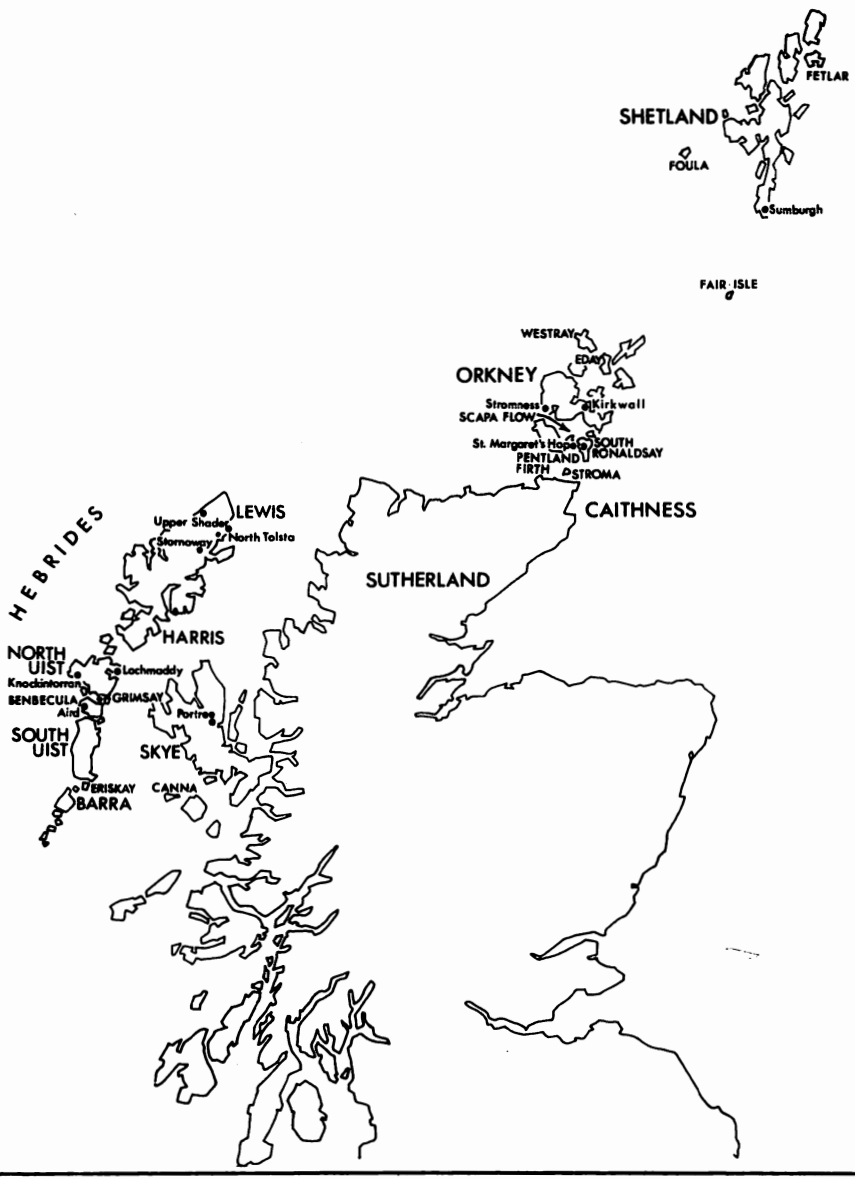


Fig. 9.1. Northern Scotland, Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles — location map.

FISHING THE SELLAG: HAND NETTING TRADITIONS FROM CAITHNESS, THE NORTHERN AND WESTERN ISLES

John R. Baldwin

INTRODUCTION

The prehistoric peoples of Northern Scotland and the Islands certainly ate fish as part of their diet. Evidence is sparse, however, and suggests only marginal exploitation of an apparently most abundant resource by peoples who must nonetheless have been skilled enough in seamanship.

At the same time, analysis of fish bone deposits suggests that the requirement varied quite considerably during the occupation in Shetland, for instance, of Bronze Age and Iron Age Jarlshof (Platt 1932-33. 135-6; Hamilton 1956. 57, 59, 87; Goodlad 1971. 42-8). And as archaeological recovery techniques are refined, we may expect to discover larger amounts of fish bone on site — instance the plentiful remains of large cod and saithe identified in 1972-73 at Neolithic Skara Brae in Orkney (Clarke 1976. 22-3).

Such discoveries will inevitably modify understanding of prehistoric economy and diet, though without destroying the notion of fluctuating reliance on sea-based resources — fluctuations that in later periods can increasingly be substantiated from oral and documentary sources, as well as from archaeological evidence.

For the Scandinavian period in the Scottish north, evidence from sites such as Jarlshof and Underhoull in Shetland (Hamilton 1956. 143, 215; Small 1966) suggests the considerably greater importance of fishing around the mid 12th century than during the earlier periods of Norse settlement — material evidence that may be supplemented by written evidence from the Sagas. For in Orkneyinga Saga the urgency of the old man who took Earl Rognvald out into the Sumburgh Roost in 1146 suggests a critical reliance on fishing for survival:

> ' "Would you like me to go out rowing with you, man?" asked the stranger in the cowl. "I would indeed", said the farmer, "but I want a share for the use of my boat. I've a lot of children at home and I must do all I can for them." '
>
> (ch. 85; Pálsson & Edwards 1978. 142)

Reliance may not have been so great in more fertile Caithness, but in the absence as yet of adequate evidence, it may be supposed that here too an increasing population was placing a greater strain on resources. Certainly

dense cakes of fish bone — of cod, ling and haddock — have recently been discovered at Late Norse Freswick (Batey above).

Since fishing clearly was pursued, how was it pursued? Again evidence is scanty. Egil's Saga tells of Grimm and his housecarls often going to the winter and spring herring fisheries along the Norwegian coast (Green 1893. 2, 27), but whether or not they used nets is unclear. Nets were known to the Norsemen — reference the Havamål, where Loki burned a net he had made, changed into a fish to escape the Gods, but was caught when the Gods found the mark of the meshes in the ash and made a new net to trap him (cf. Goodlad 1971. 59). But otherwise Saga references are not explicit and, by and large, suggest only handline fishing. In Laxdæla Saga, in Breidafjord, Iceland, 'the fish were biting well that day' for three men in a boat (ch. 14; Magnusson & Pálsson 1969. 70); in Orkneyinga Saga, Earl Rognvald and the farmer:

> 'rowed out beyond Sumburgh Head and round Horse Island. There were strong currents where they lay, and large whirlpools in which they were supposed to keep moving while they fished from the current. The cowled man sat in the bow pulling against the current while the old man tried to fish...'
>
> (ch. 85; Pálsson & Edwards 1978. 142)

And some ten years earlier, in 1136:

> 'Uni chose three young Shetlanders to come with him in a six-oared boat with provisions and fishing-tackle and rowed over to Fair Isle... Uni got lodgings there and his three so-called sons started fishing, but he stayed at home looking after the catch.'
>
> (ch. 69; Pálsson & Edwards 1978. 119)

Several stone sinkers from Norse sites in Shetland could have weighted nets, though equally well looms or even gates; the majority of weights, however, are clearly line weights. By their shape, some suggest a line towed behind a boat in tideways — as presumably off Fair Isle and Sumburgh; others a direct drop to the sea-bed from a stationary boat (Goodlad 1971. 58-9).

Such fisheries, with hook and line for large saithe, cod and ling are still pursed in these northern waters for domestic use. But there is also considerable ethnological and linguistic evidence to suggest a long tradition of exploiting the plentiful, tasty and nourishing tiny young of the saithe. This evidence covers not only Caithness, Orkney and Shetland, but equally the north and north-west mainland coasts of Scotland and the Western Isles. But on what scale? And how long-established is the practice?

For whilst there is evidence from Norse period sites confirming the presence of large white and grey fish, evidence is notably absent for small inshore and presumably even more accessible fish — particularly the young saithe. Were these tiny fish caught? Were their bones too small and insubstantial to survive or register as archaeological evidence? Were the fish rather eaten whole, just as to-day we will eat sprats, pilchards, sardines and brisling?

These are not questions to which definitive answers can be given. What this paper seeks to do, however, is threefold — to describe equipment and

techniques used historically in the north for the catching of the smallest saithe; to consider the structure and origin of the equipment; and to examine the terminology applied both to the equipment and to the fish concerned. Caithness is a good starting point for this survey — a Caithness set in the fuller context of the north and west [Figs. 9.1; 9.2].

EQUIPMENT AND TECHNIQUES FOR FISHING THE YOUNG SAITHE

In 1793-94, as part of their contributions to Sir John Sinclair's monumental *Statistical Account of Scotland,* the respective ministers of Wick, Dunnet and Reay parishes [Fig. 9.3] saw fit to comment not just upon the value of young saithe to the coastal inhabitants of Caithness, but upon the ways in which they were caught:

> '*sillocks,* a small fish caught with a *rod* from the rocks in such quantities, as to be sold for a penny an hundred.' (Wick parish — Sutherland 1794.X.8)

> 'In harvest too, amazing shoals of small fish, called *sellacks* (which are no other than the young of saiths, and some species of cod), frequent the shores, and are often taken in a small *sweep net* to the quantity of several bushels at once.'
> (Dunnet parish — Jolly 1794.XI.243-58)

Fig. 9.2. Brims Ness, between Thurso and Reay — typical of the rocky, shelving, turbulent coastline around Caithness. 1969.

Fig. 9.3. Parishes of Caithness and Sutherland.

> 'A sort of small fish, of the size of trouts, named *sillacks*, supposed to be the fry of large fishes, are taken in great numbers among the rocks of the shore with a *pock-net*, having some broken crabs cast into it for baits.'
>
> (Reay parish — MacKay 1793. VII. 570-79)

To this record may be added the comments of the schoolmaster in Portree, Skye, who noted that, use of the rod notwithstanding:

> 'The best and most expeditious way of catching the *cuddie*, when it is in greater plenty on the coast, is with a sort of creel, called a *jabh*...' (Campbell 1795. XVI. 150)

Sweep Nets

Of the methods mentioned, *sweep nets* are little recorded for the capture of *sellags* — the usual Caithness spelling of the term — and where used probably reflect localised conditions.

It is debateable whether the Rev. J. Morison was referring to a similar net in his account for Canisbay parish in 1793:

> 'The shoals of young fish that pour into every creek and bay, about the beginning of September are such, that a boll of them may be caught at a few hauls in the course of one evening...' (Morison 1793.VIII.142-69)

— this sounds more like a pock-net. But across the Pentland Firth, *sillock-*

sweeping continued into the present century at St. Margaret's Hope, South Ronaldsay [Fig. 9.4]. Moreover, a parallel, confirming that an actual net was not absolutely essential, was recorded in the parish of Stornoway, Lewis, in the mid 19th century:

> 'In harvest season, about the end of October, natives, and in calm weather, used to repair at night to the shore, with blankets sewn end to end; and at the mouths of the rivers, where it is shallow water, they cross and drag with them the chain of blankets. They beat the water to disturb the young fry, which are very numerous; and hauling the blankets like a net against the stream, they drive the cuddie fish to the sandy beach. In one night, by the haul of six blankets, twenty four barrels of cuddies have been caught...' (*NSA*. 1833.XIV. 133)

It is likely that sweep, stell or drag nets used to catch sellags were in fact 'borrowed' from local coastal or river fisheries for herring or salmon. Sweep-netting for salmon is still practised in season in coastal Caithness — instance Berriedale, where close by the river mouth a coble takes one end out from the shore, round and back to the shore. In earlier times, men waded out with the net, as illustrated for the south side of Dunnet Bay on Wm. Aberdeen's 1772 plan of the Castlehill estate [Fig. 9.5]. And a related technique was employed in the Water of Thurso where, below the fixed *crues*, men would take a net broad enough to cross the river, drag it down the pool and up to the mouth of a small stone-built enclosure, or *stem,* where other fishermen extracted the enclosed fish with a smaller (? landing-) net. Brand's description (1701.150) mentions that 18-20 men went abreast behind the net and during dragging kept it down close to the river bed with long staves — to prevent the salmon slipping through.

The advantage of a sweep net over a rod and line for fishing sellags is

Fig. 9.4. Sillock-sweeping at St Margaret's Hope, South Ronaldsay, Orkney. Early 20th century postcard.

self-evident — a much bigger potential catch at each haul. Its apparently infrequent use is perhaps explained by the rocky and turbulent waters well-liked by the fish and present around much of the north and west, as much as by the thought that relatively few of those needing to catch sellags would likely have owned such a nèt — which would in any case have required co-operative forays.

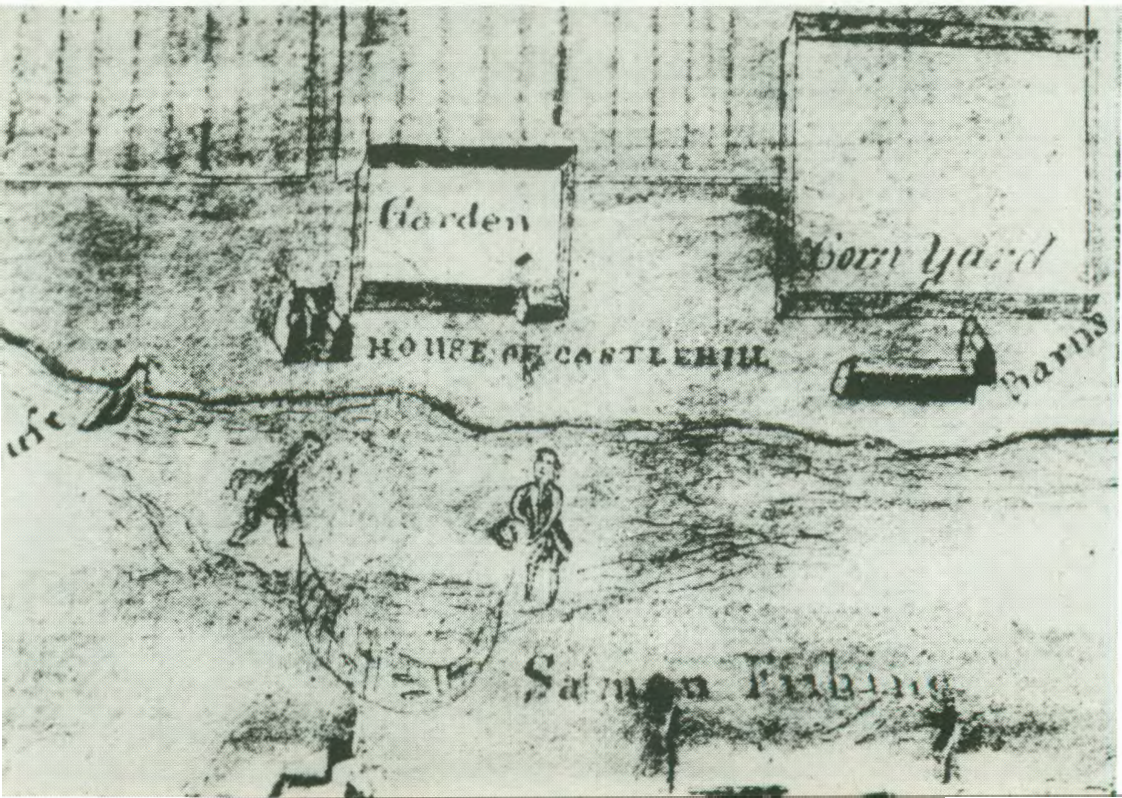
Rod, Line and Hook

By contrast, the use of *rod, line* and *hook* has long been very common in all parts of the north and west. It was the normal way of catching Caithness *cuddins* — small saithe older than *sellags* and which were taken during the summertime in areas such as Dunnet Bay, mainly in shallow water or near to the shore (Jolly 1794.XI. 243-58; J.S. Calder 1970).

In Shetland, as in parts of Caithness and the south isles of Orkney, young saithe in their second year were termed *piltocks* or *peltags* and it is clear that stronger rods and tackle were necessary to catch them in summer and autumn than to catch *sillocks* in winter (Edmonston & Saxby 1888. 301) [c.f. Fig. 9.10].

The study of fishing-lines and hooks, whether or not attached to rods, is an important area for ethnological investigation. It is enough in this paper to say that for sellag-fishing, the lines were generally made from several

Fig. 9.5. Sweeping for salmon on the south side of Dunnet Bay — from Wm. Aberdeen's plan of the Castlehill Estate, 1772. The *noust* (ON *naust* 'boat lair') was later to be replaced by the flagstone harbour of Castlehill.



strands of hemp and attached to a reel-less rod of about the same length by a fail-safe device securing the line to the rod in the event of the tip of the rod breaking off. In other words. the line was tied to the tip of the rod but also some 24in. or so (61cm) down from the tip.

The rod might be made from rowan or from Norway pine, latterly from bamboo. Generally just one hook was attached to the horse-hair cast and trimmed with some kind of lure or bait — perhaps a white feather or hair from a cow, dog, cat, swan, seagull, hen... For sellags, even bent pins might be used; or a small hook with the barb flattened so as to make it easier to take the fish off the hook (Edmonston & Saxby 1888.298; Campbell 1795. XVI. 149).

According to an anonymous 'Gentleman' in ?1750:

> '...a Boy of Nine or Ten Years of Age will take a Couple of Fishing Rods and go down to the Sea-side, set himself down upon the Point of a Rock, and in less than an Hour, he will catch as many small Fish as will serve twenty People.' (?1750.23)

Forty-five or so years later, September to March:

> '...50 to 100 men and boys may be seen catching them [*sillocks*] in good weather, either with bait or fly, in boats, or along the quays, in the harbour of Stromness.' (Clouston 1795.437)

Rod and line therefore could be used either from the shore or from a small boat close in to the land, and many stances — often referred to as *craigseats* — are still known where the fishing was good (c.f. Fenton 1978.533).

Hand Nets

The main purpose of this study, however, is to examine different kinds of hand net associated with the fishing of the youngest saithe, and to explore their cultural background. Such nets may be divided into two basic types — 'free-swinging' hand nets where the net hangs at the end of a rope attached to a pole, and 'fixed-shaft' hand nets where the net is attached directly to the pole. Most operated on the dip-net principle — but not all.

A 'free-swinging' hand net is here generally termed a *pock* or *pock-net;* a 'fixed-shaft' hand net, a *tàbh* — unless it be a conventional landing net as used in e.g. salmon or herring fisheries. Local variants are indicated as they occur, notably in Gaelic-speaking areas.

Pocks

(i) Lobster Rings:

It may appear somewhat contrary immediately to turn away from the fishing of sellags to the fishing of lobsters, but it is here that the closest parallels are found in Scotland for the free-swinging pock-nets used to take young saithe. Available evidence confirms the existence of such lobster *nets* in the north, most particularly in Orkney, northern Caithness and northern Sutherland.

Brief mention of the equipment features in descriptions of the Orkney parishes of Orphir and Stronsay/Eday (Liddell 1797. 399-400; Simpson

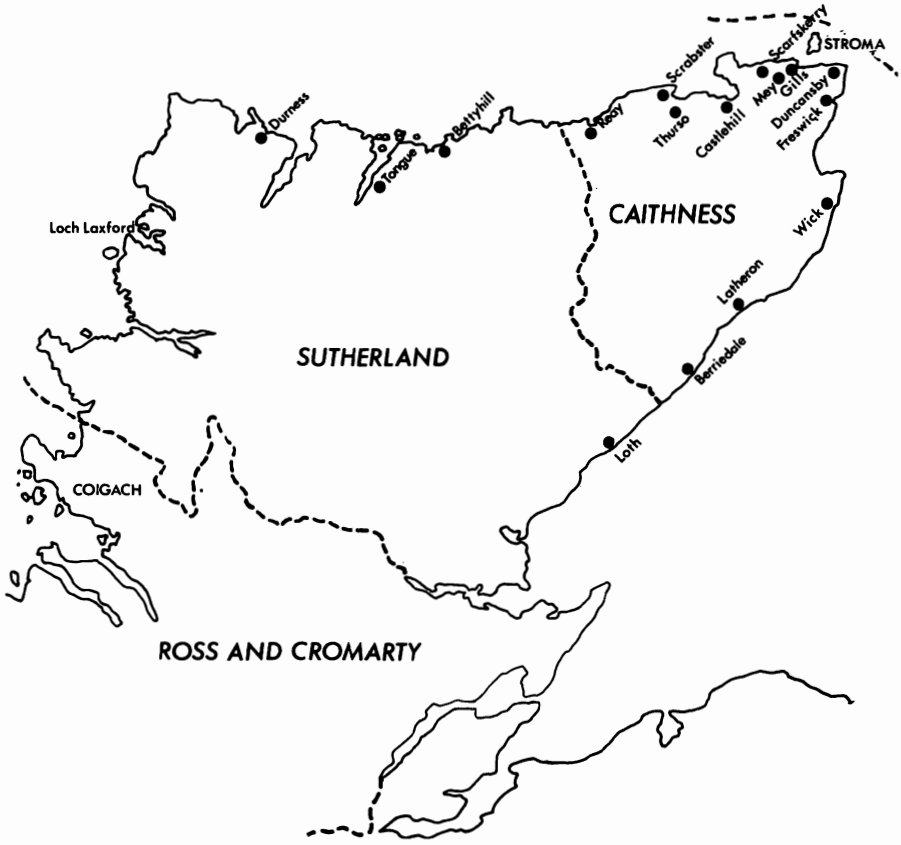


Fig. 9.6. Principle locations in Caithness and Sutherland referred to in the text.

1841. 162-3), but by far the most detailed is that from Durness, out west from Caithness along the north Sutherland coast:

> 'The lobster fishing commences in May and is carried on with little intermission till August. Six boats of fourteen feet keel were employed last season, each boat having two men, and being furnished with twenty or more nets inclosed in circular iron cylindrical hoops or rings of two and a-half feet diameter; a piece of herring or gray fish being tied in the centre of the mesh for bait. The nets are cast into the sea within a few yards of the shore by one of the men, while the other rows forward; and they are raised in about an hour after. This is continued from sunset to sunrise. When a lobster is caught, the large claws are fastened together by a strong packing thread, — otherwise, by the muscular strength of their claws, they would soon destroy each other. When thus secured, they are conveyed in the morning to the perforated floating chest, until they are called for weekly by the welled smacks.'(Findlater 1834. XV. 99)

This account is virtually identical to descriptions collected in recent years of lobster rings used in Westray, Eday and South Ronaldsay (Orkney) and in Skarfskerry and Stroma (Caithness) [see Figs. 9.1; 9.3; 9.6 for locations]. Diameters vary from 18in to 24in (46cm - 61cm), perhaps to 36in (92cm) at Loch Laxford in north-west Sutherland; depths from 6in to

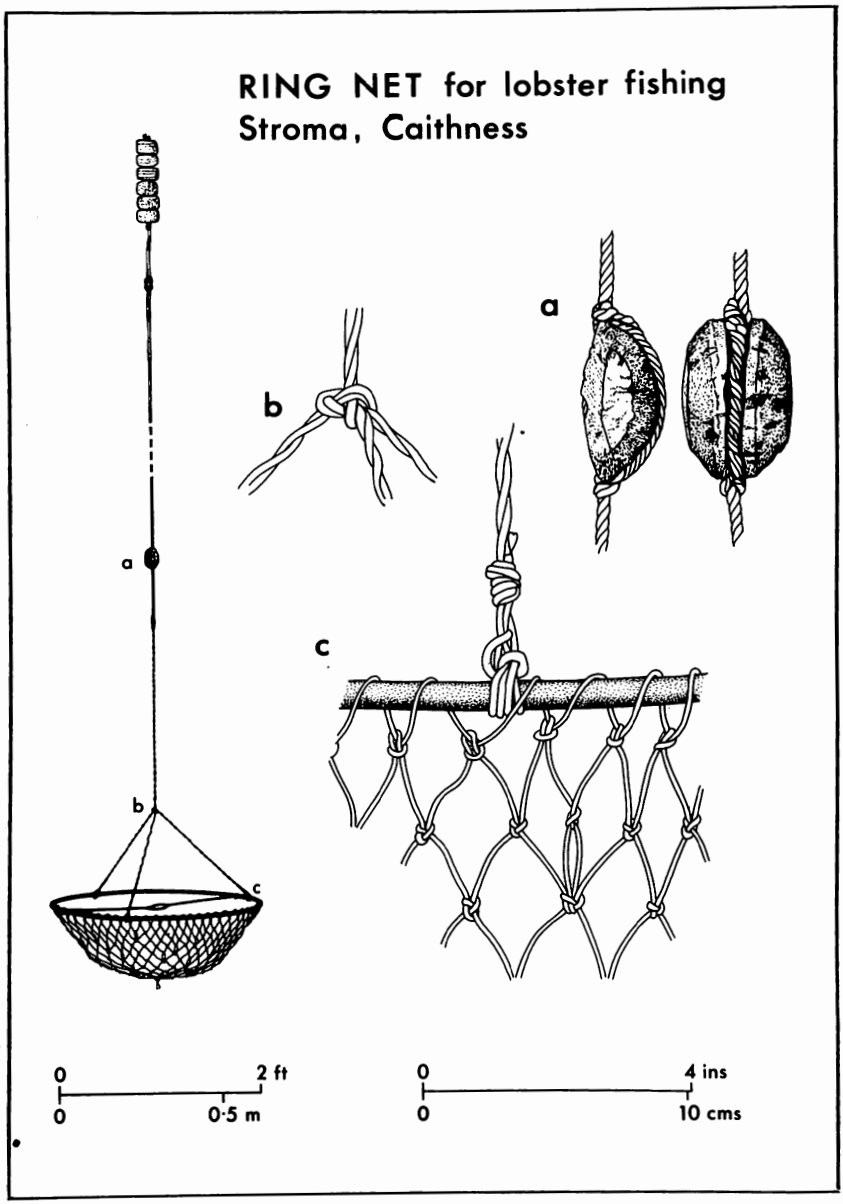


Fig. 9.7. A *lobster-ring* from Stroma, Caithness — replica made by Malcolm Simpson, Thurso.

24in (15.2cm - 61cm) (A. Bruford 1973; D. MacKenzie 1974; A. MacAskill 1974). But in use, techniques were more or less identical. On Stroma, for instance [Figs. 9.7; 9.8] bait was fixed in the middle of a line spanning the hoop, and the nets — with floats attached to the top of the rope — were set

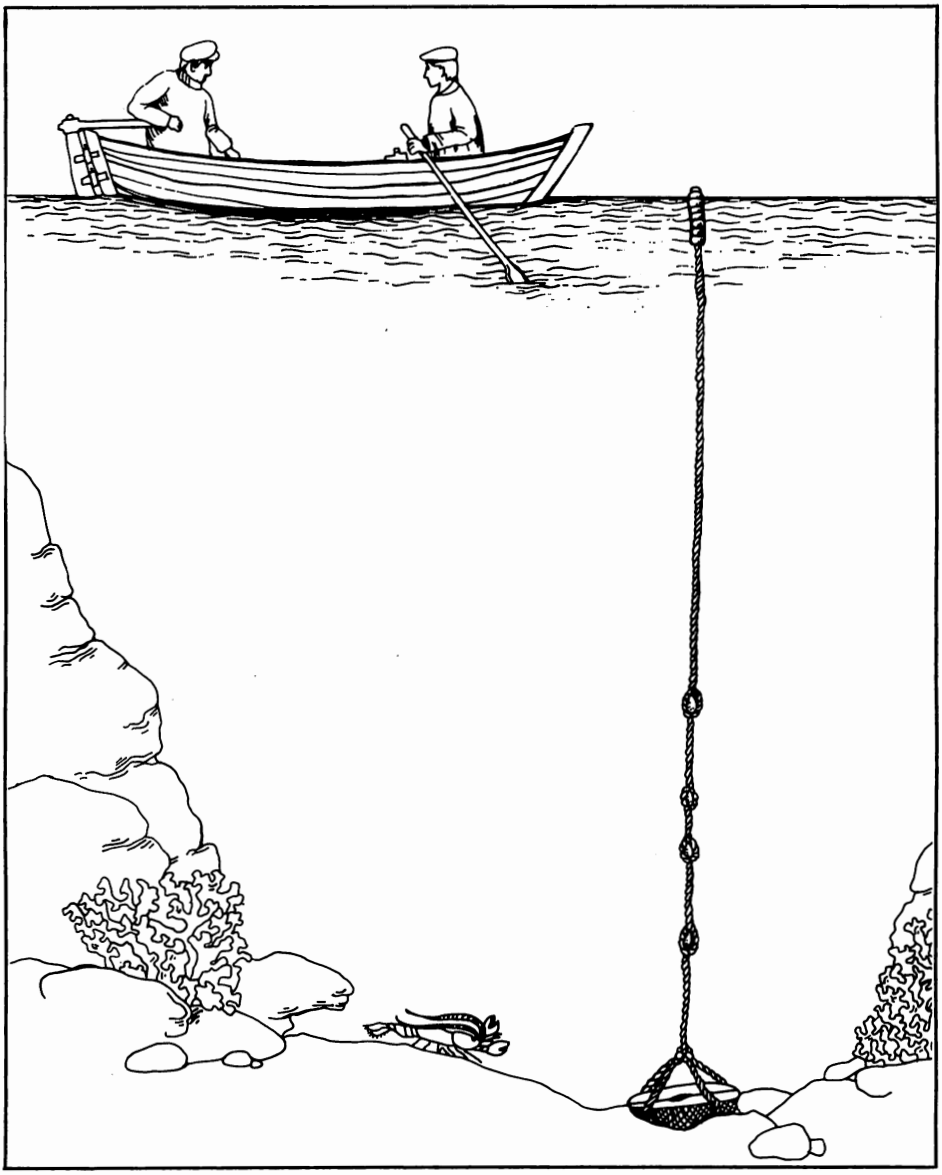


Fig. 9.8. Fishing with a *lobster-ring* — reconstruction of a Stroma technique, based on oral evidence.

singly from a boat (perhaps 30 or 40 to each boat) and hauled every half hour or so (M. Simpson 1970).

During the present century, such rings seem never to have been used exclusively. On Stroma, the *lapster-clap* certainly survived (an iron hook attached to the end of a wooden stick), and a *scummer* or landing net was occasionally used — both of them amongst the rocks around the low tide mark. And not surprisingly, modern *creels* were also used. *Rings* tended to be preferred in poor weather, often set from the rocks when use of a boat and creels was ill-advised. To quote Malcolm Simpson (1970):

> 'I have seen the lopster ring used but not for regular fishing, there was plenty on the Island when I was young we used them for hoops running to the school it always helped to take us home quicker.'!

There was a move to revive use of the lobster *hoop* on Westray in the 1930s — the only place seemingly where *ring* was not the usual term (A. Bruford 1973). But whilst now virtually obsolete at sea, rings continued in use for recapturing lobsters in commercial ponds where they were stored prior to shipment or airlifting to market — Bernera Beg in Lewis is one example, Scrabster another.

Just when the new creels, as opposed to rings, were first introduced into northern Scotland is uncertain — probably around the early 19th century (Fenton 1978. 544). In Duffus, Moray, in the early 1790s:

> 'It is said that no lobster traps were ever before seen on this coast. If this be true, it shows how long mechanical inventions are of becoming universal. So little are the people here accustomed to mechanical operations that after several fruitless attempts, they have not yet been able to imitate with success this simple invention.'
>
> (Anon 1793.VIII.391)

— though arguably this 'simple invention' could have been an open ring, rather than a closed creel.

But creels were clearly in evidence on the east coast of Ross-shire, at Cove in the parish of Nigg, as early as the 1780s:

> 'A basket... nearly a cylinder, cutting a good section off for a base, is formed of plain wood, in slits, for the bottom, and of hoops for the curve, netted over. From the ends the net-work is wrought inward into a narrow entrance for the fish, bait being hung within to entice it.' (Cruden 1793.VII. 206-7)

Small versions were used for lobsters; large versions, each costing 10/6, for crabs — to which the local inhabitants 'attribute the cloathing of their families after the hardships of 1783, and some following years.' We may suppose that the *boxes* 'frequently' — but, by implication, not exclusively — used to take the abundant lobsters around Latheron's coastline in the later 1830s were also a kind of creel (Davidson 1840. XV.104).

However, mid-19th century references make it clear that earlier fat years — 60,000 from Duffus to London in ?1792 (Anon. 1793.VIII.391) — had been superceded by lean years. Off Loth:

> 'Lobsters and crabs are, at present, very numerous, but the former were so severely fished some years ago, by fishing smacks, for the London market, that it was, for some time thereafter, thought that the lobster had been exterminated along the coast.'
>
> (Ross 1841.XV.195-6)

Off Latheron too there were again many lobsters by 1840 'but this trade is little attended to, as the herring trade has been the all-engrossing business for many years back' (Davidson 1840. XV. 104; see also e.g. Anderson 1841.XV.22).

In other words, in those areas where herring fishing became well-established and presumably more profitable, the English lobster companies' activities apparently proved less attractive to the local inhabitants, and it is perhaps no mere coincidence that references to lobster fishing with rings, as to sellag-pocking, are found primarily along the north coast of Caithness and Sutherland, outside the principle areas of herring fishing. It is likely that the English smacks were themselves fishing lobsters off e.g. eastern Caithness and around Orkney, using creels; and that they supplemented their catch both locally and in further-off and less well-endowed districts, by purchasing from part-time fishermen using mainly netted rings.

What is clear is that lobster fishing in any methodical or regular fashion only began in the north in the late 18th century as markets opened up in the south, and it was the English companies referred to that were presumably responsible for its development:

> 'The bays of Mey, Gills and Dungisbay abound in lobsters to a great degree. — A few boats at Mey, for the behoof of Messrs. Selby and Co of London, have been employed for the first time, in this branch of the industry, this season; and, from the success they have had, it is to be hoped, this species of fishing will soon become general around the coast.' (Morison 1793. VIII.16)

During the season — roughly springtime to harvest and not above six months in the year — the English smacks collected live lobsters once a week (often more frequently in later years) and carried them alive in their holds to London, in large wells filled with seawater. Some 15 smacks a season visited Scapa Flow around 1797, buying directly off the fishermen at 1d - 1½d apiece. This gave each fisherman a clear profit of L7 Sterling over the season (Liddell 1797.XIX. 399). Some eight years later, the unit price had risen to 2d and 'a good fisherman will gain, even at this low rate, ten pounds in the summer' (Barry 1805.387).

Buying and transporting live lobsters certainly proved successful for the English. About 100 ten-man boats were fishing in Orkney by 1805, and over the next 40 or so years the companies consolidated their operations in both Orkney and Caithness. And gradually they explored further west, along the north and north-west mainland coasts, to the Highland parishes of Farr, Durness and Edderachillis (Mackenzie 1834.XV.70; Findlater 1834.XV.99; Tulloch 1840. XV. 125).

We have touched on the likely origin of the closed lobster *creel,* but what of the open lobster *ring* or *net* used by the local fisherman along the north coast and in the northern islands?

The Durness account of 1834 tells of iron hoops framing the nets, but localised deposits of bog iron do not appear to have been used for this purpose, and even old fish barrels would then have been bound with withies. By contrast, Liddell's account for Orphir of 1797, stated that 'The

boats fitted out for this purpose measure 12 feet of keel, and together with the nets cost about L6.' (Liddell 1797.XIX.400).

This seems to indicate that the nets, or leastways the materials for the nets, were purchased. And, as the names given to the equipment in contemporary accounts — names identical to those still used in the 20th century — are simple English *ring, net* or *hoop,* an English origin for the equipment would seem as certain as for the developed fishery itself. Further documentary investigation might clarify this; but a similar situation seems to have existed for North-East Scotland, and the south side of the Moray Firth (Coull 1969.27).

Though much of this discussion of lobster fishery in and around Caithness in the late 18th and early 19th Century is by way of a digression, nonetheless the equipment used and its terminology is relevant to a discussion of sellag fishing, as indeed is the economic context in which it developed.

(ii) Sellag Pocks:

There are immediate and obvious similarities between the *rings* used for catching lobsters and the free-swinging *pocks* or hand nets used to fish young saithe. These are variously known, for example, as a *sellag-poke* at Scrabster/Thurso or on Stroma, a *sink-poke* at Dunnet, or a *pock-net* at Reay (all in Caithness); a *sillik-pok,* along with a *piltik-pok,* on Foula, Shetland; a *pock* on Fair Isle; a *poca chudaig* at North Tolsta, Lewis. The term *pock, poke* is doubtless a mix of L.Scots (OSc. *poke* 'a sack' — 1328; *polk* 'a bag net' — 1579; *pock net* — 1574) and ON *poki* 'a bag' — in different degrees in different localities at different periods.

Structurally, the *sellag poke* comprises an iron hoop or ring, to which is laced a conical or semi-circular net [Fig. 9.9]. Hoop and net are suspended by 3, 4 or more short lengths of cord to a rope tied to the end of a wooden pole. Westray examples were described more poetically perhaps in 1841 as '... nets made in the form of a parachute or umbrella suspended from the top of a long pole and thereby let down into the sea' (Armit 1841.XV. 122).

The design was more-or-less standard; only the size varied. Caithness nets had a diameter of 3ft - 4ft (.9m - 1.2m) (Dunnet) or 4ft - 5ft (1.2m - 1.5m) (Thurso); Shetland nets might be 5ft - 6ft (1.5m - 1.8m) or up to 10ft (3.1m) diameter; Orkney nets seem commonly to have been 8ft - 10ft (2.4m - 3.1m) diameter (J.S. Calder 1969; M. Simpson 1970; R. & J. Isbister 1974; J.T. Ratter 1974; Edmonston & Saxby 1888. 299-300; Fenton 1973.76). The hand-staff, pole or handle was commonly 8ft or so long (2.4m) in Shetland, maybe up to 12ft (3.7m) in Lewis and Caithness, by approx. 2in (5.1cms) thick (M. Simpson 1973; MacDonald ca 1959. 73).

To the end of a *sellag-poke* formerly owned by the late Alexander Angus of Shore Street, Thurso, a 'single-tail' tine was attached. This tine, wedged between rocks or set in a hole or crack, was used as a pivot when lifting. Thus, not only did the 'stick' or 'boom' — as Malcolm Simpson called it — keep the net out from the rocks during fishing, but it was integral to the lifting process (cf. Barnard 1890. plate XVII) [Fig. 9.10]. For when lifted,

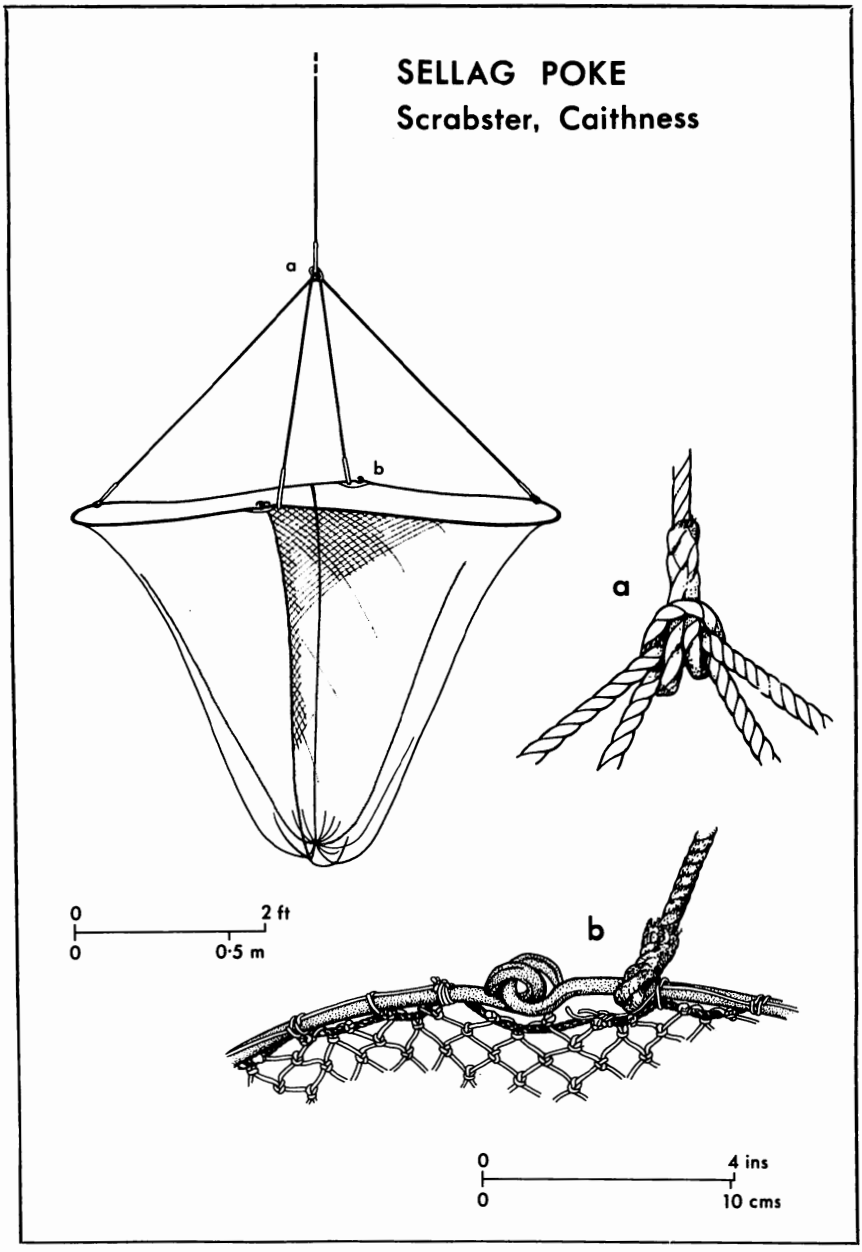


Fig. 9.9. A Thurso *sellag poke*, formerly used by Alexander Angus.

Fig. 9.10. A Shetland *sillock-pok*, probably on Foula. Note the use of pole-end pivot to aid lifting; the bait basket; the boys fishing for *sillocks* with *wands*. From Barnard 1890. Plate XVII.

such a pock might contain 'a basketfull or less' (M. Simpson 1973), or maybe half a hundredweight... and that with a 5ft (1.5m) diameter net. As Venables said for Shetland, 'A poke is a man's tool...' (1956.vii), and when swung in it often required the help of a second man or boy partly to swing it, partly to lift — since in many cases the length of rope plus net seems to have been greater than that of the pole. By way of further illustration, examples around Bettyhill on the north coast of Sutherland, might be of two types — a 3ft - 4ft (.9m - 1.2m) diameter net operated by one man, or a 7ft - 8ft (2.1m - 2.4m) diameter net operated by two men. During the landing process the second man hauled on a second rope attached directly to the ring (E. Rudie 1980: see also the Stroma coal *scummer* below). According to Mr Rudie, pock nets for catching cuddies were also used at Durness (note the 1834 reference to lobster rings) and periodically at other places along the north coast of Sutherland.

It was the pock's ability to pivot during lifting that gave it such potential and that gave rise to the developed Stromness and Kirkwall versions which — at 10ft (3.1m) diameter x 6ft (1.8m) deep and attached to 9ft. (2.7m) long cords — were also worked over the side of a boat [Fig. 9.11]. Such pocks

Fig. 9.11. Lifting a *pock-net* in Kirkwall harbour. Early 20th century postcard.

were still in use at the Stromness North Pier in the 1920s and later (*Orcadian* 12/1/1928; 29/11/1928), and similar though smaller-scale practices are yet recalled for Caithness, where 'The pokes were used by fishermen to catch pait 'Sellags' [*sic*] for their lines they were used from the peir [*sic*] at Scrabster or Thurso no doubt they could be used from a boat also'. (M. Simpson 1973). All these pocks were fished in a similar way, in water no more than four fathoms deep. First the net was lowered into the water, with or without a stone as ballast; then bait scattered to attract the sellags. The bait might be salted herring or 'chewed limpet muggies' in Shetland (Venables 1956.116), or in Caithness 'mashed potatoes or turnips or anything that would attract the fish'! (M. Simpson 1973).

Though young saithe could be fished at most times of the year, the pock net fishing for sellags was essentially a winter fishery from around November through to the spring. In Stromness 'During the continuance of the frosty weather the great body [of] fish remained in the harbour, but once the frost disappeared do did the sillocks' (*Orcadian* 12/1/1928). As the spring advanced the fish drew off to deeper water and dispersed, though still keeping close to the rocks and tideways near to the coast. And by May they were ready for rod and line fishing from a boat amongst the sunken rocks and tide rips (Edmonston & Saxby 1888.300-1).

Sellag-fishing with pocks was not restricted however to Caithness and the Northern Isles [Fig. 9.12]. Similar equipment, known as a *glúpur* (sometimes *glípur, glíp*) was used in the Faroe Islands for just the same

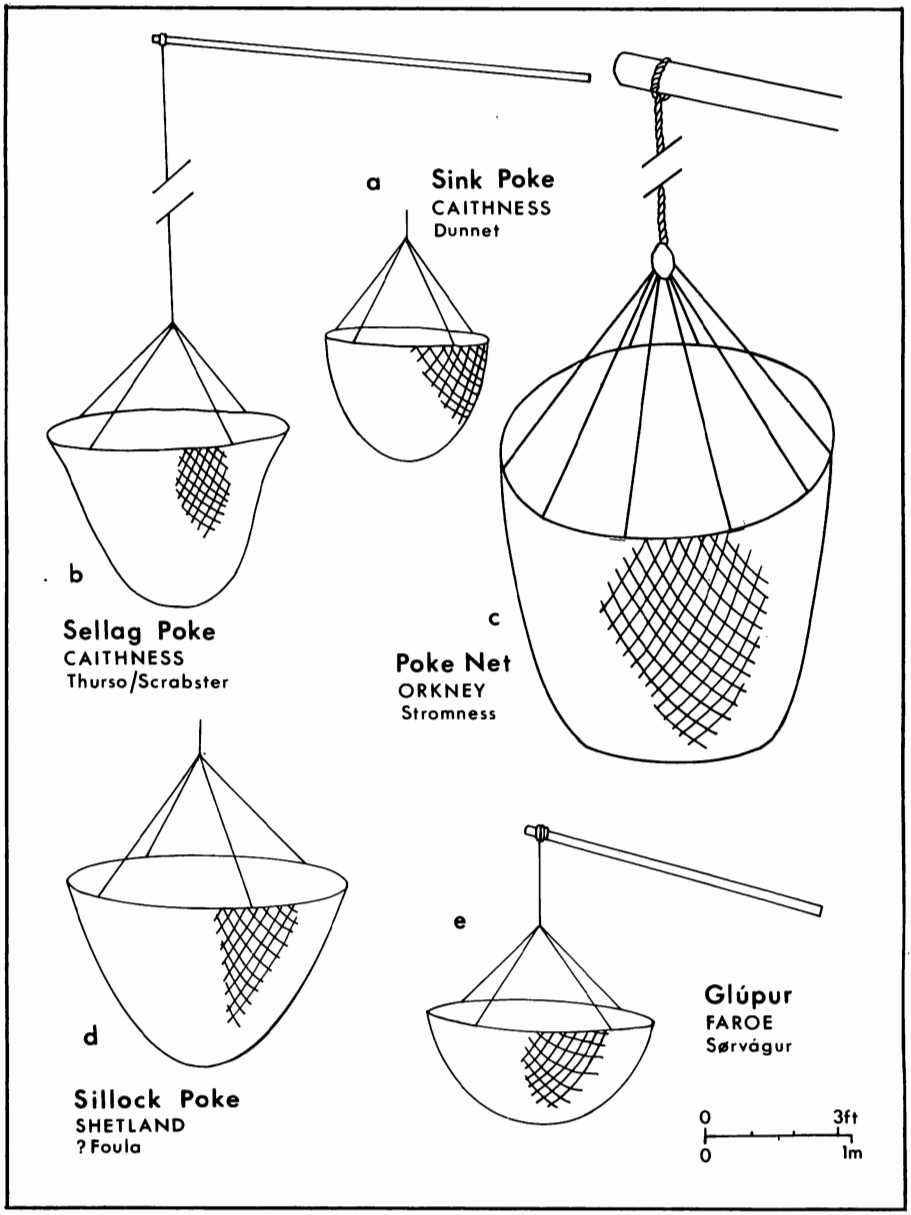


Fig. 9.12. Sellag-pocks from Caithness, the Northern Isles and Faroe — based on oral and documentary evidence.

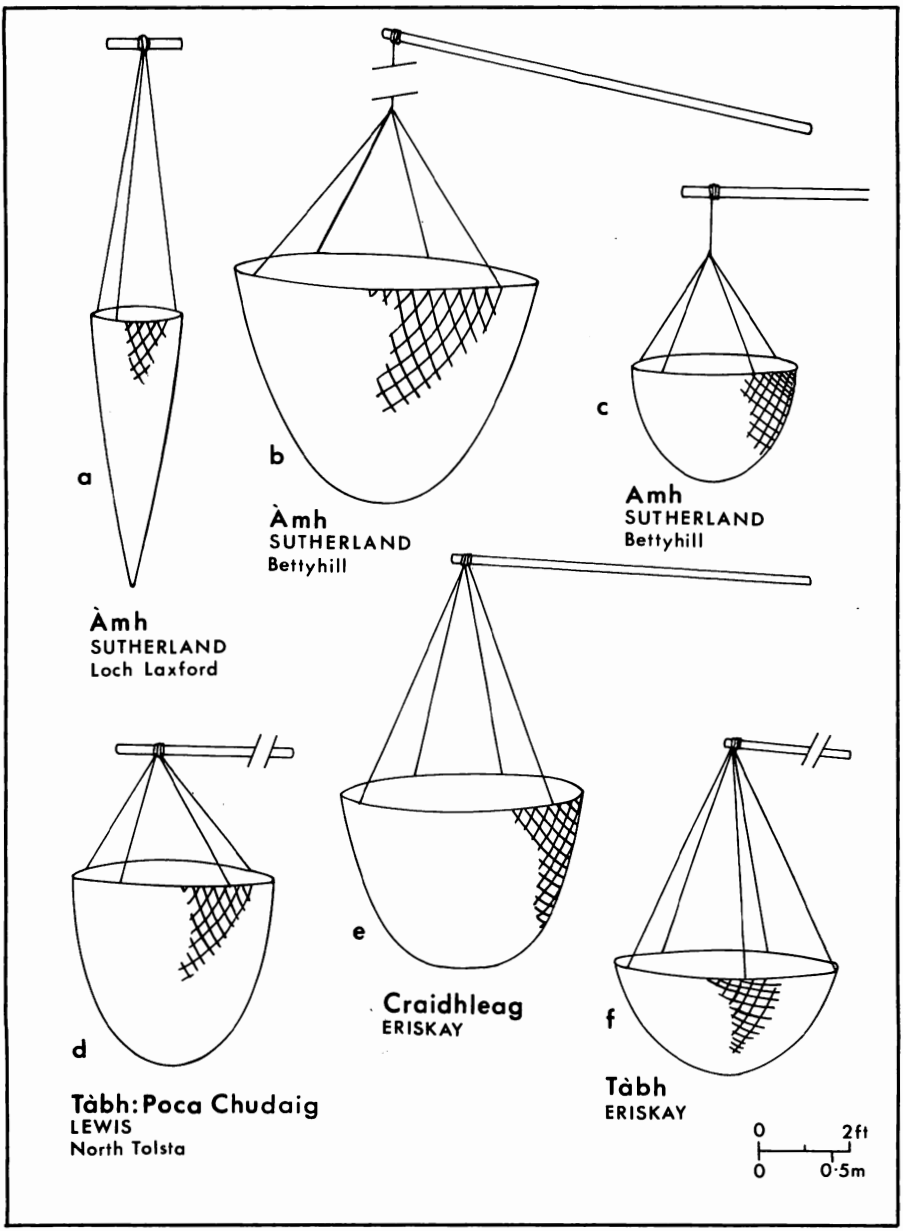


Fig. 9.13. Pocks for catching young saithe from the Western Isles and Northern Highlands — based on oral evidence.

purpose — with a net some 5ft (1.5m) diameter by 3¼ft (1m) deep, suspended at 6½ft (2m) from a 9½-10½ft (3m) wooden handle. It was used, for instance, in sheltered fjords such as Sørvágsfjørður on the island of Vágur, and from piers (P. Weihe 1979; J.P. Joensen 1979; J. Joensen 1980).

And similar equipment, with nets up to 5ft - 6ft (1.5m - 1.8m) diameter by 5ft (1.5m) deep, has been recorded in the Hebrides — e.g. in Eriskay and the North Tolsta area of Lewis — as well as something similar from Loch Laxford on the north-west Sutherland mainland. In these areas the pock was known respectively as *craoidleag,* occasionally as *tàbh* (S. McIssac 1971; D. Johnston 1971; MacDonald 1978.92), *poca chudaig* (D. MacDonald 1975) and *àbh* (A. MacAskill 1974). Along the north coast of Sutherland it was also called an *àbh* (E. Rudie 1980) [Fig. 9.13].

Whether the pock is of long standing in the Hebrides remains to be discussed. It is enough for the present to say that it was not the only kind of hand net used there to catch the young of the saithe.

Tàbhan

(i) Landing Nets:

Before looking at the Hebridean fixed-shaft hand net or *tàbh* (plural *tàbhan),* it is as well to remember that in Caithness, as generally throughout the country, a small net on a circular frame attached directly to the end of a pole has long been used as a landing net. And it has played this subsidiary role not just in a sporting context, but in the commercial fisheries for both herring and salmon [Fig. 9.14].

It was generally referred to in Caithness as a *scummer*, though formerly in Wick as an *aave* (Nicholson 1907) and in Shetland as an *avnet* (Jacobsen 1928) — used as a *save-all* to scoop up the herring that fell from the drift-nets as these were hauled. This was usually a boy's job — he also being called a *scummer*; and what he collected made up his share of the catch (*SND*; A. Bruford 1973). In the coastal salmon fisheries, a *scummer* is still used to remove the fish trapped in the compartments of stake and bag nets — a spoon net probably similar to the small net referred to by Brand for extracting salmon from the stone enclosures into which they had been driven in the Thurso River (1701. 150; see above).

On a more domestic level, a hoop-net resembling a landing net continued to be used in Coigach, Wester Ross, to poach salmon at night from a river, preferably after rain — you didn't need a torch or an oil lamp if you could see the salmon (A. MacLeod 1972)! Elsewhere, as an alternative on Stroma to a *clap* to take lobsters from crevices amongst the rocks along the low-tide mark:

> 'I have also seen a scummer used that is a ring and net tied on a stick and put down at the lobster's tail or Back and as you know a lobster always goes after the tail when frightened and finishes up in the net'. (M. Simpson 1970)

An Easter Ross *ave,* recorded around 1911, was probably something similar, 'a hoop or ring of iron, with a long handle attached, and suspended

Fig. 9.14. A landing net used for extracting salmon from stake nets. Banff, 1960s.

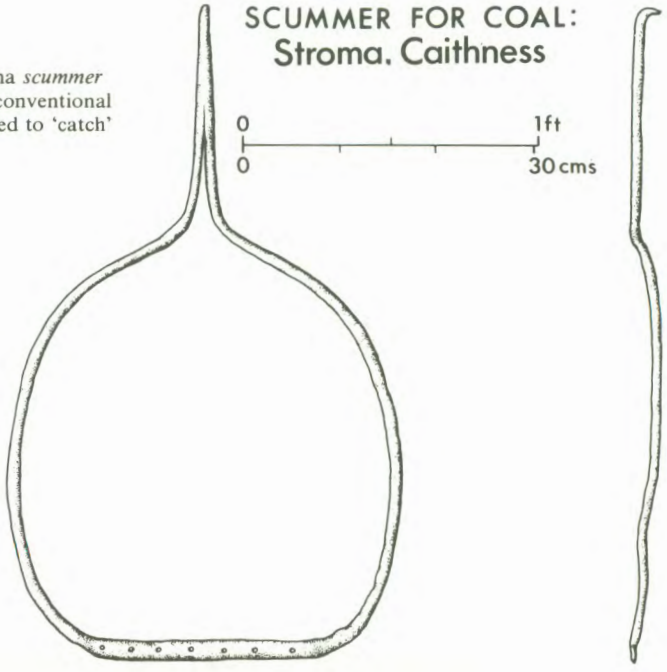


Fig. 9.15. A Stroma *scummer* — the frame of a conventional landing-net modified to 'catch' coal.

to the ring is a net for catching crabs etc.' (*SND).* All such east coast references to *ave/aave,* incidentally, could reflect a Gaelic influence introduced or reinforced during the Highland clearances.

Just how far man's ingenuity can be stretched is evident in another Stroma *scummer* [Figs. 9.15; 9.16] — a modification somewhat in design and function and used to retrieve coal from the bunkers of ships wrecked on the rocks amongst the tide-trips off the island and around the Pentland Firth. Extreme environmental factors demanded a specialisation well beyond that met with in less severe locations. Here, as in other instances, however, it is not a question of inventing a brand new tool; rather the adaptation of a known structure to fulfil a new function.

Be these references as they may, specifically for catching sellags in Caithness, hand nets with fixed shafts are as yet unrecorded. However, it is unlikely that they were never used, particularly as the iron hoop and wooden handle of one such conventional landing net preserved in the Strathnaver Museum is said to have been employed from the rocks from time to time, as an alternative to pock-nets. It was called simply an *àbh* (E. Rudie 1979).

(ii) Tàbhan:

Present evidence suggests, nonetheless, that the fixed-shaft hand net for catching the young saithe was primarily a Hebridean tool — and that whether circular, oval or triangular in shape, it was little like a conventional landing net [Fig. 9.17]. On Eriskay and parts of eastern Lewis it existed alongside the pock-net (S.McIssac 1971; MacDonald 1975); otherwise it was seemingly the only kind of hand net used in recent times for cuddy fishing, whether from rocks or from small boats close inshore.

The Hebridean name for such a net is *tàbh,* regardless of its shape, size and manufacture. To date it has been recorded for Eriskay, North and South Uist, Grimsay, Benbecula, Lewis, Skye and perhaps Canna, where, in 1824, 'The quantity of coalfish which they take is nearly incredible; often dipping them out of the water by means of large landing nets (MacCulloch 1824.IV. 30-31). The known area of distribution, therefore, is the Outer Hebrides and the closely-linked more northerly of the Inner Hebrides.

A late 18th century example fished around Portree in Skye is described thus by the schoolmaster there, Mr. A. Campbell:

> 'the *jabh* commonly consists of three or four strong rods, from 8 to 10 feet long, laid across each other in the middle, and gently bent upwards, till they are fixed at the ends to a large hoop, from four to six feet diameter, which forms its mouth. On the inside it is all lined with a narrow net made for the purpose to retain the fish and to let out the water, tightly tied to its ribs and mouth; and it has a long handle reaching its bottom, where the rods cross each other, and to which, and to the mouth, it is well fastened with a strong cord.' (Campbell 1795.XVI.150)

Twentieth century examples from the Outer Islands suggest a rather different construction, with the handle taking a more prominent structural role. In the Skye example the handle appears very much as an afterthought, lashed to a completed frame somewhat reminscent of the smaller

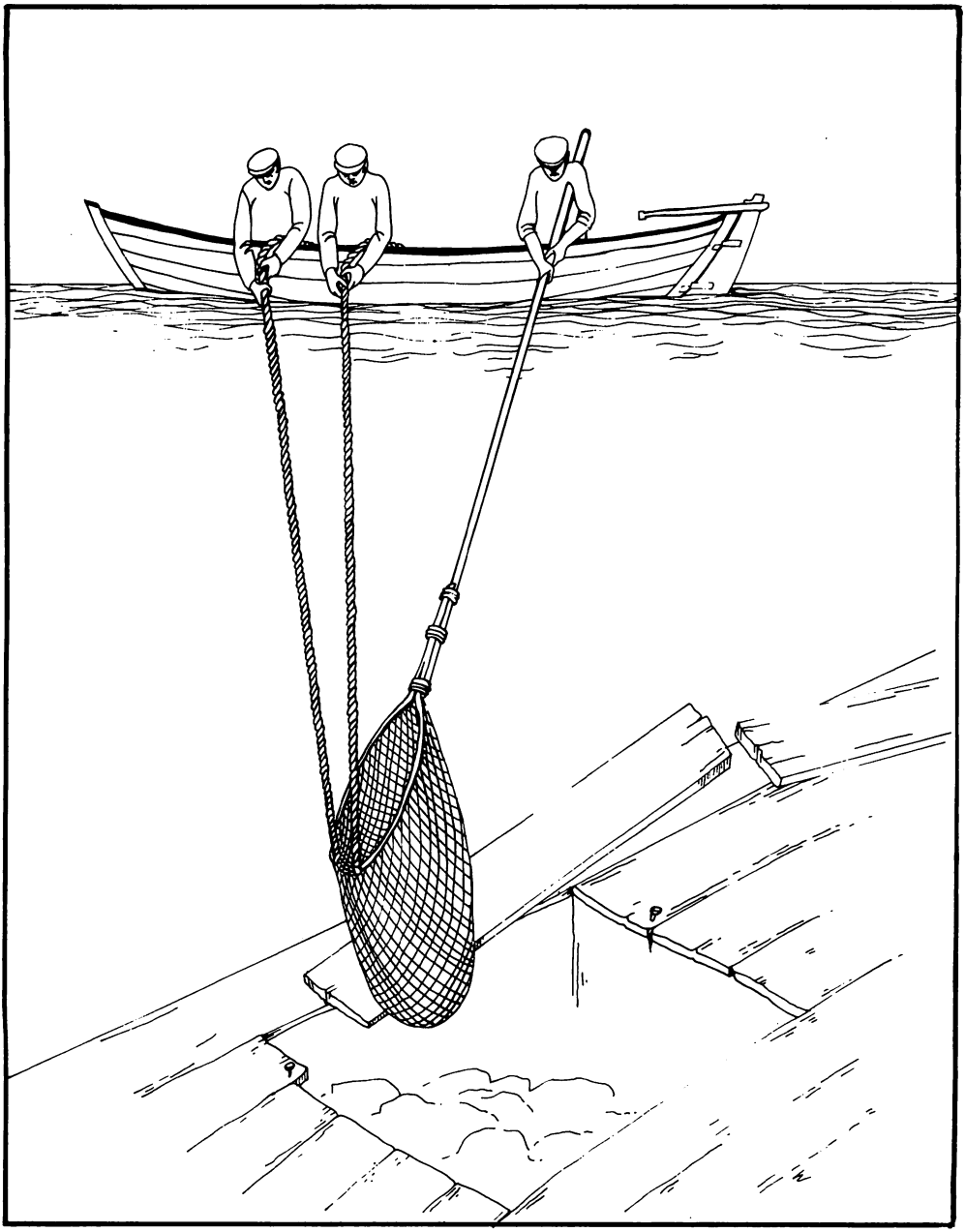


Fig. 9.16. A modified *scummer*, lowered from a boat into the bunkers of ships wrecked on the rocks of the Pentland Firth. The coal was salvaged for use on Stroma as fuel. Reconstruction based on oral evidence.

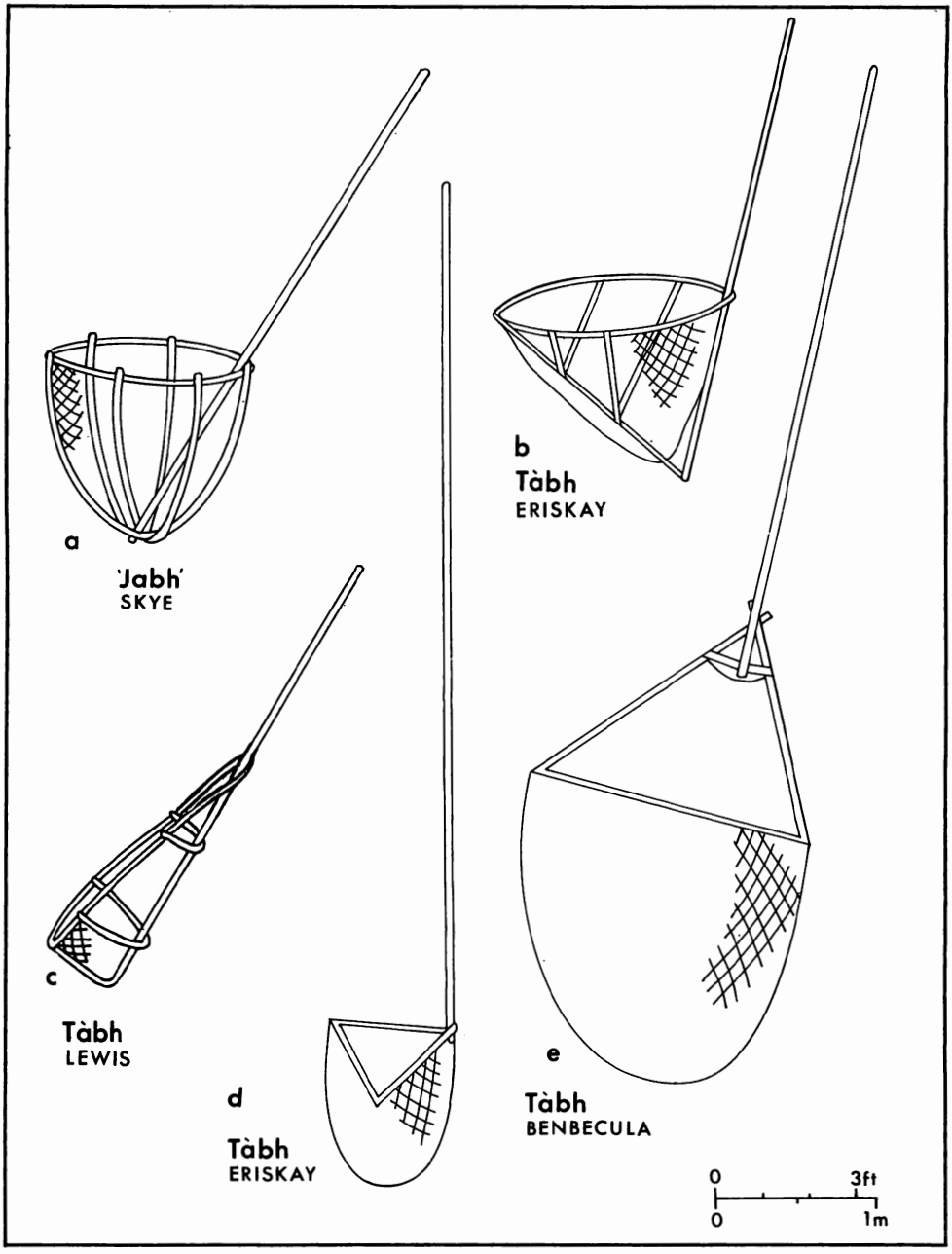


Fig. 9.17. Tàbhan from the Western Isles — based on oral and documentary evidence.

Figs. 9.18; 9.19. An oval-framed *tàbh* from Upper Shader, Lewis, with detail of the net, frame and method of lashing. 1967.

Fig. 9.20. Four men fishing with a *tàbh* from a boat. ?Lochmaddy, North Uist. Early 20th century postcard.

framework of an ordinary domestic creel such as carried maybe fish or peats on the back of a man or a pony. In the later North Uist and Lewis examples, however, the pole is integral providing a primary anchor for the wooden spars framing the net; whilst in the Eriskay version, oral descriptions suggest that it played an intermediary role, providing a primary anchor for the base spar to which, in turn, subsidiary spars were attached. In this last example, the framework was bound together with twine, and jointed and bound to the wooden handle; the net was tacked to the wooden frame-work (S. McIssac 1971).

The Eriskay *tàbh* was some 5ft - 6ft diameter x 4ft deep (1.5m - 1.8m x 1.2m), set on a wooden handle 10ft (3.1m) overall. That for Upper Shader, in Lewis, inclining to an oval rather than to a circle, held a net some 5ft x 5½ft x 2½ft deep (1.5m x 1.7m x .8m) (A. Fenton 1971) [Figs. 9.18; 9.19]. All these nets were fished from a rock.

But as with the pock-net, they could also be fished from a boat close by the shore. Evidence thought to relate to Lochmaddy, North Uist [Fig. 9.20], illustrates a larger version, similar to the Lewis example but with the

Fig. 9.21. The cross-tree of a triangular Benbecula *tàbh* — constructional detail. Aird 1970.

netting loose, inside the frame. The boat contains four men — one at the pole, two apparently handling the net and one standing by. Meanwhile, oral tradition in Grimsay recalls a 12ft (3.7m) diameter hoop attached to an 18ft - 20ft (5.5m - 6.2m) long pole. This 'hand' net was said to have been fished over the stern of a 20ft (6.1m) keel boat by 2 men in 2 to 3 fathoms (3.7m - 5.5m) of water. It was apparently fitted with a rope and pulley system so that the fish could be tipped straight into the boat once the net had been hauled up (D. MacAskill 1970; Mr MacInnes 1970). Clearly there are parallels between the Grimsay and Lochmaddy *tàbhan,* and comparisons may be suggested not only with the developed pock-net of Orkney but with mechanically-operated pock-nets still in use to lift e.g. herring or mackerel out of the holds of modern fishing boats — whether in e.g. Scotland, Faroe, Norway or elsewhere.

Some fixed-shaft hand nets, however, had a triangular rather than a circular or oval frame. Evidence has survived in North Uist (mainly around Hougharry, Knockintorran and Carinish), and at Aird in Benbecula. They may represent a later form, easier to construct in the absence of suitable withies or an iron hoop, or where the only available timber had first to be steamed (as with the Grimsay *tàbh,* made close by the Stewart family's long established boat-building shed: D. MacAskill 1970).

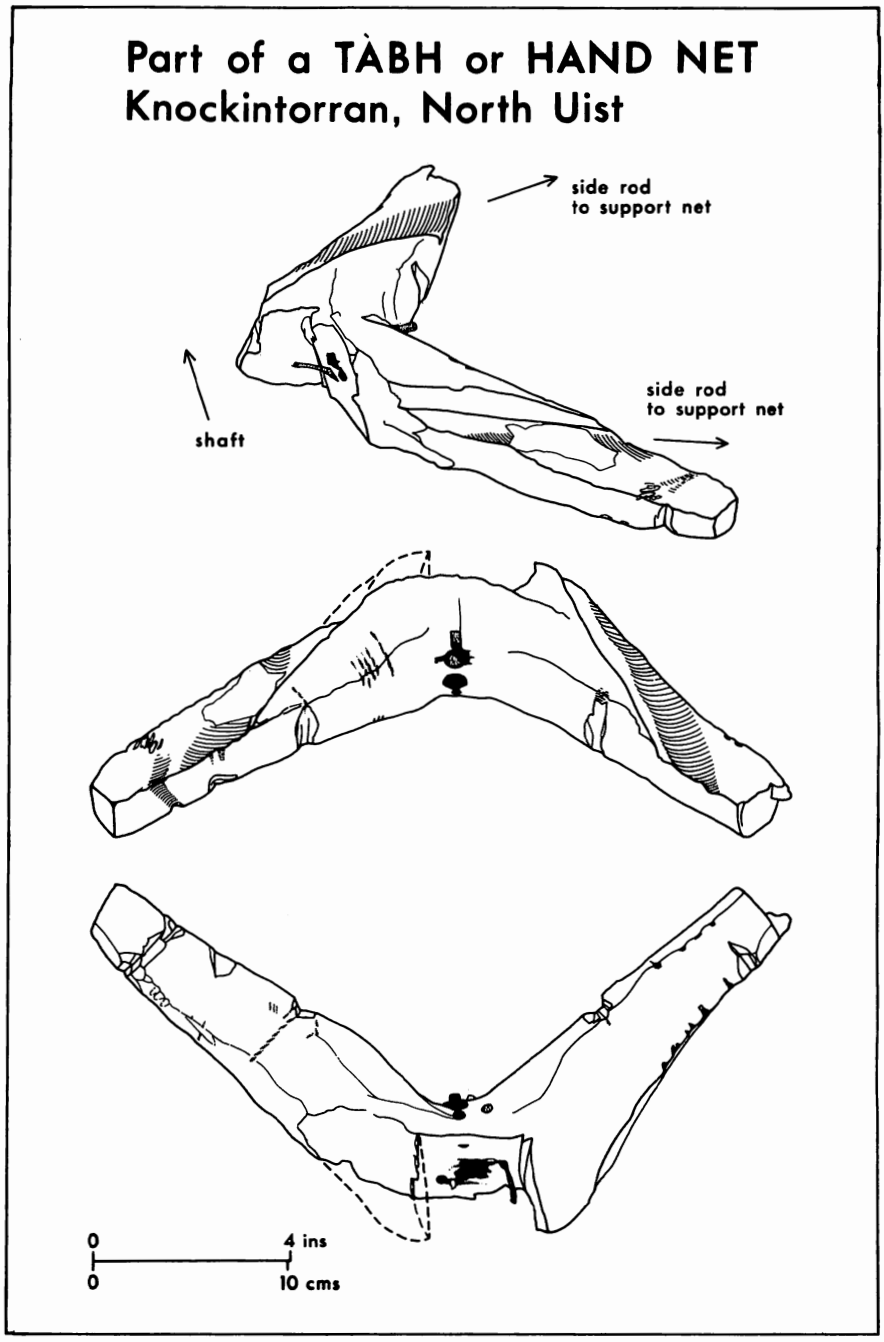


Fig. 9.22. A cross-tree or collar for a North Uist *tàbh.* Knockintorran 1970.

Fig. 9.23(a). The stages of fishing with a triangular *tàbh* on the west coast of Benbecula. Pushing out the net (with the 'cod end' wrapped over the base slat).

Fig. 9.23(b). Trawling back after lowering.

Fig. 9.23(c). Vertical to the rock face, ready for lifting.

Fig. 9.23(d). Flipping over after lifting, ready to pull in for emptying.

The construction of the triangular frames was somewhat different from that of roughly circular and oval frames. The angle of frame to pole was similar to e.g. the Lewis example, but the frame took off from close by the foot of the pole rather than part-way up. Thus a Benbecula example measured 7ft x 7ft x 9ft (2.1m x 2.1m x 2.7m), with a 3ft (.9m) deep bag, all set on the end of a 12ft - 15ft (3.7m - 4m) pole. The slats forming the framework for the mouth of the net were nailed to each other and to the handle, but to strengthen the point-of-attachment, a cross-tree or collar shaped to shallow V (and sometimes carved from the curved branch of a tree) had been inserted [Fig. 9.21; 9.22]. The side slats of the net frame were nailed into cut-away slots at either end of the inner side of the collar; the cut-away end of the pole was bolted across the apex of the V, on the outer side.

Rather like the net on a Faroese *fleygistong,* or bird fowling net, the net itself, whilst bound to the side slats or arms of the frame, is not bound to the cross-tree, but allowed to hang free. There are perhaps even closer constructional parallels with the Westray auk-swappers' net — independent developments, no doubt, in separate localities faced with a similar problem (Baldwin 1973. 13-14; 1974. 85-88, plates 1C, 3B, 3D). Nowadays bound with string or twine, the net was formerly attached with the roots of the *murain* (bent grass) or turf (D. MacEachern 1971).

To progress from structure to technique, Campbell's description of 1795 again provides a sound base:

> 'This instrument the fisher, standing on a rock, presses down sideways into the sea, till the lower part of it reaches the bottom, the mouth being nearly right above; then himself or an assistant, throwing out the bait in small bits over it, he holds it firm in that position till it be all covered with *cuddies,* attracted by the bait, when he raises it up gently, and often brings in many hundreds at a time.' (Campbell 1795. XVI. 150)

The technique used with the *tàbh*, then, was identical to that used with the *pock-net* (cf. Dwelly) — but not always.

The late Donald MacEachern of Aird, Benbecula, would first take two handfuls of *soll (sgrum* in e.g. North Tolsta, Lewis — MacDonald 1975). This mixture of crushed shellfish with or without cut boiled potatoes or perhaps a little rotten maggoty seaweed, he would throw out close to the more or less perpendicular rock. With the cuddies crowding in at the foot of the rock in 6ft - 10ft (1.8m - 3.1m) of water, he then put the net out horizontally as far as he could reach and lowered it into the water as a wave was receding. With the handle against his shoulder and with the next wave coming in, he slowly pulled the net in towards the rock. The net — previously arranged over the transverse base slat to give a kind of 'cod end' — took in the fish which slid into this 'cod end'. The handle now rising above his head, and the net frame more or less perpendicularly flush to the rock face, he hauled the whole apparatus upward and then flipped it over to the horizontal in such a way that the 'cod end' returned to being simply the ordinary bottom of the net — which could then be emptied of fish with a basin or some other container [Fig. 9.23].

In other words, the triangular Benbecula *tàbh* was used for a kind of trawling rather than for dip-netting.

As with the *sellag pocks* of Caithness and the Northern Isles, *tàbh*-fishing for young saithe was best pursued through the autumn and winter, Donald MacEachern citing early dusk or dawn, half-tide, plenty of shelter and preferably an off-shore wind. As in Stromness harbour, he found calm and frosty weather particularly good, even if with a slightly onshore wind.

As to what constituted a good catch, Mr MacEachern reckoned on 5/6 bucketsful — taken in one hour on a good day; in two to three hours otherwise. His triangular *tàbh* was comparable in size with many of the larger Orkney and Shetland *pocks*. Perhaps the seas off the west coast of Uist and Benbecula were less prolific, but the potential of the *tàbh* to that of the *pock* seems to have been notably less — a likely bucketful to a possible half-hundredweight at each lift. Might this be a pointer to Stephen McIssac's suggestion that, on Eriskay at least, the *pock-net* was of more recent introduction than the *tàbh*? Though a 'late arrival', it proved more efficient than the *tàbh,* was adopted and has survived alongside the 'native' version?

ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF THE FISHING OF YOUNG SAITHE

There can be no doubt but that young saithe were a widely valued resource around the northern fringe of Scotland by the later 18th century.

In Caithness, *sellag*-fishing was long-established in the northern coastal parishes of e.g. Reay, Dunnet, Wick and Canisbay (MacKay 1793. VII. 9; Jolly 1794. XI. 249; Sutherland 1794. X. 8; Morison 1793. VIII. 154; P. Jolly 1840. XV. 24; T. Jolly 1840. XV. 42) — though less so, it would seem, in the larger-scale fishery areas of east Caithness (see above). Its importance around Thurso, however — and that of the slightly older *cuddin* a few miles to the east — is confirmed from a list of 19th - 20th century nicknames given by 'some' to 'others' [communicated by Donald Grant (Thurso) and Malcolm Simpson (Stroma and Thurso), 1969/1979]:

Freswick : *tammy fuds*
Canisbay : *persians*
John O'Groats : *groaters*
Gills : *green runners*
Thurso : *soor sellags*
Murkle : *cuddeens*
Auchengill : *yowlies, pleepies*
Duncansby : *mutton-eaters*
Huna : *warriebowgs*
Castletown : *oakies*
Wick : *rotten herrin'*
Stroma : *codlin' heids*

Keiss : *haddie heids, partan backs*

East coast folk as far as the Brig o' Wester : *doon-thro' shither*
East coast folk south of Wick : *coasters*

But sellag-fishing was in no way limited in its importance to Caithness.

Plentiful records exist for many Shetland parishes — e.g. Delting, Lerwick, Northmaven, Noss, Foula, Fair Isle (Morison 1791. I. 389-90; Sands 1792. III. 416; Jack 1794. XII. 360; Venables 1956. 116; Barnard 1890. pl. XVII [see Fig. 9.10]; J. Eunson 1963). Also for many Orkney parishes — e.g. Firth and Stennes, Birsay and Harray, Westray, Sandwick and Stromness, Shapinsay, Orphir (Malcolm 1795. XIV. 138; Low 1795. XIV. 314; Izat 1795. XVI. 261; Clouston 1795. XVI. 436-7; Barry 1796. XVII. 239; Liddell 1797. XIX. 399). And for many Hebridean and north-

west mainland parishes — e.g. Jura and Colonsay, Barra, Skye, Tongue, Canna, Lewis (Stewart 1794. XII. 322; MacQueen 1794. XIII. 336; Campbell 1795. XVI. 149-50; MacKenzie 1841. XV. 172; MacCulloch 1824. IV, 30-1; MacDonald ca. 1950. 73).

Their value as a resource was, therefore, widely recognised, and their capture seen as a regular part of the annual round-of-work. In Dunnet parish in mid 19th century Caithness:

> 'On the coast all are, to a certain extent, fishermen. After laying down their crofts in spring, they proceed to the lobster fishing. In the end of May and June, they cut their peats, and prepare for the herring fishing, which commences to the west of Thurso about the 1st of July, and sets in at Wick about the 18th. The whole fishermen and most of the young females set off for that station and remain there for six weeks. They come home in September, get their crops cut, and potatoes dug, and betake themselves again to the fishing of cod, saithes, and *silags*. This is the ordinary routine with the coast side population.' (T. Jolly 1840. XV. 42)

Sellags and cuddins provided a welcome and often much-needed addition to a family's diet, ekeing out meagre crops of grain. And the water in which they were boiled could provide a pleasant hot drink (MacDonald 1978. 92). Towards the end of 18th century they sold for food at 6d per 1000 in Birsay and Harray on Orkney, and at 1d per 100 in Wick (Low 1795. XIV. 314; Sutherland 1794. X. 8) — commercial practices that have continued locally, though in a somewhat different context, into the present century, instance 1928 when the most part of 360 x 10 ton barrels caught in Stromness were sold to the Stronsay, Stromness and Wick offal factories (*Orcadian* 12/1/1928; 29/11/1928)!

As for their oil, this could be used in lamps (Canisbay — P. Jolly 1840. XV. 24; Lewis — MacDonald 1978. 92), or as part-payment of rents (Barra — MacQueen 1794. XIII. 336). Elsewhere, and increasingly during the 19th and early 20th centuries, the sale of sillock oil, made from their livers, supplemented the family income. It fetched 30/- to 50/- a barrel in late 18th century Delting in Shetland, whilst in Lerwick between October 1790 and April 1791, over 2000 barrels were produced. Three hundred barrels of this *kreesh* were exported from Shetland in 1790 to Hamburgh and Dublin (Morison 1791. I. 389-90; Sands 1792. III. 416; Goodlad 1971. 119).

Sellags might equally well serve as fertlizer on the land (Stroma — M. Simpson 1970, 1979), reflected also perhaps in '6 men are mowing oats in the Sellock Park', an entry in the Sandside Farm Journal for 18 September 1863. They were not always used as fully in certain areas, however, as some visitors might have expected:

> 'With the assistance of [cuddie] fishing, they contrive to exist miserably enough [on Canna] .... yet the superfluity, which is frequent, is thrown away to rot, with the improvidence so characteristic of this country, while their corn is often refusing to grow for want of manure'! (MacCulloch 1824. IV. 30-31)

In evaluating such evidence, it should be remembered that in the late 18th century food shortages were frequent in the north — on average, perhaps once every three years. And they continued through much of the 19th century.

For it should also be remembered that the benefits of agricultural

improvement, like those of the herring fisheries, did not come to all. And in many cases they came relatively late or irregularly. The amount of land available for arable cultivation or for the keeping of livestock on a purely domestic, subsistence basis declined greatly in many areas as improvements intensified; harvests and fisheries alike were poor over many years, instance during the 1830s. Although by the 1840s the potato helped many, blight reduced whole communities to starvation and destitution — especially in the West where the problems were perhaps most acute. Kelp had become increasingly important there from the 1740s -1760s (1720s in Orkney), only to decline rapidly by the 1820s, with reductions in duties on imported barilla and the development of new methods of glass-making. It was not long before sheep were seen as the land-owners' salvation, but whilst kelp and fisheries were labour-intensive in the generation of proprietorial wealth, sheep were not. Intensified clearances to the coastal margins, therefore, together with increased sub-division of holdings and even greater dependence upon the potato added to a scenario for great hardship.

Caithness and Orkney were less densely affected perhaps by clearances and extreme destitution than were Sutherland and other Highland and Hebridean areas, and they were more effectively involved in the new commercial ventures originating in the south, but it was largely a matter of degree. Additionally, Gaelic-speaking refugees from the northern straths came east and north to the coastal areas in considerable numbers. In Latheron parish, for instance, the population quadrupled from 1,500-2,000 (1720s) to 8,500 by 1861, due largely to a combination of fisheries and clearances.

In Shetland the picture was not strictly identical, though the results were much the same. The expansion of the *haaf* fisheries, some 40 or so miles off-shore, begun around the 1720s, and continuing well into the late 19th century, required a rapid increase in manpower. Landowners and merchants bound the fishermen to them through the truck system; they encouraged the young men to marry young and they continually sub-divided the land to provide potato ground for the greater labour force — their guarantee of higher returns. Such sub-division into non-viable economic units hardly made living easier for the fishermen and their families.

In other words, across the north and west, and including Caithness, demands for food very frequently exceeded the supply in the late 18th and through the 19th century. It was only natural that the local inhabitants should seek to exploit what was a very rich food source lying more-or-less on their own doorsteps. And it was only natural that, when opportunities were offered, they should seek to exploit the young saithe commercially as well as domestically — exploitation that was given an extra fillip by the mid-19th century as the large-scale expansion of the commercial fisheries for cod and ling, as well as herring, developed. Markets were improved on the Clyde for Highland and Hebridean fishermen, whilst Shetlanders and others worked not only off the north of Scotland but — by the 1870s — off Faroe, Iceland and further afield. Lines needed baiting; so also did lobster

nets and creels. Young saithe came in handy (e.g. Jack 1794. XII. 360; M. Simpson 1973).

All such factors have some bearing in any consideration of the development of sellag fishing and of its equipment and associated techniques, and it can be argued, therefore, that by the late 18th century circumstances had combined to make people more dependent upon fundamentally subsistence fisheries than they appear to have been for many centuries across the North of Scotland and the Islands.

Just as climatic deterioration in the Iron Age after around 500 BC appears to have made survival from agriculture in the north more difficult; just as in later, mid 12th century Viking times, increasing population seems equally to have rendered largely land-based subsistence insufficient, so the environmental and social, as well as commercial pressures of the 18th and 19th centuries appear once again to have made a virtue out of localised fisheries.

It is an interesting hypothesis that, in a pre-industrial age at least, intensive sea-fishing develops out of environmental necessity rather than from natural inclination, expanding or retracting in scale according to the availability of other resources. A rider might be that in such reduced circumstances, when they needed to expand their fishing capacity, people would not normally be able to afford the more effective equipment — even if available — that would make their task easier and more successful. Rather would they have to adapt and develop what was already to hand — either from their own indigeneous culture, or from cultures encroaching on their own whether territorially or commercially.

In such a context, the appearance off the coasts of Caithness and Orkney of the English lobster smacks and the introduction of the lobster nets must have seemed well-nigh providential. Conditions were perhaps somewhat less extreme here than further north and west, the new equipment seems to have been seized upon readily, and it was adapted for the primarily subsistence-level sellag fishery. Nor were the landowners slow to seize an opportunity — in the Sandside Estate Papers, 1794, 'one of the items' for John Mean's widow and son William in Dachow, Reay parish, 'to pay to the laird being a sillock pock, 1s'! (Horne 1940+ pt.2). The influence of the lobster-ring would also provide a neat answer to the matter of why all Caithness, Orkney, Shetland and Hebridean pokes are circular, rather than the square shape commonly found in Northern Europe and elsewhere — a shape which relates more to the use of sticks (without the same need for a frame) rather than ropes (which do require some kind of framework to keep the net open) as the means of suspending the net from the pole (cf. Hornell 1950. plate VIIA; Garner 1962. 76). In Faroe, both shapes are apparently recalled (P. Weihe 1979), perhaps betraying at least two avenues of cultural diffusion.

Since pock-nets appear but spasmodically in the Hebrides, should this be put down to a greater inflexibility, reluctance to change and deep-seated conservatism? Perhaps to a stronger, localised, cultural identity? to a lack of suitable materials? to lack of money? or simply to the fact that their

influence was felt too late? Certainly the Hebrides did not experience the same influence of the English lobster smacks in the late 18th-19th centuries as did Caithness, Orkney and Shetland, and by the time that islanders came into closer contact with the north and east of Scotland and the south, and into contact presumably with the *pock*, whether through the white fisheries or the herring fisheries, other solutions to the problem of more effective cuddie fishing for mainly domestic purposes had been found. Even so, some Hebrideans tried out pock nets, and it is maybe no mere coincidence that those areas where pocks have so far been recorded are areas most directly involved with the later commercial fisheries.

THE NORSE DIMENSION

It is seemingly inevitable in an economy heavily weighted geographically towards the south and south-east, that new influences are likely to reach the furthest northern and western periphery last, if at all. The example of the lobster-ring and sellag-pock reinforces a general drift of east coast northward diffusion spilling gradually around and across towards the far north-west, and would encourage speculation that evidence of earlier cultural strata might be closest to the surface in these peripheral areas — not merely evidence of earlier contact perhaps with the south, but evidence of contact with the north in that rare period of Scandinavian supremacy when traditional patterns of movement were reversed.

Equipment

Though the more recent Hebridean *tàbhan* have fixed integral handles, they bear little resemblance to ordinary landing nets. Most of them are still essentially pieces of netting fixed inside or around a fuller framework or container. And the late 18th century Skye *jabh* is even more just a large container or creel to which a pole has been added [cf. Fig. 9.17].

To lay emphasis on the technology, on the frame or container, is deliberate, for by moving from saltwater to freshwater a trail opens up which suggests comparisons not only elsewhere in the Hebrides but also in Caithness and the Northern Isles.

In his dictionary, Dwelly refers not only to a *tàbh chudaigean* — presumably a 'fixed-shaft' net attached to a pole such as that apparently noted by the Rev. Dr. Campbell of Broadford, his correspondent for Uist and Argyll — but also to a *tàbh breacaich,* 'a hand net' (otherwise unspecified) for catching trout in burns. In turn, Marwick (1929) refers to a small basket scoop called a *huivy* and used to take trout in Orkney (Westray) streams. He describes it as a small straw basket attached to a wooden handle. But in Orkney, *huivy* had equally the meaning of a small basketwork fish-trap set in a stream — the Shetland *houvie* or *troot-høvi* (Jakobsen 1928; *SND*). Such a trout trap, made of docken stalks and shaped like a conical creel, was also known as a *fursaclew* in Orkney — Marwick 1929). In the Western Isles, too, we have clear evidence for small nets or traps set horizontally for trout in streams. One — made from the

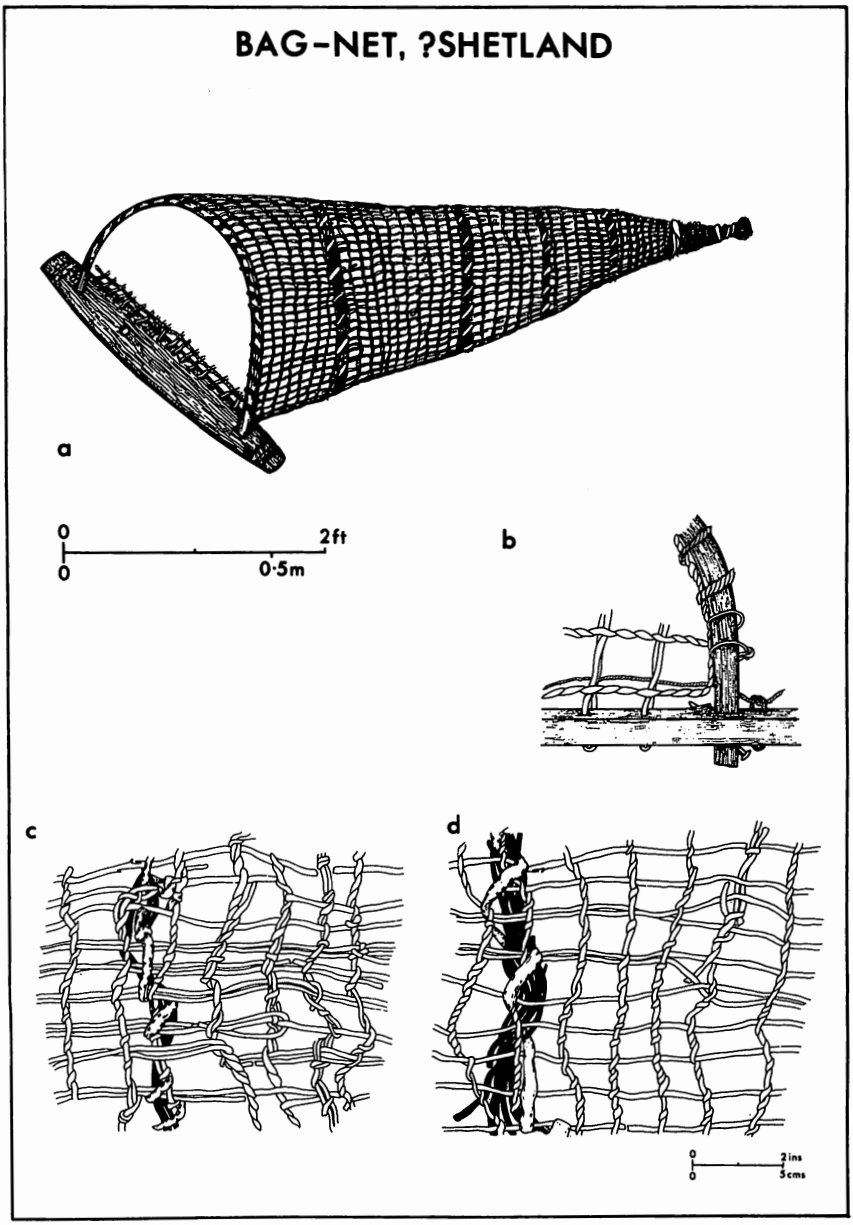


Fig. 9.24. A bag-net, believed to be a *troot-høvi* from Shetland — made from dried and twisted dockens. Detail shows the straight, lengthways fibres passing through the 2-ply, twisted, crossways fibres; lashing of the docken net to the hoop; fixing of the hoop in the base slat; heather rope lashed to the inside of the netting to help keep the funnel open. Ca 1912.

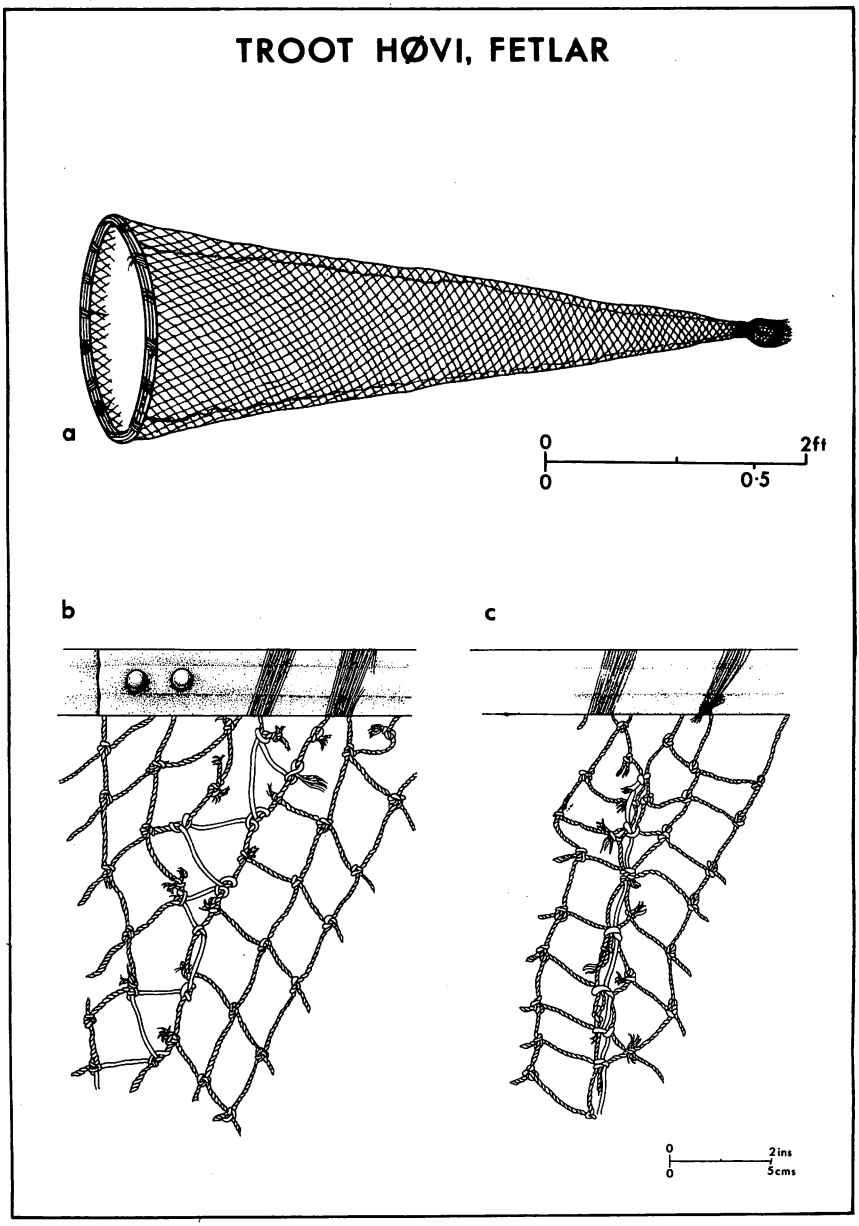


Fig. 9.25. A more recent *troot-høvi* from Fetlar, Shetland — roughly shaped from pieces of courlene fishing net braided together and lashed to a small galvanised barrel hoop at the mouth. No additional stiffeners. 1950s.

6ft-8ft (2m-2.5m) root of the freshwater grass '*carex flacca*' — is recorded for North Uist (Beveridge 1911. 322-3), and another, with a rectangular mouth, for Lewis (MacDonald 1978. 92).

This evidence highlights two 'new' factors. First, that the 'net' of a fixed-shaft hand net could be of some kind of basketwork, rather than netting; second, that such 'nets' or 'containers' could equally well be used horizontally without a handle, as vertically attached to a pole. A small, narrow, conical container could quite simply be set on its side against the stream — a common enough technique worldwide.

Examples from 19th and early 20th century Shetland, made from dried docken, had a wooden hoop in the mouth to keep them open — sometimes a half-hoop set into a narrow, rectangular, wooden slat (a barrel-stave!); latterly a small, iron barrel hoop and no base slat [Figs. 9.24; 9.25]. To keep the mouth open, stiffeners of e.g. heather rope lashed to the docken by woven tape could be inserted at intervals along its length. These traps were up to 6ft (1.8m) long, with approximately 19in (.6m) diameter mouths.

The Rev. John Bryden described the technique (1845) in Sandsting and Aithsting parish, in the westside of Shetland:

> 'The *houvie* is made of the stalks of the dock, wide at the one end and narrow at the other. A dike is built across the burn, leaving an open space in the middle sufficient to admit the wider end of the houvie. After the houvie is firmly placed in this open space, a person, with a stick in his hand, wades down the burn, and drives the trouts before him. Having entered the houvie and reached its narrow end they cannot turn to get out again.' (Bryden 1845. XV. 107)

The dyke was sometimes called a *høvi-brigg* in Shetland — resulting in a simple form of the fixed *creels, crues* or *cruives* formerly much in evidence on such mainland Scottish salmon rivers as the Water of Thurso (Brand 1701. 150) and the meeting of the Berridale and Langwell Rivers (Headrick 1813. 101-2) in Caithness. Sometimes the *houvie* was left open at the narrow end and a small bag attached for the fish to swim into, making it yet more difficult for it to escape (Jakobsen 1928).

The North Uist example was similar, both in structure and use:

> '[it] has a one-inch [2.5cm] mesh and is of conical shape, measuring 4 feet [1.2m] in length by a width of 19 inches [.6m] across its mouth, thence tapering to a point at the other end. It bears the Gaelic name of *tàbh* and when in use is placed within a *cabhuil* or dam formed by small stones in the bed of a narrow burn, the fish being then driven down stream.' (Beveridge 1911.322-3)

Similar techniques appear to have been employed in South Uist (cf McDonald 1958 — *cabhuil*) and in Wester Ross, where the net itself was referred to as a *cabhuil* and the place where it was fixed as an *eilach* (Beveridge 1911. 322-3; Dwelly). In the Faroes a *glujp*, netting lashed to a hoop, was equally used to catch trout (Svabo 1781-2. 99).

Such 'containers', however, were not limited to catching trout in burns. Dwelly defines *cabhuil* as a 'basket', as well as a 'hose net' and a 'creel for fishing'. And in Shetland, Orkney and Caithness, whether made from e.g. docken, rushes or straw, in a variety of shapes and sizes they are used in a variety of ways. Creel-shaped they might carry fish; squarer in the bottom

with a cross-handle, limpet bait; like an inverted beehive, salt. In Shetland, an open-work *huvie* of straw would even be used to muzzle a horse (Jakobsen 1928). A Caithness *heivy* or *haev* was used mainly to carry bait, sometimes fishing lines (Thorsen 1954. 236), and in particular the rush or straw *haev,* widened and flat at the bottom, was contrasted with the heather *cubbag,* narrowed at the base (Nicholson 1907). Similar distinctions obtained in Shetland and Orkney with regard to e.g. *kishies/ caisies* and underline the complexity and adaptability of material culture where specialised requirements had to be met with limited materials and manufacturing tools.

In Caithness and the Northern Isles, what appears as a culturally cohesive tradition of adaptation apparently ends around this point, both in general 'carrying' terms and in so far as 'fishing' is concerned — whether in freshwater or in saltwater. Although *troot-høvies* continued in use in burns into the mid 20th century — perhaps some still are — the equipment seems not to have been adapted to any further fishing context.

However, the need to develop some kind of larger hand net for close inshore salt-water fishing had arisen, and whilst the Caithness and Northern Isles *sellag-pock* was an adaptation of an incoming southern tradition, the Hebridean *tàbh* suggests the development of essentially local traditions. It may have been influenced in part by conventional landing-nets, just as netting itself — where not home-made from e.g. plant fibres — doubtless arrived by way of e.g. Scotland and England; but for all its diversity and shape, the Hebridean hand net for catching tiny saithe suggests little outside influence. Without the shaft-end pivot and the iron hoop it was clumsier, more ungainly and less effective — certainly in its 'pre-pulley' form — than its northern counterpart, but it served the same basic function. And in the Laxford *àbh* (north-west Sutherland) in particular, it is tempting to see the direct influence of the freshwater fish trap. Lobster-ring and perhaps pock-net influences from the east/south are doubtless evident — Mr MacAskill stated that equipment similar to that formerly used in the area to catch *cudaigean,* had also once been used to catch lobsters (A. MacAskill 1974; D. MacKenzie 1974) — but the singularly long, narrow, conical net suggests links with a horizontal trout trap more akin to the Northern Isles *høvi,* to the Lewis and Uist freshwater *tàbhan* and to the Wester Ross *cabhuil* [Figs. 9.13; 9.24; 9.25].

To what extent, however, the Hebridean *tàbh,* tool or term, may be rooted specifically in a Norse, Celtic, mixed or other tradition is unlikely ever to be clear (c.f. also the Solway *haaf-/have-net*) (Sanderson 1968. 133-40). Linguistically, *tàbh* and *àbh,* like e.g. *høvi, heivy, huivy* and *haev,* point to ON *háfr* 'a pock or bag net' [Fig. 9.26] — and arguably the Gaelic forms, though long and thoroughly assimilated into Gaelic (probably not before the 12th Century) (Sanderson 1968. 139), are closer to the Old Norse than are most of the Northern Isles forms. These latter generally show a Scots diminutive *-ie* and the probable influence of *kuivy*, also 'a small basket', (compare Norw. *kuv* 'a rounded top' or 'hump'; and Icel. *kúfr* 'the contents of a heaped container projecting above the rim') (*SND*). It is noteworthy,

DERIVATIVES of OLD NORSE *HÁFR*

	CREEL/ CONTAINER	HORIZONTAL FISH TRAP	HAND NET – FIXED SHAFT
CAITHNESS	*haev* *huivy* *heivy*		*haav*. *aav(e)*
ORKNEY	*heevie*	*huvie* *huivy*	*huivy*
SHETLAND	*huvie* *hovi* *hǿvi*	*houvie* *hovi* *hǿvi*	*av* *avnet*
ICELAND			*háfur*
NORWAY	*haav* *hov*	*haav* *hov*	*håv*
HEBRIDES		*tàbh*	*tàbh* *jàbh*
NORTH/N.W. HIGHLANDS			*àbh*
[S.W. SCOTLAND/ N.W. ENGLAND		*[haav-net* *haaf-net* *hauve-net* *heave-net*	*halfe-net* *eaves-net* *af-net*

Fig. 9.26. Some derivatives of Old Norse *háfr*.[1]

moreover, that Norw. *haav/håv, hov* not only has the sense of fish cubby (a container for fish) but also that of a basket attached to a long handle to scoop fish from the water or another net, and of a bow-net or creel set for fishing in streams. It has a freshwater context, mainly though not exclusively for trout, and clearly parallels Orkney and Shetland *heivy, høvi* etc. both as a container and as a handled fish scoop/horizontal trap. There are certain parallels, also, with the Hebridean equipment. Confident he would be, however, who opted for parallel functional developments from a common 'prototype' or even for something closer, indicative of early functional differentiation and subsequent cultural diffusion!

Naming the Fish

Further evidence for cultural affinity may be found in the terminology given to the saithe themselves, young and old, across the north. One of the more outstanding features is the obvious interchangeability/instability of much of the terminology; another, the markedly Norse flavour apparent throughout. The accompanying tables more or less speak for themselves [Figs. 9.27; 9.28]: the complexities and problems in identifying and separating the linguistic strands are considerable.

Whether it is correct to link *sellag, sillock, sillek* directly with ON *sîlungr* as Jakobsen implies (1928), or indeed Gael. *siolagan,* is debateable. If it were so, it would undoubtedly suggest a possible lengthy tradition of sellag-fishing in these areas. That such a tradition existed is not necessarily disproved, however, if it be accepted that the Caithness and Northern Isles terms incorporate for instance the Scottish diminutive suffix *-ock* (the Gaelic diminutive suffix *-ag, -og* has also been assimilated in Caithness) (*SND*). They would merely be reflecting later influence. More pertinently, the short *-i-* in the stems of *sellag, sillock, sillek* may suggest a late borrowing/influence from any Scandinavian *sild* 'herring' (*SND*); and indications of a later rather than earlier adaptation of the term may partly be reinforced by Fair Isle evidence. Here, *sillock* replaced an earlier *murt* for the youngest coalfish recently enough for Jakobsen's informants to indicate to him that *murt* was obsolete. That *murt* existed, of course, adds weight to a longer-established tradition! ON *murtr* 'small fish', is still used for the tiniest saithe in the Faroes and western parts of Norway (where it can also refer more generally to fish fry). In Iceland *murta, murti* is a small trout, smaller than a *sîlungur* and sometimes known as *sîlungs-murta.*

Another Old Norse term for 'fish fry' was *kød.* In parts of Norway it took on the meaning of 'young trout', and in Yell in Shetland *kød, kødin, kød* even meant a 'big, well-developed trout'. But in Caithness and the north isles of Orkney in particular, as *cuddin, cuithe, coothin, cheeto,* it became specific to those young saithe normally one or two years older than a *sellag* — a fish, therefore, coming on for half-grown and taken on a hook and line. In Shetland and Norway, the term generally referred to any fish of that size; specifically to saithe, only in the westside and north isles of Shetland and in south-west Norway. In Shetland, the two year old saithe were more usually known as *piltocks,* a term also found occasionally — as

THE DIFFERENT AGES OF SAITHE : TERMINOLOGY
CAITHNESS AND THE NORTHERN ISLES, FAROE

	CAITHNESS	ORKNEY	SHETLAND	FAROE
1st year	*sellag*	*sillock; sillo* *tibrick*	*sillek/sillock* *murt*	*murtur*
1-2 years	*peltag* *sma' cuddin*	*piltick* *cuithe/cooth* *cheeto*	*piltek/piltock* *kɸd; kɸð, kɸdin*	*summarseiður*
2-3 years	*cuddin* *cowmag*	*cuddin* *coothin* *harbin* *hardiback* *harber-kuithe* *harbo-kuithe* *harva-kuithe* *orva-kuithe* *knave-kuithe* *vaain-kuithe* *vathan-kuithe*	*hoal-piltek* *welshi-piltek* *rolki* *beli-piltek* *drɸlin*	*seiður* *smáseiour* *tvaeveturseiður*
3-4 years	*cuddin*	*cuddin* *sethe; sey*	*benki-piltek* *stivin-piltek*	*stórseiður* *traeveturseiður*
4-5 years	*seean* *saithe* *blackjack*		*skita-piltek* *kigga-piltek* *sjaper(t) (-piltek)* *sjaferi(-piltek)* *haf-piltek* *seth; saed/sed*	*upsi*
5-6 years	*greylord*			*stórupsi*
6+ years				

Fig. 9.27(a). Names given to different ages of saithe in Caithness, Orkney, Shetland and Faroe.[2]

THE DIFFERENT AGES OF SAITHE : TERMINOLOGY

HIGHLANDS AND HEBRIDES

	UISTS/ERISKAY /BARRA	LEWIS	W. ROSS/N.W SUTHERLAND	HIGHLANDS/ ISLANDS (general)
1st year	*cudaig*	*cudaig*	*cudaig*	*siol; siolagan cudaig ruadh sìol a' mhairt*
1-2 years	*smalag cudaig*	*smalag*	*glasag cudaig*	*cudaig cudainn saoidhean*
2-3 years	*saoidhean piocach*	*saoidhean*		*smalag cuideanach/ ceiteanach saoidhean*
3-4 years		*saoidhean mór*		*saoidhean piocach*
4-5 years	*ucsa*	*ucas*	*iasg-dubh [sey]*	*saoidhean mór saoidhean dubh*
5-6 years				*ucsa;ugsa; ucus; ucas*
6+ years				

Fig. 9.27(b). Names given to different ages of saithe in the Hebrides, the North and North-West Highlands.[2]

THE DIFFERENT AGES OF SAITHE : SOME COMPARATIVE TERMINOLOGY

OLD NORSE	ICELAND	NORWAY	FAROE	ORKNEY	SHETLAND
síl – fish fry – herring - like freshwater fish of the salmon family – sand eel	*síl(i), svil* – milt, seed – small fish – kind of herring, young herring – young salmon – sand eel	*sil* – sand eel	*sil, síl* – milt, seed, roe – small trout	*sile* – young herring ✓	*sil(l), sile* – milt – fish fry, esp. herring ✓
silungr – little salmon/ trout	*s(v)ilung, silungur* – trout – young salmon	*sil(l)ung, svile, svilung* – trout fry – young salmon		*[sillo, sillock* – young sow with first ✓ litter	*[silek* – young sow ✓
murti, murta, murtr – small fish – little trout	*murti, murta, murtur* – small fish – little trout – little fellow – little knife	*murt* – small fry – small saithe – small trout *mort* – roach	*murtur* – small trout – penis ✓		*murt* – underdeveloped animal – child – small object, ✓ person, animal
kóða, kóð – small fish fry – little plaice/ flounder	*kóð* – young fish fry – cod fry – trout/salmon fry	*kjǿda, kjǿe* – (young) trout *kot, kod* – young fish esp. saith		✓	*kǿd, kǿð, kjǿd, kǿdin* – well developed, half grown fish – big, well developed trout ✓
piltr – boy, child *piltungr* – little boy	*piltur* – boy, young boy – farm labourer	*pilt* – little boy – rude boy – small, weak man – weakling	*piltur* – little boy	*pilt* – perch *[pilk(in)* – small, lightly built boy ✓	*/pilti* – young pig *[sjupilti* – 'sea boy', nixie ✓
seiðr – saithe	*seiður* – saithe	*seid, sei* – saithe	✓	✓	✓
ufsi, upsi – big saithe	*upsi, ufsi* – (big) saithe	*ufs, ofse, ofsi, seiufs* – big saithe	✓		✓?

Fig. 9.28. Interchangeability of meaning in terms derived from essentially common Old Norse roots (Names referring to the different ages of saithe in Faroe, Orkney, Shetland and Caithness already recorded in Fig. 9.27 are excluded. They are indicated by a ✓).[2]

peltags — in Caithness and the south isles of Orkney *(pilticks)*. *Piltock* is further evidence of interchangeability of terminology — from ON *piltr, piltungr* 'a boy' (c.f. Norw. *pilt;* Icel. and Far. *piltur* 'a small boy', 'a small weak man': perhaps also Uist Gael.*pìll,* 'a wretched, mangy, unwashed man'? N.B. also Ork. *pilk* 'a pilk o' a boy'; *pilt* 'a perch': Shet. *pilti* 'a piglet') [Fig. 9.28]. Furthermore, Hebridean and Argyll *piocach* (3-4 year old saithe) is likely cognate with Norw. *pjakk* (Sunnmøre: 'a young trout/ salmon'), *pjokk* (Telemark, Hallingdal, Sunnhordland: 'little boy'). Shet. *pjakk* was a person of little physical strength 'but active in carrying out trifling work' (Jakobsen 1928-32), and Gael. *piocach* could also mean a 'small fellow' (Dwelly).

The wealth of evidence for a strong Norse base is particularly marked in Shetland, where the old language lasted longest and where diverse descriptive elements have been employed to qualify particular ages of young saithe, notably the 2-5 year old saithe, collectively known as *piltocks* (Jakobsen 1897. 20-23), e.g.

hoal piltek	: young 2yr old (ON *áll* 'strip', 'eel')
rolki	: 2yr old (Norw. *rulk* 'bundle, something bundle-shaped')
welshi piltek	: 2-3yr old (ON *vǫlsi* 'a cylinder')
beli-piltek *bilya-piltek*	: 2-4yr old (ON *belgr* 'belly'; Icel. Far. *beli* 'belly')
drølin	: 2-4yr old (ON *dýl-* 'cylindrical'; Norw. *dryle* 'cudgel', 'cylindrical object'; Icel. *drjól* 'cudgel', 'fellow', 'bull'; Far. *drýlur* 'cylindrical loaf')
benki-piltek	: 3-4yr old (Norw. *byngja* 'thickset, pot-bellied figure')
stivin piltek	: 3-4yr old (ON *stúfr* 'stump'; Norw. *styving* 'half-grown boy' / 'fish — especially halibut'; Far. *stývingur* 'half-grown halibut')
sjaper(t)-piltek *sjaferi-piltek*	: 4yr old — half grown or more
skita-piltek *kigga-piltek*	: 4-5yr old
haf-piltek	: nearly full-grown, 'a young sea coalfish' (ON *haf* 'sea', 'ocean')

It is a measure of the relative strengths and localisation of the linguistic tradition that none of these Norse-based descriptive terms is recorded for Caithness or Orkney (though Orcadians also had a number of different, mainly Norse-based names for the *coothin — harbin, hardiback, harva-kuithe, orva-kuithe, harber-kuithe, harbo-kuithe, knave-kuithe, vaain-kuithe*) (Marwick 1929). However, the strength of a material tradition should not necessarily be equated with terminological strength — language can all too easily change or disappear whilst material culture remains (or, indeed, vice-versa). Nor should apparent instability in terminology be thought necessarily to reflect weakness or breakdown of an activity. Where many types of small fish in different areas are similar in

size, shape and colour — young saithe, herring, sprats, sand-eels — interchangeability would be natural enough. In many cases it would be difficult indeed to identify individual species, hence the often more generalised sense of fish fry, small or young fish. That young salmon and (sea-) trout enter so frequently into the lists is unsurprising, given their similarities and their migratory habits between saltwater and freshwater!

By contrast, the Old Norse terms for large full-grown saithe (ON *seiðr; ufsi*) survive almost unchanged — due in part to the fact that older fish are generally more easily differentiated. Caithness and Northern Isles *sey, saed, sethe;* Far. and Icel. *seiður;* Norw. and Dan. *seid, sei;* Hebridean *saoidhean* are all cognate, as of course is O Scot. *seath,* recorded since 1632 (*SND*). So, separately, are Hebridean *ucas, ucsa, ugsa;* Far. and Icel. *ufsi, upsi;* Norw. *ufs, ofse, ofsi.* Could Shetland *sjaferi, sjaper* even relate to a compound of ON *seiðr* + ON *ufsi,* cognate with Norw. *seiufs* — influenced perhaps by ON *saer* 'sea' (see Jakobsen 1928-32)? Certainly it was a term used of the well-grown 4yr old coalfish in the South Mainland, and if it does contain ON *ufsi,* would be a so far apparently unique example from the Caithness/Northern Isles area.

Parallels go even closer. The Hebridean differentiation, with minor variations, between *saoidhean* (2-3yrs old), *saoidhean mór* (3-4yrs old) and *ucas, ucsa, ugsa* (4-5yrs old) is reflected directly in Faroese *seiður, stórseiður* and *upsi.* Less clearly, standard Norwegian has *storsei* alongside Nynorsk *ufs,* though Nynorsk has both *seiufs* and *ufs,* and Far. has *stórseiður, upsi* and *stórupsi.* The last are very big and only found further out at sea (J. Joensen 1980).

Elsewhere, in the Scottish north, the 4yr and older saithe can be termed *saoidhean dubh* and *iasg-dubh* in the Hebrides and north-west Sutherland, and *greylord* or *blackjack* in Caithness and the north — parallels to the standard English name *coalfish* and reflecting their adult colouring. *Greyfish* is generally the generic term; *glas-iasg* or *iasg glas* in Gaelic.

CONCLUSION

So what kind of picture emerges? Certainly, confirmation of long-term reliance by coastal communities in Caithness, the north and north-west, on large fish — cod, ling and saithe. Freswick bones confirm indications from elsewhere that the fish caught and eaten were at least a metre long in Late Norse times, as in earlier periods; whilst linguistic and documentary evidence suggests an unbroken domestic tradition from the Migration period. It is likely that this unbroken tradition goes back well into prehistoric times, provided for essentially by line and hook or gorge.

There is no such evidence, however, to confirm the antiquity of catching and eating the very young saithe. Yet it is reasonable to suppose that the earliest Norse settlers, their relatives back in western Norway, and indeed the indigenous population of northern Scotland at and before the Migrations, could and did catch and eat the tiny young as well as the large adult saithe — albeit perhaps in a quite minor way since the large fish were apparently so numerous and readily caught.

However, evidence from later periods is helpful, in the main, only in

examining sellag-fishing in these later periods. There is nothing in this evidence to deny the existence of earlier and linked traditions; only to confirm the considerable growth in importance of the tiny sellag in the later 18th and 19th centuries. The consequent searches for more effective fishing equipment, and the linguistic differentiation given to each and every size of these fish, underline their crucial importance to the local economy.

The development of the equipment, for instance, echoes the increased complexity around the same period in the north of systems for identifying new-born lambs and of lug-mark combinations; the extended terminology echoes the detailed naming of fleece colourations on Shetland sheep and of even the tiniest features amongst the hills and common grazings associated with subsistence pastoralism in all areas of the north and west. Without such exact knowledge and means of identification, life was simply at stake (Baldwin 1978. 100).

That this precision and detail, reflecting as it does Norse and other cultural elements and influences, has become increasingly confused, where not lost; that specialised hand nets of whatever type are all but quite obsolete except as an aid in commercial and sporting fisheries; that fishing for sellags, where still pursued, is primarily for pleasure with a simple rod fitted more often than not with a nylon gut or fly — all these factors bring us back full circle, to the ebb of the tide, to the notion of a strong correlation in a rural, subsistence economy between intensive domestic exploitation of the sea and periods of intensive hardship. What need today of such intensive exploitation in an essentially industrialised and centralised society where mass-production, good communications and a welfare state provide? And tomorrow?

Caithness had her share of fishing the sellag and the pattern of its rise and fall differs little from that found elsewhere in the north. But differences there are in equipment, in terminology and in the intensity of the hunt; differences determined by the geographical location of Caithness, the nature and distribution of natural resources and the 'accidents' of history. It is factors such as these that give Caithness a cultural identity distinct from that of Orkney or Shetland, the Hebrides, Faroe, or further afield. For in Caithness, a Norse presence — stronger than virtually anywhere else on the mainland and overlaying an earlier Pictish culture — experienced Scots and English influences more fully, earlier, than most other parts of the north and west, mainland or island. Indeed, come the 18th century, as no doubt earlier, Caithness folk — as seen from the Northern Isles — were considered so much more 'advanced' with their greater knowledge of Scots over Norn; and fortunate was the Shetlander who might travel to Caithness and acquire such a cloak of gentility!

'De vara gua ti
when sona min guid to Kadanes:
han can ca' *rossa* mare
han can ca' *big* bere
han can ca' *eld* fire
han can ca' *klovandi* taings'.

Unst, Shetland, ? 18th Century.
(Jakobsen 1928. xviii)

Yet these Scots and English influences were tempered, albeit marginally and for a very limited period, by a new wave of Celtic speech and manners as culturally distinct and clearly defined geographically in the 18th-19th centuries as were those of the Norse some 800 and more years before.

It would, therefore, be inaccurate to imply that cultural strands blended uniformly across Caithness — at any period. In material culture, as in language, placenaming and oral tradition, the distinctive physiognomy of Caithness — the essentially north-west/south-east orientation of turbulent seas and rocky coastline, fertile farmland, less fertile moorland and peat bog, inhospitable mountains — has for long provided more by way of cultural boundaries than a cultural melting pot: meeting and retreating rather than wholesale mingling. Only in recent times — when it has been more a matter of surviving trace elements than major components of earlier cultures — have the influences of industrial and technological advance and improved communications neutralised very considerably the delimiting effects of the physical terrain. And even now we have the hill shepherd, east coast fisherman, lowland farmer, atomic scientist and others besides. And the oilmen, they say, are coming in some numbers?

Regional ethnology, by looking at small-scale, localised, frequently disintegrating and almost forgotten detail — in this case of sellag-fishing — can offer a fresh dimension to the social history of an area, and make a contribution to the identification of cultural distinctiveness somewhat in excess of the apparent insignificance of the raw material.

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The objects illustrated in Figs. 9.7; 9.9; 9.22; 9.24; 9.25 are all now housed in the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, Edinburgh.

Footnotes

1. Cleasby (1957), glosses O.Icel. *háfr* as a 'pock net for herring fishing'; de Vries, (1961) glosses ON *háfr* as a 'pock net with a long handle'. In Norwegian Lappish *hoavvu* refers to a 'dip net'.

2. Sources for Figs. 9.27; 9.28 are the informants cited in the paper; also —
Nicholson 1907; Thorsen 1954; Marwick 1929; Tudor 1883; Edmondston 1809; Jakobsen 1897, 1928-32; Dwelly 1901-11; McBain 1829; MacDonald 1934-6; McDonald 1958; Mackenzie 1903; Jacobsen & Matras 1961-74; Lockwood 1955; Bogason 1966; Cleasby 1957; Fritzner 1883-96; Grant & Murison 1931-76; Knudsen 1937-57; Jonsson 1863; Torp 1963; de Vries 1961.
No attempt has been made to standardise orthography; spellings are as given by the respective sources. The lists should not be considered exhaustive and all the terminology merits a fuller lexical and etymological analysis than is possible in this paper.

For *Fig. 9.27* note:-

(i) Caithness	—	*saithe*	:	full grown coalfish
		greylord	:	biggest size of full-grown saithe
		greyfish	:	generic term for saithe (also in Shetland: c.f. Gael. *glas-iasg, iasg glas*)
(ii) Orkney	—	*piltick*	:	used mainly in South Isles
		cuithe/cooth	:	used mainly in North Isles and West Mainland
		sillock	:	used mainly in South Isles and East Mainland
		sillo	:	used mainly in North Isles
(iii)Gaelic	—	*smalag*	:	smelt
		glasag	:	female salmon; (Lewis) young rae
		iasg-dubh	:	a salmon after it has returned from the sea

(iv)'1st Year' : normally means until the New Year i.e. less than a year old.
cudaig : can mean 1st/2nd year ... up to 4-6in. (10-15cm) long
saoidhean : normally refers to a fish at least 12in. (over 30cm) long
ucas : normally refers to a fish at least 3ft (over 90cm) long (c.f. Faroese *upsi* 'sexually mature' saithe)

(v) The inhabitants of Raasay were formerly nicknamed *na saoitheanan.*

For *Fig. 9.28,* note:-

(i) Lowland Scots forms should not be ignored — e.g. *sile* 'fry', 'young herring'; *seath* 'saithe'. Lowland Scots forms inevitably have some bearing on surviving northern Scottish forms even though these may be derived originally from Old Norse and/or Gaelic (c.f. also ON *poki* 'bag'; O.Sc. *poke* 'sack').

(ii) Icelandic terms include Old Icelandic; Norwegian terms are essentially West Norwegian/Nynorsk.

(iii) ON *silungr, piltungr* are generally considered diminutives of ON *síl, piltr.* It is not always clear from which root the derivatives come. c.f. also Icel. *silungs-murta* 'the tiniest *silung*'.

(iv)Norwegian-Lappish	—	*siolla*	:	sand eel
		mǫrrto, murrtu	:	young coalfish in 3rd year
		sajdde, saite	:	saithe

(v) Interchangeability elsewhere is evidenced by e.g.
Shet. *bjartin* : little fellow, child
Icel. *birtingr* : trout
ON. *gnaddr* : peg, little boy
Norw.*nadd* : point, small fish, codling
Shet. *naddi* : barely half-grown cod

(vi) In Scots Gaelic there is also considerable interchangeabilty of meaning in terms incorporating *sïol.* Dwelly, for instance, lists:-

siol	:	seed, progeny, tribe: fish spawn/roe; oats, corn
sïola	:	milt
siol	:	sprat
sïolag	:	sand-eel (South Uist)
sïol-ghobach	:	sand-eel, pipe fish (Wester Ross)
sïol-mhór	:	eel resembling a sand-eel, but longer (Wester Ross)
tarbh-sïolag	:	3-spined stickleback, ? male sand eel (South Uist)
sïolag, sïlean	:	seedling, small/stunted grain of corn, potato
sïolag	:	breeding sow, young pig (Easter Ross)
siollan, sïliche	:	skinny, meagre creature/man

As with ON *silungr* and *síl,* Gael *sïolag, sïlean, siollan* are diminutives of *sïol;* and terminological 'links' between small fish, young pigs and small, inadequate men are as apparent in the West as in the North Isles.

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