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Norse Women in Uist Place Names: An Onomastic Perspective

Abstract

There is a large body of research which deals with the place names coined by the Norse in Scotland during the Scandinavian period of settlement. But how were the Norse, especially Norse women, remembered and imagined by subsequent users of these names? This paper presents a selection of place names that reflect associations with Norse women after the period of Scandinavian settlement in the Hebrides of Scotland and explores how these names were understood by later Gaelic-speakers. The paper presents case studies of two place names: Tobha Mòr/Howmore in South Uist and Uineabhal in North Uist. These place names, and the narratives associated with them, are examined in their onomastic and cultural context.

Keywords

Scotland, Scandinavia, folklore, socio-onomastics, folk-etymology

1. Introduction

There are numerous references to Norse women[1] in Scottish place names, many of which were *not* coined by speakers of a Norse language.[2] Crucially, we have a large body of place names and related place lore coined by later speakers of Gaelic which contain both implicit and explicit references to Norse women. This material is found in various areas of Scotland, especially the Hebrides, but it has not yet been comprehensively studied within its proper onomastic context. This paper will examine some aspects of how the women commemorated in these place names have been imagined and reimagined by different name users. It presents case studies focusing on two place names which have been associated with Norse women in local place lore: Tobha Mòr/Howmore[3] in South Uist (Grid Reference NF766362) and Uineabhal in North Uist (Grid Reference NF802672).

The principal area of investigation, the Uists in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland, are a series of connected islands consisting of North Uist, Benbecula and South Uist. As is the case for much of the Hebrides, the present namescape here is characterised by two main linguistic layers, Old Norse and Gaelic. Generally, the earliest layer still clearly visible in surviving place names was coined in Old Norse during the Viking Age (roughly the 9th to 13th centuries in this area). There is subsequently a layer of Gaelic place names, after it took over from Norse as the main spoken language in the area. We should note that all the material examined here has been transmitted through a lens of Gaelic, having been used in a Gaelic-speaking context from roughly the 13th century

[1] In this paper the term 'Norse woman' is primarily used to denote descriptions of women with explicit or implicit Scandinavian characteristics (e.g., speakers of a Scandinavian language, women who are commemorated in place names coined in Old Norse, or who are described as daughters of Norse rulers) who appear in Gaelic narratives which take place in the Scandinavian diaspora.

[2] It is worth noting that it is generally difficult to firmly associate place names coined in a Norse language with women. Although commemorations of women in Norse place names containing a feminine personal name as an element do exist, they are scarce and often difficult to identify with any certainty. For further discussion of Norse place names containing a feminine personal name in a Hebridean context, see Evemalm, 2018.

[3] Where dual spellings are given, they are based on Gaelic/Anglicised forms provided by modern Ordnance Survey maps: https://digimap.edina.ac.uk/

onwards. In addition to providing information about the historical realities of Norse settlement in western Scotland, the place names can therefore provide clues about how Gaelic speakers understood the Norse past in these areas. Notably, several of the place names discussed here do not appear on published maps, but rather are recorded in 19th- and 20th-century written and oral sources, some in Gaelic and some in English and Scots. There is typically a significant temporal gap between the recording of relevant lore and the purported time period in which the events described therein took place. This paper does not offer a tidy solution to this problem, but it does highlight the need for further detailed case studies which consider the full onomastic, historical and archaeological context. The present discussion therefore offers a springboard for future place-name surveys in these areas.

A diachronic approach is used to examine how portrayals and perceptions of the Norse (especially women) in Uist have developed geographically and temporally and how that is expressed in the onomastic material. In most of the examples discussed – as far as can be ascertained from the surviving source material – we are not dealing with historical women, but rather depictions of women found in local traditions and folklore. Thus, I will especially explore how motifs which occur in local place lore have become embedded in the physical and symbolic landscape through place names. In doing so, I will consider how we can use this material to investigate how the Norse past in Uist has been understood by speakers of Gaelic. This study also seeks to contribute to current discourse on the dynamic nature of place names, stressing the need to approach them as cultural artefacts which are constantly changing and developing.[4]

Various terms are used to describe the Norse, or Vikings, in Hebridean place names and narratives, but one frequently occurring character, or set of characters, is given the Gaelic epithet *Nighean Rìgh Lochlainn*, which can be loosely translated as 'The daughter of the King of the Norsemen'. It is found as an element in several Uist place names including Dun Nighean Righ Lochlainn in North Uist (Grid Reference NF953723, recorded by Beveridge, 1911/2018, pp. 146–147) and Dun Seibhe Nighean Righ Lochlann in Benbecula (Grid Reference NF863497, see Raven, 2005, p. 200). As we shall see, this epithet also appears in relation to other place names through associated place lore. The

[4] For a recent discussion covering similar issues in a Scottish context see Künzler, 2020.

term *Rìgh Lochlainn* is well attested in medieval and later sources in Ireland and Scotland. It can be used to denote a fictional king of Norway (or 'of Norsemen'), but the term *Lochlann* is also used in Gaelic to describe Scandinavia as a real geographical entity (Dwelly, 1901–1911/2011, s.v. *Lochlann*). It should be stressed that this paper does not attempt to trace the origins and spread of the *Rìgh Lochlainn* motif, or to explore the etymology of terms like *Lochlann* and *Laithlind*. Both terms have a long and complex history, which has been extensively discussed in their appropriate historical context.[5] For the purpose of this discussion, it is sufficient to define *Rìgh Lochlainn* as a motif looking back to a Norse (sometimes imagined) past. It is often found in the context other folkloric and mythical motifs in Gaelic tradition (e.g., see *Lochlann* in Black, 2003/2019).

2. Case study: Tobha Mòr/Howmore

Tobha Mòr/Howmore in South Uist now refers to a settlement and church-complex which emerged as a prominent ecclesiastical site in the medieval period (Stell, 2014, p. 294). Another lesser-known aspect of the site is its Norse dimension and the process by which the name Tobha Mòr/Howmore has been connected to a Norse past in local tradition. The name appears in stories in a range of 19th- and 20th-century sources, including the collections of folklorist Alexander Carmichael. One account collected from Duncan MacLellan (Càrnan, South Uist) reads as follows:

> Righ Lochlans two child [children] were out playing one day – Mor agus Aula Dearg – They went down to a stream below their fath [father's] house and seeg [seeing] a small coit – "coit an da raimh" [small boat] & the day being fine they went into it and went paddling about. The wind drove them abou [about] out and a drift till they land [landed] at Amhunn Hough They grew up Mor died & was buri [buried] at Hough. Her bro. [brother] died & was bur [buried] at Cill

[5] For example, see Kruse (2017, pp. 198–231) for discussion of the origins of *Laithlind* and its historical and geographic context.

> Aulai. [Amhlaidh] (…) The Pope sent Naomh-Blianan [to bless their graves]. He took with him as usual a sackful of uir na Roimh [soil from Rome]. He first came to Hough & put a spadeful there & conse [consecrated] it. The mean [meaning] of the name is Tunga Moire. Tow mor. (Carmichael, 1869, Coll-97/CW150/60)[6]

A similar story is told, but with some notable differences, by South Uist storyteller Angus MacLellan (1961/2015): Mór, daughter of the King of Norway, was drowned and found on the shore; she was the first woman buried at Togh-Mór (Howmore); this is why it was called Tó-Mór; i.e. Taigh Móire, "Mór's House", is its right name. The daughter of the King of Norway was the first woman buried there. The interpretations in both stories undoubtedly reflect folk-etymology; the original meaning of the name has been reinterpreted, in this context to explain the narratives presented. Our earliest attestation of the name appears in 1495 when it is recorded as *Skerehowg* (RMS II, p. 484) 'parish of **Hogh*'. This existing name was incorporated into several Gaelic place names with the added elements *mòr* 'big' (the same word as the feminine name *Mòr* which appears in the stories above) and *beag* 'small'.[7] These place names (Tobha Mòr/Howmore and Tobha Beag/Howbeg) now refer to two settlements found near the chapel-complex. Analysis of the earlier formation **Hogh* is more problematic. It almost certainly refers to an original Norse place name, possibly a simplex-name with Old Norse *haugr* 'cairn, mound'. The cairn in question may refer to the Neolithic chambered cairn located roughly one kilometre to the east at Glac Hukarvat (Grid Reference NF778362, Canmore ID 9878), but further analysis of the cairn and its historical Norse context is beyond the scope of this study.[8] It is sufficient to note here that the place name ultimately reflects an Old Norse coining, adding yet another layer of 'Norseness' to the site. We should nevertheless note that the coining of the original Norse name was possibly prompted by an existing prehistoric monument, perhaps telling

[6] This story is recorded in a field notebook belonging to Alexander Carmichael. Transcriptions of material from the Carmichael Watson collection (Coll-97) are based on those provided by the Carmichael Watson project, retrieved December 5, 2021, from https://www.ed.ac.uk/information-services/library-museum-gallery/crc/research-resources/gaelic/carmichael-watson

[7] The original name with Old Norse *haugr* developed into **Hogh* in a Gaelic-speaking context, subsequently resulting in the Gaelic place names Tobha Mòr and Tobha Beag by a process of back-formation (see Cox, 1992, p. 140 for discussion of back-formation in Norse-Gaelic context).

[8] For further analysis of the landscape context of the cairn see Cummings et al., 2005, pp. 37–54.

us something about how Norse settlers interacted with the existing physical landscape in this part of the world.

In order to fully explore the context of the place lore presented here, we should briefly consider the other child of *Rìgh Lochlainn* mentioned in the story recorded by Carmichael above. Initially referred to as Aula Dearg ('Red/ruddy Aula'), he is associated with another South Uist church site in the story: Cill Amhlaidh/Kilaulay (Grid Reference NF755461). This is a Gaelic place name which contains *cill* 'church, chapel' and the personal name *Olaf*, almost certainly referring to St Olaf of Norway (Clancy & Evemalm, 2018a). It is interesting to note that we are once again seeing the reanalysis of a Gaelic place name with a Norse dimension. Additionally, a rather different version of the story of *Rìgh Lochlainn*'s children is presented in *the "Ordnance Survey Name Books"* (OS1/18/10/84) under the entry for Cill Amhlaidh. Here the site is "supposed to be the burying place of a Danish Princess of the name of Alua or Oloff which [*sic*] was caught in a storm and blown to Uist". In this account, *Aula* has been transformed into a "Danish princess". Referring to speakers of a Norse language as 'Danes' was a frequent feature of 18th- and 19th-century antiquarian writings. Turning to *The Old Statistical Account* for South Uist we are told that:

> The only thing remarkable in this way to be observed in the parish, are the remains of the Danish forts, which are built in a circular form (…) In the island of Benbecula (…) the remains of one of these towers, of a very large size, are to be seen; the name is Dun Elvine nean Ruarie, or the tower of Elvina, the daughter of Rory; this Elvina being the daughter of some Danish chieftain, as traditionary account tells. (OSA, p. 299)

As suggested by John Raven (2005, p. 221), this probably refers to Caisteal Bhuirgh/Borve Castle in Benbecula (Grid Reference NF773505), the remains of a 14th-century tower house (Canmore ID 9962). The daughter in question seems to ultimately refer to a real woman, Amie NicRuairidh, who lived in the 14th century. According to various accounts such as the 17th-century "History of the MacDonalds" (Gregory & Skene, 1847) she was responsible for building and providing patronage to several churches in the Uists, including St. Michael's Chapel (North Uist), Teampull na Trionaid (North Uist) and Teampull Chaluim Chille (Benbecula) (Clancy & Evemalm, 2018b). The same source states that she "likewise built the castle of Borve in Benbicula", referring to

Caisteal Bhuirgh (Gregory & Skene, 1847, p. 298). This is yet another name with Norse roots, its specific having been transferred from nearby Borgh denoting Old Norse *borg* 'fortification', perhaps partially explaining the assumption that the Norse were responsible for, or at least associated with, any physical remains here.

References to the Norse as 'Danes' have been discussed by Clare Downham (2011) in Lowland Scotland using "The Old Statistical Accounts" as a point of reference. She concludes that: "Across large areas of Scotland in the 18th century 'Danes' or Vikings were cast in a negative light, although in the Northern Isles and Caithness the 'Norse' were regarded as praiseworthy ancestors" (Downham, 2011, p. 62). The label 'Danish' is thus arguably best understood in the context of antiquarian, Lowland, often (but not always) non-Gaelic, perceptions of the Vikings in Scotland. Such accounts present a sometimes stark contrast with the narratives discussed in a Hebridean context above. It serves as a reminder that we always need to carefully consider the context of transmission when attempting to gauge how Scotland's Viking past has been, and still is, understood by different actors.

3. Case study: Uineabhal

For the second case study we move northwards to a hill in North Uist known as Uineabhal. This is another place name found in one of Carmichael's field notebooks where he records the following account:

> Una Nin [Nighean] Ri [Righ] Lochlan [Lochlainn]. Clacha corrach on Unival were worship [worshipped] by Una[']s] army Any of Una's men who are guilty of crime were made to col [collect] the stones of the pharps [*barps* ('cairns')] as pun [punishment] & of & if they didn't worship her images. (Carmichael, c. 1872, Coll-97/CW90/74)

The nearby dun in Loch Huna (Grid Reference NF812667) was also the residence of Una according to another account recorded by Carmichael (Raven, 2005, p. 200). The implication in these stories is that both the hill and the

loch were named after Una, the daughter of *Rìgh Lochlainn*. One interesting aspect of this account is that the stones of **Clacha Corrach* (probably 'steep' or 'unstable stones') mentioned therein appear to have some basis in the physical landscape. On the south-western side of the hill is a Neolithic chambered cairn with at least one standing stone (Canmore ID 10234). It seems highly likely that the cairn and standing stone at least partially prompted the creation of this story. It serves as an excellent example of how existing monuments in the landscape can be used as visual anchors in the creation of narratives associated with place names.

Turning to the etymology of Uineabhal, the name is a Norse coining, with the generic element *fjall* 'hill, mountain'. The specific element is more difficult. It may reflect a masculine personal name, *Uni*, with *Una* as the genitive form (Lind, 1905–1915, s.v. *Uni*). On the other hand, an interpretation with an initial *h* is also conceivable; the loss of initial *h* is attested in other Hebridean Norse place names, as noted by Cox (1987, p. 159). If we interpret the specific element in the nearby lake of Loch Huna (Grid Reference NF811667) as representing an original Old Norse formation this seems even more likely. Thus, we need to consider multiple additional elements. One possibility would be *húnn* 'young bear' (Cl.-Vig., s.v. *húnn*) or the masculine personal name *Húni* with genitive *Húna* (Lind, 1905–1915, s.v. *Húni*). There are potential parallels with other place names such as Huna in Caithness (Grid Reference ND369732) to be considered, but ultimately the lack of early forms in our area makes it difficult to analyse the name with any certainty. The crux of the matter is that an original Norse place name is unlikely to have contained a feminine Norse personal name and once again we appear to be dealing with a reinterpretation (folk-etymology).[9] To fully understand the process by which place name elements have been reinterpreted to represent Norse women we need to consider multiple factors, some of which are outlined in the following analysis.

[9] Although masculine *Uni* would be more consistent with the current spellings, *Unna* is an attested Norse feminine personal name, and we should perhaps not entirely dismiss the possibility of a feminine personal name (Lind, s.v. *Unna*).

4. Analysis

As demonstrated in these case studies, there are different ways in which place names can evoke images of Norse women in Uist. Most obviously, the place name itself contains references to a person who was viewed as having Norse characteristics, as is the case in examples like Dun Nighean Righ Lochlainn. More frequently, the Norse connection is established through place lore, as in Tobha Mòr/Howmore and Uineabhal where the etymology of both names has been reinterpreted to connect them to their respective narratives. It is perhaps surprising that the majority of these place names are coined in Gaelic rather than Old Norse – only Uineabhal can be firmly placed in the category of place names coined by speakers of Norse – but as highlighted above, names like Cill Amhlaidh/Kilaulay have a strong Norse dimension, and Tobha Mòr/Howmore ultimately reflects an underlying Old Norse place name.

For the final part of this paper I shall address two key questions which arise in relation to these place names: why and how were these narratives created? Can we explain why women feature so prominently in them? One interpretation is that they are an expression of Gaelic speakers imagining, or perhaps more appropriately reimagining, a Viking past by adding a distinctly fantastical, mythological element. Viewed in this light these stories become representations of barbarous Viking women; an expression of 'the Other'. This has previously been suggested in a Uist context by Raven (2005) who argues that: "Strong and barbarous Lochlannich women are a common feature in the oral history of North Uist perhaps emanating from a need to show the otherness of the earlier Norse overlords" (p. 201). This may not be entirely erroneous; in some of these stories there is likely an element of othering, especially when emphasising the barbarous nature of these women, best seen in the stories of Una. For comparison, we may also consider traditions recorded elsewhere in Scotland, including the account of how "An Dubh Ghiubhsach, Nighean Righ Lochlainn" 'The Dark, or Pitch-pine, Daughter of the Norse King' burned the woods of Lochaber. Therein the Norsemen are described as follows:

> the fame they gathered for themselves through their indulgence in every manner of cruel spoliation, and slaughter of the people wherever they landed, was

> that they were a bold, courageous, hardy, rough ('The Norsemen a rough band'), peremptory and unscrupulous race, and more than that, it was attributed to them that they practised witchcraft, charms, and had much of other unhallowed learning among them. The Norse King's eldest daughter was particularly noted for the knowledge of the 'Black Art'. (Campbell, 1895, pp. 101–107)

This description undeniably brings to mind familiar depictions of plundering savage Vikings often found in popular culture. However, I propose that there is another dimension to be considered in the context of the narratives discussed above which is quite different from the casting of the Vikings as 'the Other'.

Firstly, several of these narratives have a strikingly Christian dimension. They are not stories of savage pagan Viking raiders plundering churches; rather the opposite often seems to be the case. The churches at two of the sites discussed here, Tobha Mòr/Howmore and Cill Amhlaidh/Kilaulay, emerge as important ecclesiastical sites during the medieval period, with Cill Amhlaidh/Kilaulay having a distinctly Norse association due to its commemoration of a Scandinavian saint. The narratives associated with these sites are used to explain their origins, not in the context of being plundered by Vikings, as we might expect if Raven's interpretation were correct. Similarly, we find a Christian dimension in the place lore. In the story of Tobha Mòr/Howmore recorded by Carmichael, the point is to explain how the soil from Rome ended up at various church sites in the Hebrides. Carmichael also records yet another story associated with Una, in which she was responsible for building Kilmuir at Hogha Ghearraidh/Hougharry: "Una built an Kille moire Howgeary" (Carmichael, c. 1872, Coll-97/CW90/76). Kilmuir is another medieval church site in North Uist dedicated to St Mary (Grid Reference NF708705). The site still hosts a selection of medieval carved stones (Canmore ID 10103). Considering these combined pieces of evidence, might the stories ultimately tell us something about the historical realities of the Viking Age in the Hebrides? We know that the Hebridean Norse eventually converted to Christianity, but this is a process which remains relatively obscure in the historic, onomastic and archaeological record. Nevertheless, it would likely partially have been a process of both integration and continuity (see, e.g., Abrams, 2007; Clancy, 2021). These narratives, with their Norse-Christian characteristics, may partially reflect such continuities and provide evidence for Norse-speaking communities adapting to and working within existing Christian networks. We should also explore another point further: at least one of the examples examined

here has ties to a historical person, Amie NicRuairidh who, as stated above, is credited with the building of several churches in the Hebrides. It is worth considering the possibility that this longstanding association with a prominent historical woman has influenced the emergence of other narratives associated with women and the building of churches. It is perhaps partially in this light that stories like the one of Una building the church at Hogha Gheararaidh/Hougharry should ultimately be viewed.

Secondly, it is interesting to note that in several of the examples discussed here, although an element in the place name in question has been reinterpreted as the personal name of a woman with Norse characteristics, some of the personal names are not obviously Norse. To an extent, this may reflect the fact that as place name elements, they are reinterpretations of Gaelic coinings, but there is another dimension to consider. *Mòr*, as discussed above, is a reinterpretation of the Gaelic common noun *mòr* 'big', but it is also a feminine Gaelic personal name and an attested character in medieval Irish literature.[10] The scope of this examination does not allow for a full analysis of parallels with real or literary figures found in Irish sources, but such comparisons may prove fruitful in future studies. Of course, personal names cannot be taken as indicators of language or ethnicity and there is still much work to be done to fully unpack the wider literary context of this material. Nevertheless, the strong Gaelic dimension present in these stories is worth keeping in mind, and perhaps tells us something about the role of women and the social and political context in which the Hebrides moved from a Norse to Gaelic context.

Finally, where physical monuments are used as anchors for narratives – see for example Uineabhal – they do not obviously belong to the Norse period of settlement. Of course, we cannot exclude the possibility that such monuments were reused by the Norse, but they are generally prehistoric monuments such as Neolithic cairns. Yet again, the place lore seems to reflect an amalgamation of numerous different influences spanning many centuries, and sometimes even millennia, coalescing to form the narratives and place names discussed here.

[10] Mór Mumhan, a goddess figure in early Irish tales who represents "the symbolic female personification of the territory and the divine sovereignty of the land of Ireland" (Ó Crualaoich, 2003, p. 55). Also see MacCana (1955, pp. 76–114).

5. Conclusions

This brief examination has demonstrated that the commemoration of Norse women in Uist place names is far from one dimensional. Perhaps surprisingly, they are often found in post-Norse Gaelic place names. The epithet *Nighean Rìgh Lochlainn* is especially prevalent in – and in association with – Uist place names. The place names and narratives examined here can tell us about Gaelic perceptions of a Norse past, ultimately rooted in historic reality. Crucially, in these narratives, the Norse are not necessarily presented as 'the Other' or as savage 'Norse overlords' in the way we might expect. Rather, they appear to represent a sometimes intriguingly complex intermingling of different narratives and influences which merge to create a dynamic collective cultural memory incorporating elements of both Norse and Gaelic history, at times reflecting remarkable continuity. In many respects this is different from the view of the Vikings found in parts of Scotland where the Norse presence was historically not as strong. Finally, as noted in this paper, the majority of place names discussed have resulted in the creation of folk-etymologies. Clearly, we would do well not to dismiss these too lightly since, as demonstrated here, they can tell us much about how local perceptions of place and identity have developed over time. It is a reminder of the value in considering the full cultural and historical context of any given place name.

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