



Fig. 4.1 At Inverewe, Loch Ewe, 15 October 1905.

WHAT IS A VIK?: AN INVESTIGATION INTO AN OLD NORSE COASTAL TOPONYM

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The recent upsurge of interest in Scandinavian contacts with Scotland has prompted a number of questions relating to toponymy which are fundamental to an understanding of the role of the Norse in what was very much a world dominated by maritime activity. The strategic significance of Scotland in the overall framework of Norse conquest and colonisation has been affirmed by an important recent study by Dr. Barbara Crawford (Crawford 1987). The evidence of place-names has been of enormous value in revealing some of the characteristics of Norse settlement, and while many aspects of this settlement have been clarified by an investigation of habitative names (Nicolaisen 1976. ch. 6), there remains a substantial body of Norse placenames which relate to the topography and which have yet to be analysed in detail. It is, for example, significant that substantial numbers of Norse topographical names exist on the North-West mainland, yet the number of genuine habitative settlement names is limited to a handful containing the element *bólstaðr*, such as Ullapool, Unapool, Resipole (ibid. 93 map; but see also Cox, this volume).

The significance of these topographical names must therefore be important. Few would deny that there was a Norse presence in the coastal zone north and west of the Great Glen, but the intensity and continuity of that presence has yet to be quantified, and, lacking much in the way of archaeological evidence, the chances of clarification may be slight. If, however, we examine the Norse toponyms in this zone, it may be possible to shed further light on the settlement, its pattern, distribution and intensity.

COASTAL NAMES: Old Norse *fjörðr*, *vágr*, *hóp*

Since the Norse activity was coastal in nature, the investigation of coastal names remains the most fruitful aspect of onomastic study. This is not to deny the fact that Norse placenames exist well inland, and the oral tradition relates stories of 'Viking princesses' in such areas as Loch Maree, where there is a traditional account of a Norse burial on Isle Maree, a place of pilgrimage until very recent times (Dixon 1886. 7-10; see also R. W. Munro, this volume).

Such accounts, however, are relatively rare, and are alluded to in this paper only to illustrate the popular, local belief in a rather vague Viking past (see Macdonald 1984. 265-279).

Much of the North-West coast is exposed and dangerous. However, the islands of Skye, Raasay and Rona provide shelter from the prevailing westerly winds for much of the coastline of Wester Ross, and the major sea lochs, such as Loch Ewe, Gruinard Bay, Loch Broom, Enard Bay and Edrachillis Bay afford locations which have been exploited for safe anchorages by many generations of seafarers. Several of the sea lochs on this coastline have names which contain ON *fjörðr* 'sea loch', as in the case of *Gruinard* and *Enard*. This element is, of course, common in Skye (*Snizort*, *Ainort*, *Eyshort* and *Eynort*) and on the adjacent mainland (*Moidart*, *Knoydart*). Loch Dunvegan is recorded on the Blaeu Map as 'Loch Fallort' (1654).

The Norse place-name terms which have been applied to minor inlet features are relatively few in number. A general term for a broad inlet, ON *vágr* 'bay' can be very difficult to establish as being of genuine Norse origin, since the English *bay* has appeared on maps of the area since at least the 18th century, and the resultant Gaelic *bagh* can conceivably originate from either of the Germanic languages involved. Although there are clear instances of *vágr* being adopted in the Outer Hebrides (e.g. *Carloway*, *Lemreway* and *Stornoway* in Lewis, and *Finsbay* in Harris), the term is virtually absent on the mainland of Ross. Such examples of *bay* that we find on the modern map are mostly of recent origin, as in the case of *Badcall Bay*, *Calva Bay*, *Achmelvich Bay*, *Slaggan Bay* and many others. *Scourie Bay*, however, is marked as such on the Roy Military Survey of ca. 1750, but the modern *Gruinard Bay* is referred to on the Blaeu map as 'Loch Grunord'.

The ON *hóp* 'bay', 'inlet' is in the same category, since the Gaelic equivalent, *òb*, is found in fresh-water locations as well as on the coast. Normally *òb*-names apply to well-sheltered locations, usually on major sea-lochs, or on large lochs inland. *Òb nam Muc* 'pig-bay' on Loch Maree, *Òb Gorm Beag* 'little green bay' and *Òb Mheallaidh* 'deceitful bay' on Loch Torridon and *Òb an Dreallaire* 'idler's bay' on South Rona are good examples. The latter was a bay in which fishermen rested during bad weather.

COASTAL NAMES: Old Norse *vík*

The most interesting Old Norse element from the point of view of this paper, however, is ON *vík* 'bay'. Most of the locations where we find the term have attracted settlements, some of which are substantial and of seemingly long standing. These inlets demand further investigation, especially as regards their physical characteristics. The availability of sheltered water, with a measure of protection from westerly and north-westerly winds, is an obvious requirement. A reasonable depth of water close inshore, together with a smooth stretch of beach of gravel or sand are other factors. Boats would require to be beached for repair, and the presence of a natural rock quay which would ease mooring and loading of vessels would add to the attraction of the site.

Such good harbours and anchorages attract permanent settlement, so the availability of arable land close to the *vík*, for the purposes of grain-growing, grazing and hay-making, would seem obvious as a local resource. A maritime economy always requires timber, so the *vík* should ideally be within range of good forest land. However, good timber for house-building and boat-building was, in some cases, relatively scarce, especially in the islands, and the mainland areas of Ross and Argyll must have been exploited for timber even in pre-Norse times.

When we look at the distribution of names in *vík* for West Sutherland, Ross and Skye, we find that individual sites vary a great deal. On the modern map, they are often prefixed by Gaelic elements, such as *loch*, or compounded with English terms like *River* or *Bay*. Thus a name like *Kirkaig* in Sutherland (O.N. *Kirkju-vík* 'church inlet': McBain 1922. 17) appears on the map as *Inverkirkaig* 'the confluence of the Kirkaig River', from Gaelic *inbhir* 'confluence'; so we find also *River Kirkaig* and *Loch Kirkaig*. The Gaelic forms would be *Ciorcaig*, *Inbhir-chiorcaig*, *Abhainn Chiorcaig* (the river) and *Loch Chiorcaig* (the inlet). Such developments reflect not only the amount of contact between Old Norse and Gaelic, but also the importance of an Englishing process which originated primarily with documentary forms in the 16th century, and with map-makers after this period.

Those names which had Norse origins led themselves easily to Anglicisation, and in some instances this must be one of the reasons for the survival of many Norse place-names. Gaelic speech, however, has preserved many Norse names particularly well, so that the pronunciation record is often vital in the understanding of the Norse elements involved. As Watson puts it, 'the modern Gaelic pronunciation is extremely conservative in resisting corruption' (Watson 1904. iv).

***Vík* Names in Wester Ross**

I will now examine a few of these *vík*-names, and try to make an assessment of the site and situation qualities involved. The coastline from Enard Bay to Loch Duich contains some eighteen examples which ostensibly come into the category, viz., *Inverkirkaig*, in Sutherland; in Ross, *Scorraig*, *Miotag*, *Tournaig*, *Camastrolvaig*, *Melvaig*, *Shieldaig* (Gairloch), *Diabaig*, *Shieldaig* (Applecross), *Ardheslaig*, *Cuaig*, *Tausamhaig* (marked on the O.S. 6" map as *Allt Sabhsach*, but suggested as Norse by Watson), *Reraig* (Loch Carron), *Fernaig*, *Erbusaig*, *Pladaig*, *Reraig* (Loch Alsh) and *Totaig*. Of these, it is probably safe to exclude *Fernaig*, which Watson supposes to be from Gaelic *fearnaig* 'place of alders' (ibid. 205, 184) [Fig. 4.2].

Scorraig, at the mouth of Little Loch Broom is in some ways untypical of the *vík* situation.¹ There is no inlet as such, and this otherwise level stretch of south-facing coast-line is interrupted only by a low promontory, *Corran Sgoraig*, in the lee of which lies the landing-place and the present pier. This is, in fact, probably the only site on the north shore of Little Loch

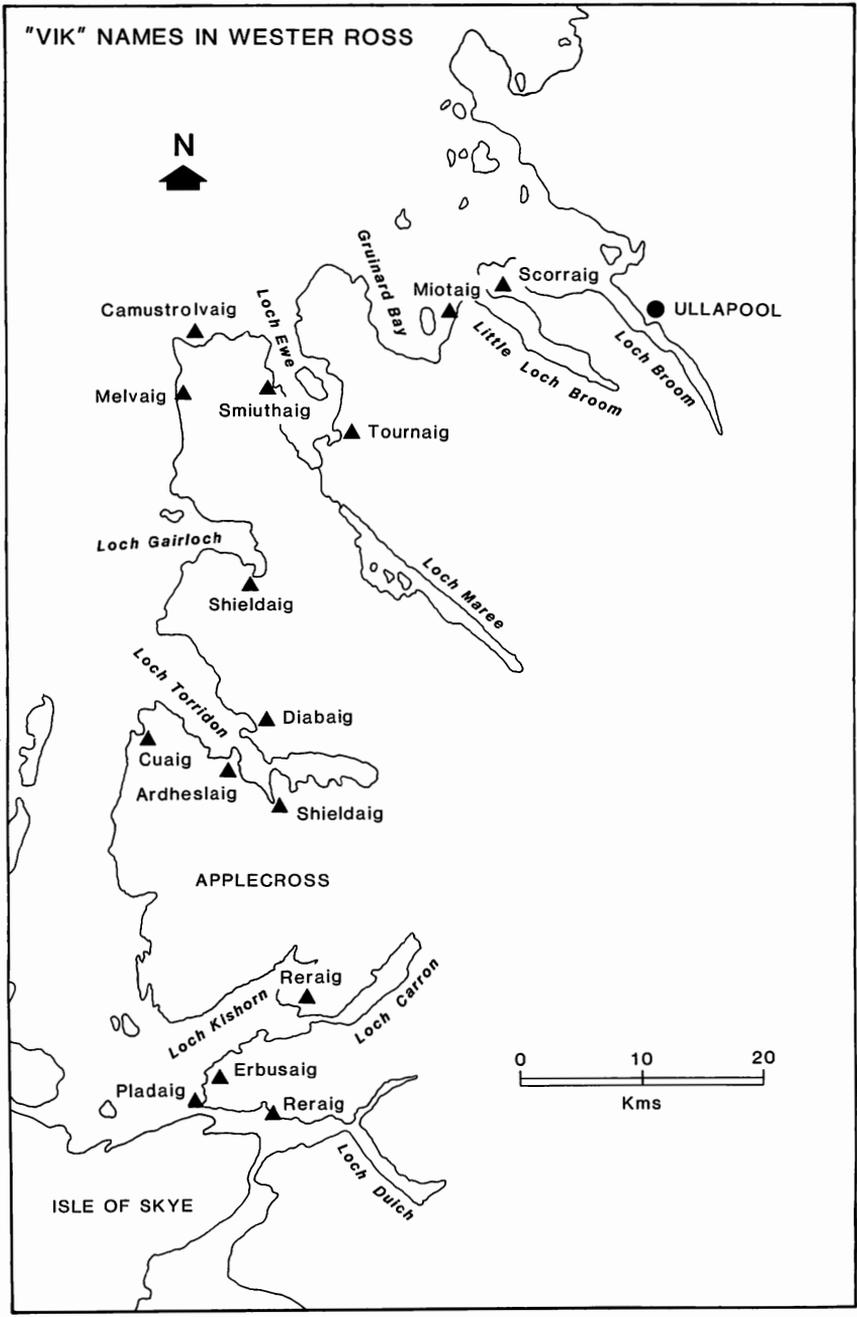


Fig. 4.2 Vik-names along the Wester Ross coastline, from Enard Bay to Loch Duich.

Broom which affords sufficient shelter for boats, so the *corran* (literally Gaelic for sickle, but in topographic terms meaning a sand or gravel spit or the horn of a small bay) assumes an importance on an otherwise difficult coastline. It is the hinterland of this *vík*, however, that is the crucial factor here. The interior is difficult of access from the settlement itself. But the coastal paths — to Rhireavach and Badrallach on Little Loch Broom, and that by Badacrain at the mouth of Loch Broom — skirt the massif of Beinn Ghobhlach, which straddles the peninsula. These paths are rough and narrow, making Scorraig almost as inaccessible as an island. It would therefore have been a useful base for a Norse settlement, especially as there is workable arable land close to the *corran*, which commands the entrance to the loch, and therefore, passage to the interior. Watson (ibid. 249) quotes a Gaelic couplet:

Sgorraig sgreagach, 's dona beag i,
Aite gun dìon gun fhasgadh, gun phreas na coille.

Scraggy Scorraig, bad and little,
A place without protection or shelter, bush or wood.

Yet despite its exposed position, this township flourished in the latter part of the last century, with a thriving fishing industry, a good merchant's shop (which dealt direct with Glasgow!), a school, post office and church, which served a vigorous population. And Annat, on the north side of the peninsula would have been an ideal situation for an early ecclesiastical site — difficult of access by land, but of considerably easier access from Loch Broom.

Camastrolvaig is another headland site a few miles west of the mouth of Loch Ewe. It has been deserted for several generations, partly because of its isolation on the extreme north of the peninsula which divides Gairloch from Loch Ewe. Watson gives as its derivation ON *troll-vík* 'goblin bay' with the prefixed Gaelic *camas* 'inlet'. This hybridised form, where *camas* and *vík* occur in the same name, is to be found in instances like *Camastianavaig*, Skye. According to Watson (ibid. 228), it was 'counted a most uncanny place', and although Dixon does not refer to it, he has several accounts of unnatural happenings occurring at the nearby settlement of Loch an Draing (Dixon 1886. 161 et seq.). Open to the force of north and north-west winds, Camastrolvaig could only have served as a safe anchorage in conditions where the wind was from south of due west.

A few miles south of this lies the township of Melvaig, on a sloping shelf in an exposed position. We first record the name in a Retour of 1566 where it is spelt 'Malefage', and another document of 1638 records it as 'Mailfog'. This corresponds closely to the Gaelic rendering, *Mealabhaig*. Watson gives the derivation as ON *melar-vík*, 'bent grass bay' (Watson 1904). Although Dixon claimed that Melvaig 'is placed at the top of a rocky cliff, of no great height but so steep that the shore below can only be safely reached by those who are acquainted with the place and have a ladder'

(Dixon 1886. 330), there is a site at the mouth of Allt Mealabhaig where boats can be drawn up. It is still, however, a most dangerous stretch of coast, bare and treeless, and it is puzzling that the *vík* element should have been used for this location.

In the south-east corner of Gairloch lies the inlet of Shildaig (ON *síld-vík*, 'herring bay'). This contrasts strongly with the other *vík* sites we have examined so far, in that it is almost completely enclosed, with a deep water anchorage and reasonable arable land at the head of the inlet, together with a considerable amount of natural timber. There is, in addition, good access to the interior, where hunting, a favourite Viking pastime, could be had in abundance.

Shildaig (not to be confused with the place of the same name in Applecross parish some 20 miles, 32 kms, further south) has long been used as a safe anchorage for quite large vessels. The sea-loch of Gairloch is open to the west, and, together with the bay of Badachro, the best anchorages are on the south shore. Shildaig is protected by two small islets, *Eilean an t-Sabhail*, 'shed island' and *Eilean Shildeig*, 'Shildaig Island', while Badachro to the west lies behind *Isle Horrisdale* (from ON *Thorir's dalr*). Both sites are still extensively used by commercial fishing boats, yachts and other small craft.

Another site which fulfils most of the requirements present at Shildaig is the settlement of *Diabaig* at the mouth of Loch Torridon, which lies partly in Gairloch and partly in Applecross. The boundary, in fact, runs through the township lands, formed partly by a stream, *Allt a' Chladha*. Watson (1904. 212) quotes a delightful local couplet which amply indicates its remoteness and security:

'S fhada bho 'n lagh Diabaig,
's fhaidha na sin sios Mealabhaig.

Far from the law is Diabaig,
Yet farther is Melvaig.

The bay is deep, surrounded by rocks and backed by mountains [Fig. 4.3]. It faces almost due west, protected from the south-west by *Meall na h-Araird*, a promontory of 400 ft. (122m) to the west, and by the off-shore skerries of *Sgeir Ghorm* and *Sgeir Dughail*.

The shelving rock called *Sgeir Ghlas* serves as a natural breakwater, and it is here that the stone pier, built in the last century, provides mooring for substantial fishing boats. In the lee of this, boats of all sizes may be drawn up on a shingle beach. The arable land, apart from a narrow strip behind *Sgeir Ghlas*, consists of steeply-sloping crofts which rise from sea-level to over 500 ft (152m). The two lochs, *Loch a' Mhullaich* and *Loch Diabaig's Airde* are fringed by arable land, thus giving the hinterland of the *vík* a considerable amount of potential for arable and grazing. The small settlement of Araird (now Aird), (Gael. *air-aird*, fore-headland) lies to the south of the bay. The township has a long history of seafaring associations. Diabaig men



Fig. 4.3 Diabaig, 'deep bay', a substantial and safe anchorage on the north shore of outer Loch Torridon. It is a classic *vík*-site, with a natural breakwater (now a stone-built pier), extensive shingle beach (for drawing up boats and drying fish), arable land (albeit steep) and woodland. Diabaig has a long history of seafaring and fishing. 1972.

were notable fishermen, often venturing out in conditions which defied many of their neighbours along the coast. The anchorage was regarded as one of the safest havens in the area, and is still a most impressive example of coastal settlement based on a fishing economy.

The inner part of Loch Torridon, known as *Upper Loch Torridon* affords relatively sheltered conditions compared to the outer part. On its indented south shore, several inlet names contain the element *òb* 'pool', alluded to earlier. The Upper Loch opens into Loch *Shieldaig* on its seaward side, both fed by substantial rivers which form the northern drainage of the Ben Damph and Applecross forests. The loch of *Shieldaig* is considerably larger and more open than Diabaig. The name is likely to be a secondary form, although it is marked as 'Loch Sheildaig' on Roy (1750). The Blaeu map of 1654 is so inaccurate for this area that, although *Shilkag* clearly refers to *Shieldaig* itself, the loch is not marked. It is therefore difficult to decide the key topographic feature which is involved in the coining of the name. If *vík* is to be applied to the whole of Loch *Shieldaig*, it is uncharacteristic compared with those we have already examined. It is much more likely that the *vík* involved is at the extreme head of the loch, marked on the Ordnance Survey map as *Ceann-locha* 'head of the loch'. The village of *Shieldaig* itself lies on the lee of a rocky, wooded island, known as *Eilean Shildeag*, giving reasonable protection from westerlies, but the only suitable place for

beaching boats lies to the south of the village, where a small headland offers some shelter.

Reraig, at the northern entrance to Lochcarron has been suggested as ON *reyr-vík* 'reed-bay' by Watson (1904. 188). This is one of two such names in our area, the other being on Loch Alsh, near Balmacara. The Lochcarron example is a settlement lying at the head of a shallow, muddy bay, while the Loch Alsh *Reraig* (for which we have a 1548 form 'Rowrag') lies on an indentation in the loch which is also shallow-bottomed and, ostensibly, unsuitable as an anchorage. Both sites, however, have good arable land close to the shore, and must have been quite pleasant settlement areas.

Erbusaig, cited as 'Arbesak' 1554 and 'Erbissok' 1633, is said by Watson (ibid. 188) to be from the Pictish personal name *Erc*, borrowed into Norse as *Erp*. Again, this bay is exposed to the west, has a shallow, muddy bottom, and the southern approaches are a maze of dangerous skerries, islets and reefs. There is, however, a reasonable amount of arable land round the shores of the bay, and good access to the interior.

Criteria for Establishing *Vík* Names

An analysis of these *víks* must of necessity be conjectural. There must have been considerable silting at the mouths of the major streams at the two *Reraigs*, and perhaps *Erbusaig* also. Few of the other sites are likely to have been affected by silting, with the possible exception of *Shieldaig* in Applecross, where the *Shieldaig* River enters the loch. Studies investigating dominant wave and wind direction might also be carried out to establish the quality of shelter in such sites (see Morrison 1985. 62-4, fig. 4.1). Much of the data, of course, will relate to present-day conditions, but such could hardly have changed dramatically since the Norse period.

Other factors involve the availability of land suitable for cultivation in close proximity to the *vík*. All the examples studied have reasonable areas of such land, at least with the potential for cultivation [Fig. 4.4].

When we compare the Wester Ross examples with *víks* in other areas, we find a similar, wide-ranging set of physical characteristics. The Skye examples (for a good account of Norse Settlement in Skye, see Small 1976. 29-37), range from *Uig* in the north, which has all the requirements for a good haven and anchorage, to *Fiskavaig* at the mouth of Loch Harport, another enclosed inlet, and *Ramasaig* in Duirinish which is very exposed to westerly winds.

Names in Harris and Lewis in this category include *Crulivig*, *Miavaig* and *Islivig*, all of which are sheltered inlets; *Loch Meavaig* in North Harris ON (*mjó-vík* 'narrow bay') is also typical, as is *Maaruig* on Loch Seaforth.

In summary, we can point to a number of physical features which combine to produce the conditions necessary for the establishing of a *vík* place-name:

*The availability of shelter, anchorage or beaching

*The availability of potentially arable land

*Supplies of fresh water, timber and game (if possible)

*Access to sea-routes.

On mainland sites, protection by isolation from the interior is an additional, and perhaps vital, factor. Many of these sites may have been occupied only on a seasonal basis, and for specific purposes, such as timber-felling, fishing or hunting.

A SAMPLE OF WESTER ROSS 'VIKS'

	Anchorage	Beaching Facilities	Shelter from West	Arable
Scorraig	good	good	good	✓
Camastrolvaig	poor	fair	poor	✓
Melvaig	poor	poor	poor	✓
Shieldaig (Gairloch)	excellent	excellent	excellent	✓
Diabaig	excellent	good	excellent	✓
Shieldaig (Applecross)	good	good	good	✓
Reraig (Lohcarron)	?	doubtful	fair	✓
Erbusaig	fair	?	fair	✓
Reraig (Loch Alsh)	poor	good?	fair	✓

Fig. 4.4 Geographical characteristics of a sample of Wester Ross 'viks'.

Such considerations, of course, would not be valid for those *vík* sites in the islands, but we can well imagine that *Scorraig* or *Diabaig* might qualify as seasonal dwelling-sites, in view of the fact that Lewis and Skye are within easy reach. We are speculating here, of course, lacking as we do even the most limited of historical sources, so the place-name record has to work overtime in this area of Scotland. It is, of necessity, a record that has to be treated with caution, but it affords us clues which are of inestimable value in the reconstruction of the Viking past.

Note

'At the outer extremity of Little Loch Broom, on the south side, lies *Stattic Point*. *Stad* ('statt') in western Norway (Sogn og Fjordane) signifies an exposed promontory; and *Start Point* on Sanday, Orkney, would once have been a promontory, rather than the tidal islet it is today. In both latter cases it is difficult to round the promontory/point safely in bad weather. Little Loch Broom too is notoriously difficult to enter by sea in many weathers. *Stattic Point*, Gael. *Sràdaig*, would appear therefore to refer to a short stretch of coast (*Stad-vik*) in the lee of the promontory, where it might even have been possible to seek shelter if caught out by weather and tides (c.f. Watson 1904. 245). As at Scorraig, there is no inlet as such; *stad* as a naming element seems to be associated with difficult and exposed headlands which it was nonetheless necessary for small boats to pass (Editor).

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