

SOME ROUGH AND READY RULES FOR INTERPRETING NORSE PLACE-NAMES.

N. = OLD NORSE; G = GAELIC.

1. If a Gaelic speaker, preferably illiterate, can translate a name, it is probably Gaelic; if not, it may be Norse. This is not infallible.
2. If a name ends in : shader, sta, ster, bost, skal, stol, thorp, thwait, borg, bie, garry, ger, os, land, ol, o, it is probably a Norse settlement name.
3. If it ends in : aig, wick, vik, dal, gil, sker, val, fell, vat, nish, clet, a, ey, hol, ford, berg, holm, sco, gro, it is probably a Norse name for a natural feature. These are also often used as names for settlements.
4. Beware of mistaking a Norse loanword into Gaelic for a Norse name element. Sgeir, geodha, mol, stac, baca, clet, gil, lón, bogha, tót, garadh, gearraidh, are now full Gaelic words borrowed from Norse, but may also be used still as Norse words : e.g. Sgeir nan Ób is a Gaelic name, but Lammasgeir is Norse; Invertote is Gaelic, but Totaig is Norse. Word-order and stress give the clue. Norse names have the stress on the first syllable, and the adjective comes before the noun; e.g. Langaig is Norse, and Sgeir Lang is Gaelic.
5. Enlarging on 2 above :
  - (a) shader : N. setr, sætr "shieling, summer pasture", also weakened to mean "farm, holding, farmstead". Appears as Shiader, Sheader on its own; shader, shadder in secondary stress at end of word.
  - (b) sta : N. staðir (stathir) "farm, holding", usually not very big, and nearly always preceded by the name of the first owner, or most important owner. Appears as Stat, Stater on its own; sta, stat, stot, in secondary stress. Some ster names are doubtful, and may be setr (see (a) above) or staðir in Caithness, ster usually comes from staðir.
  - (c) bost : N. bólstaðr (bolstathr) "farm", often a more important farm than a staðir. Appears in secondary stress only, as bost, bust, busta.
  - (d) skal : N. skáli "shieling hut, hut bothy, temporary dwelling-place". May appear in secondary stress as skil, skal, sco, especially in hill-names. Often confused with gil "ravine" (see (iii) below).
  - (e) stol : N. stóull (stouall) "a shieling hut used only by day, a temporary shieling near to the home farm". Not very frequent, and often confused with dal names (see (ii) below). May appear in secondary stress as sdal stol, stul, stle, tle; occasionally st is found as sk in weak stress, and stóull is confused with skáli.
  - (f) thorp : N. þorp (thorp) "farm, settlement, village". Probably Danish rather than Norwegian, and rare in N.W. Scotland.
  - (g) thwait : N. þveit (thveit) "farm, village". Probably Danish rather than Norwegian, and rare in N.W. Scotland.
  - (h) borg : N. borg "fortress, fort, "especially on top of a hill or headland. Also "hill, prominent mound". Usually indicates the presence of a dún or broch. Found as Borve, Borro(w), Borg on its own; may be spelled burg, burgh, borough, burrow in compounds, but is usually pronounced (b[<sup>h</sup>r<sup>h</sup>]k). Appears also in Gaelic names as first element; if unstressed there, it is probably Gaelic, if stressed, Norse. May be affected by metathesis, and become brog.
  - (i) bie : N. býr, býr "farm". Usually a large farm, like bólstaðr. Appears as bie, by, at the end of word.
  - (i) garry : N. garðr (garthr) "enclosure, building", hence "farm". Basically means anything involving a wall. Not to be confused with geroi (see (k) below). Found as Garry on its own; garry, garie, geary, ary in secondary stress)  
G. loanword garadh.
  - (k) ger, gar : N. gerði "enclosed land, especially the grass immediately around a house", used also of detached pasture at some distance from the home farm. Always distinguishable from garðr because geroi is pronounced with a palatal g' (gj), and garðr with a velar g (cp. gearraidh from gerði, garadh from garðr). Found on its own as Geary; in compounds as geary, garry, gar, ger, gir.

(l) os : N. hús "house, buildings", often referring to farm buildings not used for human dwellings. Found in compounds as os, hus, anglicized to house.

(m) land : N. land "land, farm", said to be a very old name. Appears as: lin, lan, len, lon, land, etc., and may be affected by metathesis to nil, nal, etc. This causes confusion with völlr, hól, hallr, holm, etc. land is rare in N.W. Scotland.

(n) ol, vol : N. völlr (völlir) "field", plural vellir. Often used for farm names; apt to be confused with hól "hill", hallr "slope", etc. Often affected by metathesis if close to n or r. Found as ol, al, le, lon, lin.

(o) o : N. hofn "harbour" Names in o, sco, gro, cro, are always confusing, and may represent either hofn "harbour" or haugr "cairn", or be derived from skáli (d), skógr (xv), gróf (xvi) etc.

6. Enlarging on 3, above :

(i) aig, wick, vik : N. vik "inlet, bay, creek" ; sometimes N. vágr "bay, indentation". The former usually appears as Uig on its own; as sig after a consonant in compounds, vaig after a vowel. The latter, vágr, in compounds appears as ag or eag. Sometimes they overlap. In non-Gaelic areas, vik appears as wick.

(ii) dal : N. dalr "valley, glen". May be spelled dal, dale, dail, dol, tol, tul, tle; but it is usually pronounced (t @ L). If preceded by s, it may be confused with stóðull, see (e) above. Often has Glen added at the front.

(iii) gil, kil : N. gil "ravine, gully, cleft" often with a burn at the bottom, hence also "burn flowing down steep rocks". Often used of a small tributary to a main river. Found as Gill on its own, as gil, kil, kel, kal, cil in secondary position. Apt to be confused with skáli, see (d) above. NOT to be confused with G. cille, kil, used mainly in initial position.

(iv) sker, : sgeir : N. sker "rock, skerry". Norse only if found in unstressed final position; found as sgeir, sgair, sker.

(v) val, fell : N. fjall "mountain, hill, range of hills", and fell "hill, mountain". Sometimes overlapping and indistinguishable, in meaning and form. Found as Feull, Feall on its own ; val, fal, bhal, hal, hall, al, fell, hell, el, in sec. position.

(vi) vat : N. vatn "lake, loch, water". Appears as Vatten, Vatern on its own; as vat, bhat, fat, at, atten, vatten, in sec. position.

(vii) nish : N., nes "headland, promontory". Very frequent. Found as Ness, Nish, on its own; as nis, nish, ness, nes, in compounds.

(viii) clet : N. kléttr "rock, crag", especially a steep isolated rock, inland or in the sea. Found as Cleat, Kleit on its own; as cleat, clate, gletir, glader, kleit, kletter in sec. position.

(ix) a : N. á "river". Appears generally in compounds as a or ra, and is often confused with a, ay "island", see (x) below.

(x) a, ay : N. é, éy, ey "island". Very frequent. Appears in compounds as a, ay.

(xi) hol : N. hól "hill" (= cnoc). Often used for farm names. Found as Holl or Toll on its own; as ol, al, etc. in sec. position, and like völlr, may be affected by metathesis - see (n) above.

(xii) ford, ort : N. fjórðr ("fjórðr") "fjord, inlet, deep sea-loch". Often anglicized to forth, firth; may be found in sec. pos. as ort, ord, fort, ford.

(xiii) berg : N. berg "rock, mountain". Not very frequent.

(xiv) holm : N. hólmr "island". Often preceded by Gaelic t-, and treated as a loanword. Found on its own as Holm, Tolm; in sec. position as holm, home, olm, ulm, huilm, and with metathesis, as hamul, amul, homul.

(xv) sco : N. skógr "wood, forest". Always appears as sco, but sco is not always from skógr - see (o) above.

(xvi) gro : N. gróf "pit", also "stream, burn", see (d) above.

7. It is the last element in Norse names which gives the nature of the place i.e. the word order is the opposite of that of Gaelic names. Therefore it is best to start by looking at the last element.

8. First elements are very often personal names, especially nick-names; before staðir, the first element is almost always a personal name. Frequent names are:

Grimr	Torfi	Leifr	Hjalti
Kári	þór- names (Thor):	Herjulfr	Magnús
Helgi	þorgrímur	Njáll	Rognvaldr
Karl	þórir	Borgarr	Súli
Arni	þorsteinn	Gunnarr	Siguror
Steinn	þorgeirr, etc.	Björn	
Sölvi	Eiríkr	Skeggi	
Þrándr	Óláfr	Kraki	

Also church names such as Fab from papar, papyli "hermits, holy men", munka "monks", pra - "priest's".

Women's names are rare in place names.

9. Adjectives precede the noun, and are stressed. Some common ones are:

<u>flat</u>	"flat" (flad, plad)	<u>hár</u>	"high" (ha, ho)
<u>sléttr</u>	"smooth, level" (sleat)	<u>breior</u>	"broad" (bre, brea, breighe)
<u>langr</u>	"long" (lang)		"green" (grian, gren, grinn)
<u>djúpr</u>	"deep" (diab, dibb, diub)		"red" (ro, ra, ru).

10. First elements referring to the kind of the natural feature:

<u>sand</u>	"sand", pl. <u>sandar</u> "sandbanks"	(sand, san, sanna)
<u>mel</u>	"sand-dune"	(mel, meala, mial)
<u>eyrr</u>	"sandbank, spit"	(eyre, airor, aire)
<u>hóp</u>	"bay"	(tóp, tob, ob)
<u>sæ</u>	"sea"	(sia, shaw, seo, sea, hei)
<u>skálpr</u>	"rock, lump"	(sgalp, sgalab)
<u>hraun</u>	"rough rocky ground"	(ron)
<u>skúti</u>	"jutting rock"	(sgud, skud)
<u>klif, kleif</u>	"cliff"	(clif, cliff)
<u>steinn</u>	"stone" - but very often <u>Steins</u> , a personal name.	
<u>brekka</u>	"slope" - often confused with G. <u>breac</u> "speckled".	
<u>fors, foss</u>	"waterfall" (fors, fars, ors, hors, ars, hars, os, osh)	
<u>os</u>	"estuary, river mouth" (os)	
<u>Þrfiriscey</u>	"tidal island, <u>cilean tíoram</u> " becomes orosay, oronsay.	

11. First elements referring to living things:

<u>marr</u>	"horse"	(mara, mari)
<u>hross</u>	"horse"	(ross, rosh, rois)
<u>hest</u>	"horse"	(hesta, hes)
<u>kú</u>	"cow"	(cu)
<u>goltr</u>	"pig"	(galt, gal)
<u>kálfr</u>	"calf"	(cal, cala)
<u>lamb</u>	"lamb"	(lam, lama)
<u>sauðr</u>	"ewe"	(so, sow)
<u>ær</u>	"ewe"	(jar, ear, air)
<u>hund</u>	"dog"	(hun, hund, huna) - often a personal name.
<u>lax</u>	"salmon"	(lachs, lax)
<u>sild</u>	"herring"	(shilt, shield, silt, sheil)
<u>galt, kú, kálfr, karl, kerling</u> are often used of rocks and islands lying off the mainland, like G. <u>cailleach, bodach</u> , etc.		
<u>birk</u>	"birch"	
<u>eik</u>	"oak"	
<u>kjör</u>	"copse"	
<u>hesli</u>	"hazel"	
<u>aspi</u>	"alder"	
<u>svarc</u>	"grass, grassy patch".	

12. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list, but to give a few of the more common elements in Norse placenames.

13. Further reading and reference books:

Oftedal, M. The Village Names of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides

(article in Norsk Tidsskrift for Sprogvitenskap, XVII, 1954, p. 363-409)

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Marstrander, C. Det norske landnam på Man .. (in Nor. Tid. VI, 1932; with English summary).

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Watson, W.J. The Place-names of Ross and Cromarty, Inverness, 1904.

Henderson, G. Norse Influence on Celtic Scotland. Glasgow, 1910.

MacBain. The Norse Element in the Topography of the Highlands and Isles  
(In Transactions of the Gaelic Soc. of Inverness, XIX, 1893-4),  
pp. 217-245).

Nicolaisen, W. Various articles in Scottish Studies, Scots' Magazine, etc.

14. If in doubt or having any problems connected with Norse names, do not hesitate to write to me: MISS BRIDGET GORDON,  
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(NOTE ON ORTHOGRAPHY:

ð is the Norse letter for voiced th, as in standard English "then";

þ is the North letter for unvoiced th, as in standard English "thin";

ø is a modified o, rather like German ö, and

ø is similar;

eo are long diphthongs, pronounced like the i in like. The accent is a length mark ).