN XIX 481. *Hieltland* first appears in 1490, DN VIII 426. *Hjaltland* thus appears to be a lexical adaptation to ON *hjalt* ‘hilt’. See also Gammeltoft (2010).

formations should generally be ruled out. Code-shift within one place-name, which is a very compact linguistic unit, is not to be expected. As a rule, even names that look mixed are either Old Norse or Scots from a formation point of view.

A fundamental task in contact onomastics is to find a method to identify the formation language. An important issue in my thesis (Sandnes 2003 [2010]) was to establish criteria which can help us determine formation language. The most important criteria and how they can be used is presented below.

- Morphological features. Morphological features unique to one of the contact languages are positive pointers to the formation language.
- The generic. The descriptive quality of the generic means that it has to be taken from the formation language. In a contact situation the picture is complicated by the fact that the generic may be a loan word.
- Additional elements specific for one language may support our interpretation. The three names *Boat Meadow*, *Boat Geo* and *Boats Hella* may serve as examples. Their common specific is either Scots ‘boat’ or its ON cognate *bátr*. In these cases, the words *meadow* and *hella* are language specific: Naming a meadow ‘meadow’ requires a competence of Scots, whereas calling a flat rock near the sea ‘hella’ requires a competence of Old Norse. *Geo* is ambiguous. The word is of ON origin (< *gjá* ‘ravine’), but has been borrowed into the local dialect and is actually the standard term for a narrow inlet.

| | |
|---------------------|---|
| Old Norse formation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ON formation is certain if the name contains reflexes of Old Norse morphology: <i>Ernie Tooin, Quina</i> • A generic of ON origin is an indication of possible ON formation, which may be supported by additional Norse elements: <i>Fisk Hellya</i> |
| Scots formation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scots formation is certain if the name contains <i>of</i>-periphrasis or other uniquely Scots morphology: <i>Bu of Hoy, The Dale</i> • Names containing a Scots generic specified by existing place-name of Norse origin are Scots formation: <i>Breckan Park</i> • Scots formation is suggested when all elements are Scots, including local borrowings from Norse: <i>Sunnybanks, Clay Geo</i>. |
| Uncertain | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • all elements are known in both Norse and the local Scots dialect: <i>Boat Geo, Midhouse</i> |

Fig. 3: Indications of formation language.

My examples pertain to ON and Scots, but I am convinced that they can be used other contact situations where one language supersedes the other, e.g. where Gaelic is replaced by Scots.

8. Celtic influence

Some features in the Northern Isles dialect have been explained as possible Celtic influence. As far as can be judged from place-names, the influence is minimal.

8.1 Loan words

Loan words are the only indisputable trace of Gaelic influence. In the four parishes I have studied in detail, only two elements of Gaelic origin have come into common use, namely *crue* < *cró* ‘pen’ and *loon* denoting marsh or meadow < *lòn* ‘dub, marsh, morass’. In addition, Gael *airigh* ‘shieling’ would seem to enter into the Evie name *Ayrean*. This is not impressive, considering that the borrowing of individual words does not require very intense contact. The words may have entered via bilingual speakers in Caithness or the Hebrides.

8.2 Post-positioned specifics

When it comes to inverted compound names such as *Eynhallow* and *Queenamuckle* (literally ‘island the holy’ and ‘enclosure the big’) there is definitely no need to look for a Celtic pattern. It may not have been made clear in Scottish place-name literature, but in classical Old Norse, the attribute can be placed either in front of the noun or after the noun. There are numerous examples of postposition in Old Norse texts. Constructions along the lines of King *Harald Fairhair* (in Old Norse, *hárfagri*), and the famous Viking ship *Ormr inn langi*, literally ‘snake the long’, are well-known. There are also place-name examples such as *Eyin helga*, etymologically identical to *Eynhallow*. In Middle Norwegian, post-positioning became outdated and pre-positioned attributes became the norm. Gradually all Norwegian names are adjusted to the modern word order. In the Northern Isles, however, the old word order survived and may even have become productive for quoy-names. There are a large number of late Quoy-x- names in Orkney such as *Quoy Sinclair* for a nineteenth century croft.

8.3 The intonation pattern - a digression

An analysis of the intonation patterns falls without the scope of onomastic studies but can certainly be an indication of linguistic contact. The topic has

been actualised by Klaske van Leyden's studies of the Shetland and Orkney prosodic patterns. According to van Leyden, Shetland prosody is rather close to Scottish Standard English (and, indeed, most other Scots dialects) whereas the Orkney prosody deviates in having rise delay. It means that the tone does not rise on the stressed syllable but rather on the following syllable. This rather unusual feature is also found in Celtic languages, and van Leyden suggests a connection. The question is whether this could also be a case of Old Norse interference.

Unfortunately, modern Norwegian prosody is not very well described and we know even less about intonation in former days. Nevertheless, rise delay is actually found in Scandinavian dialects (south-eastern Norway, western Sweden). On a more general basis it is much more likely that the present intonation pattern is influenced by a language that was actually spoken in the isles than a neighbouring language. It is normal for speakers to transfer prosodic features from their first language into a second language, so when the Orcadians shifted from Norn to Scots, it is quite likely that they transferred prosodic features from Norn into Scots.²

9. Late influences from Old Norse on the Northern isles dialect

The fourteenth century is generally regarded as a period of major changes in the ON language. In Norwegian dialects the old case system started breaking down and a number of phonetic changes as well as a reorganisation of the quantity system were carried out. We saw above that an archaic word order pattern was retained in the Shetland and Orkney names. The fact that a linguistic innovation taking place in Scandinavia did not reach the Northern Isles is quite unsurprising when we consider the geographical distance. Other developments in late Old Norse actually crossed the North Atlantic, however, indicating that there was still sufficient contact between across the ocean for the features to spread. I shall mention only two of them here.

9.1 Post-posed definite article

The Scandinavian post-positioned definite article: *hesten* ('the man'), *huset* ('the house') developed from the demonstrative pronoun in phrases such as *hestr inn gamla*, *hús itt gamla*. Reflexes of the definite article are found in a great number of place-names derived from masculine and feminine words

² Thanks to Professor Tomas Riad of Stockholm University, who provided information about the pitch rise delay in Scandinavian languages and commented on the matter in general terms.

such as *Breckan*, *Grandon*, *Cuppin*. There are hardly any reflexes of the definite article in names derived from neuter words, however.

9.2 Loss of dental fricatives

About the fourteenth century, dental fricatives are lost in the Scandinavian languages: /ð/ and /θ/ become /d/ or /t/ or are dropped altogether. This development seems to have been common to Scandinavia and the Northern Isles. The Shetland dialect has no dental fricatives in initial or medial position, in Orkney dental fricatives have been reintroduced following more mainstream Scots dialects and Scottish Standard English in the twentieth century. This is seen as a case of substrate interference (EHSL 506). When speakers of Norn, the local dialect of Old Norse, changed to the Scots language, they transferred this feature. They simply pronounced the Scots word without the dental fricatives.

The ties between Norway and the Northern Isles may have been strong enough for some linguistic innovations to cross the North Atlantic as late as the 14th century, but this century also saw the start of a major influence of Scots and the beginning of the end for Old Norse. Even if Norn was still spoken for centuries, Old Norse lost its importance as a written language (one document from Orkney and some six from Shetland have been preserved from the 15th century or later, see Barnes 1998:11 f.). The status of Norn must have gradually declined as it became the language of peasants rather than of power. Moreover, the impignoration of the islands 1468–9 to Scotland must certainly have contributed to a more official status of the Scots language.

10. Conclusion

The place-names of the Northern Isles reflect the islands' dual linguistic heritage. The Old Norse language is definitely dead and has been so for more than 200 years, though its impact may linger on in some phonetic features and possibly in the prosody. Even the place-names are Scots from a synchronous view, but they contain valuable information about the way the Vikings settled and the words they brought with them.

Abbreviations

EHSL = Charles Jones (ed.) 1997. *Edinburgh History of the Scots Language*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

ON = Old Norse

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