PART FOUR

PLACE-NAMES AND LANGUAGE
The Scandinavian Element *Gata* Outside the Urbanised Settlements of the Danelaw

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The Scandinavian element *gata* (f.) is undoubtedly most generally known as a street-name element in the urbanised settlements in the Danelaw, particularly in York and the Five Boroughs but also as far south as Peterborough, as well as in the medieval towns of Norwich and Great Yarmouth, and in the Norman foundation of King’s Lynn. It also occurs in several parts of rural England, for example in the Isle of Ely, Yorkshire, Durham and Northumberland, as well as across the northern Pennines in Cumbria. It has also left its mark on Lowland Scotland and the Isle of Man.

In street-names the element *gata* denotes ‘a street (in a town)’. It is a typically Scandinavian element, although it is related to German *Gasse* (f.), which has the sense ‘narrow street or alley’. Scandinavian *gata* is thought originally to have had a meaning such as ‘opening, way out’ and perhaps to be associated with Modern English *gate*, with which it is sometimes confused, but in Scandinavian sources from before c.1500 it is certainly recorded with the meaning ‘a road, street or path’, predominantly one that is bounded on either side by fences (e.g. a fenced path for cattle), by trees (e.g. a path cut through a forest), by buildings (e.g. a street in an urbanised settlement) or by human-beings (e.g. a path slashed through opposing forces). It must also, however, have had a more general sense of ‘road’ or ‘highway’. It is certainly used to translate the Latin terms *via* ‘way’ and *semita* ‘path or lane’ (cf. the files of the Dictionary of Old Norse Prose in Copenhagen). Unfortunately, the word *gata* does not occur very frequently in early written sources either in Britain or in Scandinavia but it would seem that in Scandinavia *gata* was the word most frequently used for a street in urban areas in Denmark and southern Sweden, whereas the more commonly occurring elements in Norway are *almenning* and the loanword *stræti* from Latin *via strata* ‘paved way’. The latter of these elements is of course also recorded in Anglo-Saxon England.