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### Norse Shielings in Caithness: 'A Perverse Distribution'

Ryan Foster

I initially contacted Arne about a potential part-time PhD project in Edinburgh. He suggested that I apply for the recently advertised Northern Scholars Scholarship, which I duly did and was exceptionally lucky to be awarded. Arne then took on the role of one of my supervisors, and it is that project that this chapter is based on. Arne was brilliant as a supervisor; he is a superb scholar, highly organised, thorough, methodical, and logical in his approach. The stress of supervising me – a dyslexic geographer with a grasshopper brain – should not be underestimated, but he took it all with his usual good humour and calm demeanour. It was a pleasure and a privilege to have spent four happy years under his guidance, and I feel deeply honoured to have been asked to contribute to this volume.

#### Introduction

The use of shielings as part of an infield-outfield system has been characteristic of Scandinavian farming from the Iron Age and into the modern period. The infield around the home farm was used to grow cereal crops and hay, and was surrounded by the

*garðr* ('fence') separating it from the outfield.<sup>1</sup> Shielings were secondary farming units found in the outfield and inhabited by people with livestock during the summer months. This removed livestock from the farm, protecting the hay and crops,<sup>2</sup> and also provided areas of fresh grazing for livestock, the opportunity to collect winter fodder, and complete ancillary tasks, such as hunting, iron working, textile manufacturing, and some dairying.<sup>3</sup> The export of this type of farming system has been suggested through onomastic evidence in Britain,<sup>4</sup> as well as archaeological evidence in the Faroes,<sup>5</sup> Iceland,<sup>6</sup> and Greenland.<sup>7</sup>

In Norway, shielings are most commonly referred to as *sætr*,<sup>8</sup> though there are regional variations.<sup>9</sup> *Sætr* was also the most commonly used generic to denote shielings in Scandinavian settlements around the North Atlantic, with two exceptions, *sel* (n.) in Iceland<sup>10</sup> and *ærgi* in Britain<sup>11</sup> and the Faroes.<sup>12</sup> Whereas *sel* was an Old Norse (ON) element and used as a shieling name – albeit with a limited distribution in Norway<sup>13</sup> – *ærgi* was a loanword from Gaelic.<sup>14</sup> In the Hebrides, Northern Isles, and Cumbria, *ærgi* would seem to have been used as a shieling name in more fertile locations than *sætr*-names.<sup>15</sup> I have

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1. Øye 2005: 360.

2. Zimmermann 1999: 315.

3. Øye 2004: 91; Bjørge 2005: 219, 225.

4. Pearsall 1961; Whyte 1985; Fellows-Jensen 1980.

5. Dahl 1970; Mahler 1991; 1993; 2007.

6. Hitzler 1979; Guðrún Sveinbjarnardóttir 1991.

7. Albrethsen and Keller 1986.

8. Beito 1949: 274–275.

9. Beito 1949.

10. Guðrún Sveinbjarnardóttir 1991: 91.

11. Pearsall 1961; Fellows-Jensen 1985; Whyte 1985; Higham 1996; Foster 2018.

12. Dahl 1970; Mahler 1991; 1993; 2007.

13. Beito 1949: 118–122.

14. Fellows-Jensen 1980: 67.

15. Pearsall 1961: 84; Fellows-Jensen 1985: 74; Whyte 1985: 105; Higham

argued elsewhere that the link between *ærgi*-names and more fertile locations is due to the need for richer grazing to fulfil the nutritional demands of lactating cattle.<sup>16</sup> The one exception is Caithness, where *sætr*-names would seem to be located on more favourable sites when compared to *ærgi*-names.<sup>17</sup> The aim of this chapter is to examine why the distribution of *sætr*- and *ærgi*-names in Caithness seems so atypical or perverse.

## Definitions

The most common place-name element for an ON shieling in Scotland is derived from either *setr* (n.) or *sætr* (n.),<sup>18</sup> which under the influence of Gaelic often take the form of *siadar/ seadar*.<sup>19</sup> *Setr* had the meaning of (1) ‘seat, residence’, or (2) ‘a mountain pasture or dairy lands’; while *sætr* was a specific term for a mountain pasture.<sup>20</sup> It is now impossible to distinguish between the two elements in Scottish place-names,<sup>21</sup> even if both elements were present in Scotland,<sup>22</sup> and for simplicity they will be referred to as *sætr* hereafter.

*Ærgi* (n.) has the same definition as *sætr*,<sup>23</sup> and has traditionally been taken as adopted from the Scottish Gaelic *àirigh* (f.), meaning either ‘hill pasture’ or ‘shieling’.<sup>24</sup> However, several scholars have suggested that the original meaning of *ærgi* may

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1996: 56; Foster 2017: 124–125; 2018: 496.

16. Foster 2017: 128; 2018: 504.

17. Foster 2018: 381–397, 465–488.

18. Beito 1949: 11–84.

19. Nicolaisen 1969, 13; Cox 1990, 95–98.

20. Cleasby and Vigfússon 1874: 525, 619; Haegstad and Torp 1909: 370, 451.

21. Crawford 1987: 102–103.

22. Cox 1990: 111.

23. Cleasby and Vigfússon 1874: 133, 619; Haegstad and Torp 1909: 546.

24. MacBain 1911: 10.

have been closer to the Old Irish *áirge* (f.),<sup>25</sup> being a ‘herd of cattle’, a ‘pasture’, a ‘herdsman’s hut’, or a ‘milk herd’.<sup>26</sup> However, the difference in meaning between the Old Irish and Scottish Gaelic terms may have developed from agricultural changes that occurred in the post-Norse period.<sup>27</sup>

*Ærgi* is one of only a handful of Gaelic words adopted into ON.<sup>28</sup> By comparison, Peder Gammeltoft found around 200 ON words adopted into Scottish Gaelic.<sup>29</sup> Contact linguistic theory suggests that language borrowing usually occurs in one direction when two languages meet, with the less prestigious language borrowing from the more prestigious one.<sup>30</sup> The difference in the number of words adopted by the respective languages would suggest that ON had been the more prestigious during the Viking Age. The adoption of *ærgi* is therefore unusual, and all the more so when considering that ON already had its own term for a shieling.<sup>31</sup>

The reasons behind why ON speakers adopted *ærgi* led to a long-running debate between Mary Higham<sup>32</sup> and Gillian Fellows-Jensen.<sup>33</sup> One solution to this problem can be found in Uriel Weinreich’s ‘concrete loanwords’<sup>34</sup> and Carol Myers-Scotton’s theory of cultural borrowing.<sup>35</sup> The two theories involve the adoption of words that cover new ideas, concepts, or objects.

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25. Cox 1992: 139; 2002: 220; Macniven 2015: 69; Foster 2018: 463; Edmonds 2019: 166.

26. Dineen 1904: 24.

27. Cox 2002: 122–123; Raven 2005: 384, 463; James 2009: 54.

28. Cox 1991: 486.

29. Gammeltoft 2004: 63–64.

30. Weinreich 1968: 3; Myers-Scotton 2002: 41.

31. Weinreich 1968: 1–3.

32. Higham 1977–78; 1996.

33. Fellows-Jensen 1977–78; 1980; 2002.

34. Weinreich 1968: 56–58.

35. Myers-Scotton 2002: 41.

Weinreich suggests that there are three possibilities when there are two competing words for the same object or idea: (1) confusion in usage, leading to the abandonment of one of the terms; (2) the replacement of the old word with the foreign term; or (3) the specialisation over time of the old and new term.<sup>36</sup>

The continued use of *sætr* alongside *ærgi* in Cumbria<sup>37</sup> and Sutherland<sup>38</sup> would seem to rule out options one and two, leaving only option three, a specialisation in usage.<sup>39</sup> I have suggested that ON *sætr* encompassed a more general meaning of summer grazing and winter fodder collection, possibly with some dairying.<sup>40</sup> Scandinavian settlers to Gaelic-speaking areas of the Irish Sea encountered the intensive dairy shieling, a new concept to them.<sup>41</sup> The adoption of *ærgi* most likely fulfilled a ‘need-filling motive’ in ON as their own term did not sufficiently cover this new concept.<sup>42</sup>

## Location and physical geography

Caithness occupies the far north-eastern part of mainland Scotland, separated from the rest of the mainland by Sutherland and from Orkney by the Pentland Firth. The area forms a rough triangle, running around 49 km from the northern tip at Duncansby Head to Reay in the west, then south-east from Reay, 49 km south to the Ord of Caithness. Sutherland – ON *suðrland* (‘southern land’) – lies to the west and south, isolating Caithness from the rest

36. Weinreich 1968: 54–56.

37. Oram 2000: 248.

38. Fraser 1979: 19–20; 1986: 29.

39. Foster 2018: 504–505.

40. Bjørge 2005: 225.

41. Foster 2018: 506.

42. Anttila 1989: 155.

of Mainland Scotland. Doreen Waugh has made a compelling argument that the whole northern coastline of Scotland could be considered as part of Caithness in the Viking Age.<sup>43</sup>



Figure 1: Map of Northern Scotland.

The landscape of Caithness is formed from Middle Old Red Sandstone, which was created in a lacustrine environment

43. Waugh 2000: 22–23.

and has produced a low-lying, gently sloping landscape. There is a change in geology along the south-western border with Sutherland, where the land becomes more mountainous, as the bedrock changes to metamorphosed fine-grained semipelite and igneous intrusions of felsic Strath Halladale granites.<sup>44</sup>



Figure 2: Photograph of Assary, Caithness, possible site of *Ásgrims.ærgin* ('Ásgrim's-ærgi') in *Orkneyinga saga* (author's photo).

Overlaying this geology are wide expanses of blanket peat, peaty gleys, and peaty podzols, which cover around 65% of Caithness.<sup>45</sup> Blanket peat forms an acidic, nutrient-deficient soil that is used for rough grazing.<sup>46</sup> It covers much of the west and the south-west of Caithness, and includes a band

44. 'Onshore GeoIndex', *British Geological Survey*, <https://mapapps2.bgs.ac.uk/geoindex/home.html>. Accessed 30 July 2021.

45. Board of Agriculture for Scotland 1912: 52–57.

46. *Scotland's Soils*, [https://map.environment.gov.scot/Soil\\_maps/?layer=5#](https://map.environment.gov.scot/Soil_maps/?layer=5#). Accessed 30 July 2021.

running up to the far north-east. There are scattered pockets of more fertile alluvial and brown forest soils, the latter forming a discontinuous band along the north-west and with pockets along the south-east coast. There are two small areas of humus iron podzols, one around Reay in the north-west and a second smaller one just north of the Ord of Caithness. Though these soils are naturally acidic and nutrient deficient, they are improvable and are often converted to growing arable crops.<sup>47</sup>

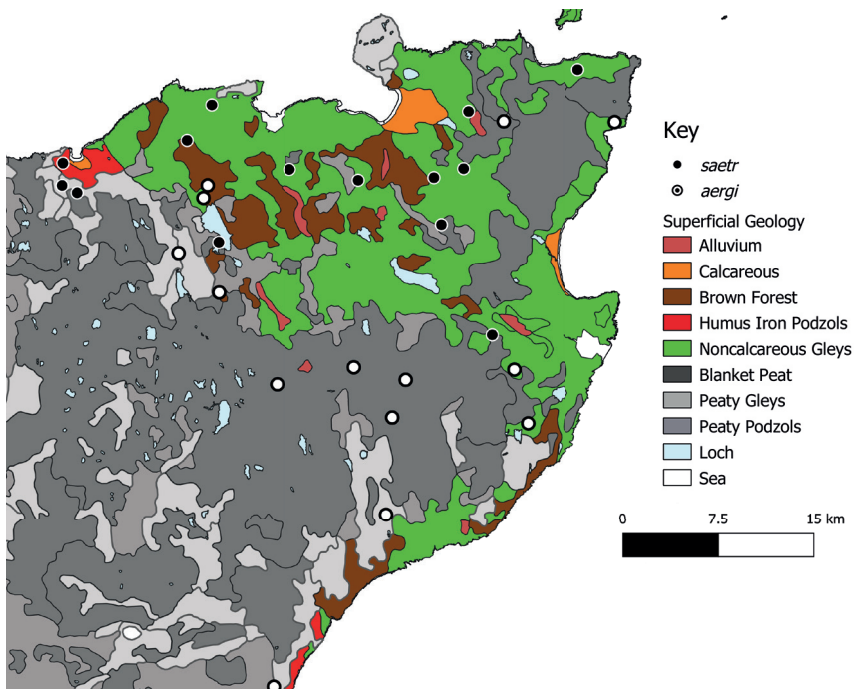


Figure 3: Map of superficial geology in Caithness (Soils 250K shapefile copyright and database right: The James Hutton Institute, used with permission. All rights reserved).<sup>48</sup>

47. 'Humus-Iron Podzols', *The James Hutton Institute*, <https://www.hutton.ac.uk/learning/exploringscotland/soils/humusironpodzols>. Accessed 30 July 2021.

48. *The James Hutton Institute*, <https://www.hutton.ac.uk>. Accessed 7 August 2018.



Noncalcareous gleys are the second most common soil in Caithness, being found along much of the coastline and also forming a wide band between Reay and Wick. Being naturally poorly drained, they are usually exploited as grazing land.<sup>49</sup> However, in Caithness, they are often used for arable farming, but this requires artificial drainage, and it is likely that their use in arable production was less widespread in prehistory.

## Climate

Rainfall is relatively low across Caithness and varies between 800 mm in the north-east to 1100 mm a year in the south-west. Temperatures are generally lower at more northern latitudes, but there is also a split between coastal and inland locations. In winter, coastal areas are warmer, but in summer the opposite is true, inland sites reaching a maximum temperature of 18.1°C inland, while along the coast this is between 16.2–16.6°C.<sup>50</sup> At Wick John O’Groats Airport and Strathy East along the coast (both 36 m asl), minimum air temperature rises above the growing degree-day<sup>51</sup> from May until October, which gives a six-month growing season.<sup>52</sup> The growing degree-day is the average daily air temperature needed for plant growth to start, and for grass this is around 5°C. At Kinbrace (103 m asl), situated 23 km inland, the growing season drops to only four

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49. ‘Noncalcareous Gleys’, *The James Hutton Institute*, <https://www.hutton.ac.uk/learning/exploringscotland/soils/noncalcareousgleys>. Accessed 30 July 2021.

50. ‘UK climate averages (Kinbrace, Sutherland, Strathy East, Sutherland Wick John O’Groats Airport)’, *Met Office*, <https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/research/climate/maps-and-data/uk-climate-averages>. Accessed 30 July 2021.

51. Skaugen and Tveito 2004: 221.

52. ‘UK climate averages’, *Met Office*, <https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/research/climate/maps-and-data/uk-climate-averages>. Accessed 30 July 2021.

months (June–September), which also experiences eighty-six days of air frost, compared to forty-three to forty-five days at coastal sites.

A cool climate in Caithness leads to low levels of evapotranspiration, which means some soils can still be considered as wet, despite low levels of precipitation.<sup>53</sup> The available water capacity of soils is the volume of water a soil can provide for plant growth and is heavily linked to soil type. The calcareous soils found around Sinclair's Bay and the eastern part of Dunnet Bay have an available water capacity of only 47.63 mm. This increases to between 138.95 mm to 161.15 mm for the brown forest soils and noncalcareous gleys, while blanket bog has an available water capacity of 504.59 mm.<sup>54</sup>

## Distribution

In Caithness, ON shieling names exhibit a complementary distribution, with distinct and separate concentrations of each place-name element. *Sætr*-names are found in an arc parallel to the northern coastline, stretching from Braxside in Reay Parish in the west to Seater in Canisbay Parish (Figure 4). There are small concentrations of *sætr*-names in Reay, Thurso, and Bower Parishes. The most southern example in Caithness is Thuster in Wick Parish, though it should be noted that there are some examples further south in Sutherland (see Figure 5).<sup>55</sup>

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53. Futty and Towers 1982: 9.

54. *Scotland's Soils*, [https://map.environment.gov.scot/Soil\\_maps/?layer=5#](https://map.environment.gov.scot/Soil_maps/?layer=5#). Accessed 30 July 2021.

55. Fraser 1979: 19–20; 1986: 29.

Table 1: Old Norse shieling names in Caithness.

<i>Sætr</i>	Specific element	<i>Ærgi</i>	Specific element
Braxside, NC951634	ON <i>brekka</i> ('slope') or ScG <i>breac</i> ('variegated in colour') <sup>56</sup>	Assary, ND062624	ON <i>Ásgrímr</i> (m., personal name) <sup>57</sup>
Brimside, ND049669	ON <i>brim</i> (n., 'surf') <sup>58</sup>	Badrinsary, <sup>59</sup> ND118240	
Carriside, ND074590	ON <i>Kári</i> (m., personal name) <sup>60</sup>	Blingery, ND306489	ON <i>Blæingr</i> (m., personal name) <sup>61</sup>
Fryster, ND184638	ON <i>Friði</i> (m., personal name) or ON <i>Frey</i> or <i>Freyjá</i> <sup>62</sup>	Dorrery, <sup>63</sup> ND074550	
Helshetter, NC963628	ON <i>hella</i> (f., 'a flat stretch of rock') <sup>64</sup>	Golsary, ND206375	
Hunster, ND243640	ON <i>Húni</i> (m., personal name)	Halsary, ND180491	<i>Hall</i> or ON <i>Hallvard</i> (m., personal name) <sup>65</sup>
Reaster, ND257654	ON <i>hreysi</i> (n., 'heap of stones') <sup>66</sup>	Kensary, ND221481	
Sandside, NC952652	ON <i>sandr</i> (m., 'sand, shore') <sup>67</sup>	Learary, ND065634	
Seater, ND357725	simplex <sup>68</sup>	Munsary, <sup>69</sup> ND211452	
Seater, ND249603	simplex	Raggra, ND317446	ON <i>Ragi</i> (m., personal name) <sup>70</sup>
Shalmstry, ND130647	ON <i>Híalmr</i> (m., personal name) <sup>71</sup>	Scolary, ND298684	ON <i>Skúli</i> (m., personal name) <sup>72</sup>
Syster, ND270691	ON <i>sjár</i> (m., 'the sea') <sup>73</sup>	Shurrery, ND042581	ON <i>Sióvarr</i> / <i>Sævarr</i> (m., a personal name) <sup>74</sup>
Thuster, ND289517	ON <i>þuríðr</i> (m., personal name) <sup>75</sup>	Skirza, ND387682	ON <i>Skerrir</i> (m., personal name) <sup>76</sup>
Thuster, ND068698	ON <i>þuríðr</i> (m., personal name), possibly ON <i>Fjós-</i> from ON <i>fē-hús</i> ('cow house') <sup>77</sup>	Smerary, ND120478	ON <i>smjör</i> ('butter') <sup>78</sup>

56. Waugh 1985: 65.

57. Waugh 1993: 123–124.

58. Waugh 1985: 147.

59. Waugh 1993: 124.

60. Waugh 1995: 75.

61. MacBain 1922: 290; Waugh 1993: 123–124.

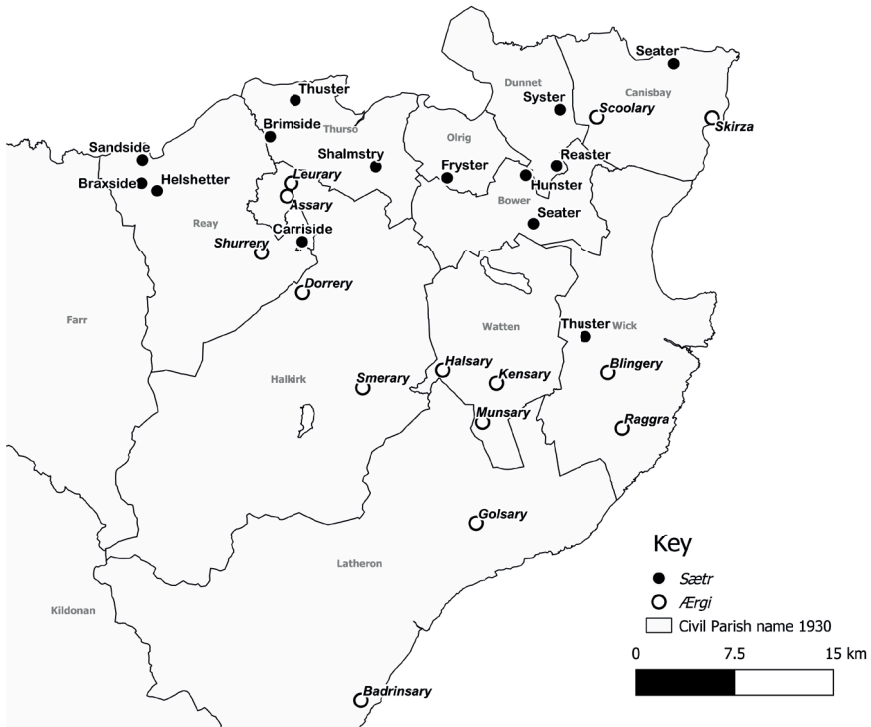


Figure 4: Map of *setr*- and *ærgi*-names in Caithness.

62. Waugh 1985: 216.
63. MacBain 1922: 173, 290.
64. Waugh 1985: 74.
65. MacBain 1922: 173, 290.
66. Waugh 1985: 258
67. Waugh 1995: 80.
68. Waugh 1985: 306–307.
69. Waugh 1993: 123–124.
70. Ibid.
71. Waugh 1985: 169.
72. Ibid.: 306.
73. Ibid.: 16.
74. Ibid.: 81; Waugh 1993: 123–124.
75. Gammeltoft 2001: 313.
76. Waugh 1985: 308; 1987: 103.
77. Waugh 1985: 175.
78. For similar derivation, see Fellows-Jensen 1980: 70.

*Ærgi*-names in comparison are found inland and further to the south than *sætr*-names, with a distribution pattern concentrated in Halkirk, Wick, Watten and Latheron Parish. Two outliers, Scoolary and Skirza,<sup>79</sup> are found in the most north-eastern parish of Canisbay. In Halkirk Parish, Assary has been suggested as the *Ásgrimsærgin* ('Ásgrim's-*ærgi*') from *Orkneyinga saga*,<sup>80</sup> the only known reference in ON literature to an *ærgi*-name.

### Comparison of location factors

There is little difference in the altitude of shieling names in the Northern Isles, Hebrides, or Cumbria, with an average difference of only around 5–9 m. However, in Caithness, *ærgi*-names are found at almost twice the altitude of *sætr*-names; even so, the difference is only around 40 m, with 71% still below 100 m asl and all below 150 m asl.

*Sætr*-names have a more coastal distribution than *ærgi*-names (except in Cumbria), with *ærgi*-names some 300 m further inland in the Hebrides and Northern Isles. Caithness is somewhat of an anomaly in this respect, as *ærgi*-names are on average 2,500 m further inland than *sætr*-names. Proximity to the coast is normally indicative of an agriculturally more favourable position, with flatter land, deeper and more fertile soil, and the ameliorating effect of the sea in winter. However, in the Western and Northern Isles, high winds increase the risk of damage from salt spray to coastal vegetation.<sup>81</sup> Although inland locations are less likely to suffer from salt spray, there is a trade-off with a cooler climate, which could delay the start

79. Waugh 1985: 103.

80. Fellows-Jensen 1980: 67; 2002: 91.

81. Hudson et al. 1982: 15; Jóhansen 1985: 63.

of the growing season.<sup>82</sup> This would suggest the *sætr*-names in Caithness were located in far more favourable locations than *ærgi*-names.

Table 2: Location factors of shielings from selected Scandinavian settlement areas (the number of sites is given in brackets).

		Hebrides		Northern Isles		Cumbria		Caithness	
		<i>sætr</i> - (59)	<i>ærgi</i> - (44)	<i>sætr</i> - (196)	<i>ærgi</i> - (10)	<i>sætr</i> - (24)	<i>ærgi</i> - (26)	<i>sætr</i> - (14)	<i>ærgi</i> - (14)
Altitude (m asl)	Mean	53	44	33	38	141	135	46	90
	Median	40	45	30	30	151	125	45	90
Distance from sea (m)	Mean	885	1246	724	1056	21136	16930	4789	7415
	Median	543	1030	489	500	24330	16210	4445	6585
Soil (%)	Fertile	23	37	16	21	0	15	14	14
	Moderately fertile	22	21	40	21	17	19	64	29
	Infertile	55	42	44	58	83	66	22	57
Modern Vegetation (%)	Arable	17	18	20	21	37	38	26	24
	Grassland	22	21	30	24.5	12	38	28	24
	Damp grassland	17	22	15	27.5	33	17	26	18
	Rough grazing	44	38	35	27	18	7	20	34

*Ærgi*-names are more likely located on fertile soils than *sætr*-names in all areas except Caithness, where 14% of both

82. Anslow and Green 1967: 118.

*sætr*- and *ærgi*-names are located on these soils. In the Hebrides and Cumbria, around 20% of both *sætr*- and *ærgi*-names are located on moderately fertile soils. In the Northern Isles, 40% of *sætr*-names are on moderately fertile soils, while in Caithness this rises to 64%, compared to only 29% of *ærgi*-names. Around 35% more *sætr*-names than *ærgi*-names are located on moderately fertile soils in Caithness, while *ærgi*-names are 35% more likely to be located on infertile soils. When considering soil fertility, ON shieling names in Caithness would seem to be an anomaly.

## Discussion

Overall, when comparing soil fertility and height above sea level, Caithness does not conform to the perceived view that *ærgi*-names were located in more favourable locations than *sætr*-names. However, the idea that *ærgi*-names in Caithness are atypical is not as clear-cut as at first glance. The difference in altitude between *ærgi*- and *sætr*-names is at best marginal and is likely to have had a minimal effect on the growing season. The more inland location of *ærgi*-names in Caithness have colder and longer winters,<sup>83</sup> giving a shorter growing season.<sup>84</sup> Shielings in the *Gulathing* law code were only occupied from around 14 June,<sup>85</sup> which would coincide with the start of the

83. July temperature inland at Kinbrace (103m asl) 18.1°C and 16.2°C at the coastal site of Wick John O'Groats Airport (36m asl). 'UK climate averages', *Met Office*, <https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/research/climate/maps-and-data/uk-climate-averages>. Accessed 30 July 2021.

84. Minimum air temperature of 5°C: June–September at Kinbrace (103m asl) and May–October at Wick John O'Groats Airport (36m asl). 'UK climate averages', *Met Office*, <https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/research/climate/maps-and-data/uk-climate-averages>. Accessed 30 July 2021.

85. Earliest Norwegian Laws: 94 (G81).

growing season at inland locations in Caithness. This would mean that there would be fresh grass for the livestock as they arrived at the shieling.

What is atypical is that *ærgi*-names in Caithness, when compared to *sætr*-names, are more likely to be located on soils classed as infertile and with vegetation classed as rough grazing. Around 71% of *sætr*-names are located on soils with less than 200 mm available water capacity, compared to only 43% of *ærgi*-names. *Ærgi*-names are twice as likely to be located on soils with an available water capacity exceeding 350 mm.<sup>86</sup> This would suggest *ærgi*-names were preferentially located on damper soils, reducing the risk of water stress. One factor which may help explain this is the geology of Caithness – sandstone is permeable, allowing water to more freely percolate down through the soil. Alongside low precipitation levels, this increases the possibility of water stress for plants during dry periods. Water stress occurs when water extraction from the soil by roots is lower than that lost through respiration, leading to wilting and reduced photosynthesis.

The higher soil moisture capacity of peat-based soils may have been attractive in regions at risk of summer drought. These damper soils could help promote plant growth over a longer period, especially if grazed or used for hay. A key component of damp grassland are sedges (*Carex spp.*) and rushes (*Juncus spp.*). Torstein Garmo found these to be higher in crude protein and lower in crude fibre than grass species between July to August.<sup>87</sup> Dairy cows have been shown to select a diet with a higher protein content to produce milk.<sup>88</sup> This would suggest that the ‘perverse’ distribution of

86. *Scotland's Soils*, [https://map.environment.gov.scot/Soil\\_maps/?layer=5#](https://map.environment.gov.scot/Soil_maps/?layer=5#). Accessed 30 July 2021.

87. Garmo 1986: 17.

88. Tolcamp et al. 1998: 2669; Sæther et al. 2006: 385.



*ærgi*-names in Caithness is more illusionary than real when seen from the perspective of dairying. Interestingly, despite over half of *ærgi*-names being located on what are considered infertile soils, only a third are classed as rough grazing, while half are utilised as arable. Similarly, in South Uist, *ærgi*-names were preferentially situated on the Blacklands,<sup>89</sup> formed from a mix of peaty soils and windblown calcareous sand,<sup>90</sup> which has formed the basis of settlement since the Middle Ages.<sup>91</sup>

The lack of *sætr*-names in Southern Caithness may suggest that *sætr* had been abandoned in favour of *ærgi* by these Norse settlers.<sup>92</sup> However, there are a small number of *sætr*-names scattered throughout Sutherland (Figure 5). While many of those found along the northern coastline may be considered as part of the original settlement of Caithness,<sup>93</sup> three *sætr*-names are located in southern portion of Sutherland: Linsidemore (NH541991– ScG *Lionsaid*, ON *linsætr*, ‘flax shieling’); Hòrasaid (NC886189 – ON *Doris/Dorirs-sætr*, ‘*Thori-* or *Thorir’s* shieling’);<sup>94</sup> and Bosset (NC449058 – ON *búsætr*, ‘cattle shieling’).<sup>95</sup> The location of these three *sætr*-names and the fact that both generics were still active place-name elements during the later settlement of North-West England would strongly suggest *sætr* had not been replaced by *ærgi*.<sup>96</sup>

89. Foster 2017: 128.

90. Owen et al. 1996: 128.

91. Parker Pearson 2012: 14–15.

92. Kruse 2007: 7–8.

93. Waugh 2000: 22–23.

94. Watson 1905–6: 366.

95. Fraser 1979: 19–20; 1986: 29.

96. Wainwright 1948: 147–169; Foster 2021: 1–10.

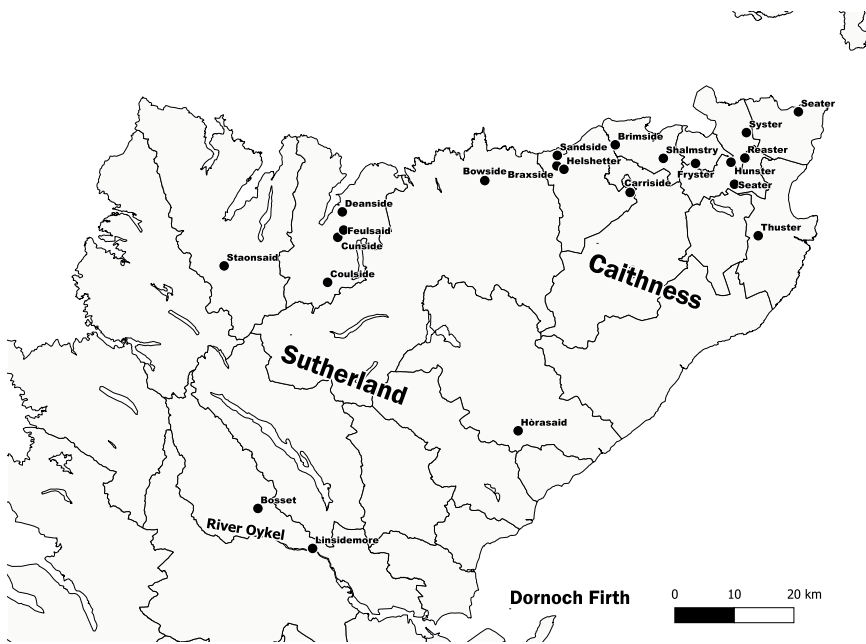


Figure 5: Map of *sotr*-names in Caithness and Sutherland (Soils 250K shapefile copyright and database right The James Hutton Institute, used with permission. All rights reserved).<sup>97</sup>

This distribution pattern of *sotr*-names could be explained by the scarcity of fertile land, which limited settlement. In Figure 6, areas of fertile soils are relatively small and scattered, both west and south of Caithness. South of Caithness, there are no large areas of fertile soil until the Dornoch Firth. The best soils for agriculture in this area are the small pockets of brown forest soil or humus iron podzols along some of the larger river valleys. Each fertile pocket which could be utilised for arable is separated by wide expanses of infertile peat, limiting settlement density. The function of a shieling in Norse agriculture was to provide summer grazing for cattle, which were needed to provide manure to fertilise the arable crops in the infield.

97. *The James Hutton Institute*, <https://www.hutton.ac.uk>. Accessed 7 August 2018.

When this aspect of Norse farming is considered, the scarcity of shieling names can be explained by the lack of arable land. What can be seen in Figure 6 is that where pockets of fertile soil do occur, an ON shieling name is also found close by.

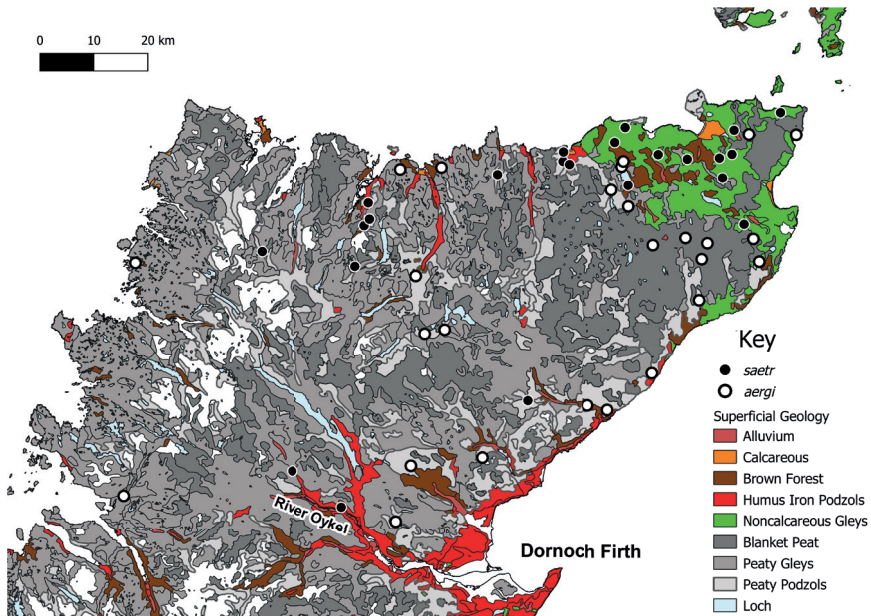


Figure 6: Map of superficial geology and Old Norse shieling names in Northern Scotland.

However, it is highly likely that the present distribution pattern has also been influenced by later language change. In the post-Norse period, eastern Caithness experienced a language shift from ON to Scots, and in western Caithness from ON to Gaelic and then to Scots.<sup>98</sup> The area with the greatest concentration of ON names in northern Caithness is also the most fertile. This would translate to a large ON-speaking population, which would not only increase the likelihood of ON

98. Bangor-Jones 1995: 82–83; Waugh 1995: 66.

place-names becoming cemented into the landscape,<sup>99</sup> but also act as a barrier to the introduction of Gaelic. It is in this region, where ON survived longest, that *sætr* is most commonly found, while *ærgi* in comparison predominates in areas that were more extensively Gaelic-speaking in the post-Norse period, such as Sutherland.<sup>100</sup> *Ærgi*, being a cognate of Gaelic *àirigh*, may have been more easily recognised and accepted by Gaelic speakers, making it more likely to survive.<sup>101</sup> *Sætr*, having no cognate in Gaelic, would be unintelligible to Gaelic speakers and consequently more likely to be replaced by a Gaelic term in areas where Gaelic came to predominate.<sup>102</sup>

The impact of language change on place-name survival<sup>103</sup> could arguably be best seen around the Dornoch Firth. This represents the first large area of fertile soil travelling south from Caithness. The area has some surviving Norse habitational names in the area,<sup>104</sup> and further south, there is possible evidence for it acting as a political centre with the names Dingwall – ON *þing-vøllr* ('assembly field') – and Scatwell – ON *skattr-vøllr* ('tax-field').<sup>105</sup> However, despite these names suggesting an established Norse presence, there are relatively few other ON names.<sup>106</sup>

The Dornoch Firth lies close to the old Pictish heartland of Moray,<sup>107</sup> which was also an area where Gaelic power and

99. Thomason 2001: 69–70; Gammeltoft 2006: 53; Caldwell 2008: 29.

100. Small 1986: 209; McNeill and MacQueen 2000: 426; Kruse 2005: 162; Gammeltoft 2006: 65; Jennings and Kruse 2009b: 95; Foster 2018: 346.

101. For similar conclusions on Islay, see Macniven 2015: 64.

102. Caldwell 2008: 29; Macniven 2015: 64.

103. Jennings and Kruse 2009a: 141, 138–143; Oram and Adderley 2011: 131–132; Macniven: 2013: 7.

104. Fraser 1986: 29–31; Jennings and Kruse 2009a: 143.

105. Crawford 1986: 34; Small 1986: 205.

106. Fraser 1986: 29; Small 1986: 206–209.

107. Nicolaisen 1982: 76.

language had become increasingly important.<sup>108</sup> The distance from other centres of Norse influence, combined with the proximity to the centre of Pictish and later Gaelic power, may have led to language shift away from Norse at a relatively early date. The pressure to adopt Gaelic is likely to have been even greater on any small populations of ON speakers found on the isolated pockets of fertile land to the north of Dornoch.<sup>109</sup>

This, however, does not fully explain why there is a complementary distribution of shieling names in Caithness itself. A similar distribution pattern of *sætr*- and *ærgi*-names can be seen between the Isle of Lewis and the Uists in the Western Isles,<sup>110</sup> but this is less evident in Cumbria.<sup>111</sup> I would argue that this may indicate a difference in chronology in the Scandinavian settlement of the Western Isles and north-eastern Caithness when compared to Cumbria. Caithness is believed to have been settled relatively early in the Viking Age, c. AD 800.<sup>112</sup> The Pentland Firth (ON *Pettlandsfjörðr*) separates Orkney from Caithness. The name would suggest that Norse settlers in Orkney knew that the land opposite was inhabited by Picts<sup>113</sup> and would also suggest that Caithness was settled after Orkney.<sup>114</sup>

A lack of characteristically Pictish names in Caithness<sup>115</sup> led Doreen Waugh to suggest that Scandinavian settlers imposed a new settlement pattern and land-use system, which replaced the original names.<sup>116</sup> Caithness and Lewis have both been

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108. Nicolaisen 1993: 257; Shepherd 1993: 85–86; Crawford and Taylor 2003: 9.

109. Small 1986: 208; Jennings and Kruse 2009a: 141.

110. Foster 2017: 113.

111. Foster 2018: 35; 2021: 6.

112. Nicolaisen 1982: 75; Waugh 1987: 99.

113. Nicolaisen 1982: 76.

114. Waugh 1985: 2–3; Crawford and Taylor 2003: 2.

115. Nicolaisen 1982: 76.

116. Waugh 1985: 2–3; 1993: 124.

suggested as Pictish-speaking, a Brittonic-related language,<sup>117</sup> in the pre-Viking Age.<sup>118</sup> In Lewis<sup>119</sup> and Caithness, there are a few exceptions to what would seem a Norse onomastic whitewash. There is, however, no way of identifying whether many of these non-Norse names are pre-Norse, post-Norse, or formed during the Viking Age.<sup>120</sup>

Caithness – ON *Katanes* (‘headland of the cats’) – is one example of an ON name that incorporates a pre-Norse specific element,<sup>121</sup> which Nicolaisen suggests is probably the Gaelic term *cat* (m., ‘cat’).<sup>122</sup> There is little evidence to suggest that Caithness was Gaelic-speaking in the pre-Norse period.<sup>123</sup> However, Gaelic may have started to make inroads into Sutherland from around AD 800<sup>124</sup> and in western Caithness from the mid-ninth century.<sup>125</sup> Nicolaisen has suggested that the name *cat* was bestowed on the people by their Gaelic neighbours to the south,<sup>126</sup> though the element may well be a Pictish rather than a Gaelic term.

Doreen Waugh,<sup>127</sup> following Nicolaisen, proposed that ON-speaking settlers to Caithness encountered Gaelic speakers as they expanded their settlement to the south.<sup>128</sup> Waugh proposed that the complementary distribution of shielings in Caithness represented a contact zone between ON and

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117. Jackson 1955: 129–166; Wainwright 1962: 91–112.

118. Bannerman 1974: 28; Taylor 2016: 4.

119. Fraser 1974: 19; Fellows-Jensen 1984: 152–153; Kruse 2004: 104; 2005: 158; Jennings and Kruse 2005: 251; Gammeltoft 2006: 65.

120. Waugh 1993: 120–121.

121. Nicolaisen 1982: 77.

122. *Ibid.*

123. *Ibid.*

124. Bangor-Jones 1995: 82–83.

125. Nicolaisen 1982: 80.

126. *Ibid.*: 76.

127. Doreen Waugh 1993: 123–124.

128. Nicolaisen 1982: 80.

Gaelic.<sup>129</sup> She suggested that it was along the edge of this onomastic contact zone where a higher number of Gaelic speakers led to the adoption and use of *ærgi* for a shieling.

However, the parish of Reay has evidence for the earliest and most intense Gaelic influence, containing twenty-two out of twenty-four Gaelic *achadh*-names ('field' and later 'farm') in Caithness.<sup>130</sup> Surprisingly, considering the density of Gaelic names, it is *sætr* that outnumbers *ærgi* by four to one. Whereas in Canisbay, in the extreme north-east, the ratio is two to one for *ærgi* to *sætr*, despite a complete lack of evidence for Gaelic ever being spoken there.<sup>131</sup> Jake King has suggested that some, at least, of the *achadh*-names in Caithness and Sutherland are very late formations. King proposes that Norse settlers to Caithness ignored the existing place-names, coining purely ON names, but later Gaelic speakers moved into the area, adapting existing ON names as well as coining new Gaelic ones.<sup>132</sup>

The lack of Gaelic place-names in Caithness and Orkney may point to both areas being settled before contact with Gaelic speakers.<sup>133</sup> David Dumville suggests that during the early part of the Viking Age, interactions between Scandinavians and Gaelic speakers was sporadic and violent.<sup>134</sup> It is only after AD 820 that encounters evolved from robbery and killing to taking prisoners and making alliances,<sup>135</sup> and it is only after AD 850 that groups of Vikings began to be identified in Irish sources, suggesting some form of communication.<sup>136</sup> It is likely that it was during this period that language contact developed to allow

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129. Waugh 1993: 123–124.

130. Waugh 1985: 20.

131. Nicolaisen 1982: 77.

132. King forthcoming.

133. Nicolaisen 1979–80: 110; Smith 2001: 20.

134. Dumville 2008: 357.

135. *Annals of Ulster*: 363; Downham 2007: 238–239.

136. Dumville 2008: 358.

for the exchange of ideas. If the Northern Isles and northern Caithness were settled c. AD 800, then this would have been before language contact with Gaelic speakers had developed and the settlement would exhibit an insular Norse nomenclature.<sup>137</sup>

The idea that there was a difference in the timing of Scandinavian settlement of Caithness and Sutherland would seem to be corroborated by some Icelandic sagas. Icelandic sources sometimes refer to Scandinavian settlers and settlement in Scotland. A major issue with sagas is that they were written down some 300–400 years after the events they describe, and the accuracy of the material is open to question.<sup>138</sup> However, sagas are one of the earliest ON sources that refer to the Viking Age and are, in fact, the only source to discuss Caithness in this period.<sup>139</sup> It is therefore worth examining what evidence they may contain.<sup>140</sup>

*Ketill flatnefr* (Ketill ‘Flatnose’) was a well-known settler from Icelandic sources who had a close connection to the Gaelic west.<sup>141</sup> In *Laxdæla saga*, Ketill’s daughter, *Auðr djúpaúðga* (Aud ‘the Deep-Minded’), also referred to as *Unnr*, is reputed to have married *Áleifr hinn hvíti* (Óláf ‘the White’).<sup>142</sup> Óláf the White is believed to be *Amlaib*, the Norse King of Dublin mentioned in Irish sources from c. AD 851–853.<sup>143</sup> Óláf the White had been, at various times, allied to a variety of petty Irish kings and even previously married to the daughter of one.<sup>144</sup>

*Dórunn hyrna*, another of Ketill’s daughters in *Laxdæla saga*, married *Helgi inn magri* (Helgi ‘the Lean’), son of *Eyvindr*

137. Foster 2018: 313.

138. Woolf 2007: 296; Jennings and Kruse 2009a: 127–129.

139. Dumville 2008, 351.

140. Jennings and Kruse 2009a: 127–129.

141. *Eyrbyggja saga*: 25; *Landnámabók*: chap. 11; *Laxdæla saga*: chap. 4; Jennings and Kruse 2009a: 127.

142. *Laxdæla saga*: 47.

143. Ó Corráin 1998: 298; Downham 2007: 15–23, 238.

144. Downham 2007: 238–239.



*Bjarnarson* (nicknamed ‘the Easterner’) and *Rafertach* (Rafarta), daughter of *Kjarval Írakonung* (Cerball of Osraige).<sup>145</sup> The sagas suggest Ketill was heavily connected to Ireland, including alliances with Norse rulers, who themselves were also strongly associated with Gaelic rulers. Andrew Jennings and Arne Kruse have argued that the Icelandic tradition concerning Ketill and Aud may have some validity, as the likely source was Ari Þorgilsson, one of their descendants.<sup>146</sup>

A common theme in many sagas connect this group of Norse settlers in the Irish Sea to later events in Caithness.<sup>147</sup> Ketill’s grandson by Ólaf the White and Aud was called *Þorsteinn rauði* (Thorstein ‘the Red’). Thorstein was married to *Puríður Eyvindardóttur* (Thurid, the daughter of Eyvind and Rafarta), further connecting the dynasty to the Gaelic west.

*Laxdæla saga* states that Thorstein raided widely in what later became Scotland, gaining half of it through treaty, but was later killed while in Caithness.<sup>148</sup> Some Icelandic sagas report that Thorstein the Red made an alliance with *Sigurðr inn ríki* (Sigurd ‘the Mighty’), the Earl of Orkney,<sup>149</sup> Sigurd and Thorstein reputedly conquering Caithness and Sutherland as far as *Ekkjalsbakki*.<sup>150</sup> Sigurd was killed shortly afterwards and buried at said place,<sup>151</sup> whose name may refer to the River Oykel in Sutherland.<sup>152</sup> The burial site has been suggested as referring to a mound, Cnoc Skardie, at Cyderhall.<sup>153</sup> The use of grave mounds as symbols of power and of land ownership in

145. *Laxdæla saga*: 47; Jennings and Kruse 2009a: 129.

146. Jennings and Kruse 2009a: 127.

147. Crawford 1986: 37.

148. *Laxdæla saga*: 51.

149. *Haraldr saga hins hárfagra*: 369; *Orkneyinga saga*: 27; *Eirík’s saga rauða*: 126.

150. *Orkneyinga saga*: 27.

151. Ibid.

152. Crawford 1986: 38; Crawford 1987: 58–59; Crawford and Taylor 2003: 1.

153. Crawford 1987: 58–59; Crawford and Taylor 2003: 3.

Norway<sup>154</sup> is well known and would suggest that Scandinavian settlers felt confident enough in their control of the area to bury their leader here. There are a number of recorded furnished graves in Northern Scotland, especially in north-eastern Caithness. There are also two furnished graves located in the south-east of Sutherland,<sup>155</sup> which adds weight to the idea that this area was under Norse control at one time.<sup>156</sup>

The campaign of Sigurd and Thorstein likely expanded Norse control south from the coastal strip of Caithness into what is now Sutherland. Thorstein's powerbase was in the west, and his followers are likely to have been predominantly drawn from this area. These forces, having already been in contact with Gaelic speakers, would have had the opportunity to adopt *ærgi* into their farming system and lexicon. This concept may then have been introduced to Caithness by this group, who settled in the newly won areas of southern Caithness and Sutherland.

Thorstein's mother, Aud, had also travelled to Caithness, and according to *Laxdæla saga*, it was from there she secretly fled to Iceland on his death.<sup>157</sup> Though circumstantial, it is arguable that the story of Aud fleeing in secret might suggest that any surviving members of Thorstein's force are likely to have stayed behind.

## Conclusion

ON shieling names in Caithness, at first glance, do have an atypical distribution pattern when compared to other areas of Scandinavian settlement. However, the difference in altitude

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154. Skre 2001: 10.

155. Harrison 2008: 291.

156. Crawford and Taylor 2003: 3.

157. *Laxdæla saga*: 51–52.

between the two groups of shieling names is negligible, while either group's distance from the coast makes little impact concerning the use as a shieling in Scandinavian farming. The only aspect that can be considered odd concerning the location of shieling elements in Caithness is that *sætr*-names are located on more fertile soils compared to *ærgi*-names. However, even this may not be as unusual as it first seems when considering the available water capacity of soils. Despite peaty soils being considered infertile, their increased water capacity could arguably have been a benefit for livestock grazing in areas of relatively low rainfall. The fact that over half of *ærgi*-sites today are used for arable farming would suggest that the sites, though superficially infertile, were not as marginal as they first appear.

This difference in location of the two shieling elements, rather than being an indicator of marginality, may be the result of a combination of factors. The timing of each area's settlement is likely to have affected the choice of shieling name, with the northern coast being settled before language contact with Gaelic speakers had occurred. The insularity of Norse settlement is highlighted by the intensity of ON place-names and occurrence of furnished graves.<sup>158</sup> The density of settlement is no doubt a result of the general fertility of soil, which supported a large population of ON speakers. This would, in turn, have helped to retain distinctly Norse characteristics long enough for names to become mono-referential,<sup>159</sup> and in north-east Caithness stopped Gaelic from encroaching completely.<sup>160</sup>

When place-names are coined, they have appellative meanings in their respective language, such as 'hill' or 'field'. However, when they become established names for a location, they lose the appellative element and act purely as names, thus becoming

158. Waugh 1985: 2–3; 1993: 124.

159. Gammeltoft 2006: 53; Caldwell 2008: 29.

160. Nicolaisen 1982: 77.

mono-referential. As a place-name's main function is to single it out from other localities, it can then be easily transferred from one language to another, or as Peder Gammeltoft puts it, a name 'stops connoting and starts denoting'.<sup>161</sup>

The argument that the complementary distribution pattern of shieling names in Caithness is a result of a contact linguistic zone is difficult to prove. The evidence for large numbers of Gaelic speakers in Caithness in the pre-Norse period is weak. I would argue that the story found in Icelandic sources of a secondary later migration of Scandinavians who had spent time in the Gaelic west is supported circumstantially by the place-name evidence. Once the southern part of Caithness and Sutherland was subdued, Scandinavian settlers were able to set up their farming enterprises. These new settlers may have brought with them from the west a new concept and loanword *ærgi*, which they had incorporated into their farming economy.<sup>162</sup>

The distribution pattern of ON shieling names in Caithness is not perverse or atypical as it first seems, but fits into the general pattern of Scandinavian settlement in the Viking Age. The distribution pattern of shieling names in Caithness, rather than being the result of a single factor, is likely to be the result of a complex interaction of geography, settlement chronology, and later language shift.

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161. Gammeltoft 2006: 55.

162. Foster 2018: 508.

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