

Gaelic Place-Names: 'Gall'

By Alison Grant

The Gaelic place-name *gall* means 'stranger, foreigner', and occurs in Scottish place-names including *Achingall* 'field of the strangers' (East Lothian), *Rubha nan Gall* 'point of the strangers' (Mull), *Cnoc nan Gall* 'hill of the strangers' (Colonsay), *Allt nan Gall* 'stream of the strangers' (Sutherland), *Inchgall* 'isle of the strangers' (Fife), *Barr nan Gall* 'summit of the strangers' (Argyllshire) and *Camusnagaul* 'bay of the strangers' (Wester Ross).

In many cases, the strangers or foreigners in question were the Vikings who settled the northern and western seaboard of Scotland from the late eighth century. For example, the old Gaelic name for the Hebrides was *Innse Gall* 'islands of the foreigners', and the Gaelic name for Caithness was *Gallaibh* 'among the foreigners'. This contrasts with the Gaelic name for (eastern) Sutherland *Cataibh* 'among the Cats', revealing that whatever the Gaels relationship with the Pictish 'cat' tribe who inhabited the area, they did not consider them to be *gall*. The Vikings themselves referred to the Picts in northern Scotland by the same term, as the name Caithness is from Old Norse *katanes* 'headland of the Cat people'.

The handful of *gall* names in Fife are also likely to refer to Viking settlers. However, in the case of *Cairngall* in Aberdeenshire and *Balnagall* in Easter Ross, it seems likely that *gall* had a more general meaning of 'non-Gael', and may have referred Lowland Scots speakers rather than Vikings. *Gall* also has a secondary meaning of 'rock, stone', particularly in reference to a distinctive standing-stone. In some cases, it can be difficult to establish whether names in *gall* refer to strangers or to a specific stone, although in examples such as *Leac nan Gall* in Argyll (containing *leac* 'slab, flat stone') and *Craigengall* in West Lothian (containing *creag* 'rock'), the interpretation of 'stranger' or 'non-Gael' is to be preferred, as they would otherwise be 'stone-of-the-stone' tautological formations.

The Viking *gall* are well-documented in historical sources including the *Annals of Ulster* and the *Annals of the Four Masters*, where they are often subdivided into two groups, with the Norwegians designated as the *fionn gall* 'fair strangers' and

the Danes as the *dubh gall* 'dark strangers'. *Fionn gall* is the original of the Gaelic personal name Fingal, and similarly *dubh gall* has evolved into the modern personal name and surname Dougal. Another surname derived from *gall* is Galbraith, which is Gaelic *gall Breathnach* 'foreign Briton'.

In addition to the *dubh gall* and the *fionn gall*, Gaelic-speakers recognised a distinct ethnic group they referred to as the *Gall-Gaidheal* or 'foreigner Gaels'. There has been much debate about the precise ethnicity of the *Gall-Gaidheal*, with various theories including that they were Gaelic-speakers from Ireland, English overlords in a Gaelic-speaking region of Scotland, Norman immigrants, Irish Protestants or Strathclyde Britons. However, the predominant view is that the name referred to a group of a mixed Gaelic-Viking group, who originated either in Ireland or the Western Seaboard of Scotland, and who eventually settled in the Galloway area. Indeed the modern Gaelic name for Galloway is *Gall-Ghaidhealaibh* 'among the foreign Gaels'.

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