Gaelic Place-Names: ‘Uamh’

By Alison Grant

The Gaelic word *uamh* or *uaimh* (pronounced ***oo**-av*) means ‘a cave’. It occurs in place-names such as *Uamh an Uisge* ‘cave of the water’ in Sutherland, *Uamh an Ard Achadh* ‘cave of the high pasture’ on the Isle of Skye, *Uaimh Chrom*‘curved cave’ south of Oban, *Uamh Ròn* ‘seal cave’ in Caithness, *Uamh an Òir* ‘cave of gold’ in Wester Ross and *Uamh nan Gabhar* ‘cave of the goats’ on the Isle of Longa.

The word is also found as the qualifying element in a wide range of place-names, with examples including *Ob na h-Uamha* ‘bay of the cave’ in Wester Ross, *Allt nan Uamh* ‘burn of the caves’ in Sutherland, *Bealach na h-Uamha* ‘pass of the cave’ on the Isle of Harris, *Loch nan Uamh* ‘lake of the caves’ near Arisaig, *Creag na h-Uamha* ‘rock of the cave’ in Wester Ross, *Cnoc na h-Uamha* ‘hill of the cave’ on the Isle of Jura, *Rubha na h-Uamha* ‘headland of the cave’ in Ardnamurchan, *Sgurr na h-Uamha*, ‘rocky peak of the cave’ on the Isle of Skye and *Beinn na h-Uamha* ‘mountain of the caves’ on the Isle of Lewis.

The word is also attested in the diminutive form *uamhag* meaning ‘a small cave’, occurring in place-names such as *Loch nan Uamhag* ‘loch of the small cave’ in Wester Ross and *Traigh na h-Uamhag* ‘beach of the small cave’ in Sutherland.

Uamh is additionally found in the anglicized form *weem* in place-names including *Pittenweem* ‘estate of the cave’ and *Wemyss* ‘cave place’, which are both located in Fife, and *Wemyss Bay* in Renfrewshire, in which the Scots or English word bay has been added to the original Gaelic name which meant ‘cave place’ like its counterpart in Fife. However, names such as *Hole o’ Weems* in Glen Clova and *Weems Hole* near Kirriemuir may be entirely Scots rather than Gaelic in origin, as *uamh* was also borrowed in the Scots language in the form *weem*, and is used in Scots to refer to Pictish subterranean dwelling-houses as well as naturally-formed cavities.

Some of the caves with *uamh* names are of considerable archaeological importance. *Uamh an Claonaite* ‘cave of the sloping rock’ in Sutherland is the longest cave in Scotland, where the skeleton of a brown bear believed to be up to

40,000 years old was discovered in the 1990s. The caves at *Wemyss* in Fife feature Bronze Age Cup-and-ring carvings together with a large number of carvings from the later Pictish period. Similarly, excavations *Uamh an Ard Achadh*on the Isle of Skye have revealed Iron Age artefacts and burial sites.

Other caves with *uamh* names have a literary significance. One of the most well known *uamh* sites is a hill summit in Stirlingshire known as *Uamh Mhòr* 'big cave' or 'great cave', in reference to a large cavern in the cliff-face. The name is sometimes anglicized as *Uam Var*, and is referenced in Walter Scott's poem *The Lady of the Lake*, in which a bounding stag, 'stretching forward free and far, Sought the wild heaths of Uam-Var'. The cave also features in Robert Louis Stevenson's novel *Kidnapped*, when David Balfour and Alan Breck make their bed in a heather-bush on the hill-side of *Uam Var* on their way to Edinburgh towards the end of their adventures.

Walter Scott is known to have had a particular fascination with Scottish caves, and visited many of them in the early part of the nineteenth century. His tour including the *Spar Cave* on the Isle of Skye, which he describes in his poem *The Lord of the Isles*, and *Fingal's Cave* on the Isle of Staffa, which is also known by the Gaelic name *An Uaimh Bhinn* 'the melodious cave', due to the sound of the waves echoing around the massive, vaulted interior of the cave. Scott took tremendous inspiration from these visits, and caves feature prominently in a number of his best-known works, including *Waverley*, in which the eponymous hero, after going on an expedition to retrieve stolen cattle, awakens in a remote cave called *Uaimh an Ri* or the King's Cavern 'as the abode of Donald Bean Lean was proudly denominated'.The Gaelic word *uamh* or *uaimh* (pronounced ***oo**-av*) means 'a cave'. It occurs in place-names such as *Uamh an Uisge* 'cave of the water' in Sutherland, *Uamh an Ard Achadh* 'cave of the high pasture' on the Isle of Skye, *Uaimh Chrom*'curved cave' south of Oban, *Uamh Ròn* 'seal cave' in Caithness, *Uamh an Òir* 'cave of gold' in Wester Ross and *Uamh nan Gabhar* 'cave of the goats' on the Isle of Longa.

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