

Some Place-Names from the Old Scatness Project, Shetland

Doreen Waugh
University of Glasgow

Old Scatness (identified on the map as Scatness (fig. 1)), the focus of a heritage initiative managed by the Shetland Amenity Trust, is described by the archaeologists from the University of Bradford who have been excavating the site each summer for the past seven years as 'a multi-period settlement mound situated adjacent to Sumburgh Airport, South Mainland, Shetland'.¹ The Trust commissioned a variety of people to contribute to the multi-disciplinary research programme, including myself on place-names. At the core of the project is the archaeological excavation² and, in a sense, on the periphery are those who are examining other available evidence from the surrounding landscape to build up as full a picture as possible of the locality and its history, but the ultimate aim is to integrate the various studies and to arrive at an understanding of the relationship over centuries of time between humans and their environment.

The archaeological evidence from the Old Scatness site consists of broch, wheelhouses and Pictish, Norse and post-medieval settlement. Unfortunately, place-names cannot match the stones in terms of survival throughout the centuries since the broch period and, in particular, one is still left wondering about the Pictish to Norse transition, and why there are no surviving Pictish place-

1S. J. Dockrill and J. M. Bond, *Old Scatness Broch & Jarlshof Environs Project: Field Season 1999* (Shetland Amenity Trust and University of Bradford, 2000), p. 6.

2See also R. A. Nicholson and S. J. Dockrill, *Old Scatness Broch, Shetland: Retrospect and Prospect* (University of Bradford/Shetland Amenity Trust/North Atlantic Biocultural Organisation, 1998).

NOMINA 26

names although the evidence of the excavation points to continuity of settlement. It is very useful to have the evidence of the archaeology to provide an approximate chronological framework within which to conduct place-name research because the recorded history of the names themselves extends back to the late medieval period at best and it is only the archaeology which lends credence to assumptions about continuous settlement from the broch period.

WAUGH

The fact that Old Scatness is an ancient habitation site is confirmed by analysis of carbonised plant material, the earliest of which has been dated (at 95% confidence) to a period spanning 86 BC to 216 BC.³ A siltstone artefact which suggests a Viking/Norse date,⁴ along with various loom weights, bowl fragments and spindle whorls point to the Early Norse period and, interestingly, unpublished postgraduate research by Amanda Forster has indicated that certain 'carinated steatite bowls ... have direct parallels to those from graves in southern Norway, which are thought to date between 750 and 850 AD.⁵ Parallels with neighbouring Jarlshof, which was excavated in the 1930s,⁶ have also been found, which is hardly surprising given the minimal distance between the two sites. In fact, Stephen Dockrill's report on the 1999 excavation season ends with the following statement:

old Scatness, together with Jarlshof, provide perhaps the richest farming estates in Shetland and as such would have been prime targets for Viking settlement. Artefacts together with the absolute dates for the surface in Structure 12 suggest an early Viking settlement of Old Scatness.⁷

Artefacts are not, of course, limited to the earliest period of settlement on the site. Post-medieval ceramics also feature, one of my favourites being a 'decorated lid from a jar of Holloways' ointment' about which the following amusing excerpt is quoted by N. D. Melton:

Holloways' Ointment was a familiar product in the north of

³Dockrill and Bond, *Old Scatness Broch & Jarlshof Environs Project: Field Season 1999*, p. 9.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁶J. R. C. Hamilton, *Excavations at Jarlshof, Shetland* (Edinburgh, 1956).

⁷Dockrill and Bond, *Old Scatness Broch & Jarlshof Environs Project: Field Season 1999*, p. 16.

NOMINA 26

Scotland between the 1840s and the 1880s, advertised constantly in the local newspapers. Its promotional copy has obvious satirical potential; in 1872 it offered relief from 'short fevers, influenza, inflammation, diphtheria, and a host of other complaints (including piles), but by 1878 it also cured 'gout, rheumatism and neuralgia' as well as 'Bad Legs, Bad Breasts, Old Wounds, Sore Nipples and Sore Heads' (John o' Groats Journal, 8/2/1872, 24/1/1878).⁸

If a cure for all of this was necessary, it is surprising that any Vikings survived in Shetland for long enough to name the places in which they lived, but survive they did, as did many of their place-names created in the seven centuries, give or take a few decades, during which Norn was spoken in Shetland.⁹ The Picts did vanish and there has been much recent discussion about the gory nature of their demise at the points of Viking swords but I am not totally convinced by the scene of genocide which has been painted by Brian Smith,¹⁰ although it is one possible explanation of lack of Pictish place-names and, on a smaller scale, I do not find it difficult to accept pockets of convenient slaughter of locals who happened to be occupying desirable land.

Smith's recent well-argued contribution to the discussion did almost, but not quite, make me change my own view that earlier Pictish place-names were deliberately replaced by Norse place-names, which is based on analogy with the contemporary scene in other North Atlantic islands where Norse place-names were certainly being methodically and intensively introduced by

8N. D. Melton, 'The post-medieval ceramics', in Dockrill and Bond, *Old Scatness Broch & Jarlshof Environs Project: Field Season 1999*, p. 26.

9M. P. Barnes, *The Norn Language of Orkney and Shetland* (Lerwick, 1998).

10B. Smith, 'The Picts and the martyrs or did Vikings kill the native population of Orkney and Shetland?' *Northern Studies*, 36 (2001), 7-32.

WAUGH

the Viking colonists as a means of land management and establishment of a distinct cultural identity. Faroe and Iceland had no indigenous population and, therefore, blanket Norse naming could easily happen. In Orkney and Shetland, the existence of indigenous peoples would have complicated the process of annexation of land, making it necessary to replace earlier names rather than simply to create new names, but the Norse settlers would have been keen to stamp their linguistic authority on the islands in exactly the same way that this was being done by their fellow settlers in the islands to the north and, in so doing, they would have used the bank of toponymic material which they had brought with them from western Norway. What the place-names in all the North Atlantic islands do, by their very existence, is to make a vigorous statement of both national pride and separate colonial identity outside the Norwegian homeland.

It is against this background that I am attempting to reconstruct the cultural landscape in which Old Scatness was set. The survey area lies to the south of the Ward Hill (see fig. 2) (ON *varða* a beacon), the name of which suggests that it may have been a lookout point for vessels arriving from the south. Also suggestive of a certain wariness about new arrivals is the place-name Virkie, deriving from ON *virki* 'a work, wall, stronghold or castle'. Unfortunately, the earliest reference to 'Wirkie'¹¹ which I have found thus far is from 1606¹² and that is by no means atypical of dating available for place-names in Shetland, so any reconstruction of the Early and Later Norse period will remain speculative and needs the supportive evidence of the archaeology. What follows is one possible scenario.

Whatever the exact nature, date and location of the original structure at Virkie, I believe that the name is

¹¹Initial [v] is retained in pronunciation but written references vary between <w> and <v>. This is not unusual in Shetland.

¹²J. H. Ballantyne and B. Smith, *Shetland Documents 1580-1611* (Lerwick, 1994), p. 197.

NOMINA 26

significant and that the Pool of Virkie is likely to have been a focus of Viking activity from the Early Norse period, since it is a virtually landlocked sea-pool with access from the sea on the east side, which would have provided good harbourage for Viking ships (fig. 3). In the first instance, these might have sheltered briefly to take on supplies of fresh water and food, perhaps plundered from local inhabitants, before heading off on marauding trips to the south but, at a slightly later stage, when Norse settlement had been established and local magnates were controlling traffic, the Pool would have been a very suitable location for ships to offload trade goods and, indeed, plunder.

If the Pool of Virkie is taken to be a focal point of economic activity, surrounding settlement should complement its centrality, both in terms of place-names which directly support the significance of the Pool in the local economy, and in terms of those which provide evidence of an established farming community in its environs. The name Virkie itself falls into the category of a place-name which directly confirms the economic importance of the Pool, as does the name Tolob, with forms such as *Tollope* (1589) and *Tolhoip* (1606) confirming derivation from ON *toll-hóp* toll bay, a name which also occurs as the name of a tunship in Orkney for which Hugh Marwick has suggested the same derivation.¹³ ON *hóp* specifically describes a small landlocked bay or lagoon and it only occurs in Shetland when the topography fits that description, as in the landlocked bay described here. Tolob is the name of the tunship on the higher ground to the west of the Pool of Virkie, now linked to the Pool by a footpath named by Derek Black, an informant who lived in Tolob until his death in 2000, as Da Gersti (ON *gordsta/ gordste/gordsti* 1. `a ridge of earth remaining from an old fence (in the outfield)'; 2. `boundary (ridge of earth) between two pieces of

13D. J. Waugh, `Place-name survey', in Dockrill and Bond, *Old Scatness Broch & Jarlshof Environs Project: Field Season 1999*, p. 76.

WAUGH

arable land').¹⁴

There is no clear statement in written record that the bay in the name Tolob is the Pool of Virkie but there is really no other likely contender for the appellation 'toll bay' because West Voe, which might be the other possibility, is very exposed to the frequent south-westerly gales and it is really too broad and open to the sea to be described as a *hóp*. In fact, what survives of the Norse settlement at Jarlshof at the side of West Voe is pounded by the sea and it is only because of strong modern sea-walls that erosion has been held at bay. It is possible that Tolob was the original name of the enclosed sea-pool at Virkie and that, after Tolob began to be used as a tunship name, the later Scots construction Pool of Virkie replaced it. The name Tolob suggests exchange of trade goods and payment of toll or tax and, in fact, one of the possible interpretations of the neighbouring name Skolland (recorded as *in Scollandis in Scatnes* in 1589¹⁵), is Jakob Jakobsen's suggestion of `*í skálanum or í skálum' from ON *skáli* a shed or hut, which fits with the idea of huts in which trade goods might have been stored.¹⁶ Alternatively, the way in which the term *skáli* seems to have been applied in both Orkney and Shetland might suggest that these were fairly significant buildings for domestic use, rather than mere store-houses. Perhaps they could have been places where visiting traders stayed.¹⁷

To the north of the Pool of Virkie, on the side of the hill, there is the farm of Exnaboe, a name which appears in records from the start of the sixteenth century onwards, in forms such as *Oxinabo*, *Oxnabo*, *Oxnabuye* etc. Locals talk of Boe [bø], a form which is also recorded from the

14*Ibid.*, pp. 76-77.

15*Ibid.*, p. 74.

16J. Jakobsen, *The Place-Names of Shetland* (London, 1936; repr. Kirkwall, 1993), p. 96.

17I am grateful to Dr Barbara Crawford for this suggestion and for her helpful comments on this paper.

NOMINA 26

sixteenth century, rather than Exnaboe.¹⁸ The generic is ON *bœr* which tends to be used of minor, secondary settlement in Shetland and the specific is ON *øxn*, cattle. Another neighbouring name which also refers to oxen in its specific, is recorded in the sixteenth century as *Ocknastay*, *Oxinasta*, and *Oxnasta*¹⁹ and in 1735 as *Ocktnistae*²⁰. It was not included in the First Edition OS map (1895) and it was only remembered by Derek Black, whose death meant that knowledge of its location would have vanished if he had not pinpointed the name as recorded on this map in the form Occinster, which is how he chose to write and say it. Early forms do seem to suggest that the generic is *staðir* rather than the more common *setr* or *sætr*, hill-farm or shieling, and the modern ending *-ster* in Shetland names does often, in cases where proof is available, point back to a farm named *-staðr* (commonly pl. *staðir*), but the two elements are difficult to separate at times.

While farms on the rising ground to the north of the Pool of Virkie would appear to have concentrated on cattle rearing, although the land is very fertile and capable of cultivation, the flat, sandy land to the south of the pool was intensively settled and, presumably, farmed as the archaeological excavations at Scatness and Jarlshof would indicate. All other evidence of Norse settlement to the south has been destroyed by the creation and subsequent expansion of Sumburgh Airport on the Links of Sumburgh, but the picture from both Scatness and Jarlshof is of a thriving economy based on farming, in-shore fishing and craft work such as that carried out in the smithy at Scatness. There is also evidence of local manufacture of steatite bowls from the quarries at Cunningsburgh to the north which probably supplied Jarlshof and Scatness.

18Waugh, *Old Scatness Broch & Jarlshof Environs Project: Field Season 1999*, p. 77.

19*Ibid.*, p. 77.

20Baillie Court Book of Dunrossness, RH 11/29/1. Shetland Archives, Lerwick.

WAUGH

I envisage settlement running across the land from Scatness to Wilsness, with the farm of Benista (possibly a *staðir*-farm belonging to a man called *Beinir*) lying between the two points, but early documentary proof is non-existent for this latter name thus far. Benista, now buried under the runway, is a chance survival on the 1895 map, also remembered by Derek Black. Otherwise it has proved elusive. I also envisage settlement running south from Wilsness to Jarlshof and the gloriously sandy but, as has already been noted, very exposed beach at West Voe. Infuriatingly, the two names for the archaeological sites—Scatness and Jarlshof—have proved unrevealing, each for a different reason.

I have dealt with Scatness in detail elsewhere and came to the conclusion that the most probable derivation is from a masculine form **skat*, from ON *skati* used in the sense of 'protruding part'.²¹ In fact, the name Skatanes occurs in Hardanger in Norway for a headland ending in a narrow point, which is the shape of the 'ness' (ON *nes*) at Scatness. Not exactly the stuff which one hopes to find in the naming of significant Norse estates, although I think that ness-names were much more significant as names in the Northern Isles than has hitherto been recognised. The adjective 'Old' in 'Old Scatness' is a more recent Scottish English addition, the reason for which seems to be that the name, which originally applied to the archaeological site at Scatness, is now more frequently used of the headland where crofts were established in the nineteenth century and, therefore, the adjective 'old' was recently added to the name of the former settlement in recognition of the movement of the name from that site to the headland proper.

Jarlshof is even more disappointing as a piece of toponymic evidence. There was no eponymous Norse warlord domiciled here; instead the name came from the lively imagination of Sir Walter Scott in a much later

21D. J. Waugh, 'In (and around) Scatness', *Northern Studies*, 36 (2001), 69–90.

NOMINA 26

century when he took an interest in the ruins and created a name with suitably Viking resonance for his romantic novel *The Pirate*, featuring the witch, Norna of Fitful Head. Sumburgh, rather than Jarlshof, is actually the place-name which appears frequently in early documents. Scatness features just as frequently and Wilsness and Grutness on the east side rather less so, but I see these four place-names as delimiting, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say composing, the settled area to the south of the Pool of Virkie. There is no archaeological evidence of early settlement on the two promontories running to the south (i.e. the Ness of Burgi and Compass Head).

The form *Sowndbroche* for Sumburgh, which occurs in a document dated 1588–89, which mentions ‘The 60 marks land in Sowndbroche, Skatness and Ulsness in the parish of Dunrosnes...’,²² is one of various ways in which this name is rendered, alternating with forms such as *Swinburgh* (1498) and *Swounburgh* (1577).²³ Whatever the specific in this name, the broch (ON *borg*) at Jarlshof is situated on very fertile land near the place where the principal local farm of Sumburgh is situated today, and it seems reasonable to assume that this is the broch which gave rise to the place-name Sumburgh. One of several possibilities for the specific in Sumburgh is the Old Norse personal name *Sveinn* and one might, because of this and because of its continuing importance as a farm throughout many centuries, see Sumburgh as the original administrative centre, with its named occupant controlling farming activities as well as revenue from the Pool, but it should be noted that the specific in Scatness too could be interpreted as the masculine personal by-name *Skati* and there is also a broch at the centre of the site at Old Scatness.

When trying to decipher the origins of these two

²²Ballantyne and Smith, *Shetland Documents 1580–1611*, p. 56.

²³*Shetland Documents 1195–1579*, edited by J. H. Ballantyne and B. Smith (Lerwick, Shetland, 1999), pp. 24 and 209.

WAUGH

important Shetland places, in fact, I have recently been thinking of the archaeological concept of the 'central place' which was drawn to my attention again by Frans-Arne Stylegar in an Orkney context.²⁴ In particular, he has made reference to an article by Charlotte Fabech in which the following statement is made: 'Besides agrarian hamlets, we find magnate residences with hall and production areas, cult-building/shrine and trading places ... Thus the central place forms a settlement cluster, and a single spot consequently does not represent it'.²⁵ In fact, the idea of the settlement cluster echoes Olwyn Owen's comments with regard to the farm at Tuquoy in Orkney that 'the early Viking farm at Tuquoy may be fairly typical of a primary Viking settlement; and typicality in Viking Orkney may mean larger farms, or an agglomeration of farmsteads, [rather] than the simple farmstead excavated, for instance at Underhoull, Unst, Shetland'.²⁶

Perhaps the Tuquoy 'typicality' is also exemplified at Scatness and Jarlshof/Sumburgh and they should, in fact, be seen as part of an agglomeration of farmsteads, as Owen describes. If we consider the types of dwelling and associated buildings described by Fabech with relation to Scatness and Jarlshof, we can certainly find agrarian hamlets surrounding the trading place at the Pool of Virkie, and potential magnate residences at Jarlshof and Scatness. Wilsness, on the east coast opposite Old Scatness, appears as *Ulsness* in the 1588-89 document but, in spite of this early form *Ulsness*, it may seem a little too convenient to find that the pagan deity Ullr is the

24F-A. Stylegar, 'Central places in Viking Age Orkney' (forthcoming).

25C. Fabech, 'Centrality in sites and landscapes', in *Settlement and Landscape*, edited by C. Fabech and J. Ringtved (Højbjerg, 1999), pp. 455-73 (p. 457).

26O. A. Owen, 'Tuquoy, Westray, Orkney: a challenge for the future?', in *The Viking Age in Caithness, Orkney and the North Atlantic*, edited by C. E. Batey, J. Jesch and C. D. Morris (Edinburgh, 1993), pp. 318-39 (p. 336).

NOMINA 26

specific in this name, although alternative interpretation remains elusive. The sheltered harbourage for ships in the Pool of Virkie would have enhanced the economic importance of the nucleated settlements to the south and, if my argument is accepted, would have given them their initial *raison d'être*. West Voe could have been used as a landing place for ships but it is much too exposed to the elements to vie with the Pool of Virkie when ships needed shelter.

There are many other Norse place-names in the locality, several of which are transparent in meaning. For example, one only has to walk towards neighbouring Grutness to realise that the stones on the low-lying headland and on the beach confirm derivation from ON *grjót* 'shingle, stones'. Unfortunately, however, the transparent names are often outnumbered in Shetland by their enigmatic counterparts. Perhaps most enigmatic of all are the names which simply aren't there at all at the southern extremity of Shetland, such as names in ON *bólstaðr* which do occur elsewhere in Shetland. I would tend to see the lack of *bólstaðr* names as providing some support for my theory that Norse settlement was firmly established in this southern part of Shetland from the early Viking period, after which the diversification and subdivision of farms characterised by names such as *bólstaðr* did not take place, but I think that the reasons for the absence of *bólstaðr* are more complex than that.

In conclusion, as already quoted from Stephen Dockrill, 'old Scatness, together with Jarlshof, provide perhaps the richest farming estates in Shetland and as such would have been prime targets for Viking settlement'.²⁷ I would agree with his statement and would interpret Scatness and Jarlshof, in the Viking period, as important parts of the same agglomeration of settlement on the rich sandy soil of south Shetland.

²⁷Dockrill and Bond, *Old Scatness Broch & Jarlshof Environs Project: Field Season 1999*, p. 16.

WAUGH

Figure 1

NOMINA 26

Figure 2

WAUGH

Figure 3

NOMINA 26

Still to be done

Insert two phonetic transcriptions.