

SCANDINAVIANS AND CELTS IN CAITHNESS : THE PLACE-NAME EVIDENCE

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INTRODUCTION

Any investigation making use of place names as evidence for the historical and prehistoric settlement of linguistic people must be aware of the scope as well as the limitations of toponymic material. On the one hand, place names have the advantage of being capable of surviving *in situ* for many centuries repeated processes of linguistic change and are therefore valuable raw material for periods for which there is little or no linguistic evidence of any other kind available; on the other hand, they have the disadvantage of being almost incapable of providing, by and within themselves, references potentially helpful for the purpose of absolute dating. Consequently, any relative chronological stratification constructed on the basis of suitable place-name material can only be put into a satisfactory absolute context with the help of chronological frameworks derived, for example, from documentary or archaeological sources. There is nothing inherently wrong with such a procedure, as long as it is borne in mind that any absolute dates employed in the study of place names have, of necessity, been borrowed from other disciplines. There is, for instance, nothing or very little evidence in the place-name material to be used in the following, which directly and unequivocally points to, confirms or corroborates the dating of the earliest Norse settlement in Shetland, Orkney and Caithness at approximately the year 800 A.D.; there is however, also nothing in that material to contradict such dating. The toponymic evidence is, on the whole, neutral in this respect.

In contrast, the same evidence becomes quite vociferous, both through its demonstrable presence and its more than accidental absence, when the less ambitious determination of a relative linguistic stratification is the aim of scholarly enquiry, and it is really in this more circumscribed endeavour that place names serve the enquirer best and with the most hopeful prospect of acceptable, indeed persuasive, results. This is particularly true when a systematic examination of the material is not intended to isolate effectively names, name types, or name elements which may serve as markers of the initial phases of certain periods of settlement, as represented by discernible linguistic strata, but rather of toponyms which, for one reason or another, ceased to be used productively in the creation of place names at a certain time and may therefore be employed to indicate the end or duration of particular strata. Quite legitimately, such procedures frequently try to establish a link between the spatial and the

chronological distribution of certain place-name elements, mostly generics, but just as naturally not every geographical scatter has chronological, especially stratificational, implications. Utmost care is needed in the selection of appropriate toponymic material.

PRE-GAELIC/PRE-SCANDINAVIAN EVIDENCE

When due attention is given to these general considerations, the investigation of the place-nomenclature of any region or area can begin, confident of producing helpful results. As far as Caithness is concerned, the first important observation resulting from a careful perusal of its place names is the noticeable absence of any linguistically ascribable pre-Gaelic and pre-Scandinavian names. Admittedly, names like *Dunnet*, *Bower*, or *Tain* have so far resisted any attempts at satisfactory etymologization, but this does not necessarily make them earlier than those names which can with certainty be said to have been created by Gaels and Norsemen. Obscurity is by no means always the hallmark of antiquity, especially when it is accompanied by a dearth of primary documentation. At present, we simply do not have the means to place such names anywhere linguistically. Hypothetically, any or all of them may of course be 'Pictish', for as the name *Pentland Firth* (Old Norse *Pettalands-fjörðr*) undoubtedly indicates, Caithness must have been inhabited, before the arrival of either Norsemen or Gaels, by the Picts. But as proved by the total absence of place names beginning with *Pit-*, the northernmost examples of which are found in south-east Sutherland (*Pitfour*, *Pitgrudy*, *Pittentrail*), the Caithness Picts, like their counterparts in the Northern Isles and in other parts of the northern mainland, did not speak a Celtic language. While being part of the historical kingdom of the Picts, Caithness also belonged to that of the two provinces of Pictland where linguistic affiliations are, in our present state of knowledge, obscure; whereas the inhabitants of the other Pictish province, mainly covering the Scottish north-east from the Firth of Forth to the Moray Firth, did of course speak a language closely allied to both continental Gaulish and insular Cumbric and British (Jackson 1955. 129-166; Wainwright 1962. 91-112).

THE NAME 'CAITHNESS' : ORIGIN AND APPLICATION

This very conveniently and appropriately makes *Caithness* itself the oldest recognisable place name in this part of the world. It is primarily a tribal rather than a place name and, like the *orc* of *Orkney* (Ptolemy's *Orcades*) appears to have been given to the people in question by their Celtic-speaking neighbours. At least, there is no reason why these non-Celts should have referred to themselves by a Celtic animal name. The Norsemen, as well as the Gaels, knew that the Pictish people, who lived in an area of roughly the same extent as modern Caithness and Sutherland, were termed 'the Cats' and therefore, probably even before they ever set foot on the mainland, called its north-easternmost extremity quite appropriately *Katanes* 'headland of the Cats'. Initially perhaps only used of Duncansby Head (Nicolson 1907. 34), the name became more extensive

in its application as the Scandinavian settlement area continued to grow. Caithness is therefore basically a Norse name incorporating a pre-Norse specific, but despite its bi-cultural make-up it lacks the kind of information which could tell us something about the relationship between the 'native' inhabitants and the incoming colonists. That this relationship cannot have been a very intimate one is obvious from the absence of identifiable pre-Norse place names which could only have survived into the Norse and post-Norse periods if linguistic and cultural contact had been fairly close, but the lack of more detailed evidence is nevertheless disappointing.

While the Norsemen applied the name *Katanes* 'Caithness' or *Nes* 'headland' (McBain 1922. 100-101) only to the area settled and governed by themselves, they referred to the other, much more extensive, part of the original 'Cat' country, settled in contrast by Gaelic-speaking Scots from Ireland, as *Sudrland* 'Southland', a name which since the thirteenth century has been Anglicised as Sutherland. This implies a northern point of view, matching the Norse name *Sudreyjar* 'South Isles' for what, from a Scottish viewpoint, are the Western Isles, the Hebrides. For the Gaels, on the other hand, their share of the formerly Pictish territory remained **Cataobh*, or rather *Cataibh*, representing an older dative-locative plural *Cataib* 'among the Cats' — a Sutherland man is still called a *Catach* in Gaelic —, whereas the Norse portion, i.e. much of Caithness, became known as *Gallaibh* 'among the Strangers', paralleling Gaelic *Innse Gall* 'Islands of the Strangers' for the Hebrides (Watson 1905-6. 234). Both names arose out of a similar context, the 'strangers' clearly being the Norsemen in this case.

NORSE AND GAELIC PLACE-NAMES IN CAITHNESS

Since this matter of conflicting Norse and Gaelic nomenclatures for the later twofold division of this formerly Pictish area tends to be somewhat complicated and daunting for the uninitiated, this summary seemed to be called for. It is, however, also a convenient introduction to the main theme under discussion, and a valid general commentary on the major feature of the accompanying map [Fig. 5.1], i.e. what must have been, from the ninth to thirteenth centuries anyhow, a quite clearly marked separation of the two spheres of interest, with a later, gradual, but still limited encroachment of the Gaelic settlement area on the Norse one, probably not before the establishment of the authority of the Scottish crown in these northern parts. As a rider to this statement it should perhaps be added that, as far as the place-name evidence is concerned, there is no doubt that there was never a time when Gaelic was spoken throughout the whole of Caithness, not even in post-Norse times. Otherwise there would have survived at least some minimal indication of Norse names passing through Gaelic before being adopted into English. Although Gaelic names for places in the Scandinavian portion of Caithness exist (*Inbhir-Theòrsa* for Thurso, *Inbhir-Ùig* for Wick, *Liabost* for Lybster, *Hacraig* for Halkirk, *Langal* for Langwell, etc.), these have apparently only been used within a Gaelic linguistic context in the Gaelic-speaking western portion of the country

and have not in any way interfered with, or become an intermediary in, the process of Anglicization. A particularly instructive example in this respect is the doublet *Lybster/Liabost*, in which *-bster* and *-bost* respectively represent the English and the Gaelic developments of Norse *bólstaðr* 'farm'. It is also worth pointing out that the Gaelic forms were transmitted almost exclusively in oral tradition, while the English forms were passed on

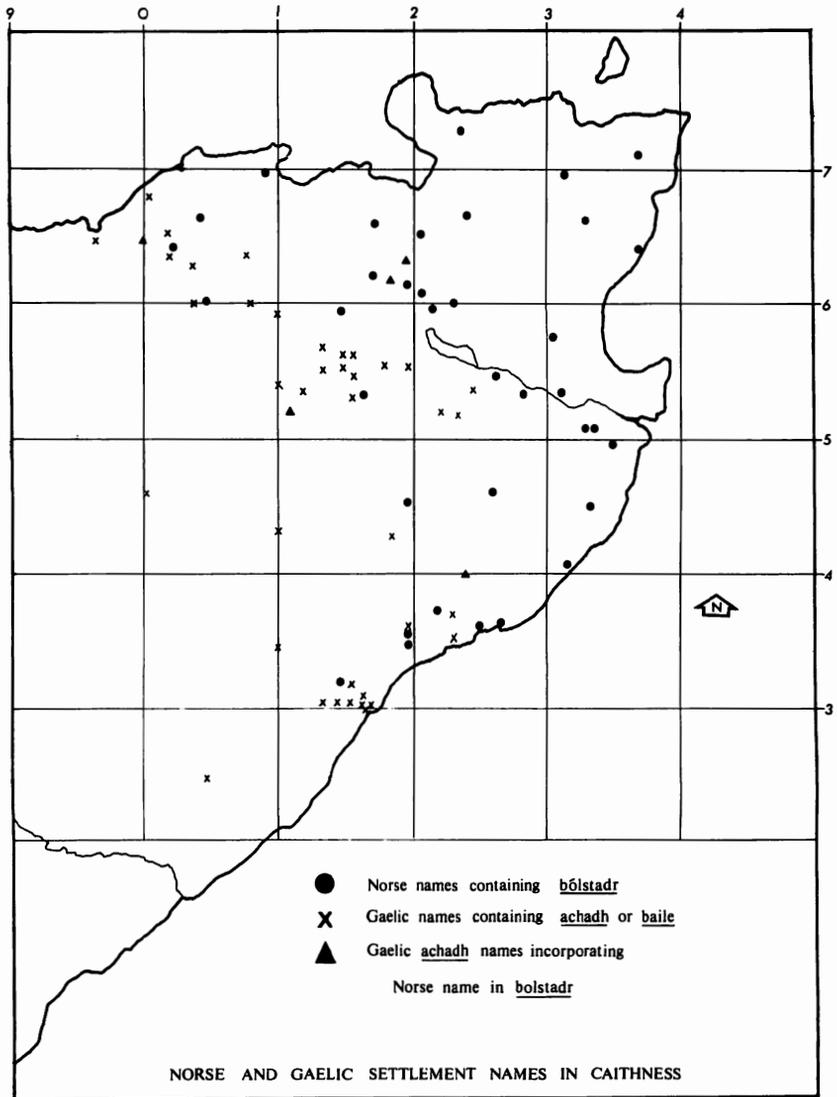


Fig. 5.1. Norse and Gaelic Settlement Names in Caithness.

in both oral and written form and consequently also became part of the all-important cartographic tradition.

Similarly, the notion has to be refuted that Caithness was fully Gaelic speaking when the Norsemen first arrived. This idea may possibly have arisen in the wake of strong claims made by both Jakobsen and Marwick with regard to the existence of a substantial number of Gaelic place names in Shetland and Orkney respectively (Jakobsen 1936; Marwick 1922-23). As long as these claims were regarded as convincing, there was every reason to believe that the situation in Caithness must have been not dissimilar. Despite the slight possibility of limited and sporadic 'intrusive Scottish influences from the Gaelic west', it was noted almost twenty years ago that 'when the elements in the lists of Jakobsen and Marwick are examined, it is found that many of them have to be removed' (Wainwright 1962. 100, 103). This judgement does, in fact, err by being not severe enough, and to whatever circumstances and causes the presence of a small number of Gaelic names may be ascribed, they can never be interpreted as evidence for a process of thorough, or even partial, 'Scotticisation'. As far as Caithness is concerned, there is not a single surviving or recorded place name of Norse origin which incorporates an earlier Gaelic element, apart from perhaps *Duncansby*, for which the Orkneyinga Saga has *Dungalsboer*, probably containing a Celtic personal name. All the evidence points in the other direction, *vide Achkeepster, Achlibster and Badlibster, Achscrabster, Achsteenclate, Achunabust, Achvarasdal*, etc. It is also highly unlikely that a preceding Gaelic place-nomenclature was wiped out or obscured completely by later Norse names — through full translations, unconnected replacements, or neglect. These are not the most prolific processes observed in bilingual situations elsewhere, where phonological adaptation is the major phenomenon in operation (Nicolaisen 1975; 1976. 53-56). Names, after all, do not need lexical meaning in order to survive!

Naturally, the map does not show all the evidence; nor does it make real sense without a wider context. Caithness is not, after all, and never has been, a linguistic or cultural island. It would, on the other hand, be impossible to present within the limits of this discussion the evidence for the whole of Scotland or even for the whole of *Scotia Scandinavica*, the area where Scandinavians settled in Scotland. For the Norse evidence in general, reference should therefore be made to *Norse Settlement in the Northern and Western Isles* (Nicolaisen 1969), for that of neighbouring Sutherland in particular to Ian Fraser's recent account (Fraser 1979); relevant maps, comments and lists of names for both the Norse and Gaelic strata, albeit separately, are also to be found in *Scottish Place-names* (Nicolaisen 1976) and in *An Historical Atlas of Scotland c.400 - c.1600* (McNeill and Nicholson 1975). The present map therefore only synthesizes and particularizes the same evidence for Caithness. This strongly localised focus is useful, in so far as it makes a more persuasive case for the separation of the two nomenclatures and what they represent. By showing both the Norse and the Gaelic names on a single map, the actual existence of a linguistic and cultural seam is also emphasized, acting both as divide and bridge. How far, however, are the names plotted on this map

chronologically compatible? How many of them are likely to have existed side by side more or less at the same time?

In this respect, the date 800 is again relevant. According to the best documentary evidence, it is improbable that many, if any, Scandinavian place names in Scotland, had been coined before that date. Since this can be said of the Northern Isles, it is even more relevant to Caithness, for the Norse generic *stadir* 'dwelling place, farm' — which is the earliest element for which a distributional pattern of any significance emerges which is of more than just local value — is well represented in the place names of Shetland, Orkney, and the Hebrides (Lewis and North Skye) but does not occur in Caithness or anywhere else on the mainland. Although there is the slight possibility of it not being used in Caithness because the configuration of the landscape or the pattern of settlement did not warrant it, it is much more likely — and the absence of this element from the 'southern' Hebrides confirms this explanation — that *stadir* had ceased to be a place-name generic when the Vikings began to settle in Caithness. If this conclusion is justified, it would imply that the earliest phase of Norse settlement in Caithness must have been at least two generations later than the initial Scandinavian settlement in the Northern Isles, Lewis, and parts of Skye; and we should perhaps be reckoning with the middle rather than the beginning of the ninth century as the time when Norsemen first gave names to places in Caithness in order to create a structured, familiar habitat (Nicolaisen 1979).

Gaelic Generics

Dating the arrival of name-giving speakers of Gaelic in the more westerly parts of Caithness also depends largely on the absence of a particular place-name generic, in this case *cill*, dative-locative of Gaelic *ceall* 'church'. The northernmost example of a place name containing this element appears to be *Kilphedir* 'St. Peter's Church' in Sutherland. This name type, so common in the areas settled by Gaelic speakers in the first four centuries after their initial arrival from Ireland (Nicolaisen 1976. 128-133, 142-144), is datable because of its noteworthy absence from the heartland of the Picts in the Scottish north-east, between the Firth of Tay and the Moray Firth. This allows the conclusion that *cill* ceased to be productive or fashionable or appropriate as a toponym about the time Gaelic speakers moved into Celtic Pictland proper, i.e. about the middle of the ninth century. It is therefore again unlikely that Gaelic place names were coined in Caithness much before this date, since otherwise at least a few examples of names beginning with *Kil-* would have been found; it can further be argued that the boundary line between Gaelic and Norse Caithness must have been established before the end of the ninth century. The confrontation along this line can be expected to have stopped effectively both the strong north/north-eastward movement of the Gaelic-speaking Scots and the south-westerly expansion of the settlement area of the Scandinavian-speaking Norsemen, and there seems to have been very little change in that situation before the twelfth or even thirteenth century.

Our major toponymic markers for Gaelic settlement in Scotland are, of course, the generics *baile* 'a farm, a homestead, a village' and *achadh* 'a field' (Nicolaisen 1976. 136-143). These are the two most ubiquitous elements in the Scottish-Gaelic settlement names, occurring practically everywhere where Gaelic was, at one time or another, the means of daily communication. Because of their longevity and continuous popularity in the creation of place names referring to human habitations of some permanence, the resulting names are very difficult to date. Most of them might have been given at more or less any time between the arrival of Gaelic speakers in a given area and the death of Gaelic in that area, if that has already occurred, or at least at any time before their earliest recorded documentation. For a name like *Balnabruich* (=Gaelic *Baile na Bruaich* 'Bank-stead') in Latheron parish this means a potential span of almost eight centuries; it appears to have been first recorded in 1657. For names like *Balantsionnach*, *Balantrath*, *Balbeg*, *Balcladich*, *Balcraggie*, *Balla-chara*, *Ballone*, *Balmore*, etc., similarly vague time spans must be envisioned, although the semantic transparency of most of these names suggests a later rather than an earlier date. It is, however, unwise to base any argument for relative lateness solely on this criterion; a late name may sometimes be quite obscure whereas an early name has occasionally preserved its lexical meaning astonishingly well. Much depends probably on how recently the language, from whose lexicon the name in question was created, has been spoken in the vicinity, but other, less tangible, factors come into play as well.

Having begun its toponymic career as a word appropriate for the naming of fields rather than farms, *achadh* is very often both later in its application to settlement names and more directly indicative of human activity on the land. It is impossible to judge whether Caithness names such as *Achalone*, *Achastle*, *Achavarn*, *Achavrole*, *Achcomhairle*, *Achlachan*, *Achnamoine*, *Achow*, etc., began life as field names which were subsequently transferred to habitations or whether *achadh* could, after a while, have been directly applied to such habitations. There are probably names of both kinds somewhere in this list. It is, however, significant that, although there are several names on the Caithness map [Fig. 5.1] in which *Ach-* is followed by a Norse name — the *Achlibster* type — there seems to be no comparable name beginning with *Bal-*. It therefore looks as if *achadh* came really into its own as a productive favourite toponym after the twelfth century. Obviously *Achlibster* is not 'the field of Libster' but 'the farm of Libster' in which Gaelic *achadh* duplicates the original Norse *bólstaðr*.

Norse Generics

Bólstaðr is, in fact, the most important generic in the Norse settlement nomenclature of Caithness (Nicolaisen 1976. 92-94). There is no reason to assume that it still maintained, in colonial territory, its force of designating secondary farms, as in the Norwegian homeland. For most of the period of Norse linguistic domination over much of Caithness, it must have been *the*

farm-name generic par excellence. In modern usage it is usually reduced to *-bster* (*Bilbster*, *Brabster*, *Brubster*, *Lybster*, *Nybster*, *Scrabster*, *Shebster*, *Ulbster*, etc.), sometimes is only detectable because of its influence on the final consonant of the preceding specific (*Stemster* < **Stein-bólstaðr*), and in a few cases has lost all traces of its original first element *ból* (*Haster*, *Thrumster*, *Wester*). In this reduction, Caithness goes much further than neighbouring Orkney with which it otherwise shares so many toponymic features, for in Orkney the modern reflexes of O.N. *bólstaðr* are almost invariably *-bister*, *-buster*, and the like. Documentary evidence, however, shows quite clearly that the further reduction of *-bister/-buster* to *-bster* and *-ster* is of comparatively recent date for one only has to consult such important sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sources as the Registers of the Great and Privy Seals or the Retours to note consistently spellings which are analogous to the forms surviving in Orkney to the present day: *Balbuster* as late as 1671 for *Bilbster*; *Brabister* and *Brabuster* in 1644 for *Brabster*, but *Brabster* in 1671 and 1697; *Hasbustar* in 1552 for *Haster*; *Lybuster* in 1604 for *Lybster*; *Skrabister* in 1601 and *Scrabister* in 1605 for *Scrabster*; *Schabuster* in 1539 for *Shebster*, but the latter form in 1683; *Subuster* in 1644 for *Sibster*, but *Subster* (*weik*) in 1671; *Stambuster* and *Stambester* in 1605 for *Stemster*, but also *Stamster* as early as 1529; *Thrumbuster* in 1604 for *Thrumster*; *Ulbuster* in 1604 and *Ulbester* in 1644 for *Ulbster*, but the modern form from 1680 on; etc. The loss of the vowel after the *-b-* is therefore in most instances fairly precisely ascribable to the second half of the seventeenth century, although sequences such as *Ulbuster* > *Ulbester* > *Ulbster* demonstrate that the loss may have been preceded by a process of levelling. That *Stamster* occurs as early as 1529, however, is a healthy reminder that the reduction to *-(b)ster* may well have begun in oral tradition some time before it is expressed in writing, although even then in an English phonological context rather than in a Scandinavian one.

Bólstaðr is without doubt the most appropriate toponymic generic to be mapped in the quest for a distribution pattern representative of Norse settlement in Caithness at its most extensive, but it is, of course, not the only one (Omand 1972. 222-228); nor is it helpful to think exclusively in terms of individual elements divided from each other in a sequential arrangement of strata. From the very beginning of their colonization of the Scottish north and west, the Scandinavians must have used a variety of generics in their effort to create a viable place-nomenclature, for both man-made and natural features, as it would be absurd to think of anything but simultaneous naming for both these categories.

It cannot be our purpose to trace each one of these elements in detail, as that would be outside the intended scope of this paper, but it may well be profitable to look at the contents of the whole of that nomenclature, in order to catch a glimpse of the way in which it is structured semantically. As is to be expected, because of corroborating evidence from other Norse settlement areas in Britain, a major association expressed is that of personal proprietorship, as in *Duncansby* 'Dungal's settlement', *Assery* 'Asgrim's shieling', *Auckingill* 'Hákon's ravine', *Ousdale* 'Oystein's valley'

Thurdistoft 'Thurdi's farm', *Ulbster* 'Ulfr's farm', *Occumster* 'Hákon's farm', *Thuster* 'Þjóðrek's steading', etc. Another large group consists of names descriptive of a noteworthy quality of the feature named: *Sortat* 'sour clearing', *Haster* 'high farm', *Nybster* 'new farm', *Greenland* 'green land', *Holborn* 'high brow', *Utterquoy* 'outer farm', *Sibster* 'south farm', *Sordale* 'sour valley', *Langwell* 'long field', *Braal* 'broad field', *Halkirk* 'high church', *Sannick* 'sandy bay', *Whitegar* 'white enclosure', etc.; position, shape, colour, and geological characteristics seem to be the dominant associations in this group. An astonishingly large class of place names, however, was created with reference to another feature in the vicinity, such as *Wester* 'homestead by the loch', *Stemster* 'homestead near the stone (-circle)' (Ofteidal 1964. 226), *Berriedale* 'valley at the rock', *Brubster* 'bridge homestead', *Camster* 'ridge homestead', *Lybster* 'homestead on the slope', *Stroma* 'island in the current', *Braxside* 'slope farm', and many others. In order to orient themselves in unfamiliar terrain, the Scandinavians clearly structured the emerging landscape toponymically by relating features to each other, or, indeed by referring to prominent regional features by generic only: *Brua* 'brae', *Ham* 'haven', *Keiss* '(rounded) ridge', *Reiss* 'ridge', *Wick* 'bay', *Howe* 'mound', *Skaill* 'hall', *Watten* 'water', *Lyth* 'slope', *Garth* 'enclosure', etc; also two places named *Forse* 'waterfall', and three named *Borgie* 'fort'. The comparatively large numbers of such simple names is especially surprising in view of the fact that the generics involved are not very discriminatory in their semantic burden and do consequently not allow of much precision. Nevertheless they must have had sufficient deictic force as identifying markers.

In contrast, the place names of Gaelic origin display not only greater morphological and syntactic complexity but also a much wider variety of associations. They are, to all intents and purposes, indistinguishable from Scottish Gaelic place names elsewhere and quite a few of them look as if they have been coined in recent centuries. Gaelic did, after all, remain productive much longer in the creation of place names in Caithness, than Norse, if one restricts the term 'Scandinavian (or Norse) place name' to those names actually given by Scandinavians. Needless to say, the impact of the Norse language on Caithness did not cease at the end of Scandinavian political domination of the area or when the language itself ceased to be the daily means of communication. Numerous Norse words entered the English dialect of Caithness, perhaps after a phase of what might be called 'Caithness Norn'. Among these were also topographical terms (Omand 1972. 241-260). Not all place names containing words of Norse origin are therefore necessarily themselves of Norse provenance, and caution is necessary when one tries to ascribe them linguistically. This is, for example, the case with names ending in *-geo* or *-goe* 'narrow inlet'. Whereas names like *Fresgoe*, *Staxigoe*, *Girnigoe*, and *Whaligoe* are likely to have been coined by Scandinavians, *Hobbie Geo*, *Samuel's Geo*, *Castle Geo*, *Corbiegoe*, and *Broad Goe* are probably English in origin as is *Geo of Nethertown*, just as *Geodh nam Fitheach* 'the ravens' inlet' would be Gaelic rather than Norse. Naturally, such names cannot be used as primary evidence for the linguistic presence of Scandinavians in Caithness.

CONCLUSION

Considering the materials and arguments presented, the conclusion of such a brief overview must be that the relevant place-name evidence does not depict Caithness so much as a 'cultural crossroads' rather as a fairly rigorously divided province in which only the later slight advance of Gaelic towards the east and north created an area of toponymic and linguistic overlap. Only in the post-Norse era does the arrival of English effect a gradual diminution of these basic differences and divisions. Of course, there were contact zones before then, and the linguistically divided populations cannot have been without some kind of intercourse. There is, however, no solid place-name evidence for a sustained period of bilingualism in which many people might have used both Gaelic and Norse, and the two main toponymic strands hardly ever intertwine.

A POSTSCRIPT: THE NAME 'THURSO'

It would be inappropriate to conclude this brief discussion of the Scandinavian and Gaelic place names of Caithness without mention of the name of Thurso itself. Since the details of the arguments advanced for the three main etymologies for *Thurso* advocated have been well rehearsed in print (McBain 1894. 276; 1922. 6-7; Henderson 1910. 155; Watson 1926. 36; Brøgger 1929. 97; Johnston 1934. 310; Nicolaisen 1966. 171-176; Thorson 1965 (1968). 71-77; 1967. 84-86; Omand 1972. 127, 228), it is not necessary to repeat them here. It must, however, be stated again that the documentary evidence is complex and does not permit a clearcut answer. In my own view (differing somewhat from what I said in 1966), the two crucial items of information are the Gaelic name of the town, *Inbhir-Theòrsa* 'mouth of (the river) Thurso', and the variant *Pjòrsá* 'bull's river', besides *Pòrsá* 'Thor's river', in Orkneyinga Saga. As the Gaelic form indicates, the Norse variant cannot just be dismissed as having been used by the saga writer 'by chance, with the well-known Icelandic river-name *Pjòrsq* unconsciously in mind' (Thorson 1965.74). Even if it is unconnected with *Tarvedu(nu)m* 'bull-fort', Ptolemy's name for one of the headlands near Thurso, and therefore not a direct translation of an earlier Celtic **Tarvo-dubron* 'bull's river', it establishes 'bull's river' as one of the Norse designations for the river. It is not difficult to imagine that such a name might easily be influenced by the better known name of the god *Pór* and a doublet *Pjòrsá/Pòrsá* be established at an early stage. After all, the modern Gaelic name for the town is now also frequently *Inbhir-Thòrsa*, probably under the influence of the English name. Another Norse name for the same river, or for an upstream portion of it, appears to have been *Skinandi* 'the shining one', preserved for us in the place name *Skinnet* (*Scynend* or *Scynand* in the twelfth century). It is difficult to say whether any of these names ever referred to the whole water-course, as naming may well have begun at the river-mouth where the appearance of the flowing water may not have been as 'shining' as in its upper reaches, but when etymologizing the modern town-name *Thurso* we obviously must bear both *pòrsá* 'Thor's river' and *Pjòrsá* 'bull's river' in mind. Whether, in addition, there was also

a *Þórshaugr* ‘Thor’s mound’, as has been suggested (Thorson 1965. 75), is an even thornier problem. Although I am inclined to interpret such forms as *Turishau* in *Bagimond’s Roll* (1287) and *ad Turseham* in Roger of Hoveden’s *Chronicle* (c.1200) as manuscript variants created by scribes unfamiliar with the name itself, we should perhaps not disregard this further possibility altogether and, at least for the town name, admit *Þórshaugr* as yet another ingredient in the development of our name. The complexity of potential associations in the minds of those who create and use names is, after all, one of the most fascinating aspects of the study of names, including the place names of Caithness.

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