# NORSE AND CELTIC PLACE-NAMES AROUND THE DORNOCH FIRTH

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The Dornoch Firth is perhaps the most important topographic feature of this part of eastern Scotland. It is divisive in terms of both topography and history since it is a natural barrier between Ross and Sutherland, and even if it is no longer significant in political terms there can be no doubt that it proved to be exactly that in past times. Nevertheless, Norse place-names successfully bridged the Dornoch Firth to establish themselves in Ross, so that parishes such as Tarbat, Fearn, Nigg, Edderton and Kincardine display some of the Norse elements that are to be found across the Firth in Sutherland, albeit in smaller numbers and in less variety.

The peninsula between the Firths of Dornoch and Cromarty is largely undulating and low-lying, with a variety of topography, and potentially fertile. It has much in common with the Moray Firth coastlands in this respect, and the presence of Pictish place-name elements in the area is a link with the littoral to the south. It can truly be said that here the place-names of both Picts and Norse intermingle in what must have been a zone of contact between the two peoples, with a later, Gaelic element being introduced as Pictish power declined in the ninth century. Certainly no other area of Scotland can present us with such an interface, so the Easter Ross peninsula is worthy of detailed investigation, if for this reason alone. Moreover, the archaeological remains left by the Picts in the area provide useful comparative material [Figs. 2.1–2.3].

Sutherland and Ross have had widely varying treatment by place-name scholars. W. J. Watson's *Place-Names of Ross and Cromarty* (1904) is a valuable reference, which is unsurpassed elsewhere in the north. Sutherland can boast of no such comprehensive survey, although John Mackay's series of articles in the *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* (1888–94) does attempt to tackle the place-names of much of Sutherland on a parish basis. This has many suspect derivations, which is not surprising since it comes from the pen of an amateur writing nearly a century ago. Watson himself wrote a brief article entitled 'Some Sutherland names of places' in the *Celtic Review* of 1905–06, which is well up to his usual standards, although fairly limited in scope.

## PICTISH NAMES

These are, as one might expect, relatively infrequent in the area [Fig. 2.4]. Apart from those containing the habitative element *pit-*, 'share', 'portion', of which there are four in Sutherland and six in Easter Ross, the only other
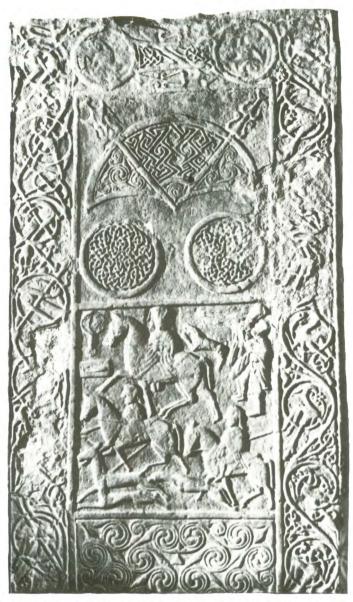
*Fig. 2.1*  Pictish Symbol Stone, Hilton of Cadboll (in Royal Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh).
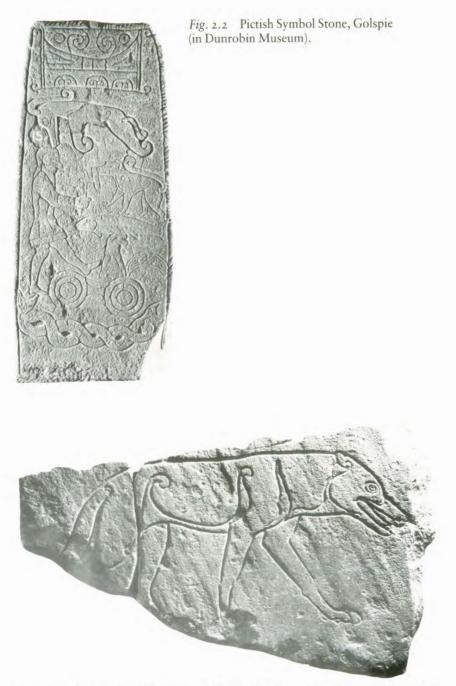
*Fig.* 2.2 Pictish Symbol Stone, Golspie (in Dunrobin Museum).



*Fig.* 2.3 Pictish Symbol Stone, Ardross No. 1 — Sittenham (in Inverness Museum).
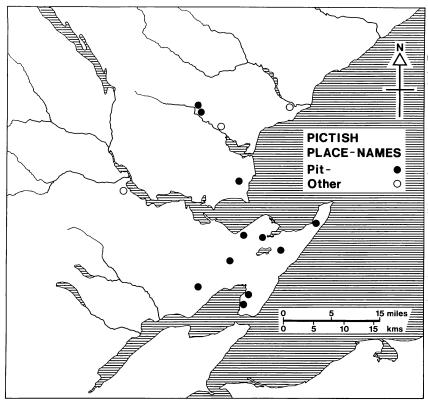
*Fig. 2.4*  Pictish place-name elements around the Dornoch Firth.

significant examples contain *dol*, 'meadow', *aber*, 'confluence', and *cardden*, 'thicket', 'wood'. The other important name is *Oykel*, suggested by Watson as originating in the Early Celtic *uxellas*, 'high', which became *uckel* or *uchel* by the Norse period. *Strath-ochell* 1490, *Kill-ochell* 1582 and *Strath-okell* 1582 are the earliest documentary forms which we have, apart from the *Orkneyinga Saga* reference to *Ekkjall* and *Ekkjallsbakki*, 'Oykel-bank' (Watson 1926. 209). There seems little doubt that this place referred to in the saga is the Oykel, and it reinforces the suggestion that the valley is one which is part of a frontier zone. In any case, there are Norse names in some numbers in Strath Oykell.

The names in *pit-* show similarities to examples further south, in the Pictish heartland. Many contain qualitative elements which are clearly Gaelic, or which have close Gaelic parallels. *Pitfour* in Rogart becomes Gaelic '*Baile-phùir*', from G. *pòr*, W. *pawr*, 'grazing-land', 'pasture-land'. *Pitmean* is 'mid-share'; *Pitgrudie* may be compared with the river-name *Grudie* in Ross, which Watson reads as G. *grùidich*, 'gravelly-water'. *Pitarxie* remains obscure.

Across the Firth, the Ross-shire *pit-* names include *Pithogarty* in Tain (*Petogarthe* 1548, *Pettogarty* 1560), 'the priest's share'; *Pitnellies* in Tain, a pluralised form which points to the fact that there were originally two — north and south — originating in G. *ianlaith*, 'birds', giving 'stead of the birds'; *Pitculzean* in Nigg, 'share of the little wood'; *Pitcalnie* in the same parish, of obscure origin; *Pitkerrie* in Fearn (*Pitkeri* 1529), perhaps from G. *ciar*, 'dark'; and *Pitmaduthy* (*Pitmadwy* 1370, *Pettecowy* 1578), 'Macduff's share', in Logic Easter.

Of the other identifiably Pictish names, *Aberscross* at the mouth of Strath Fleet may contain *aber*, 'confluence'. If so, the second element is obscure. *Doll* in Clyne is the equivalent of Gaelic *an Dail*, 'the meadow' or 'the valley', but must be pre-Gaelic. There are many parallels, including *Dull* near Aberfeldy, for example. This element becomes *dail* in Gaelic, and occurs throughout Gaelic Scotland as a settlement name, from Sutherland to Galloway. But it also appears as a simplex in such cases as *Doll* and *Dull*, and these are usually regarded as indicative of Pictish rather than Gaelic presence (see Watson 1926. 414–19). The name *Dallas* in Edderton is a variant form, *daláis*, which comes from a compound of *dul* or *dol*, and O.Ir. *foss*, 'resting-place', 'stance', and gives 'meadow-stance' or 'meadow-dwelling' as the derivation.

It is appropriate to mention *Kincardine* as being an important name which as Watson says (Watson 1904. 1) 'is of common occurrence on Pictish ground'. The elements here are G. *ceann*, 'head' and a term which is cognate with O.W. *cardden*, 'wood', and which must have been a Pictish *càrdain*. This term crops up widely, in names like Urquhart, Cardenden in Fife, Pluscarden, and several other Kincardines, so the Ross-shire example is notable, and is of course an established parish name. The earliest documentary form is *Kyncardyn* 1275.


## GAELIC NAMES

Although these form by far the largest proportion of the settlement names in the area [Fig. 2.5], I do not propose to discuss them in detail. The two basic habitative elements, *baile*, 'farmstead' and *achadh*, 'field', are well represented in both counties; and their distributions nationally are mapped in Nicolaisen (1976. 137, 140). Easter Ross has a particularly high density of names in *baile*, while the parishes of Dornoch and Creich contain many *achadh-* names. *Baile* tends to be located in good agricultural land, while *achadh* is a term applied to farms in less fertile, upland country. This is a generalization, of course, but one which holds more than a grain of truth. *Bailenanalltan*, 'farm of the streams' in Creich, *Balloan*, 'pool-farm' in Dornoch, *Bailenacroite*, 'farm of the croft' in Creich, and *Balyraid*, 'street-farm' near Skelbo are Sutherland examples. In Ross, *Balcherry*, 'farm of the quarter davach' in Tain, *Balintore*, 'bleaching-farm' in Fearn, *Balnabruach*, 'farm of the banks' in Tarbat, and *Ballachraggan*, 'farm of the rock' in Logie Easter are typical. Some date from as
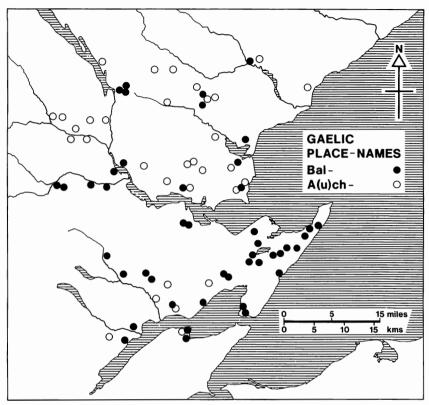
Fig. 2.5    Gaelic place-name elements around the Dornoch Firth.

late as the sixteenth century, like *Ballinroich* in Tain, which is 'Munro's farm' and recalls the acquisition of the lands of Meikle Allan by one William Munro about 1570 (Watson 1904. 43).

Of the names in *achadh*, most are conventional and descriptive, although *Achinchanter* in Dornoch is 'the precentor's field' and *Achnahanat*, 'field of the mother church', in Kincardine must be an early example. Similarly, *Achnagart*, also in Kincardine, contains *gart*, 'corn enclosure', a term now nearly obsolete in Gaelic, and occurring as a prefix in place-names in central Scotland, such as Gartnavel, Gartinsherrie, Gartmore, and many others.

A significant omission, as far as early Gaelic habitative names is concerned, is the element *cill*, 'church', which is relatively scarce in the area. *Kilmachalmag* in Kincardine is the only significant example, probably 'Colman's church'.

Topographic names feature strongly in the Gaelic material. Terms like *bad*, 'clump', 'place', abound in the southern parishes of Sutherland, with names like *Badbog*, 'wet place' in Creich and *Badninish*, 'meadow-place'

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in Dornoch. *Garbad*, 'rough place' in Edderton is a Ross-shire example. *Druim*, 'ridge', *cnoc*, 'hillock' (giving names in *Knock-*), *innis*, 'meadow', *ruighe*, 'hill-slope' and *lón*, 'water-meadow', are found throughout the area. *Clais*, 'hollow', 'defile', is unusually common in the parishes of Creich and Dornoch, applied usually to small farms in hilly situations like *Clashban*, 'fair hollow', *Clashcoig*, 'hollow of the fifth part', *Claiseanglas*, 'little grey hollow' in Creich, and *Clashmore*, 'big hollow' and *Clash-mugach*, 'murky hollow' in Dornoch. *Camas*, 'bend', is found associated with large meanders on major rivers, or with curved coastal bays such as *Cambusmore*, 'big bend', at the south-western end of The Mound in Dornoch parish and *Cambuscurrie*, 'bay of the coracle' in Edderton. *Aird*, 'height', 'high place', 'promontory' occurs in *Ardmore*, 'big promontory' in Edderton, and *Ardjachie*, 'field promontory' in neighbouring Tain. *Eiden* in Strath Fleet is *aodann*, 'hill-face'; *Camore*, just to the west of Dornoch, is *cadha mór*, 'big path or passage'; and *Tullich* in Fearn is *tulach*, 'hillock', a very common topographic element in Easter Ross.

## NORSE NAMES

With scarcely more than a dozen habitative names, it cannot be said that Norse place-names have survived here in any great strength. Yet they are of significance, and they are distributed fairly evenly throughout the area [Fig. 2.6]. As one might expect, the earliest documentary forms for most of them are late, usually no earlier than the sixteenth century, and it is noticeable that in Ross those with habitative names are on reasonably good soils. There are some fifteen extant topographic names, all relating to settlement, which contain important Norse elements, although this number could be added to if we take in 'lost' names. There is, however, sufficient Norse material of an onomastic nature to confirm the supposition that this was an area where Norse settlement was considerable, if not dominant.

North of the Dornoch Firth the most significant name of Norse origin in the study area is *Golspie*. The early forms are *Goldespy* 1330, *Golspi* 1448, *Gospye*, *Golspe* 1570. Johnston (1903. 147) suggests an ON. personal name *Gold*, or Gaelic *gall*, 'stranger', while Mackay (1894. 178) settles for *gil*, 'ravine', for the first element, with *býr*, 'farmstead' as the classifying element. *Býr* is uncommon on mainland Scotland in the north but Golspie, located on the edge of a fertile area between the mouth of the Golspie Burn and the tidal Loch Fleet, is certainly an attractive site for early settlement. The Gaelic form, *Goillsbidh*, still used by Gaelic-speakers, provides no assistance as regards derivation, and the general consensus of opinion is that this must remain obscure, since both Johnston's and Mackay's offerings do not bear close scrutiny.

The term *setr*, 'farm', 'stead', 'shieling', normally appears in Sutherland as *-side* or *-said*. Two examples occur in Creich parish, along the Oykell, above its confluence with the Shin — *Linside*, 'flax-stead' and *Bosset* or *Bowside*, 'cattle-stead'.

*Ból*, 'farmstead', occurs in several Sutherland names. *Embo* in Dornoch is *Ethenboll c.*1230, *Eyndboll* 1610, perhaps 'Eyvind's stead'; *Skelbo* which occurs in an early form as *Scelbol* is possibly 'shell-stead'; *Skibo* is *Scitheboll c.*1230, and may be 'Skithi's stead'; *Torboll* in Dornoch and *Torrobol* in Lairg probably share the derivation 'Thori's farm'. The only other habitative Norse term in the area is *-land*, 'land', which appears in *Merkland* in upper Lairg parish, possibly from *merki-land*, 'march or boundary-land'.
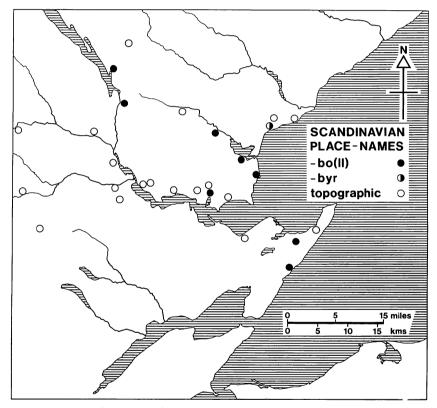


*Fig. 2.6*   Norse place-name elements around the Dornoch Firth.

Of the non-habitative Norse elements, the most common is *dalr*, 'valley'. *Osdale* in Lairg, *Astle* in Dornoch (which is *Askesdale* 1222, and is likely to be 'ash-valley'), *Migdale* in Creich, *Ospidale* in Dornoch (perhaps 'Ospak's valley'). *Swordale*, 'grassy valley' in Creich, and *Spinningdale* in the same parish, are the most obvious examples. The last-named is *Spanigidill* in 1464, a form which bears a close resemblance to current Gaelic pronunciation, but again the derivation is obscure. *Völlr*,

'field' occurs in *Rossal* in Strath Fleet which could be 'horse-field'; *Backies* in Golspie is O.N. *bakki*, 'bank', with a pluralized Scots ending; and *Uppat* a few miles to the east has been tentatively given the derivation *upp-vatn*, 'rising spring loch'.

The Norse place-names which are found in the Ross-shire section of the area (which does not include the parishes south of Strathrory) are mostly located along the Dornoch Firth shore and up the Oykell valley, although a few important examples occur in the Tarbat peninsula. Of the habitative names, *Arboll* in Tarbat is *Arkboll* 1463 and 1535. Watson (1904. 47) gives the derivation of this as 'Norse *ork-ból*, ark-stead, but possibly from *orkn*, seal, which in Skye gives *Or-bost*'. *Cadboll* in Fearn is *Cathabul* 1529, for which Watson (1904. 40) gives '*kattar-ból*, cat-stead'. Both of these derivations must be regarded with some suspicion, but subsequent attempts to provide more likely derivations have proved fruitless.

*Langwell*, *lang-völlr*, 'long field', and *Syal* (*Seoll* 1578, *Soyall* 1642), *sauða-völlr*, 'sheep-field', are two examples in Kincardine parish incorporating *völlr*, 'field' (for *Scatwell* in Strath Conon, see Crawford in this volume), and there are several names in *-dalr*. These include *Alladale*, 'wolf-dale', *Diebidale*, 'deep-valley' and *Gradal* in Kincardine, *Bindal* which Watson suggests as *bind-dalr*, 'sheaf-valley' in Tarbat, and *Carbisdale* in Kincardine, which appears as *Carbustell* 1548. *Kjarr-bolstaðr*, 'copse-stead', with a *-dalr* suffix is an unlikely combination, but one which fits in reasonably well with the topography.

*Amat* in Kincardine is *á-mót*, 'river-meet', a name found elsewhere in the Gaelic-Norse area. *Plaids* near Tain is *Plaiddes* 1560, and may well be from O.N. *flátr*, 'flat place', again with an 'englished' plural as in *Backies*.

An unusual Norse example is *Cyderhall* in Dornoch, which has the early forms *Sywardhoth* 1230, *Sytheraw* 1275 and *Siddera* 1654. This is reputed to be the burial place of Earl Sigurd who, according to the saga account, died from blood-poisoning when he was scratched by the bucktooth of Maelbrigt, Mormaer of Moray. Sigurd, having slain Maelbrigt in battle, was imprudently carrying his adversary's head home to Caithness on his saddlebow, when the fatal scratch was acquired. It is certainly the most colourful of the Norse names in the area, and one of the few which can be said to be truly commemorative.

There are few Norse names which apply to coastal features in the area. When we consider the diversity of such elements in the north and west, this is surprising. *Vík*, 'bay', occurs only in *Shandwick*, 'sand bay' in Nigg parish, just south of Balintore; and *gjá* which becomes Gaelic *geodha*, 'creek', 'inlet' appears to be absent. The presence of a Gaelic- and Scots-speaking population along the coasts of Easter Ross and Sutherland has obviously had a profound effect on coastal place-names; many in fact are Scots, displaying many of the naming characteristics of the south shore of the Moray Firth, and Buchan to the east. *Tarbat Ness* and *Whiteness* are important promontories which contain the Scandinavian *nes*, 'promontory', but it is by no means certain if these date from the Scandinavian period. They may well be late formations.

# CONCLUSION

Place-name evidence must never be viewed in isolation. In this area of northern Scotland, however, there is a relative lack of archaeological research relating to the dark-age period, and consequently there is a considerable onus put on the onomastic record and the documentary evidence. If we look at the area with the highest density of names in *pit*- and *-bol*, there is a certain amount of correlation evident. The coastal strip of Sutherland from Brora to Bonar Bridge is by far the most productive not only agriculturally but in terms of habitative names from the dark-age period. The same is true of the parishes of Tain, Tarbat, Fearn and Nigg in Ross. It is in these areas that we find the most revealing place-names. The presence of Norse topographic names in the hillier areas, however, suggests that Norse settlement was not confined to the coast, but that exploitation of these less productive areas was a prominent feature of settlement.

The interface between Pictish and Norse is still ill-defined, despite the information which the place-names reveal. We are left with but tantalizing glimpses of the political and economic situation in the Dark Ages. Place-names provide only a fragmented picture and the samples of habitative elements, Pictish and Norse, are relatively small, so that the place-name record poses new questions which often remain unanswered. In the final analysis, archaeological research may be our last chance to shed light on the complex earlier history of this part of Scotland.

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