SCANDINAVIAN NAMING-SYSTEMS IN THE HEBRIDES—
A WAY OF UNDERSTANDING HOW THE SCANDINAVIANS
WERE IN CONTACT WITH GAELS AND PICTS?

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Introduction

Our knowledge of the Hebrides from the late eight to the thirteenth
centuries is rather patchy. As such we do not know who the incoming
Scandinavians met: were they Gaels or Picts—or both? We do not know
how they interacted with them over time, let alone initially. That being
said, not everything about the Hebrides is unknown. For instance, the
Southern Hebrides can relatively safely be considered to have been
inhabited by a Gaelic speaking people, as this area formed the western part of the Gaelic kingdom of Dál Riata. Whether the Northern
Hebrides were also Gaelic-speaking or instead Pictish-speaking is more
of a question. Archaeological evidence suggests that the material culture
appears to have been largely Pictish at the time of the Viking raids (cf.
e.g. Lane 1983; Fisher 2001, 11–12), so the possibility that the Northern
Hebrides were Pictish-speaking certainly exists. According to the Irish
annals, the Viking raids began in the late eight century.1 Although the
attacks are only referred to in the broadest terms there, it is clear that
no area of the Hebrides was spared.

Within a century of the recording of the first attacks in c. 794 Scotland
underwent great changes. In the 840s Cínáed mac Alpín, a Gael, gained
kingship of the Picts and a large-scale Gaelicisation of Pictland started;
a process which resulted in the disappearance of Pictish culture and

1 Cf. e.g. Annals of Ulster (AU) 794.7: Uastatio omnium insolarum Britanniae gentilibus (Devastation of all the islands of Britain by the gentiles). But note that the other AU entry from around this time (AU 795.3: Loscadh Rechrainne o geintib & Scis do choscradh & do lomradh), which was formerly translated ‘The burning of Rathlin by the gentiles; and Skye was pillaged and devastated’ is now thought to refer to Lambay Island off Dublin and the taking of the reliquary (scín) (see Downham 2000).
language. At the same time, the Scandinavians appear to have undertaken a large-scale and substantial colonisation of the Northern Isles, the Hebrides and the adjacent mainland of Scotland—at least when the sheer number of place-names of Scandinavian origin in these areas is taken into account. By the middle of the ninth century, a new grouping emerges on the political scene, namely the Gall-Gaidhel, ‘foreign Gaels’ (cf. ESSH I: 285; Crawford 1987, 47–8). The exact origins and ethnic composition of the Gall-Gaidhel is not entirely certain. Some sources state that they were Gaels who had joined forces with Scandinavians (O’Donovan 1860, vol. III: 138), whereas the name rather indicates a culturally mixed Gaelic and Norse background. The recording of this grouping is our first indications of peaceful Norse-Gaelic contacts. It is not conceivable that such a grouping should emerge without close and peaceful contact between, at least, segments of the Norse and Gaels. From Scandinavian sources, the notion of Norse-Gaelic peaceful co-existence is also corroborated through the large number of people mentioned as originating from the British Isles having typically a Scandinavian first name and a Gaelic byname, e.g. Helgi Bjólan (‘little mouth’) and Grímr Kamban (‘crooked fellow’).2 It is as though such a name construction was needed in order to switch between a Norse-speaking user-group and Gaelic-speaking one. At any rate the environment in which such a naming tradition evolved must have been bilingual Norse-Gaelic. Of the two naming elements, only the byname has meaning in the ordinary sense. This means that the byname could a) not have been coined without Gaelic language-users, and b) not have become established without a general knowledge of Gaelic within the whole local community, also within the strictly Norse segment. Otherwise it would not make sense to bear a byname of foreign extraction.

The sources thus speak both of the Scandinavians’ violent actions against the indigenous peoples of the Hebrides at the same time as providing indirect evidence of peaceful Norse-Gaelic co-existence during the early phase of Scandinavian engagement in the North Atlantic area. The question is now: How does the Hebridean place-name material and mutually borrowed place-name elements in the area relate to this information? Do we see evidence of cultural contacts in this material?

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2 For further examples of Gaelic bynames and personal names in Old Norse and present-day Scandinavian, see Schulze-Thulin 2001: 71–8.