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Viking Influence on the Gaelic Place-Names of the Hebrides
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The Viking raids around the Scottish coast began in the closing years of the eighth century, with devastating attacks on Iona Abbey and the Isle of Skye. These 'vikings' were Norwegian adventurers who sailed to the Hebrides via Shetland and Orkney in search of wealth, and later, land, as the raiding gradually gave way to colonisation over the course of the ninth century. The Vikings would control the Hebrides for the next four hundred years, with the islands officially coming under Norwegian rule in 1098. The islands were known in the Old Norse language as the *Suðreyar* 'the Southern Isles' to distinguish them from the *Norðreyjar* or 'Northern Isles' of Shetland and Orkney which had also been ceded to the Norwegian crown.

This 'Kingdom of the Isles' lasted into the second half of the thirteenth century, until the collapse of Norwegian power on the western seaboard of Scotland in the aftermath of the Battle of Largs in 1263. Three years later, the Treaty of Perth returned the Hebrides to Scottish rule, but the impact of the Viking era left a lasting mark on the islands, both culturally and linguistically. In particular, the place-names of the Hebrides reveal a significant Old Norse influence.

From the period of colonisation, many of the Old Norse names coined by the Viking settlers survive to the present day. Examples include *Habost* 'high farm' (Lewis), *Breivig* 'broad bay' (Barra), *Sandavat* 'sandy loch' (Lewis), *Conisby* 'king's farm' (Islay), *Hestaval* 'horse hill' (Lewis), *Papadil* 'priest's valley' (Rum), *Leurbost* 'mud farm' (Lewis), *Smerclett* 'butter rock' (South Uist), *Laxdale* 'salmon (river) valley' (Lewis), *Cattadale* 'valley of the cats' (Islay), *Earshader* 'beach settlement' (Lewis) and *Nereby* 'lower farm' (Islay). Additionally, many of the smaller Hebridean islands have Viking names, with the Old Norse word for an island *øy* featuring in names such as *Soay* 'sheep isle', *Flodday* 'float isle', *Sanday* 'sand isle', *Calvay* 'calf isle', *Stromay* 'tidal isle', *Fladda* 'flat isle', *Ensay* 'ewe isle', *Shillay* 'seal isle', *Kearstay* 'hart isle', *Langay* 'long isle' and *Pabbay* 'priest isle'.

However, the Vikings also left their mark in another way, as many of these Old Norse place-name elements were borrowed and adapted by the Gaelic-speakers of the Hebrides. These loan words reflect the importance of the sea to this remote archipelago, with many borrowings relating to coastal features.

Examples include the Gaelic word *òb* meaning 'a bay, a cove' which was borrowed from Old Norse *hóp* 'a small land-locked bay'. Names featuring this element include *Òb nam Portan* 'bay of the crabs' (Skye), *Òb Dubh* 'black bay' (South Uist), *Ob nam Feusgan* 'bay of the mussels' (Skye), *An t-Òb* 'the bay' (Harris) and *Òb a Deas* 'south cove' (Skye). This word was also borrowed from Old Norse into Scots in the form *hope*, meaning 'a small bay or haven' and features in place-names such as *St Margaret's Hope* and *Chalmers Hope* in Orkney.

Another Old Norse word *gjá* meaning 'chasm, cleft, gully' was borrowed into the Gaelic language in the form *geodha* which can be translated as 'inlet, cove, gully'. Examples include *Geodha Grannda* 'nasty cove' (Lewis), *Geodha na Bà Ruaidh* 'cove of the red cow' (Islay), *Geodha nan Ceann* 'headland cove' (Colonsay), *Geodha a' Sgadain* 'herring cove' (Lewis), *Geodha Garbh* 'rough cove' (South Uist), *Geodha Ruadh* 'red cove' (Lewis), *Geodha nan Damh* 'cove of the stag' (Islay), *Geodha Mhor* 'big cove' (Lewis), *Geodha Dubh* 'black cove' (Skye), *Geodha an Tairbh* 'bull cove' (Lewis) and *Geodha Gorm* 'blue cove' (Colonsay). As with *òb*, this word was also borrowed from Old Norse into the northern dialect of Scots, in the form *geo* 'a creek or inlet of the sea with steep rocky sides, a cleft with deep water among rocks', and is found in Scots place-names such as *Castle Geo* and *Red Geo* in Caithness.

Another word relating to the shoreline is Gaelic *mol* 'a shingly beach', which was borrowed from Old Norse *möl* 'pebbles, bed of

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pebbles on the beach', and is found in names such as *Mol an Eich* 'beach of the horse' (Lewis), *Mol Mhòr* 'big beach' (Barra), *Mol an Tuim* 'island beach' (Lewis), *Mol Bàn* 'white beach' (Harris), *Mol na Dùine* 'beach of the men' (Lewis), *Mol Beag* 'small beach' (Barra), *Mol na h-Airde* 'beach of the promontory' (Lewis) and in simplex form as *Moll* 'beach' (Skye).

The Gaelic speakers also borrowed words for rocks, including Gaelic *cleit* 'a rock, a rocky eminence' from Old Norse *klettr* 'a rock, a cliff'. Names featuring this element include *Cleite na h-Uamha* 'rock of the caves' (Lewis), *Clett na Cairidh* 'rock of the weir' (South Uist), *Clett Ruadh* 'red rock' (Lewis), *Clette an Iasgaich* 'rock of the the fishing' (Harris), *Cleite nan Uan* 'rock of the lambs' (Lewis), *Cleit Mhor* 'big rock' (South Uist), *Clette nan Luch* 'rock of the mice' (Harris) and *Cleite Beag* 'small rock' (Tiree). This word also found its way into Scots in the form *clet*, *clett* 'a detached rock' by way of the Vikings who settled in the Northern Isles and the adjacent mainland, with examples such as *The Cletts of Ramnageo* in Shetland and *Little Clett* in Caithness.

Gaelic *sgeir* 'a rock or reef in the sea, a tidal rock' was borrowed from Old Norse *sker* 'a rock in the sea'. The word was also borrowed into English and Scots as *skerry.* Examples of Gaelic place-names include *Sgeir nan Crubag* 'crab skerry' (Lewis), *Sgeir nan Gall* 'skerry of the foreigner' (Jura), *Sgeir Liath* 'grey skerry' (Islay), *Sgeir Mhòr* 'big skerry' (Barra), *Sgeir a' Chaisteil* 'castle skerry' (Skye), *Sgeirean na Sròine Riabhaich* 'skerries of the brindled point' (Jura), *Sgeir Bhiorach* 'sharp skerry' (Colonsay), *Sgeir nan Caorach* 'sheep skerry' (Harris) and *Sgeirean Uaine* 'green skerries' (Islay).

The Gaelic speakers also borrowed words for wildlife from the Vikings, such as Gaelic *sgarbh* 'cormorant' from Old Norse *skarfr* with the same meaning. Examples include *Sloc nan Sgarbh* 'hollow of the cormorants' (Colonsay), *Geodha nan Sgarbh* 'cove of the cormorants' (Lewis), *Druim nan Sgarbh* 'ridge of the cormorants' (Skye), *Cnoc nan Sgarbh* 'hill of the cormorants' (Tiree), *Rubha nan Sgarbh* 'promontory of the cormorants' (Harris) and *Stac nan Sgarbh* 'cliff of the cormorants' (Jura). The word was also borrowed into Northern Scots in the form *scarf*, and is found in names such as *Scarf Point* in Orkney and *Scarf Water* in Shetland.

These are only some of the many words which Scottish Gaelic owes to the Vikings, but they do give some insight into the ways in which these Scandinavian settlers helped to shape both the Gaelic language and the toponymy of the Hebridean landscape.

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