Issues in developing a chronology for Norse and Gaelic place-names in the Hebrides[1]

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Introduction

Thinking of the past and of how place-names are built up, we can imagine the people of a given area, over a period of time, naming features in the landscape according to their practices and their use of the land. Similarly, over a period of time, we can imagine new peoples coming into the area and, in their turn, naming features in the landscape, according to their own practices and use of the land. Although we can often identify the original language behind these names, the question of 'over a period of time' is harder to qualify. It is this question that I would like to address in this article, with particular reference to Norse names in the Gaelic nomenclature of the Hebrides.

Some areas of Scotland are comparatively rich in early documentation. However, generally speaking, the Hebrides lack relevant sources until Timothy Pont's maps of the 16th century and, for the majority of recorded names, the earliest written source is the 19th century Board of Ordnance 6 inch : 1 mile series.

Perhaps at least partly because of this, the dating of names in the Hebrides has largely been restricted to differentiating those considered to be Scottish Gaelic, on the one hand, from those considered to be Old Norse, on the other.

Traditionally, Norse names have tended to form an amorphous group that, until Professor Nicolaisen's work on the distribution of habitative generics, would generally have been thought of as going back to the settlement period of the early 9th century. This group frequently includes—by virtue of that most unonomastic of concepts, tautology—forms such as ScG *Loch Langabhat* 'the loch of *Langabhat*', with a loan-

name from ON *Langavatn* '[the] long loch' as specific. Whether an independent form (*)*Langabhat* exists today or not, the name *Loch Langabhat* is certainly not Norse, and to call it Norse ignores potentially centuries of Gaelic name development.[2]

The Gaelic group is often equally amorphous in dating terms and, more importantly, is usually taken, perhaps by default, to post-date the Norse group.

Of course, the very fact that the Scottish Gaelic language contains loans from Old Norse—including words, personal names and place-names—means that Norse and Gael were in contact and that that contact was maintained over a period of time that was at least sufficient for this transference of loans to take place.

Given the paucity of external dating criteria for the majority of Norse names in the Hebrides, the question is whether any internal criteria exist within the nomenclature that may help define this period of contact, which we may assume began some time roughly between the early Viking raids of the 790s and the secession of the isles to Scotland in 1266. By definition, internal criteria are linguistic in nature, involving syntax, onomastic structure, lexis, morphology and phonology.

Onomastic structure
Looking at onomastic structure first of all—and by onomastic structure I mean the structure of names as seen through the various functions of individual elements within them—we can peel back chronological layers of names. For example, from *Loch Langabhat* we can extract *Langabhat, an erstwhile name used as a specific in the creation of a new name, which, in turn, takes us back to ON *Langavatn* itself; and, more drama-tically, from *Creagannan Buaile Bhoth Tastabhat* we can extract **Buaile Bhoth Tastabhat*, *Both Tastabhat, *Tastabhat and, finally, an Old Norse form in final -*vatn*, the specific of which is uncertain.[3] Trawling the nom-enclature in this way, then, using both loan-names and loan-words, helps reconstruct its earliest recoverable layers.

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[2] R. A. V. Cox, 'Questioning the Value and Validity of the Term 'Hybrid' in Hebrid-ean Place-name Study', *Nomina* XII, 1988–89, 1–9.
[3] 'The hillocks (of the enclosure (of the bothy (of *Tastabhat)))'.

We can then carry out the same process with regard to the Norse element in the nomenclature, although this is much more difficult to do. In the first place, the material available to us can only be a remnant of the complex tapestry of names, built up over time, that must once have been present, and surviving Old Norse loan-names usually exist in relative isolation from each other. Nevertheless, we get the odd glimpse of what must once have been the fuller picture. For example, the name *Tamnabhagh*, from ON *Hamnarvág* and to which we will return later, appears to have been used as the specific in at least two other names, *Tamnasdal* and *Tamnaiseal*, from ON *Hamnarvágsdal* '[the] valley of *Hamnarvágr*', with accusative of *dalr* 'valley', and *Hamnarvágsfjall* '[the] mountain of *Hamnarvágr*', with *fjall* 'mountain'. In the second place, as is apparent from this example, unstressed medial syllables in long Old Norse forms are frequently syncopated during transmission to modern Scottish Gaelic, a fact which can make the identification of related names like this yet more difficult.[4]

An analysis of onomastic structure, therefore, can help establish a relative chronology for some names.

Syntax

Another way in which we can differentiate chronologically between Norse names is by looking at their syntax. Excluding prepositional structures such as *Mille Thòla* < ON *Mille Hóla* 'between the hills', with genitive plural of *hóll*, the normal word order we expect to find in Old Norse loan-names is 'qualifier + noun' or, in onomastic terms, 'specific + generic', and indeed this is what is generally found throughout the area: for example, ScG *Langabhat* < ON *Langavatn* 'the long loch', with the weak neuter form of the adjective *langr* 'long' + *vatn* 'loch'; *Cliasgro* < ON *Kleifsgróf* '[the] stream of the cliff', with genitive singular of *kleif* + *gróf* 'stream' (the equivalent of ScG *feadan*, used especially of streams in

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[4] M. Oftedal, 'Ardroil', in *Indo Celtica*, edited by Herbert Pilch and Joachim Thurow, *Commentationes Societatis Linguisticae Europaeae* II, 1972, 111–25.

moorland); and *Laimiseadar* [ˈʟãĩmɪ ˌʃadər] < ON *Lamb-sætr* '[the] lamb-shieling', with stem-form of *lamb* + *sætr* 'sheiling' etc.[5]

However, several examples of forms with a generic-initial structure have been found in Lewis and St Kilda, and these form a typologically later series of (originally Norse) names, part of a development that took place within the Atlantic colonies—in the Faroes, the Northern Isles, Caithness and the north-west periphery of the Hebrides. For example, ScG *Beirgh Làgha* < ON *Bergit Lága* 'the low promontory', *Lidh Langa* < ON *Hlíðin Langa* 'the long hillside' and *Bhatan Dìob* < ON *Vatnit Djúpa* 'the deep loch'—contrast *Dìobadal* < ON *Djúpadal* '[the] deep valley'.[6]

A syntactical analysis, then, provides a relative chronology for a few Norse names.

Lexis

While there is plenty of evidence for the borrowing of words and names from Old Norse to Gaelic, there is some evidence that the traffic was not all one way.

Examples of Gaelic loan-words in Norse loan-names include Early Gaelic (EG) *crecc*, *áirge* and *lénae*, for example in *Cliasam Creag* (or, perhaps better, *Cliasamcreag*) < ON *Kleifsholm**crecc*** (using the EG form for the loan) '*Kleifsholm*-rock' (with a specific meaning '[the] hill of the cliff'); *Tiongalairidh* < ON *Þingvǫll-**áirge*** '*Þingvǫll*-milking-place' (with a specific meaning '[the] assembly-site') and *Lianacuidh* < ON ***Lénae**kví* '[the] fold of the meadow'.

In the case of Canna's *Camas Thairbearnais*, the form *Tairbearnais* appears to go back to a Norse form containing an EG loan-name, (*An*) *Tarbert* 'the isthmus'—in modern Gaelic *An Tairbeart*. Similarly, the Lewis name *Eilistean* appears to go back to a Norse form containing an Early Gaelic loan-name, (*An*) *Ail* 'the rock'. Although *Eilistean* would

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[5] ON *Lamb-sætr* > Middle Gaelic *[ˈʟãũmb ˌʃadər] with diphthongisation before the medial cluster -*mb*- > [ˈʟãĩmʲbʲ ˌʃadər] with regressive palatalisation > [ˈʟãĩmʲɪ ˌʃadər] with intrusive vowel, i.e. modern [ˈʟãĩmɪ ˌʃadər].

[6] R. A. V. Cox, 'The Norse Element in Scottish Place Names: Syntax as a chronological marker', *The Journal of Scottish Name Studies* 1, 2007, 13–26.

then translate metaphrastically as 'rock rock', onomastically the Norse name would simply have meant 'the rock of (*An*) *Ail*', just as *Eilean Thailm* in Eigg (with genitive of the Old Norse loan-name, *Talm* < ON *Holm* (*holmr*)) means 'the island of *Talm*', not 'island island'.

Loans, however, sometimes present a further challenge that is worth bearing in mind. While there are many Norse loan-words in Gaelic whose development in relatively straightforward—for example, *mol* < ON *mǫl* 'shingle', *sgeir* < ON *sker* 'skerry', *dorgh* < ON *dorg* '(trailing) fishing-line' and *langa* < ON *langa* 'ling'—there are several examples where it is evident that morphemic substitution has taken place.

Loan-words, then, can appear in the target language at varying levels of adaptation. Where all original morphemes have been adapted phonologically to Gaelic, this adaptation can be said to be complete, as in the preceding examples and even in the case of the likes of *arspag* < ON *svart-bak* (accusative of *svart-bakr*) 'great black-backed gull', in spite of the fact that here the final morpheme in the Norse word (-*bak*) happens to coincide with the Gaelic bird name suffix morpheme -*ag*.

At the other end of the spectrum are forms where phonological adaptation is only apparent and where in fact there has been complete substitution of morphemes. Cases such these are termed loan-shifts. For example, the man's name *Somhairle* (EG *Somarlid*) is traditionally derived from ON *Somarliði*. However, this would force us to accept the unexpected development of ON *m* [m] > EG *m* [β̃] and it is much more probable that the Gaelic name is a variant of EG *samairle* 'cub, whelp' (with medial [β̃]) and that it represents a loan-shift—with complete morphemic substitution—albeit based upon, rather than a loan-word from, ON *Somarliði*.

ScG *sgoth* 'a type of boat', which has traditionally been derived from ON *skúta* 'vessel, small light craft' (Heggstad 1975), is a further example: ON *skúta* is related to ON *skúti* m. 'overhanging cliff' and the verb *skúta* 'to project, jut out' and no doubt the Norse boat term arose by association with a physical or sea-going characteristic of the vessel to which it applied. However, while ScG *sgoth* cannot upon phonetic grounds derive directly from ON *skúta*, it appears to be based upon a similar characteristic but related to EG *scothaid* 'cuts off, lops, shears'

(verbal noun *scothad*), and modern ScG (*sgoth*) *sgath* 'to lop off, prune, cut off', (verbal noun *sgothadh* 'gash, slash, cut' and *sgathadh* 'lopping off, severing, act of lopping off or pruning'). *Sgoth*, then, while not derived directly from ON *skúta*, is most probably a loan-shift based upon it.[7]

Loan-words, however, often fall between these extremes so that there is some phonemic adaptation and some morphemic substitution. For example the verb *rannsaich* 'to search' etc. is derived from the Old Norse verb *rann-saka*, but with substitution of the verbal morpheme *-aich*. Similarly, the loan-word *uinneag* 'window' is derived from ON *vindauga*, but with substitution of the noun agent (formally diminutive) morpheme *-ag*.[8]

In dealing with Gaelic loan-words or loan-names in Norse forms, however, were morphemic substitution to have taken place, we might never be able to recognise it, let alone prove it. At any rate, Old Norse forms that contain Gaelic loans, at whatever level of adaptation, are typologically later than those that do not.[9]

Morphology

In spite of the challenge of loan-shifts, the nomenclature is broadly conservative in nature and the morphology of loan-words is often discernible, for example *tòb* < ON *hóp* (accusative of *hópr*), *beirghe* < ON *bergi* (dative of *berg*) and *bodha* < ON *boða* (oblique of *boði*) 'reef'.

Similarly in loan-names: for example, nominative in *Tinndir* < ON *Tindar*, nominative plural of *tindr* 'tooth, or pinnacle', and *Tòlair* < ON *Hólar*, nominative plural of *hóll* 'hill' (while the same element is attested in the genitive plural in the form *Mille Thòla*, cited above); genitive singular in *Bhàcasaigh* < ON *Vágsey* 'the island of the bay', with genitive

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[7] R. A. V. Cox, 'Old Norse words for "boat" in Scottish Gaelic: Revisiting Henderson's list', *Scottish Gaelic Studies* 24, 2008, 169–80; As a parallel to these examples, we might cite the Scottish Gaelic man's name *Tormod* and the English value usually given it, viz *Norman*.

[8] R. A. V. Cox, 'The Phonological Development of Scottish Gaelic *uinneag* 'window' and Related Questions', *Scottish Gaelic Studies* XX, 2000, 212–21.

[9] For a fuller discussion of categories of loans in this context, see R. A. V. Cox, 'Norse Place-names in Scottish Gaelic: towards a taxonomy of contact onomastics', *Journal of Scottish Name Studies* 3, 2009, 15–28.

singular of *vágr* 'bay',[10] and *Thearmadraigh* < ON *Hermundarey* 'Herm-
und's Island', with genitive singular of the man's name; and accusative
singular in *Liarob* with a generic in ON *-hóp*, accusative of *hópr* 'bay;
creek'.[11]

Occasionally, we have to concede local variation morphologically,
just as we recognise local variation lexically—as for example with the
occurrence of ON *sætr* in the Hebrides (see below) but its absence in
Iceland. For example, ScG *palla* 'ledge' is formally not expected to
derive from either nominative ON *pallr*, dative *palli* or accusative *pall*,
and we are left asking whether ScG *palla* attests to the existence of a by-
form of ON *pallr*, namely an otherwise unattested weak noun **palli*,
whose oblique form, **palla*, would regularly yield ScG *palla*. If this is
allowed, there may also be chronological implications.

Phonology

From a phonological point of view, we have to take into account develop-
ments in both Gaelic and Old Norse in reconstructing Old Norse forms.

For example, long [eː] /eː/ developed into /ia/ or /iə/ in many Scottish
Gaelic dialects, so *beul* [beːʟ] becomes [biaʟ]—and this is relevant to
the debate on the series of *shader*-names found particularly in Lewis,
Harris and Skye. Two Old Norse elements, *setr* and *sætr*, are traditionally
thought to be behind this series. However, they are differentiated by
vowel quantity as well as quality, *setr* having short [e], *sætr* long [ɛː].
The former would, therefore, be expected to yield ['ʃedər], and the latter
['ʃɛːdər], or with breaking of long *ē*, ['ʃiadər] or ['ʃiədər]. In reduced
stress position, these would yield [ˌʃədər] and [ˌʃadər], respectively. The
fact, therefore, that all examples of *shader*-names are pronounced
['ʃiadər] or ['ʃiədər] or, in weakly-stressed position, [ˌʃadər], indicates

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[10] ON *Vágsey*, with medial -[xs]-, > ScG *['vaːʰkˌsaj] with development of the orig-
inal Norse velar fricative into a plosive before *s*, > modern *['vaːʰkəˌsaj] with intru-
sive vowel.

[11] See also R. A. V. Cox, 'Maintenance of the Norse Legacy in Scottish Hebridean
Nomenclature', *Namnen i en föränderlig värld*, edited by Gunilla Harling-Kranck,
Studier i nordisk filologi 78, Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland nr 631, (Helsinki,
2001), pp. 45–52.

quite clearly—unless we care to claim the possibility of occasional analogical levelling, although there is no evidence to suggest there was any—that we are dealing with ON *sætr* only here.[12]

The assimilation of the non-palatalised and palatalised dental fricatives, /ð/ and /ðʲ/, to the velar and palatal fricatives, /ɣ/ and /j/, respectively, in Gaelic was complete by the thirteenth century, and this is significant for the development of loans such as *geàrraidh* (< ON *gerði* 'enclosure'), which predates the development, and *urrdh [ˈuˈʀuɣ] (< ON *urð* 'pile of stones'), which post-dates it and which later participated in the development of svarabhakti, the phenomenon whereby a vowel retaining the stress of and often the quality of the preceding stressed vowel occurs between certain clusters beginning in *l, m, n* and *r*.[13]

Yet some changes evidently take place at a staggered pace. For example, the loan-name *Bhiondalam [ˈvĩɴtə ˌʟam] from ON *Vind-holm*, literally 'wind-isle', apart from the metathesis in the final syllable, retains its original Old Norse shape. In contrast to the conservatism of *Bhiondalam*, the loan-name *Tinndir* [ˈtʲʰẽɪɴʲtʲəðʲ] (see above), with its diphthongisation of the stressed vowel before palatal *n* + consonant, has followed the general pattern of development in the dialect. Tellingly, people who are not familiar with the traditional pronunciation of *Bhiondalam* are apt to try and pronounce it with a diphthong.

Indeed, just as the nomenclature is in general conservative in nature, so loans restricted to it may be generally more conservative than loans which have been incorporated into the lexicon. The village name *Garrabost*, for example, conservatively retains the quantity of the stressed vowel of the original Old Norse farm name, *Garðabólstað* (with genitive plural of *garðr*), while ScG *gàrradh* (< ON *garð* accusative) shows innovative lengthening of the stressed vowel—in accordance with similar lengthening elsewhere in the dialect—before the original *-rð* cluster.[14]

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[12] R. A. V. Cox, 'The Origin and Relative Chronology of *Shader*-names in the Hebrides', *Scottish Gaelic Studies* XVI, 1990, 95–113.

[13] R. A. V. Cox, 'The Development of Old Norse *-rð*(-) in (Scottish) Gaelic', in *Language Contact in the Place-Names of Britain and Ireland* edited by George Broderick and Paul Cavill (Nottingham, 2007), pp. 57–96.

[14] Cox, 'The Development of Old Norse *-rð*(-)'.

From an Old Norse perspective, the nomenclature also shows traces of change:

The Old Norse diphthong *ai* was raised to *ei* relatively early and loan-names such as *Stainneabhal* and the personal-name *Amhlaigh* [ˈãũʟaj] (< ON *Áⁿlaif*, before loss of the original nasal), are therefore earlier than loans such *Stèineacleit* and *Ùisdean* [ˈʉːʃt ⁱan], which show evidence of the raised diphthong.[15]

ON *-fn* develops into *-mn* in East Norse (which includes the area around Trondheim). *Tamnabhagh*, cited earlier, for example, from ON *Hamnavág* (accusative) 'the bay of the harbour', with genitive singular of *hamn*, contrasts with *Tamhnaraigh*, from ON *Hafnarøy* 'the island of the harbour', with genitive singular of *hǫfn*. Although it has been suggested that forms such as *Tamnabhagh* and *Tamhnaraigh* indicate the provenance of settlers, the evidence suggests the distinction between them is in fact a chronological one.[16]

There is also a connection with East Norse in the case of ScG *bìrlinn* 'galley'. ON *Byrðingr* could not formally yield ScG *bìrlinn*, but from the late thirteenth century the cluster *-rð* began developing into a 'thick *l*' (a flapped, slightly retroflex *r*) in East Norse, which fell together with an allophone of *l*: in effect, ScG *bìrlinn* derives directly from an East Norse form of the word.[17]

Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to air some of the issues involved in trying to develop a chronology for Old Norse loan-names in the Scottish Gaelic nomenclature of the Hebrides. Although it is evident that contact between Norse and Gael took place over an extended period of time, the vast majority of names remain more or less undatable within the broad timescale of 800–1266. Where dating is at all possible, one cannot claim to be able to date them absolutely with much precision, and most dating

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[15] R. A. V. Cox, 'Notes on the Norse Impact upon Hebridean Place-names, *The Journal of Scottish Name Studies* 1, 2007, 139–44 (pp. 140–40).
[16] R. A. V. Cox, '*Tamhnaraigh ~ Tamnabhagh*: the development of Old Norse *-fn* in (Scottish) Gaelic', *The Journal of Scottish Name Studies* 2, 2008, 51–68.
[17] Cox, 'Old Norse words for "boat" in Scottish Gaelic: Revisiting Henderson's list'.

is couched in relative terms. There are many obstacles in our way, not least the opacity of many of the names involved—indeed, our efforts often barely scratch the surface—but the various approaches touched upon here hopefully represent a foot in the door.

Phonetic note

ScG [b d] are devoiced; [d dʲ t tʲ ʟ ɴ ɴʲ] are dentals; [ʟ ɴ ʀ] are velarised; [ʟʲ ɴʲ] are palatals; [r] is a flap and [ʀ] trilled.