A SCATTER OF NORSE NAMES IN STRATHNAVER

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BACKGROUND

Strathnaver first came to my attention during my study of Caithness place-names, in particular those of the parish of Reay, which included the neighbouring valley of Strath Halladale prior to 1245, as indicated in the Caithness and Sutherland Records (*CSR*. 20). To the west of Strath Halladale, past Strathy and Armadale, the next major north/south valley or strath is Strathnaver, now part of Sutherland but not referred to as such during the Norse period when *suðrland* 'southern land' was the name used for the territory in the southern part of the province of Caithness. Neither Reay, Strath Halladale nor Strathnaver is mentioned in *Orkneyinga Saga*, which is unfortunate for the researcher, but which tends to confirm the view that these were not central territories in terms of the Norse in Caithness and their links with the Orkney earldom.

I favour a Norse interpretation of the place-name Reay (1995. 68-70), although a Gaelic-based interpretation has also been suggested (Watson 1926. 117-118) and, at this distance in time from the creation of the name, it is impossible to be certain which is closer to the truth. The place-names which occur in the area surrounding the village of Reay are of varied linguistic origin, with Norse, Gaelic, English and Scots all being represented to some extent. There is plenty of evidence in the naming to suggest that there was an active Norse farming community around the village of Reay.

If we go west from Reay to Strath Halladale, the proportion of Gaelic names becomes higher and that of Norse names lower; and the same is true, in turn, if we go further west to Strathnaver. The name Halladale itself, however, is of Norse origin (Macaulay 1982. 283), as is Armadale, and several of the habitative names in these valleys to the west of Reay confirm the presence of the Norse language and, therefore, of people who could use it in the naming of their farms.

I have defined Strathnaver as a valley, as indeed it is – the valley of the River *Naver* – a Celtic name which was in use prior to the arrival of the Norse and which outlasted their presence (Watson 1905-6. 233; 1926. 44, 47, 72). Sometimes we can surmise that Norse settlers heard existing Celtic names and 'translated' them in such a way as to make them meaningful in their own language (as may possibly have happened in the case of Reay, for instance), but sometimes the Celtic name was either so well established, or so different from Norse, that no attempt was made to translate it in this way, and Strathnaver is a case in point.

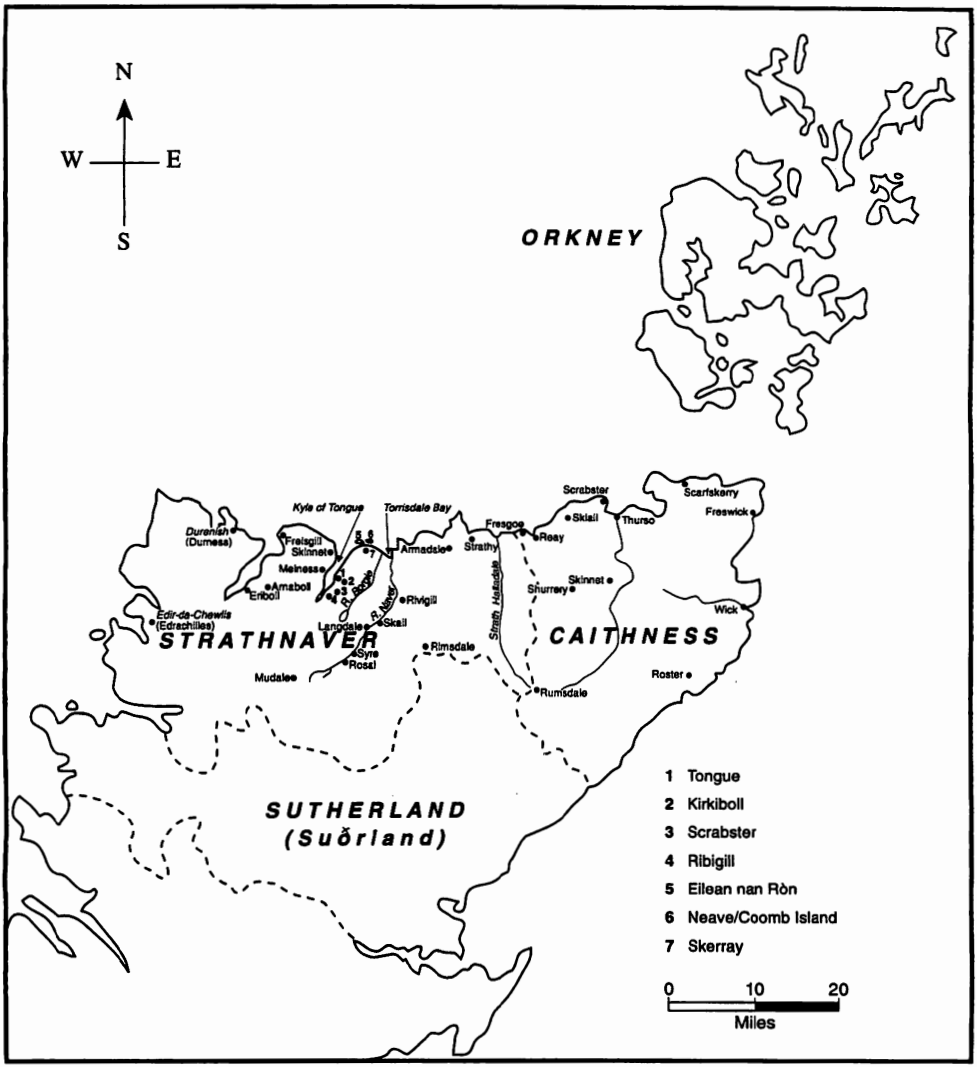

Fig. 2.1 Some key place-names in the 'province' of Strathnaver.

As well as being a reference to a valley, the name Strathnaver had a wider territorial application, as can be seen in the following 17th-century text cited in Macfarlane in translation (1907. II. 453-454):

> STRATHNAVER: This district derives its name from the River Naver, which intersects its centre. It begins where Caithness ends, at the River Hallowdail, and stretches right westwards. Separated from Edir-da-Chewlis by the bay and river of Durenish, it has the wide and open sea on the north, and no land, no island opposite, even in the extreme north. On the south ... Sutherland is next to it, and is separated from it by very high mountains.

It is from this wider land area that I shall select some place-names for discussion [Fig. 2.1], because I propose to concentrate on the Norse rather than the Gaelic names and to suggest that the Norse did settle along the north coast and into the river valleys where these offered scope for habitation, although the extent of the Norse presence is less than in Caithness which was more favoured for settlement. The flatness and fertility of the land in Caithness would have made it more attractive, but it may also have been more easily controlled by the Norse colonists because of its closeness to the centre of power in Orkney.

Many questions still have to be answered about the historical position of Strathnaver within or outwith the Caithness earldom. The linguistic situation in Strathnaver in the medieval period is much less open to argument than its territorial position. By the 13th century the Gaelic language was in the ascendancy, but the fact that Norse names have survived through centuries of Gaelic use suggests that, at some point – probably in the 10th to 12th centuries – Norse inhabitants were sufficient in number and length of stay to leave their place-names behind when they eventually departed – whether literally, through death, or metaphorically, through intermarriage and gradual language change and loss of distinctive Norse identity.

PLACE-NAMES INCORPORATING ON *dalr, völlr*

When examining evidence for Norse settlement, it is traditional to look for those place-name generics which describe farms or other types of human habitation and, of course, they are the most reliable indicators of extensive and prolonged Norse presence. It is my opinion, however, that we should give more weight than we do to topographical naming as evidence of Norse presence in a settled capacity in north and north-west Scotland. I find it difficult to accept that, on the one hand we argue that topographical names are often the oldest names in a region of Norse settlement (eg Fellows-Jensen 1984. 154) and yet, on the other hand, we tend not to cite these as sound evidence of any form of permanent settlement if *bólstaðr*, *setr*, *sætr* and other primary elements indicative of habitation and farming are not to be found in place-names in the vicinity. It is difficult to believe that Norse terms could attach themselves with such tenacity to topographical features if the

Scandinavians were not present, on the land, in numbers large enough and permanent enough to perpetuate the names surrounding their dwellings.

The Norse names along the north coast and in the river valleys from Halladale to Durness are frequently topographical in reference, but I would argue that they should, nevertheless, be seen as indicators of settlement. Norse names are more numerous closer to the coast, as they are in Caithness, although there is a smattering of names at fairly regular intervals along the valleys which run south from the coast, such as Strathnaver itself. The Rivers Naver and Borgie reach the sea at Torrisdale Bay – Torrisdale containing the Norse element *dalr* 'a valley' – and it is certainly interesting that this eminently suitable Norse name did not compete successfully with Strathnaver as a description of the valley at the mouth of which it lies, although the issue is slightly complicated by the fact that the River Borgie also empties into the sea in the same bay. The River Borgie, however, already has a Norse name which applies to its valley.

In neighbouring Caithness, what appears to have happened is that the two Norse settlements at the mouths of the Thurso and Wick Rivers gave their names to the rivers, and if there were earlier Celtic river names, these have been forgotten along with the language in which they may have been coined. The River Borgie, to some extent, follows this pattern in that the generic in its name is ON *borg*, 'a broch' with reference to an earthwork at the side of the river in its lower reaches, although not at its confluence. The fact that something similar did not happen in Strathnaver again highlights the tenacity of this particular Celtic name vis-à-vis a potential Norse alternative As Watson says: 'It rises in *Loch Nabhair*, flows through *Srath Nabhair*, and enters the sea at *Inbhir Nabhair*' (Watson 1926. 47), and has been recorded in variants of this Celtic format since written records began.

There is no doubt that the Norse name Torrisdale, or *Thorisdaill* as it appears in 1565 (*RMS*. IV. 388), was seen to be closely related to the confluence of the River Naver because it is described in a list as follows: 'Invernaver, Thorisdaill, cum salmonum piscaria earundem'. Donald Macaulay suggests the interpretation 'Thor's dale' for Torrisdale and he could be right, although it is impossible to be certain (Macaulay 1982. 283). If he is right, the name forms an interesting parallel with Thurso in Caithness which, as has already been noted, is also situated at the mouth of a river and which appears on record in the form *Þórsá* in the 13th-century *Orkneyinga Saga*. Initial /þ/ was replaced by /t/ in Gaelic but, in the case of Thurso, the original pronunciation would have been preserved in a more lastingly Norse environment. There is some disagreement about the nature of the generic in the name Thurso, to which reference was made in the proceedings of an earlier Scottish Society for Northern Studies Conference (Nicolaisen 1982. 84-85), but all scholars who have discussed the matter are agreed that the specific in the name is Thor.

Other names containing the Norse element *dalr* 'a valley' are scattered along the north coast from Halladale to Armadale to Torrisdale; and in the innermost reaches of several of the valleys running south from the coast there are Norse names such as Rumsdale, Rimsdale and Mudale, which point to

Scandinavian penetration deep into these valleys in search of viable farms. There is also Langdale in Strathnaver itself, although it is deceptive, because it is earlier recorded as *Langwall*; Langdale appears to be the result of a 19th-century switch of generic, perhaps because 'dale' is a word which can fit readily into either Gaelic, Norse or English vocabulary. As such, it renders the modern name more comprehensible to users, which is an impulse that occasionally governs naming and, in particular, the replacement of generics by other, more easily understood generics appropriate to the situation of the name. This explanation, however, begs the question why other names in *-wall* or *-well* in the vicinity did not experience a switch of generic, and there is no ready answer. There are several written references to *Langwall*, dating from as early as 1269 when it is recorded as *Langeval* (*CSR.* 33) but the reference which most clearly identifies it as an alternative to Langdale is: 'There were chapels also ... at Langdale or Langwall on the Naver' (*OPS.* 708). The element which appears as *-wall* in this name is most probably the Norse word *völlr* 'a field', which is quite common in place-names in the Northern Isles.

Another neighbouring place-name, Rosal, is very similar in the early form of its final element, and it seems likely that it too derives from Norse *völlr*. The earliest recorded form of this name is from 1269, when it appears in the combination 'Langeval et Rossewal' (*CSR.* 33). It is also recorded with Langdale in 1542 as *Langewall* and *Rossewall* (*Sutherland Charters*: *OPS.* 711), and again in 1621 as *Longaveall* and *Roseveall* (*RMS.* VIII. 35). One possible source of the specific in *Rossewall/Roseveall* is ON *hross* 'a horse', which is also likely to be the specific in the name Roster in Latheron Parish, Caithness, which was recorded in 1541, and several times thereafter, as Rosbister (*RMS.* III. 561), but the *-bister* form of the original Norse generic *bólstaðr* has been further reduced in the modern name, as often happens in Caithness place-names. There may be other possibilities for the specific in *Rossewall/Roseveall*, but ON *völlr* does often occur in combination with reference to animals.

PLACE-NAMES INCORPORATING ON *skáli, bólstaðr, ærgi, saurr*

Lying to the north of Langdale and Rosal in the valley of the River Naver we find Skail, which is a Norse name that also occurs in Reay Parish in Caithness. Skail (deriving from ON *skáli*) is a place-name which is common in Orkney but rare in Caithness, although it occurs in Reay Parish. Again, we can discern a link between the west side of Caithness and Strathnaver in its occurrence in the Naver valley. In its earliest sense, the term *skáli* referred to a hut or shed put up for temporary use, but the Orkney examples indicate that it refers to a much more permanent and important residence, and that seems to be true of the Caithness example and, I would argue, of the Strathnaver example. A name which survives so effectively in a predominantly Gaelic

linguistic environment bespeaks the importance of the habitation to which it originally referred, and the fact that it appears in written records from the 16th-century in references such as: 'terras de Skaill et Regeboill (extenden. ad 6 lib.), Strathnaverne' (*RMS.* IV. 402), also argues its importance as a settlement. It was also the site of one of the chapels in the valley of the Naver (Pennant [1769] 1979. 326).

Another place-name clearly associated with a chapel, both in terms of the real building and the initial element in the name itself, is Kirkiboll, situated by the Kyle of Tongue: 'There was a chapel at Kirkboll or Kirkiboll, the burialplace of the family Macky, which was standing and was repaired about the year 1630' (*OPS.* 708). The final element of this name, along with many other *-bols*, was scrutinised in a very useful and thought-provoking article by Dr Richard Cox (Cox 1994. 53). I am sorry to have to disagree with him on the interpretation of this name, for which I would suggest ON *kirkja* + *bólstaðr* 'church farm', rather than the *kirkja* + *pollr* 'church (by the) pool or pond', which is favoured by Dr Cox. It is, however, a matter of opinion, because there are no definitive early written references to the name and the reader will, like the writer, have to weigh factors in the balance and reach his or her own conclusion.

Earliest written references to the Strathnaver name are 16th-century and take the forms *Kirkeboll* (1565) (*RMS.* IV. 388) and *Kirkboill* (1583, 1588) (*RMS.* V. 178, 1588). Other references are similar in displaying no hint of a final syllable which might derive from an earlier Norse *bólstaðr* 'a farm'. In the absence of written evidence, Dr Cox relies on the modern Gaelic pronunciation of the name for its etymology, but I would rather turn to parallel place-name evidence in the Northern Isles, which were also colonised by the Norse and where the original Norse names have been more fully preserved because the Norn language survived there for a much longer time and was replaced by another Germanic language, rather than a Celtic language such as Gaelic. *Kirkja* + *bólstaðr* is a common compound in the Northern Isles, particularly in Orkney where numerous examples are recorded (Marwick 1952. 2, 25, 32, 56, 72, 78, 105, 136, 163, 182), but also in Shetland (Jakobsen 1936. 10, 27, 93; MacGregor 1984. 10; Stewart 1987. 54, 55, 56, 58). There are, however, no known examples of *kirkja* + *pollr* 'a pool or pond' in the Northern Isles. The location of Kirkiboll also militates against *pollr* as generic. It is situated at the side of a sea-loch, the Kyle of Tongue, which does not have a particularly narrow neck to give rise to the description *pollr*. With *pollr* as generic one would expect a basin of water with only a narrow access passage to the sea but the Kyle is broad at its mouth, narrowing gradually inland and, in view of this and the other circumstantial evidence from the Northern Isles, I believe that the generic in the name is ON *bólstaðr*.

If that is true of Kirkiboll, the likelihood is that other names ending in *-boll* in the vicinity also derive from *bólstaðr*: ie Arnaboll and Eriboll. There is one puzzling name which I have not successfully identified and that is *Regeboill*, as recorded above, which also appears in the form *Rogeboll*,

1581 (*RMS.* V. 90), *Rigabold*, 1608 (*RMS.* VI. 762), *Regiboll*, 1608 (*RMS.* VI. 790). It is tempting to suggest that the final /d/ of *Rigabold* represents just a hint of a dental cluster following, as in *bólstaðr*, but that is perhaps to read too much into limited information (cf however, the final /d/ of *Kirkebold* in the same document, and of *Kirkebold* in Tiree (*RMS.* V. 510), which is also one of the names discussed by Dr Cox).

The origin of the generic in *Regeboill* is certainly puzzling, but what is even more puzzling is the location of the name. It clearly had territorial significance in the 16th and early 17th centuries and yet it seems to vanish thereafter, unlike Skail in Strathnaver with which it is often cited in legal documents. Has the name simply been lost along with the settlement to which it applied, or could it be that the name we are looking for is Ribigill at the side of the Kyle of Tongue? Another candidate could be Rivigill in the valley of the Naver, situated close by Skail, but we can probably discount the latter because it is recorded as *Rewigill* in a list of Naver valley names, which includes Skail, whereas *Regeboll* appears a little later in the same list among names of places lying at the side of the Kyle of Tongue, as follows (*OPS.* 710; *RSS.* VIII. 168-9):

> In 1530 King James V granted to William Sutherland of Duffois the nonentry and other dues of the lands of Galvell and Bellinaglis, with the fishing in the water of Halladal, the lands of Strathy with fishing of the same, the lands of Armadall and Far with the fishing, the lands of Rennewe, Skelpik, Rewigill, Syre, Skale, Skarray, Allanye, Dilrit, Catak, and the lands of Towng, Kirkkeboll, Scrabustir, Regeboll, Kennesett, Elyngiell, Kinloch, Mellenis, Latirlioll, Hop with the fishing of the same ... .

Rivigill in the valley of the Naver (or Rifa-gil as it is recorded on the Ordnance Survey 1:50,000 map) is now used with reference to a hill, a loch and a burn flowing down towards the River Naver and the generic is ON *gil* 'a deep narrow glen with a stream at the bottom' – although the deepness of the glen is not particularly important if the landscape is generally flat when, by contrast, a slight indentation can assume gigantic proportions, as in Caithness where the element *gil* occurs quite frequently. The specific may possibly be ON *rif* 'a rib, or ridge', but one cannot be certain. Various early forms of this name and others in Strathnaver are recorded in an interesting article by Alex Morrison (Morrison 1987. 14-15). I note that he records *Rigibald* as an early form of Ruigh na Sealbhaig (shieling or slope where sorrel grew) but that seems unlikely, not only because of the great difference between the written forms but also because the records suggest that *Rigibald/Regeboll* – wherever it was situated – was more significant than a shieling.

If Ribigill – the small farm beside the Kyle of Tongue with no clearly marked 'gill' in the vicinity – is what the map-makers now give us in lieu of the earlier *Regeboill*, it gives us pause to think about the pitfalls and traps awaiting the place-name researcher. Unfortunately, I have not heard a present-day pronunciation of the name and, therefore, cannot say whether or not the oral form differs from the written form. Whatever the history of its

development, however, we can at least be reasonably certain that Ribigill is a name of Norse origin.

Another very debatable name is Syre, which now applies to a settlement and a loch in the Naver Valley, next to Norse Langdale and Skail. I have no firm suggestion to make for the etymology of this name but it brings me to a theme which I should like to explore further, and that is the marked similarity between Norse naming in the wider area of Strathnaver, and that in Reay and Thurso Parishes on the west side of Caithness, in particular. I have already mentioned that Skail is a name which occurs in both Reay and the valley of the Naver. I suspect that the specific in the name Syre may derive from the same source as that in Shurrery in Reay Parish and, if I am correct, then it is likely that both Syre and Shurrery, as well as Skail, are of Norse origin.

Shurrery is recorded frequently from the 16th-century onwards – e.g. Showrarne, 1558 (*RSS*); Schourari, 1619 (*RMS*. VII .725); Schurarie, 1640 (*Retours*). Because of the word order in the compound, we can assume that the final element is most probably ON *ærgi* 'a shieling' – itself a borrowing from Gaelic *airigh* – which is quite common in Gaelic-influenced parts of present-day Caithness. For the specific, I would tentatively suggest ON *saurr* 'mud', which is frequently used in place-names, with reference to the swampy nature of the soil in the vicinity of any name which contains it. In Iceland, for instance, the name *Saur-bær* is common. The reference would be to the swampy ground around Loch Shurrery and Loch Syre. The generic in Syre is problematic, but it could be that this name also contains *ærgi*, further abbreviated due to earlier and more long-lasting influence from the Gaelic language. The settlement at Syre appears in written records from the 16th-century onwards – e.g. Shyre, 1570 (*Sutherland Charters* : *OPS*. 713); Syr, 1583 (*RMS*. V. 178); Schyre, 1608 (*RMS*. VI. 762). Like Shurrery, it displays some of the palatalisation of the initial consonant which could result from Gaelic influence.

While the above suggestions regarding the etymology of Syre and Shurrery rely much too heavily upon supposition, there can be no question about the exact parallel between some of the other Norse names which occur in Strathnaver and names in Thurso and Reay parishes. Beside the Kyle of Tongue, for example, one finds the name Scrabster to parallel Scrabster beside Thurso. The Thurso name is well documented from the 13th-century *Orkneyinga Saga* onwards, where it is recorded as *Skarabólstaðr* (in which the specific is either ON *skári* 'a young sea-mew' or *Skári*, the related personal name). The Scrabster beside the Kyle of Tongue, on the other hand, has not been so prominent in the settlement history of the area and now refers to a deserted site, although it was more significant in the 16th and 17th centuries when it appears in the same form as its more well-known counterpart in Caithness – e.g. Scrabuster, 1583 (*RMS*. V. 178). I believe, in fact, that the Strathnaver name has retained the *-buster* ending in this instance because the people who applied it and used it were very familiar with the Thurso name and, therefore, the subsequent Gaelic influence was not strong enough to lead to an alteration in the name.

PLACE-NAMES INCORPORATING ON *gil, vík, gjá, skínandi, sker*

Another place-name which is reminiscent of names further to the east is Fresgill (sometimes Freisgill), by the side of Loch Eriboll. There are parallels in Caithness in Reay Parish, where Fresgoe is a coastal name (although Sandside Harbour is now built where Fresgoe was), and in Canisbay Parish on the east coast where there is an attested Norse settlement at Freswick (Morris & Rackham 1992, 43-102). The specific in each of these names could be ON *fress* 'a tom-cat', with reference to a wildcat, or it could even be ON *fyrsa* 'to gush or stream in torrents', although the metathesis has then to be explained. As Dr Barbara Crawford has rightly pointed out in a personal comment, it is difficult to accept that *fyrsa* should develop into Fres-, when ON *fors* 'a waterfall' remains nearby, without metathesis, as Forss.

The etymology of Fresgoe and Freswick may be debatable but, whatever the nature of the specific, fresh water would have been an important prerequisite of permanent settlement – which there certainly was at Freswick and in the vicinity of Fresgoe. One could speculate that Fresgill, likewise, might be situated in an area which has something of interest to offer archaeologists. The cave of Fresgill, which one assumes is the eponymous *gil*, is described in hyperbolic terms in the *Old Statistical Account* (*OSA*. 475), and the Norse might well have been similarly drawn to it:

> ... *the Great Cave of Fraisgill* ... [which] is about 50 feet high, and 20 feet wide at the entrance, and grows narrow by degrees, till at last a man can scarcely creep in it. Its sides are variegated with a thousand colours, which are lost in each other with a delicacy and softness that no art can imitate. Upon entering the cave, the mind is impressed with a pleasing sort of awe ... .

Each of the names – Freswick, Fresgoe and Fresgill – is topographical in reference, deriving from ON *vík* 'a bay', *gjá* 'a geo or steep-sided inlet of the sea' and *gil* 'a gully'. It is, of course, to some extent, chance which has led to archaeological digs being undertaken and finds being made in or near two places in Caithness where the names are topographical in reference, rather than habitative; but these names with their attested settlements should be weighed in the balance when considering whether or not topographical names should be seen as indicators of settlement.

At the other side of the Kyle of Tongue – itself a Norse name deriving from *tangi* 'a spit of land' – one finds Skinnet which, like Scrabster, is a name which is much better known from the Thurso area where it is situated in the valley of the River Thurso. The Thurso valley name is recorded from the time of Bishop Gilbert: ' ... tres ecclesias parochiales, videlicet, Olrich, Donotf, Canenisbi, separatim, adjunximus ecclesiam de Scynend ... ' (*CSR*. 16). Further references to the name are made in 1500 (Skenand) (*RSS*. ii. fol. 23); in 1561, 1566 & 1567 (Skenand), and in 1620 (Skynand) (*OPS*. 756-757). W.F.H. Nicolaisen has suggested an interpretation which identifies the name as Norse and relates it to the river beside which it lies (ON *skínandi*

'the shining one') (Nicolaisen 1982. 84), and it seems a very good suggestion in the context of the Thurso valley name. But what of Skinnet at the head of the Kyle of Tongue? There are no neighbouring rivers which could be described as 'shining', and I have found no early references to the name in the sources used for other names in the area. One reasonable conclusion which could be drawn is that there is some direct connection between the two Skinnets, at least in terms of the people who named them and possibly in terms of land ownership or use.

We must also take into account the possibility that, in the absence of early forms to prove the contrary, the name is of Gaelic origin (the map now records Skinnet and Ard Skinid), but it is no easier to suggest a realistic etymology from Gaelic than it is from Norse. I would favour Norse origin, and would suggest that the Gaelic name Ard Skinid, which means 'height of Skinnet', is a later coinage which incorporates an earlier Norse habitative name in a hybrid compound in which Gaelic *àrd* becomes the new generic. That the Norse were present on the west side of the Kyle of Tongue is confirmed by the name Tongue itself, which has already been mentioned, and by the name Melness – ON *melr* + *nes* 'sandy headland' (*melr* usually relates to an area of bent-grass growing in sandy soil) – which occurs in several early documents from the 14th-century onwards. It is recorded in the *Caithness and Sutherland Records*, for example, in a Charter dated 1379, confirming the gift by King Robert II 'to Farquhar, our physician, of the lands of Melness ... ' (*CSR*. 168).

It is certainly true that, when the Norse were giving names to places, they were using an onomastic vocabulary which was simultaneously wide in its range of possibilities and yet narrow, in that elements – particularly generics – were used repeatedly if appropriate to the situation. For example, there are many instances of ON *sker* 'an isolated rock in the sea' being used both as the common dialect term 'skerry' and as the first element in a place-name in a situation where there is a neighbouring rock or island in the sea, just as there is at Scarfskerry (the specific is ON *skarfr* 'the green cormorant') in Dunnet Parish in Caithness, or at Skerray which is a settlement on the coast between Torrisdale Bay and the Kyle of Tongue, opposite the two islands which are now known as Eilean nan Ròn and Neave or Coomb Island.

CONCLUSION

Whether the similarities I have been pointing to between Strathnaver names and names from Caithness have to do with this general tendency towards replication in naming or, as I believe, to direct links between the Norse settlers along the north coast, may never be proven. Common sense argues that the latter is true, although it cannot tell us when the links occurred or how they functioned. For instance, were the Norse who settled in Strathnaver or by the Kyle of Tongue contemporary with the initial colonisation of Caithness from Norway or Orkney? Or were they the sons and daughters of people who had settled in the vicinity of Thurso and Reay in the first instance

and who, therefore, looked with affection to their earlier homes for inspiration in naming new homes of their own? We shall perhaps never know, but I hope that archaeologists working in the area may provide at least some of the answers.

In the meantime, I believe that, rather than being influenced in our thinking by modern county divisions, it is useful to think of the whole of the north mainland of Scotland, from Caithness westwards, as an area which the Norse found attractive for settlement and which they could easily have penetrated from the Atlantic by boat, until their route was blocked by high mountains to the south. The evidence of the names suggests that, while settlement was undoubtedly more concentrated in the east, for reasons already cited, it also extended westwards into the wide area known as Strathnaver; and it does seem reasonable to propose that the Strathnaver settlement occurred in or very shortly after the period when colonisation was taking place in Caithness, immediately opposite Orkney. I am conscious of straying into the domain of the historian, but I see no good reason to assume that Strathnaver was not part of the Caithness earldom.

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