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SOME SUTHERLAND NAMES OF PLACES

W. J. WATSON

THE Norse occupation of Sutherland and Caithness lasted from about 880 to 1200 A.D., when William the Lyon finally established the authority of the Scottish crown in these northern parts. The names from this source, therefore, may be over 1000 years, and cannot be less than 700 years old. While it is true that Norse names may be found almost anywhere in Sutherland, even in its very centre, there are several indications that the occupation was not nearly so complete as it was, *e.g.*, in Lewis. There the old Celtic names have suffered a clean sweep; almost all the Gaelic names are 'phrase-names' of the type of *Allt na Muilne*. In Sutherland, on the other hand, there survives quite an appreciable number of Pictish names, dating long before the advent of the Norsemen. We also find a free use of suffixes in forming Gaelic names—such as *-ach* with its old locative *-aigh*; *-lach*, *-an + ach*, and other combinations of an antique cast, which could hardly have been formed after 1200, and probably date much earlier. The Norse element is very strong on the north coast, much weaker in the interior and in Sutherland proper. It is noteworthy, however, that many of the principal hills and dales are Norse. Fresh-water lochs are mostly all Celtic, as also rivers. Village names are divided, with a preponderance in favour of Norse which does credit to their choice of site. The evidence of the place-names, then, goes to show that the Norsemen held the whole of Sutherland as its overlords, but did not occupy it to the extent of displacing the native population or their language. At the same time, it is highly probable that there was a good deal of bi-lingualism during this long period of 300 years; this also is, to some extent, reflected in the names.

We shall take first the principal terms found in combination :—

á, river, genitive *ár*, appears terminally in Brora, G. Bróra, N. Brúar-á, Bridge-water, a name found in Iceland; also in Borgie, Fort-water. The genitive case is seen in Ariscaig, ár-skiki, 'river's strip,' with which we may compare Ascaig, 'river-strip.' Amat (Oykell and Brora), G. àmaid, is á-mót, 'river-meet,' 'confluence,' found also in Ross. Calda Beag and Calda Mór are two parallel streams that flow into Loch Assynt: kald-á, Coldstream. The district between them is Edrachalda for Eadar-dha-Chalda, 'between two Coldstreams.' Abigil, G. àbigil, may be á-bæ-gil, 'river-stead-gully.' Aberscross is in G. àbarscaig and àbairsgin; in 1512 Abbirskor, 1525 Estir and Westir Abbirschoir; 1563 Westir Abberscors, showing the modern English form to be a plural. The G. àbarscaig would represent á-búr-skiki, 'river-bower-strip'; in Iceland there is Búrá, 'bower-stream'; but in view of the variant forms the last syllable must be held uncertain. In any case the initial long vowel shows that we are not dealing with a Pictish *aber*, as has been commonly supposed.

Bakki, a bank, is seen in Ekkiallsbakki, Oykell-bank. Hysbackie is hús-bakki, 'house-bank,' and Coulbackie, G. Callbacaidh, is kald-bakki, 'cold-bank.' The first part of Crasbackie is not clear. Backies, near Golspie, is an English plural, Banks.

Bólstaðr, *ból*, a homestead, is not uncommon. Arnabol is either 'Arni's stead,' or, less probably, 'eagle or erne stead.' Gylable is gilj-á-ból, 'gully-river-stead.' Erribol, G. éiribol, is eyrr-ból, 'gravel-beach-stead.' The Gaelic of Embo is also éiribol, but it appears as Ethenboll, circ. 1230; Eyndboll 1610; and may mean 'Eyvind's stead.'

Unapool in Assynt is Una's or Uni's stead. Kirkibol and Crosspool, Churchstead or Kirkton, and Roodstead, are two of the few Norse church-names in Sutherland. Leirable, 1563 Lyriboll, occurs in Kildonan, apparently mud-stead, N. leir, whence in Lewis Lurebost. With it may be compared Duible, 1527 Doy-pull, perhaps from *dý*, 'a bog,' 'bog-town.' Colaboll is either 'Kol's stead,' or 'charcoal stead.' Scrabster appears in the *Orkneyinga Saga* as Skára-bólstaðr, 'seamew-stead.' Torboll in Dornoch and Torrobol in Lairg both represent Thori's stead. Eldrable, G. Eildirebol, 1563 Altربول, 1610 Eltribol, has been explained as Altar-stead, but more probably contains a proper

name such as Elldjárn. The N. altari, 'altar,' is late and Christian. Skelbo means 'shell-stead,' the Gaelic Sligo and Sligachan. Skibo, G. Sgiobul, appears about 1230 as Scitheboll, which may be either 'Skithi's stead,' or, from skid, 'firewood-stead.' The local authorities take it from G. sgiobal, 'a barn,' but the ancient spelling has to be taken into account. Ribigil is in 1530 and 1610 Regeboill, which might be reyka-ból, 'reek-stead,' but though reykr, 'reek,' is common in Icelandic names it seems always to be applied to places near hot springs. A suggested derivation is rygjar-ból, 'housewife's stead'; the difficulty here is that Norse *g* between vowels would certainly have been aspirated. Ulbster in Kildonan is probably Ulfr's stead, but may be Ulli's stead, Ulli being a pet form of Erlend.

Borg, a fort, appears in Borge Castle, Farr, G. Borgh; here G. *gh* must have been sounded *v*, a pronunciation which we know from other instances to have been formerly common, and which is still heard. Near it is Borrogeo, borgar-gjá, 'fort creek.' Borrobol is 'fort-stead'; there is a broch within about a mile of it. Burragaig Bay in Durness appears to be borg-vík, 'fort-bay.' There is also Loch Borralaidh, from borg-hlið, 'fort-slope.' In Assynt in Loch Borrolan, at Altnacealgach, borgar-land, 'fort-land.' The river Borgie is 'fort-river.'

Dalr, dale, is found terminally in many names. Armadale in Farr, is 'Arm dale' or 'Bay dale.' Mudale, G. Muthadail, 1570 Mowdaill; 1601 Mowadale, is possibly módadalr, 'muddy-river dale.' Strathalladale, a hybrid, is helga-dalr, 'holy dale'; the personal name Helgi is also possible. Trantlemore and Trantlebeg, 1527 Trountal, contain the name Thrond, the full genitive of which appears in Trotternish, Skye, G. Trondairnis, Throndar-nes. Langdale is simply Longdale. Rimsdale, 1630 Rimbisdale, and Achrimsdale are from rymr, roaring, 'roaring dale.'

Scalmasdale in Kildonan is hard to dissociate from Skálmardalr, 'sword-dale'; 'cloven dale,' in Iceland. Skelabosdale is skela-bólstaðr-dalr, 'shell-stead dale.' Strathskinsdale is from skinn, skin, cf. Skinnet in Caithness. Oulmsdale is the present equivalent of Ullipsdale, 'Ulfr's dale.' Keoldale, G. Cealdail, 1559 Kauldale is possibly Kaldi-dalr, 'Cold-dale.' Torrisdale is 'Thorir's dale.' Astle or Asdail in Dornoch is in 1222 Askesdale, 1275 Haskesdale, meaning 'Ashdale.' Swordale, G. Suardail, 1275 Swerdel, is 'sword-dale.' Ospisdale is probably for Ospak's dale; Spinningdale, G. Spainigdail (long *n*), 1464 Spanigidill, 1467 Spainzidell, 1546 Spangzedail. It has been re-

ferred to *spöng*, gen. *spangar*, 'a spangle,' which would, however, result in *Spangadail*. The second syllable *ig* is doubtless *vík*, 'a bay'; the first may be *spann*, 'a pail' or 'measure,' possibly with reference to the shape of the small bay on which *Spinningdale* stands. *Migdale*, G. *Migean*, 1275 *Miggeweth*, 1561 *Mygdail*, an obscure name. *Helmsdale* is known from the *Sagas* to be *Hjalmund's dale*.

Ey, an island: *Boursa* is *búrs-ey*, 'bower-isle.' *Soyea*, *sauða-ey*, 'sheep-isle.' *Handa*, *sand-ey*, 'sand-isle,' with *s* aspirated. *Calbha Bheag* and *Calbha Mhór*, 'calf-isle,' a name commonly applied to small islands standing off the shore. *Howga* of 1570 is in 1601 *Haga*, now *Hoan*. *Oldaney*, G. *Alltanaidh*, though applied to the island is really a mainland name, and probably Gaelic; the island is *Eilean Alltanaidh*, the Isle of *Oldaney*. It is supposed to represent *Jura* of *Ferchar Leighich's* charter of 1386; *dýr-ey*; 'deer isle.'

Erg, shieling; borrowed from O.G. *áirge*; now *àirigh*. The classical instance is *Asgrim's ergin* (*Orkneyinga Saga*), which is now *Askary*, in *Caithness*. In *Sutherland* it is rather common terminally as *-ary*. *Fiscary*, in *Tongue*, is 'fish-shieling,' and about a mile from it is *Ach-an-iasgaich*, 'fishing-field.' *Toscary*, from *tosk*, a tooth, tusk, means 'tooth-shieling.' *Scottarie* comes from *skot*, a shot; 'shot-shieling,' cf. *skotbakki*, shot-bank, *i.e.* butt. *Modsary* probably contains a contracted form of a personal name, *e.g.* *Mötull*, and so with *Kedsary*, which may be *Ketill's* shieling. *Halmadary*, famed for the legend of *Tuivteam Halmadairigh*,¹ is most likely 'Hjalmund's shieling.'

Sleasdary, in *Creich*, is doubtful. *Creag Thorairigh* is 'the rock of *Thori's* shieling.' *Scourie*, G. *Sgobhairigh*, is probably from *skógr*, a shaw, wood; 'shaw-shieling.'

Fjall, a hill, fell, has in several cases been replaced terminally by G. *beinn*, as has happened elsewhere, *e.g.* *Goatfell* is in G. *Gaodabheinn*; so *Blaven*, 'blue-fell,' and others. In *Sutherland* *Sulven*, G. *Sulabheinn*, is for *Sula-fjall*, 'pillar-hill.' *Fashven*, G. *Faisbheinn*, with its tapering peak, is *hvass-fjall*, 'pointed fell.' *Sgribhisbheinn* is not clear as to its first part; perhaps it contains *sgriða*, a landslip, scree. *Foinaven*, G. *Foinnebheinn*, may be pure Gaelic, meaning 'wart-hill,' from its peaks. On the other hand it may represent *vind-fjall*, 'windy-fell,' just as *vindauga*, 'wind-eye,' becomes *fuinneog*,

¹ *Inverness Gael. Soc. Trans.*, xx. 99.

winneag, window. It has been thought that *fjall* has also been replaced by G. *meall*, lump, in Færrmeall, as for Fær-fjall, 'sheep-fell'; but the name is more probably pure Gaelic meaning 'projecting lump'; cf. Farrlary. At least four hills in Sutherland are called Maovally, G. Maobhalaidh with old people; now becoming Mao'alaidh; 1564 Movell. All these present the same rounded, semi-elliptical appearance, and I take them to be from maga-fjall, 'maw-fell' or 'paunch-fell'; the aspirated *g* would be sounded *v* as in Borve above. Another name which recurs three or four times is Saval, G. Sàbhail. There is a Saval near Lairg, and in Assynt are Saval Beag and Saval Mor, with a gap between called *Bealach eadar dha Shàbhail*. Eastward is *Lurg an t-Sàbhail*. Sàbhail seems to be a Gaelic form of há-fjall, 'high-fell.' Norse initial *h* before a vowel is usually treated in Gaelic as if it were an aspirated *t*; thus há-bakki, 'high-bank,' becomes in Lewis Tàbac. But this *h* might equally well be taken to stand for aspirated *s*, and of this we have one certain instance in Hjaltland, Shetland, which becomes in Gaelic Sealtainn. It may be noted that Sutherland names happen to present no clear instance of Norse initial *h* becoming *t* in Gaelic. Ben Loyal, west of Loch Loyal, near the Kyle of Tongue, is in G. Beinn Laghal; 1601 Lettirlyoll. As far as phonetics go this may represent laga-fjall, 'law-fell,' or laga-völlr, 'law-field.' Another suggestion is leid-fjall or leid-völlr, 'leet-fell' or 'leet-field,' *i.e.* places where certain public meetings were held; but, though this makes good sense, it would become Laoghal, rather than Laghal in modern Gaelic. Ben Arkle, where the deer in Sir Robert Gordon's time had forked tails, is G. Airceil, and is thought to mean 'ark-fell,' 'chest-fell,' from its shape. It may equally well be Gaelic *airceal*, a hiding-place, a name which occurs in Lochbroom. In any case it can hardly be erg-fjall, 'shieling-fell,' as has been sometimes suggested. Beinn Smeòrail is 'butter-fell,' or 'butter-field,' (völlr).

Fjörðr, a firth, appears in Loch Inchard, G. Loch Uinnseard, probably engis-fjörðr, 'meadow-firth,' and in Loch Laxford, G. Lusard, 'salmon-firth.' Strath Dionard probably contains the Norse name for the Kyle of Durness, into which it opens, and may be dýn-fjörðr, 'noisy-firth.'

Gardr, a garth, yard, court, occurs as *-gary*, *-chary*: Odhrsgaraidh is 'Ógr's garth.' Ach-cheargary is from kjarr, copse; 'field of the garth by the copse.' Griamachary, at the foot of Ben Griam, is

'Grim's garth.' Halligary may be either 'sloping garth' or 'Hallr's garth.'

Gil, a ravine, gully, is so common that only examples can be given. Fresgil, in Durness, may be from fress, tomcat; fraes, noise, 'noisy gully,' has also been suggested. Eirigil, from eyrr, means 'gravel-beach gully.' Báliligil, báliligil, is 'bale or flame gully.' Abigil (à) seems to be á-bæ-gil, 'river-stead gully.' Allt Thàisgil is from háls-gil, 'hause (throat) gully'; cf. Gob Thàis in Lewis, and Thàisgil in Gairloch. Achridigil, field of Rìdigil, probably rjóta-gil, 'rowing or roaring gully.' Achürigil, Rosehall, is not to be compared with Loch Urigil, in Assynt, which has the initial vowel long, and may be from úrr, wild ox. The Rosehall Urigil is rather from urð, 'a heap of stones.' Achriesgil is from hris, copse; 'field of the copse gully.' Connagil is from kona, woman, Sc. quean; cf. Cuniside, G. Caonasaíd, qvenna-setr, showing the genitive plural. Bréisgil may be explained as breid-áss-gil, 'gully by the broad rocky ridge.' Allt Thòirigil means 'burn of Thorir's ravine.' Sgrigil is 'scree or landslip gully'; Tràiligil, 'thrall's gully.' Réigil, 1601 Raygill is given as Gaelic of Rhifail, and has been given me also as Rifagil. The double form may be explained as rifgil or régil, 'big gully.' Suisgil in Kildonan, G. Sisgil, 1527 Seyisgil, 1545 Suisgill, has been referred to seyðisgil, 'seethe-gil.' With it may be compared Gísgil, 'gushing gil,' from geysa, gush, whence geysir, gusher. Lastly may be taken Dun Dornadilla in Strathmore, in Gaelic Dùn Dornagil, which may well be Thornagil, 'thorn-gully.'

Gjá, a creek, has been taken over into Gaelic as *geodha*, and appears terminally as *-go* or *-geo* in Port Vasgo for hvass-gjá, 'tapering creek'; Lamigo, 'lambs' creek'; Borrogeo, 'fort creek'; Sango, 'sandy creek'; Glaisgeo, (?) 'glass creek,' but it may be G. 'green creek.'

Hlið, a slope, genitive hliðar, occurs in Swordly, 'sward-slope.' Leathad Darnlaidh is probably 'hillside of the thorny slope.' Tuirsligh is for Thursa-hlið, 'giant's slope'; cf. *na Tursaichean* in Lewis, applied to the standing stones. Rudha Armlì is 'Cape of the bay slope,' cf. Armadale, and Borralaidh is 'fort-slope.' Fastly is probably hvass-hlið, 'pointed slope,' cf. Faishven. Fhìrum, a rocky islet off Durness, is probably hliðar-holm, 'sloping isle'; Rob Donn has *leac Fhìrrum*.

Nes, a headland, cape, occurs only thrice: Melness, 'bent-grass cape'; Unes, 1275 Owenes; 1566 Unis; G. Jùneas; often mentioned in

connection with the 'ferry of Unes,' now the Little Ferry, *am Port Beag*, at mouth of Loch Fleet. Durness, G. Diùranais, 'deer-cape'; cf. Diurinish, Skye, and elsewhere.

Setr, a stead, shieling, appears in Sutherland terminally as *-said*, which becomes in English *-side*. Caonasaid has been noted above; 1601 Kennyside. Linside, G. Lionasaid, is for lín-setr, 'flax-stead.' Loch Staonsaid is from stein-setr, 'stony shieling'; Loch Coulside, G. Cùlasaid, is kùlu-setr, 'knob-stead,' from kùlu, a rounded hill; cf. Culbo, in the Black Isle. Hòrasaid is 'Thori's stead or shieling.' Dionsait may be 'noisy stead,' from dynr din. Fealasaid is fjall-setr, 'hill-stead,' in English Fallside. Bowside, búsetr, 'dwelling-shieling.' Bracsaid is brekka-setr, 'slope-seat.' Sandset, now Sandside, is 'Sandseat.' Clanside, G. Claonasaid, and Clayside are doubtful.

Skiki, a strip: Arscaig and Ascaig have been mentioned. Overscaig is ofarr-skiki, 'over or upper strip.' Poulouriscaig, G. Poll-aorisgaig and Poll-éirisgeig, is from eyrr, meaning 'pool or hollow place of the gravel-beach-strip.' Boarscaig is búdar-skiki, 'bothy strip.' Malmsgaig, from málmr, sand, with secondary meaning of metal; 'sand-strip, or ore-strip'; cf. Malmö in Sweden, and Málmeý, Iceland. Calascaig is 'Kali's strip'; cf. Calascaig in Lochbroom. Ramascaig is from hrafn or hramn, a raven: 'ravens' strip,' while Ròmascaig is rauma-skiki, 'giant's or clown's strip.' Truderscaig cannot come from trúdr, a juggler, for *ð* would drop. It is probably Throndar-skiki, 'boar-strip' or 'Thrond's strip'; cf. Trantle, above. Skibbercross, G. Slobarsgaig; 1360 Sibyr(s)oc; 1562 Syborskeg, Schiberskeg; a difficult name; possibly sidu-búr-skiki, 'side-bower strip'; sida, 'a side,' is common in Norse names. Gordonbush has been given me in Gaelic as Gar-éisgeig, where *gar* is Gaelic meaning 'copse'; éisgeig may be eydi-skiki, 'waste-strip.'

Völlr, a field, gives Carrol, kjarr-völlr, 'copse-field.' Rossal is hross-völlr, 'horse-field'; its grass is injurious to cows, though harmless to horses. Langwell is lang-völlr, 'long-field,' and Sletell, 'even-field,' from sléttr. Musal, 1560 Moswell, is 'mossy-field'; Marrel, mar-völlr, 'seafield.' Brawl, G. Breithal, is breid-völlr, 'broadfield.'

Some names may be added which do not come under these headings. In addition to the personal names already noted, we have Craig Shomhairle and Airigh Shomhairle, 'Somered's rock and shieling.' Poll Amhlaibh is 'Olaf's or

Anlaf's pool,' Druim Manuis, 'Magnus' ridge'; Eilean Eglei is 'Egill's ey or isle.' Dalharrald in Farr contains the common Harold, possibly in this case Earl Harold, who was defeated by King William in 1196. Cyderhall is an interesting name. In 1230 it appears as Sywardhoth; 1275, Sytheraw; and Siddera on Blæu's map; clearly 'Sigurd's how' (*haugr*), the burial-place of Earl Sigurd, who died from the effects of a scratch from the buck-tooth of Mælbrigit, Mormær of Moray, whose head he carried at his saddlebow. Sigurd, says the Saga, was 'laid in how' at Ekkiallsbakki. The Gaelic is *Siara*, which may represent *Sýr*, a pet form of Sigurðr: the full form would be expected to yield *Siarda* in Gaelic. Asher or Oldshore, G. Aisir (à) was in 1551 Aslar, 1559 Astlair, and has been regarded as a contraction from Asleifarvík, Asleif's bay, where King Hacon touched in 1263. Leac Bhiurn in Strathnaver is 'Björn's flagstone.'

Golspie is in 1330 Goldespy, G. Goi(II)sbidh; the latter part is bærr, býr, a stead, village; the first part has been referred to *gil*, a ravine, which is impossible; also to *gull*, (older *goll*), gold, which, in default of a personal name, is the most probable explanation. Strathfleet, G. Srath-fledid, comes from fjót, flood, a common stream-name. Eilean Klourig (Clobhraig) on the north coast, is klofar-vík, cleft-bay; the island is cleft right through by a narrow channel. Sandwood in Durness stands for sand-vatn, sand-water, the only instance known to me of *vatn* in Sutherland and the mainland of Ross, whereas it is so common in the Western Isles. Two parishes bear Norse names, Tongue, from *tunga*, a tongue; and Assynt, ascribed to áss-endi, rock-end. The difficulty with the latter is that the initial vowel of Assynt is short in Gaelic. The suffixed article is seen in Merkin, the march (*mörk*), Akran, the acre, Pólin, the ból or stead. Syre, G. Saghair, is rather uncertain. If we accept initial *s* of Gaelic as arising from Norse *h*, as was suggested in the case of Saval above, it would represent *hagar*, pasture-lands; on the other hand there is a Saghair in Ireland. Storr in Assynt, G. Stòr, is usually supposed to be from *stór*,

big, the latter part of the name having dropped. But the name occurs in the *Orkneyinga Saga* as Staur, and there is another point of the same name in the *Heimskringla*, with suffixed article, Staurinn, both apparently from *staurr*, a stake, point. Ben Hope is from *hóp*, a bay, whence Gaelic *òb*; as Ben Horn is from *horn*, a horn. Ben Clibreck is in G. Clibric, and may be *klif-breikka*, 'cliff-slope' but Gaelic *ì* makes this doubtful; in any case the latter part is *breikka*, a slope. Grumbeg and Grummore are interesting. In 1570 they appear as Grubeg and Grubmore, and farther back in 1551 Gnowb Lital and Mekle, from *gnúpr*, a peak, common in land-names. Loch Merkland is *mörk-land*, 'march-land'; it is on the watershed. Strath-vagastie appears to be from *vaka-staðr*, 'watching-stead.' Heilem, which appears in Rob Donn as Hilleam and Huilleum, is in 1530 Wnlem, 1542 Unlem; 1551 Handlemet; 1601 Hunleam and Houndland, and may be *hund-holm*, 'hound isle'; it is a mushroom-shaped peninsula. Fors, a waterfall, gives Forsinard and Forsinain, upper and lower waterfall respectively. Cape Wrath, G. *am Parbh*, is from *hvarf*, turning-point, cf. *hvarfs-gnípa*, Cape Farewell, in Greenland. Solmar, in Durness, is *sól-heimar*, 'bright-ham,' Brighton, a name found in Iceland. Ben Armin is from *ármaðr*, gen. *ármanns*, a steward, controller, whence G. *ármunn*, a hero. The Italian looking Ben Stomino, east of Loch Loyal, is said on good authority to be a mere map-name. It appears on a map of Sutherland dated 1823, and has kept its place since. The Gaelic form is Beinn Staim and Loch Staim lies north of it, apparently from the by-name Stami. *Druim-basbaidh* in Farr probably contains a shortened form of a personal name with the *-by* suffix, seen in *Golspie*; *baðs-bær*, 'bath-stead' is possible. *Drumholli-stan*, east of Strath-halladale, is 'the ridge of the holy stone.'

In dealing with the Norse element I have had the advantage of consulting a paper contributed some years ago by Dr. A. Macbain to the *Highland News*, of which he kindly permitted me to make use.