

· VI ·

‘Over hill, over dale’:  
Reviewing the Distribution and Significance  
of Old Norse *dalr* in Scottish Place-Names

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Over hill, over dale,  
Thorough bush, thorough brier,  
Over park, over pale,  
Thorough flood, thorough fire,  
I do wander everywhere,  
Swifter than the moon's sphere;

Shakespeare, W. c. 1595.  
*A Midsummer Night's Dream*; Act II, Scene I

## Introduction

The names used to label and describe the natural features in any given landscape form part of a complex cultural narrative. As Shakespeare implied in his *Midsummer Night's Dream*, their generic elements alone equip users to anticipate and navigate topographies – both real and imagined – without ever having seen them. Beyond this basic cognitive function, however, the

analysis of place-names and their linguistic building blocks has the potential to help settlement historians negotiate the changes in language, outlook, and cultural norms, which separate the modern users of those names from the communities that first coined them. Indeed, in areas and periods for which traditional historical sources are lacking, the contextualised review of place-name material can help add crucial nuance to narrative accounts of the past. This is particularly true in the study of the largely undocumented events and developments which together comprise Scotland's Viking Age.

There may have been a delay of a millennium or so before the dedicatee of this volume, Arne Kruse, undertook his own *landnám*. But when he arrived in Edinburgh in the late 1980s, Arne spared little time in developing the toolkit needed to assess the impact of his predecessors. Amongst his intellectual luggage was a wealth of experience in the theory and practice of place-name research, a keen familiarity with the typology and function of Scandinavian place-names, and an enduring interest in the Viking Expansion. As the underpinning for much of his teaching, research, conference papers, publications, and editorial work, this combination soon germinated into a notably multi-disciplinary *milieu* for investigating the Scandinavian dimension of Scotland's onomastic heritage. I myself have been a direct beneficiary of this environment, first as a student, then as a supervisee, and then as a colleague and friend. I offer the following in the spirit of celebration this festschrift represents.

### Mapping and analysing the development of Norse settlement

In the 1960s, Bill Nicolaisen initiated the large-scale mapping of onomastic markers for Norse activity along the north and

west coasts of Scotland, their hinterlands, and off-lying islands. The volume and density of this material inspired him to label the area *Scotia Scandinavica* (Figure 1). Nicolaisen's investigation of Old Norse settlement generics such as *staðir*, *bólstaðr*, and *setr* (Figure 2) fed into a series of influential assumptions on the evolution of Viking settlement, from its opening stages, through its expansion, to its internal consolidation.<sup>1</sup>

Taking his lead from Hugh Marwick's 'Farm Chronology',<sup>2</sup> and F.T. Wainwright's distillation of the same,<sup>3</sup> Nicolaisen argued that the widespread but diffuse distribution of *staðir*-names was indicative of an initial phase of land-taking, in which large, landed estates were demarcated<sup>4</sup> – the so-called 'primary settlements'. The clustering of *bólstaðr*-names, on the other hand, was thought to point to the subdivision of those parent estates at a later stage into 'secondary' units – indicating the maximum extent of Norse settlement.<sup>5</sup> By way of contrast, names of the *setr*-type were thought to reflect a stage in the consolidation of initial settlement, into what we might extrapolate as centres of specialised yet economically subordinate activity, whose more limited distribution is 'a pointer to the period of confrontation between Norse and Gaelic speakers'.<sup>6</sup>

While most scholars would still agree with the general tenor of these observations, the tendency nowadays is to view the relationship between the different naming elements in this

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1. For a summary, see Nicolaisen 2001: 109–155, but also i.a. 1969; 1976; 1977–80; 1980; 1982; 1994.

2. Marwick 1952: 235–251.

3. Wainwright 1964: 139.

4. Nicolaisen 1969: 17; 2001: 113–116.

5. Nicolaisen 1969: 9–11, 14–16; 2001: 119–122. Of course, the interpretation of Scotland's Old Norse *bólstaðr*-names has since been substantially revised by Peder Gammeltoft (2001).

6. Nicolaisen 2001: 116–119; 1969: 11–14.

system as hierarchical rather than chronological.<sup>7</sup> Even with the first wave of Norse colonists there would have been a will, if not always a way, to establish the full range of agricultural and cultural facilities demanded by contemporary societal norms. The large agricultural landholdings of the leading settlers would have needed mills, smithies, summer pastures, and so on from the outset. This is what appears to have happened in fairly short order when the Norse first arrived in the untamed wilderness of Iceland.<sup>8</sup>

Considering that *Scotia Scandinavica* was no cultural *tabula rasa* when the Norse arrived but a fully developed settlement landscape, it is all but inevitable that planned differentiation would have been a feature of societal organisation from the very start. The relative economic viability of given sites within their localities will have determined their success or failure as settlement units, and the speed and stability with which the associated names became embedded in their local namescapes, or – alternatively – disappeared.

Of far greater controversy are Nicolaisen's observations on names containing the Old Norse nature generic *dalr* ('valley').<sup>9</sup> Whereas the bulk of his better-known surveys foreground cultural generics – all of which could reasonably be associated with agricultural settlements of one type or another – the interpretation of *dalr*-names presented a problem, in as much as it concerned a word whose most self-evident function was to designate topographical features. For that reason, Nicolaisen argued that there was 'no reason to think that [the element *dalr* in Scottish place-names] has ever meant anything but what it still means in Norwegian today, i.e. "a valley"'.<sup>10</sup> By extension, he

7. Crawford 1987: 105, 108; Thomson 1995, 42–62.

8. Vésteinsson 1998; Karlsson 2000.

9. Nicolaisen 2001: 112–113, 122–124.

10. Nicolaisen 1969: 16–17; 2001, 122–124.

reasoned that the widespread distribution of this name type was indicative of the 'sphere of Scandinavian influence', rather than 'a map of permanent Norse settlement', and most likely reflected patterns of seasonal exploitation, such as hunting, fishing, summer grazing, the odd military raid, or even friendly visits.<sup>11</sup>



Figure 1: *Scotia Scandinavica*.<sup>12</sup>

11. Nicolaisen 2001: 122.

12. After Nicolaisen 1994: 31; 1980: 219–220. See also Crawford 1995: 5.

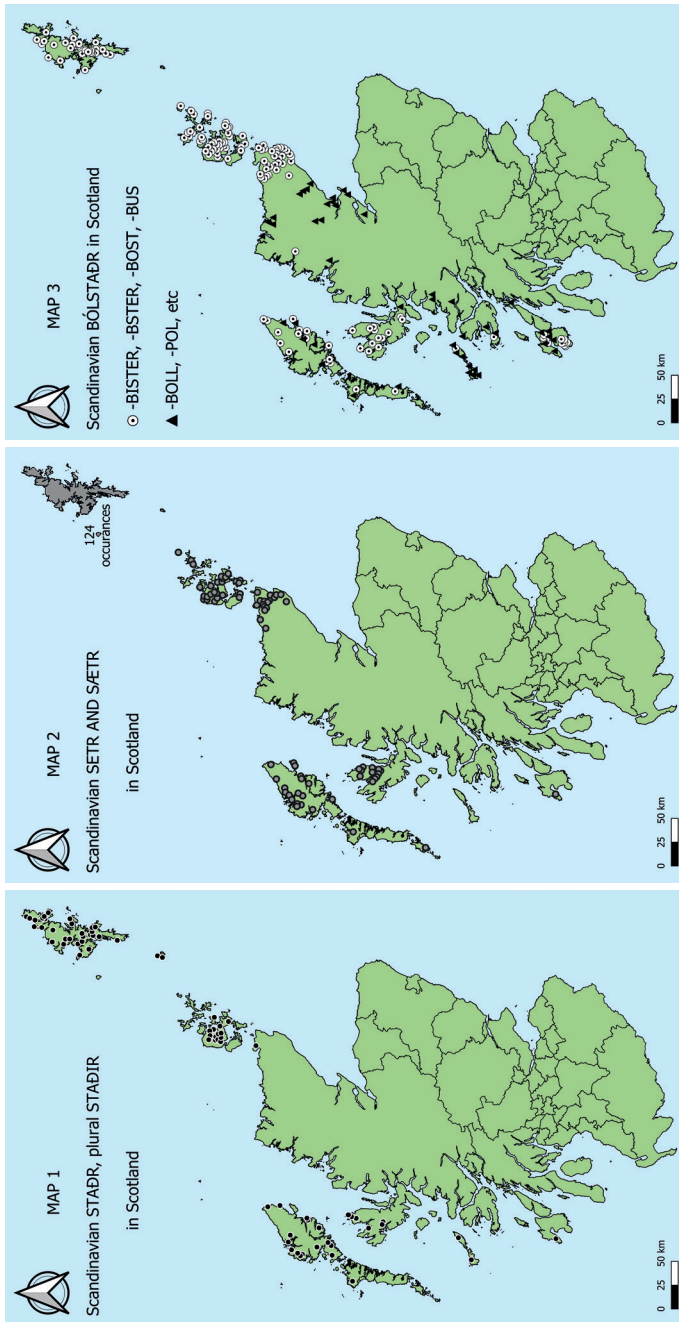


Figure 2: Distribution of Old Norse *stadir*, *setr*, and *bólstaðr* on OS one-inch-to-the-mile sheets.<sup>13</sup>

13. After Nicolaisen 1969: pull-out between pp. 8–9. These maps have been reprinted multiple times since, e.g. Nicolaisen 2001: 114, 115, 121.

It is perhaps not surprising that this straightforward and rhetorically compelling argument was quickly accepted as the settlement-historical orthodoxy. However, its simplicity has since been shown to belie a fundamental misunderstanding of ancient Scandinavian naming traditions,<sup>14</sup> and the transmission of place-name material in general.

Amongst the most neatly argued critiques of this position from an onomastic perspective are those of Scandinavian place-name scholar Arne Kruse. As Arne has pointed out over a series of articles, the namescapes of the Scandinavian homelands evolved over an extended period of time – as settlement expanded, retracted, or intensified, with new land being broken, old land abandoned, and cultural and economic emphases changing. The end result was the repository of name typologies, as well as cognitive toponymies exported by Viking Age colonists to Scotland.<sup>15</sup>

Logic dictates that at least some of the oldest surviving settlements in Scandinavia itself will have been named for the most prominent natural feature in their locality, whether that happened to be a bay (e.g. ON *vík*), a mountain (ON *fall*) or a valley (ON *dalr*). With early settlement sites most likely chosen for their convergence of ecological, and therefore economic potential – as opposed to making-do-and-mending with whichever spare land was left – it follows that they enjoyed an elevated chance of success and, with it, survival – which also explains the relatively high values often associated with these sites in the earliest taxation lists.<sup>16</sup> When Scotland's first Norse *landsnámsmenn* set about naming their new environment, we might therefore expect them to begin with nature generics – either for practical, geographical reasons, to commemorate

14. Crawford 1987: 111 and 111n19; Crawford and Taylor 2003: 9.

15. See, for example, Kruse 2004; 2005; 2007; Jennings and Kruse 2009.

16. Kruse 2004: 105–106.

what they saw as important typological markers, or icons of nostalgia or success from back home. In so doing, they would have been unpacking and arranging their onomastic baggage.<sup>17</sup>

While Nicolaisen later turned away from the idea of rigid place-name chronologies,<sup>18</sup> and accepted that topographic generics like *dalr* could also be used for farms, he did so with the caveat that they must surely indicate ‘less permanency in occupation, or at least a very different attitude towards the land’.<sup>19</sup> Yet for this material to have survived *in situ* from the Viking Age to its written crystallisation in later medieval charters, rentals, and – later still – maps, we can assume that it was maintained and preserved by permanently settled Norse-speaking communities until the names lost their appellative meaning, and passed into the sphere of lexically opaque address labels.<sup>20</sup> The alternative – of heritage communities of Gaelic speakers, eschewing their own naming traditions in favour of neologisms left behind like used chewing gum by transient Norse interlopers – is rather more difficult to accept.

To cut a long story short, and contrary to Nicolaisen’s assessment, the distribution of Old Norse *dalr*-names has clear potential to serve as a starting point in the study of Scandinavian settlement in Scotland. Determining whether all of the names in the surviving corpus had dual referents – to both a settlement and a natural feature – would require the close and contextualised study of each name in turn. And to confirm whether they pointed collectively to concurrent usage and therefore the maximum extent of Norse settlement would

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17. Kruse 2007. For a discussion of Old Norse *dalr* in the namescapes of Kintyre, see Jennings 2004.

18. Nicolaisen 2011: 213–214.

19. *Ibid.*: 214.

20. See Nicolaisen 2011: 308–309 for a brief overview of the factors which influence meaning and longevity in names.



depend on the relationship of *dalr*-names to the wider body of settlement-historical evidence, including other place-names, archaeological material, genetics, and even folk-traditions.<sup>21</sup>

### Identifying Old Norse *dalr*

Before embarking on such a monumental task, it makes sense to review how we might go about identifying the surviving examples of these names, the areas and forms in which we expect to encounter them, which – if any – observations might help to narrow or expand the list, and which issues and problems might complicate the search. The most convenient starting point is the suite of modern maps produced by the Ordnance Survey, which provide both relative certainty of location and geographical accuracy. This was the approach taken by Nicolaisen himself, leading to the identification of several hundred *dalr*-names, comprising around 340 examples on the mainland and isles to the west, with the observation that it also ‘occurs frequently’ in the Northern Isles (Figure 3).

Before reviewing the situation, it is important to be clear about how a given name is assigned to this category. Ideally, the process would involve a thorough programme of scientific research for each and every name. The onomastic methodologies required to confirm etymological suspicions are well established. At a minimum, they comprise the collection and comparison of the earliest written forms of the names with long-standing local pronunciation, and a consideration of local topography, alongside other relevant aspects of the environmental, cultural, and economic context.<sup>22</sup> As a diagnostic

21. Cf. Nicolaisen 2011: 215.

22. See, for example, Christensen & Kousgarrd-Sørensen 1972; Waugh 1998.

precursor to this work, however, it is necessary to consider the possibilities suggested by the attested place-name typologies of the likely source language(s) – in this case Old Norse, and Scottish Gaelic, as well as Scots and standard English.

As there is no part of *Scotia Scandinavica* for which locally coined Norse name material did not survive as oral phenomena – in some cases for half a millennium or more – before being transcribed, a certain degree of transformation can be expected. As this process has taken place at different times and under different circumstances in different parts of the country, there is no clearly established framework of spelling to work with. The forms recorded in the Northern Isles and Caithness, for example, tend to be limited to *dale*, and occasionally *daal*.<sup>23</sup>

By way of contrast, in the West Highlands and Islands, the added complication of transmission through a Gaelic-language environment means that the variety of written forms encountered is, to say the least, diverse. With *dalr* and its reflexes occurring in simplex names, compounds, and in *ex-nomine* onomastic units used as the basis for later Gaelic-language constructs,<sup>24</sup> they can be difficult to unpack from their onomastic matrices. Fortunately, there are numerous guides to likely linguistic transformations, with some focusing on discrete phonemes and morphemes,<sup>25</sup> and others considering names as a whole.<sup>26</sup> From these, it is possible to lay out a range of orthographic variants, encompassing *dal(l)*, *dail(l)*, *dil(l)*, *dle*, *dul(l)*, *tal(l)*, *tale*, *tail*, *tel(l)*, *til(l)*, *tle*, *tul(l)*, and others.

23. See, for example, Stewart 1987: 71–78.

24. Cox 1988–9: 3; 2002: 36–39.

25. E.g. Henderson 1910: 342–357; MacBain 1911; Marstrander 1915; Oftedal 1961–2; Stewart 2004; Cox 2022 (vol. 1).

26. E.g. MacBain 1922; Marwick 1952; Oftedal 1954; Stewart 1987; Stahl 1999; Gammeltoft 2001; Cox 2001; 2022; Sandnes 2010; Márkus 2012; Macniven 2015.

## Screening the data

Given the potential number of place-names involved, this kind of investigation presents a considerable challenge, which would almost certainly benefit from being broken down into a series of more manageable chunks. Ultimately, the need for an appropriate geopolitical context might warrant the use of administrative boundaries, such as those of the pre-1976 counties, pre-1891 parishes, or – more productively – the medieval landholdings and territories familiar from earlier sources. Before doing that, there are a few simple ways to pre-screen the data and filter out a significant number of ‘false friends’.

It is worth remembering that Nicolaisen’s survey was undertaken in the days before GIS or any other kind of easily accessible computer software. By current standards, his use of paper copies of maps is a process which is far more susceptible to error and omission than it needs to be. But thanks to the wonders of modern information technology, and the output of the GB1900 project, we have the ability to undertake computer-aided searches of a UK-wide place-name gazetteer, comprising over a million rows of data, transcribed and geocoded from the Ordnance Survey’s second edition of County Series (six-inch-to-the-mile) sheets, originally produced between 1888 and 1914. Scotland alone is served by almost 260,000 rows of data – which translates into a daunting number of names.

Fortunately, not all of these need to be considered here. For the area outwith Nicolaisen’s primary settlement zone, there is still very little historical, archaeological, or place-name evidence to support the prospect of Norse settlement on any discernible scale. For this reason, the search can be restricted to the modern local authority areas of Shetland, Orkney, Na h-Eileanan an

Iar, Argyll and Bute, Highland, and North Ayrshire. So doing reduces the number of rows to just over 110,000. Working with these, a standard search for place-names containing the most common reflex of Old Norse *dalr*, ‘dale’, returns 1,621 hits (Figure 3). Of these, only 1,227 are found within *Scotia Scandinavica*. For names encountered to the east and south, the *prima facie* assumption for most must be origins in English ‘dale’ or ‘dell’, which are not relevant to this study.<sup>27</sup>

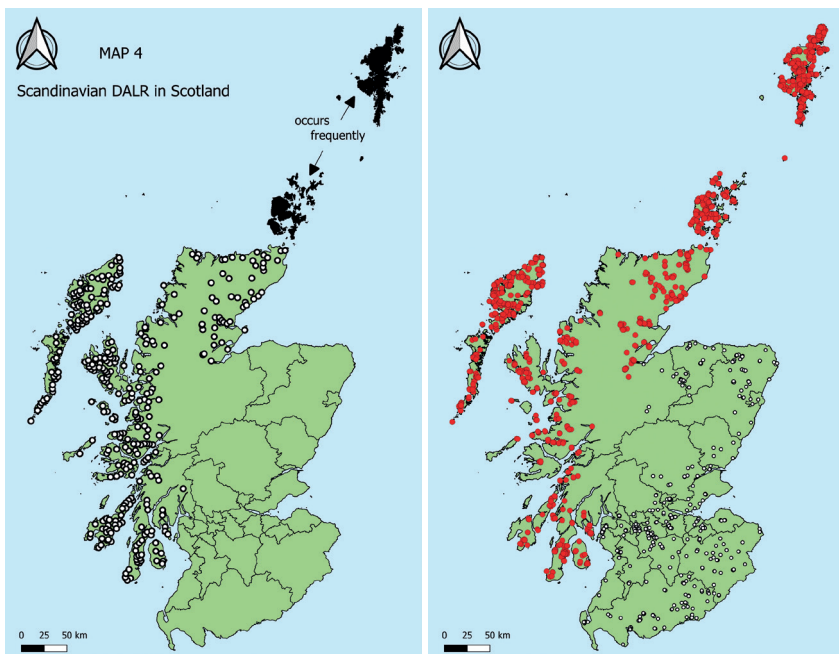


Figure 3: Distribution of Old Norse *dalr* on OS one-inch-to-the-mile sheets (left),<sup>28</sup> place-names containing ‘dale’ in the GB1900 database (right).

Given the chequered linguistic history of the main study area, however, and the distinctly non-standardised spelling of its

27. E.g. Nicolaisen 1969: 17n1; 2001: 124.

28. After Nicolaisen 1969: pull-out between pp. 8–9. As with the maps shown in Figure 2, this example was reproduced in numerous subsequent publications, e.g. Nicolaisen 2001: 123.

place-names, a search for 'dale' alone will not capture everything. Coding the search using the 'regular expressions' feature of a standard spreadsheet filtering tool gives a better impression of the maximum number of names derived from Old Norse *dalr*.<sup>29</sup> Combining '[dt][aeiu]l' with '[dt]ail' and 'daal', for example, covers all of the variant spellings listed above, returning almost 2,800 hits for the target area – substantially more than that indicated by Nicolaisen's survey (Figure 4).

Nevertheless, it is clear from even superficial analysis that not all of this material reflects Old Norse origins. There are a quite a few obvious cuckoos in the nest, where derivation is from a transparently English word, such as *hotel* (126 hits), *distillery* (forty-two), *telegraph* (thirty-seven), and *hospital* (thirty-five), among others. There are also forty-two examples where the name itself does not meet the search criteria, but the name field for that entry also contains a parish name which does, such as 'South Knapdale Ph.'

In addition to this, the search inevitably returns a large number of names built from exclusively Gaelic material. Some, such as *tull[o/i]ch* (sixty-one: 'hillock'), *dalach* (twenty-two: potentially the genitive form of *dail*, 'meadow', or *dàil*, 'assembly'), *tailleir* (twelve: 'tailor'), and *talamh(anta)* (ten: 'earth') – with those forms – are readily apparent. But the proliferation of variant spellings resulting from the historical lack of standardisation, and even diacritics, in map-names means that others are potentially more difficult to spot.

29. In theory, the prospect of more sophisticated 'fuzzy matching' is offered by machine-learning programmes such as the KNIME analytics platform. There is certainly no shortage of 'skeleton material' with which to develop potential algorithms. Considering the flexible position of the generic in each string of onomastic data, and the potential linguistic variety in the rest of the matrix, however, the best results of this approach are likely to be limited to searches for names which were originally both typologically and etymologically identical or at least very similar.

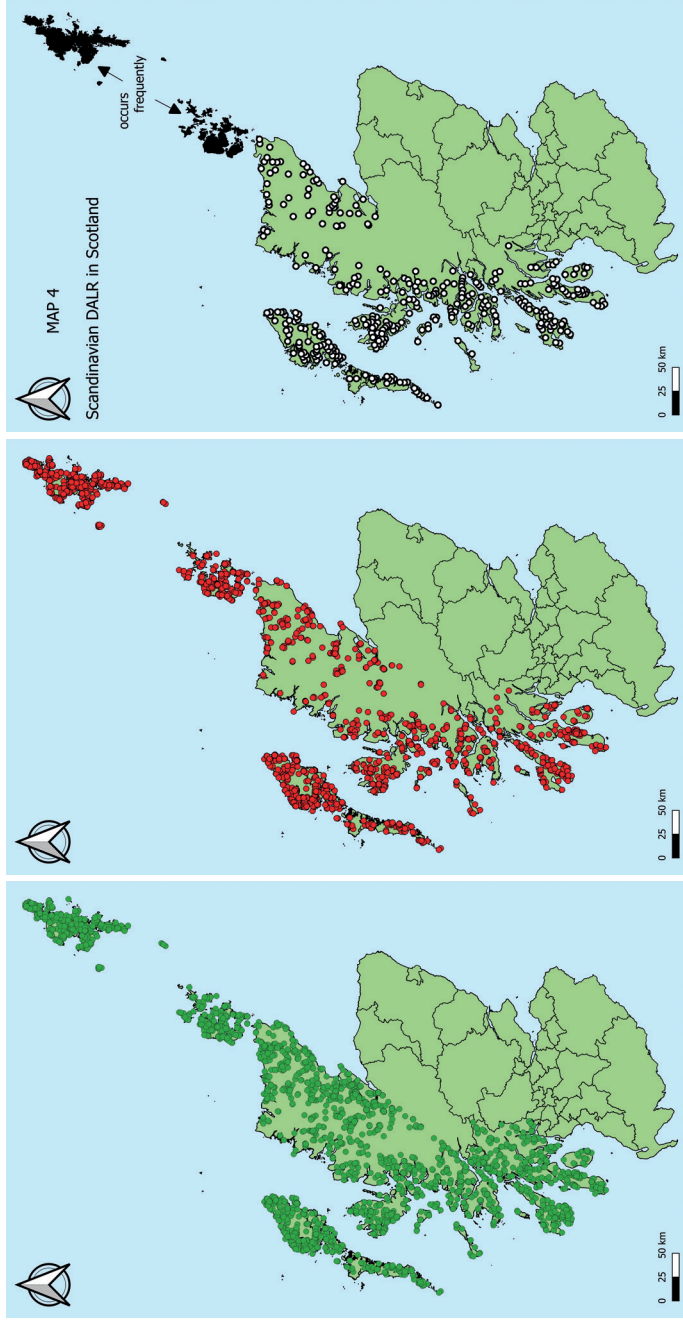


Figure 4: Unfiltered search for Old Norse *dadr* in GB1900 using 'regular expressions' (left); filtered results showing relatively certain *dadr* compounds only (middle); Nicolaisen's 1969 distribution map (right).

Features of name typology can serve as important diagnostic tools here. Names beginning with epexegetic onomastic units, for example, can help to identify Old Norse generics in the *ex-nomine* onomastic units which follow. Take the Islay names Glenastle, Gleneedale, Gleann Ghàiredail, and Gleann Chòireadail – all of which are associated with settlements and/or valleys, thus providing extra justification for the interpretation of the original *\*Astle*, *\*Egedale*, *\*Gàiredail*, and *\*Còireadail* as Old Norse *dalr*-names.<sup>30</sup>

There are also bound to be cases, particularly with simplex names, where differentiation between originally Old Norse and Gaelic material will only be possible after detailed examination of the local topographical and cultural circumstances. Amongst the most ambiguous of these are potentially simplex examples of Old Norse *dalr* and stand-alone examples of the Gaelic generics *dail* ('meadow') and *dàil* ('assembly').

In Islay, the etymology of the traditional farm-name Daill (*Dal* in 1509) has been seen variously as Gaelic and Norse. While there are a number of factors which point more strongly towards the latter, including the linguistic origins of the other large land-holdings in the vicinity, the wider toponymic context is crucial here.<sup>31</sup> Daill is only a few kilometres from the head of the major waterway, Loch Indaal (likely from a preceding *Loch na Da/à[ach]*). It also commands a fertile spot in the district of Islay known as The Glen in English, and *An Gleann* ('The Valley') in Gaelic. With such a close connection between these three names, it is not unreasonable to posit common origins in Old Norse *dalr*. But with the bulk of this subset of material likely to derive from Gaelic tradition, it makes sense to separate it – as a category – from the main group of *dalr*-candidates.

30. Macniven 2015: 152–154, 154–155, 175, 284.

31. Macniven 2015: 203–204.

Based on the crude analysis of spelling alone, there were twenty-three examples of ‘Dal’ / ‘Dell’ and 254 of ‘An Dàil’ / ‘Dail’ etc., which can be removed from the total (Figure 5).

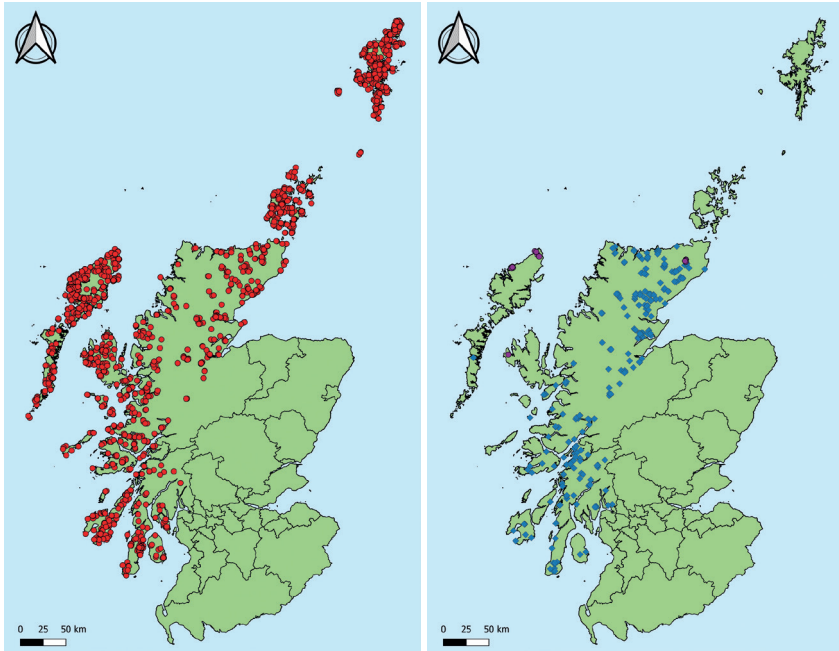


Figure 5: Likely compound *dalr*-names in GB1900 (left); originally simplex ‘dal’ and ‘dale’ names (red) and discrete ‘dail’ names (blue) (right).

## Discussion

Following the methodology outlined above, it would seem that 1,750 or so *dalr*-names are preserved in the GB1900 entries for *Scotia Scandinavica* – a substantially higher volume of material than that identified by Nicolaisen. While closer scrutiny of individual names in the corpus could reduce the total, re-evaluation of certain erstwhile Gaelic *dàil* or *dail* names could increase it. Of course, it is possible that the strictly defined boundaries of the study area exclude some outliers. But



it could also be the case that they include further examples, which await discovery in older, albeit less reliable maps, or non-cartographic sources, such as charters and rentals – as can be seen in the collation of the Islay *bólstaðr*-names.<sup>32</sup>

At the same time, it is important to stress that not all of the potential *dalr*-names in this list represent unique locations. In fact, a notable portion of the total can be attributed to clusters derived from a single original referent. These range from simple contrastive pairings, such as Doodilmore and Doodilbeg from Islay – from Old Norse *\*Dúfadalr* ('Dovedale')<sup>33</sup> – to more complex phrasal derivatives such as Loch Laingeadail Beag – from Old Norse *\*Langadalr* ('Longdale').<sup>34</sup> While pruning back names of this type to single, parent constructs will inevitably reduce the overall number of *dalr*-sites, the clusters themselves serve to highlight the cultural significance of those sites and the surrounding areas.

As seen in Figure 6, the revised base-map for Old Norse *dalr*-names in *Scotia Scandinavica* brings certain potential routes of communication into sharp relief, especially those linking the coasts of Caithness, Sutherland, and Ross to their hinterlands. This aligns with the observations by Barbara Crawford on the expansion of the jarldom of Orkney under Sigurðr *digri* Hlöðvisson (Sigurd 'the Stout', c. 991–1014), and his son Þorfinnr *inn ríki* (Thorfinn 'the Mighty', c. 1016–65).<sup>35</sup> Consolidation of Norse settlement during this period would have been necessary to safeguard Orcadian interests in the West.

32. Macniven 2015: 71–73 [Map 72].

33. Ibid.: 259–260.

34. Ibid.: 298.

35. See, for example, Crawford 1986, 1987, 1995b, 2003, and 2013.

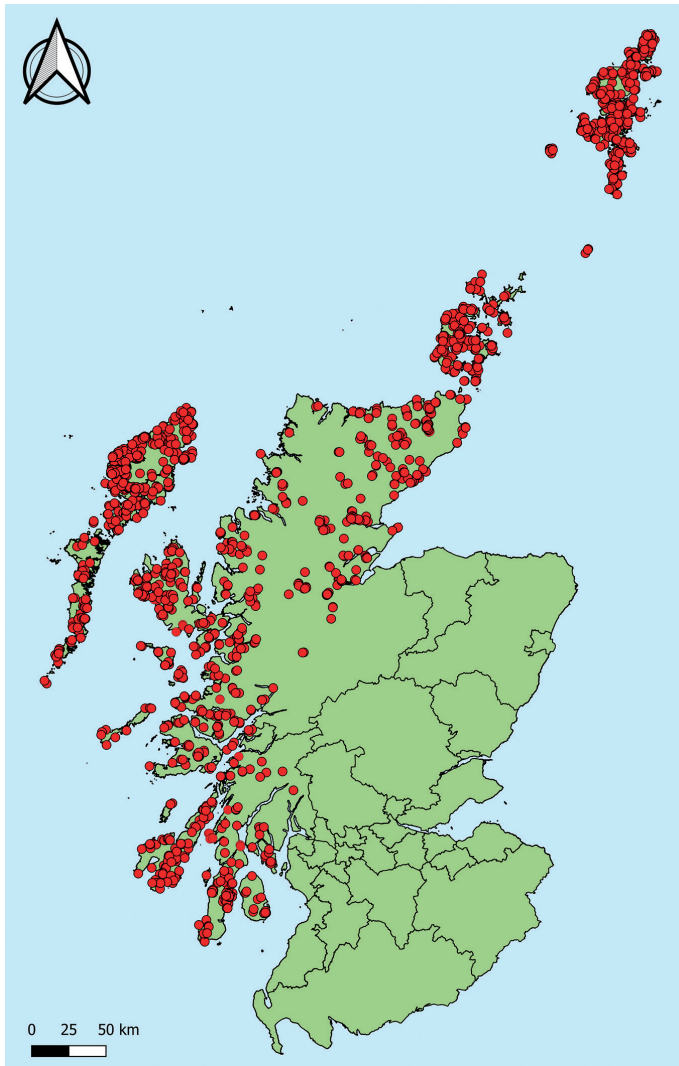


Figure 6: Base-map for Old Norse *dabr*-names in *Scotia Scandinavica*.

According to the thirteenth-century literary work *Brennu-Njáls saga*, for example, Sigurd is said to have had ‘this dominion in Scotland: Ross and Moray, Sutherland and the Dales’,<sup>36</sup> with the

36. *Jarl átti þessi ríki í Skotlandi: Ros ok Myrbæfi, Syðri-lönd ok Dali*. Sveinsson 1954: 206–207; Crawford 1995b: 5.

*dali* or 'dales' in question likely to reflect both ancient Dàl Riata, or Argyll, and the coastal valleys linking the mainland part of that territory to Sutherland.<sup>37</sup> As Crawford has also stressed, however, jarldom aspirations are likely to have involved control of the overland transit routes from the Firthlands of Easter Ross and Sutherland to the Great Glen and beyond – as well as the inland timber resources crucial for maintaining both naval strength and (prestige) building programmes in relatively tree-less Orkney.<sup>38</sup>

Through close-reading of the semi-historical *Orkneyinga saga*,<sup>39</sup> Crawford builds a particularly strong case for the domination of the northeast coast under Thorfinn between about 1040 and 1065, when the attentions of the Scottish throne appear to have been turned elsewhere.<sup>40</sup> The apparent floruit of Dingwall – Old Norse \**Þingvöllr* ('Assembly Plain') – during this period as a Norse administrative and likely also market centre may only have been possible under the protection of the Orkney jarls.<sup>41</sup> It may also have led to the expansion and consolidation of Norse settlement in the surrounding area, resulting in the introduction (or revival?) of a layer of Old Norse place-names.<sup>42</sup> But it would be wrong to assume that the scope for Norse settlement in the preceding centuries would have been curtailed by the agendas of powerful neighbours to the south. These were clearly no impediment to the Norse *landnám* in Orkney itself, which was once controlled by a powerful hierarchy of Pictish kings,<sup>43</sup> presumably alongside large stretches of the adjacent mainland.

37. Sveinsson 1954: 207n1; Taylor 1938: 401.

38. Crawford 1986: 40–44; 1987: 25; 1995b: 11–17; 2003: 4–7.

39. See Taylor 1938; Guðmundsson 1965.

40. E.g. Crawford and Taylor 2003: 4–6.

41. Crawford 1995b: 17–21.

42. For a review of the historical namescapes to the south-west of Dingwall, see Crawford and Taylor 2003.

43. See, for example, Márkus 2017: 89, 96, 103, 160.

The early arrival of Norse settlers in the interior of Caithness, Sutherland, and Ross may have amounted to the opening phase in the long-term cycle of control between Norse and Celtic overlords. But it was no doubt predicated on the benefits offered by local resources and connections, just as it was elsewhere in *Scotia Scandinavica* – the same advantages which had previously been exploited by the displaced Celtic landowners, and would later be developed by their own descendants. The economic infrastructure reflected in the later medieval and early modern drove-roads, for example, may not have exact parallels in the Viking Age.<sup>44</sup> But what they might reveal are the main routes along which goods, people, and news are likely to have travelled. It seems little coincidence that one of the main thoroughfares between the east and west coasts today, the A835, links Ullapool in the west with Ulladale and nearby Dingwall in the east. Could it be that the common referent points to some aspect of shared community across the span of the route?

In terms of the overall distribution of *dalr*-names, the emphasis placed by Nicolaisen on their frequency in the Northern Isles – and effective downplaying of their density elsewhere – also needs to be reconsidered. Of the 1,754 examples tentatively identified here, only 212 are in Orkney, and 382 in Shetland. Far more are found in Highland, with 500 examples to the west and north of the Great Glen, another 400 in Na h-Eileanan an Iar, 247 in Argyll and a further thirteen on Arran in North Ayrshire.

As far back as 1978, Ian Fraser had argued that *dalr*-names should be considered as candidates for Norse control in areas lacking habitative names. But perhaps the scale of the dataset now coming to light points to an even bolder conclusion – that the scope and aspirations of Norse settlement in these areas was once as ambitious as it was in the far north? With further development

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44. Baldwin 1986.

of the data, it seems likely that Scotland's Old Norse *dalr*-names could inform our understanding of not only the extent of Norse settlement but also the lines of communication and control which initially held it together but ultimately helped to hasten its demise.

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