Norse *Steinn* in Hebridean Place-Names

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Abbreviations and references:
C. G. = Common Gaelic, i. e. the Gaelic language common to Ireland, Scotland, and Man until the thirteenth century, see Kenneth H. Jackson's British Academy *Rhŷs Lecture* for 1951.
Jakobsen = Jakob Jakobsen, *The Place-Names of Shetland.*
Marwick = Hugh Marwick, *Orkney Farm-Names.*
Marstrander, *Bidrag,* = C. J. S. Marstrander, *Bidrag til det norske sprogs historie i Irland.*
Marstrander, *Man* = id., *Det norske landnåm på Man.*
Mod. G. = Modern (Scottish) Gaelic.
O. N. = Old Norse.

The double purpose of this paper is to present the results of a small-scale investigation and to acquaint the reader with some aspects of Norse place-name research in areas where the Norse language has been supplanted by Gaelic. I shall attempt to illustrate a few of the problems which confront an investigator in this field, and also to show how the solution of certain of these problems may throw some light upon the development of the Norse and Gaelic languages in these areas. As this is only a preliminary study I shall choose one particular linguistic element and its development in a limited geographical area: O. N. *steinn* as a first component of place-names in a district where the Norse influence was particularly strong: the Outer Hebrides and Skye (the other islands belonging to Inverness-shire were also examined, but without results relevant to the present study).

The word *steinn* 'stone' as a place-name element is frequent both in Norway and in the western Norse settlements from Iceland to Man. It is found in the Faroes, in Shetland, Orkney, Caithness, and the Hebrides. In Ireland, the remaining Scandinavian place-names are so few, comparatively spoken, and so little explored, that nothing can be inferred from its apparent absence from Irish toponymy.

Steinn, in Norwegian place-names, "usually refers to large earthbound stones or to stones crected by human hands, or else to mountains, tall rocks in the sea, and small islands ... Only in a limited number of cases the reference is to stony ground; in this connection the term generally used is *griót* (a collective word). In some cases, place-names containing *steinn* have reference to something built of stone, such as *Steinbrú* 'stone bridge'." This statement, abbreviated and translated from the introductory volume to O. Rygh's *Norske Gaardnavne,* p. 79, seems to be valid for the western settlements as well as for the monther country. Thus, *de Stenaveljen* in Shetland is the name of "a piece of field adjoining a large, earthfast rock" (Jakobsen p. 102). In Orkney, the parish name *Stenness* and the farm names *Stembister* and *Stenigar* denote localities characterized by one or more monoliths still standing (Marwick pp. 110, 86, and 164); the same is true of at least one of several *Stemster* names in Caithness. Reference to something built of stone is found in the Hebridean name "Stoneybridge", see below. The element *griót* for 'stones' collectively is found in many of the Viking settlements from Iceland to the Hebrides and seems to be especially frequent in Shetland, see Jakobsen pp. 48-9 (but curiously enough, Marstrander makes no mention of it in *Man).*

As the first constituent of place-names, *steinn* is used in three different forms: the bare stem *stein-,* the genitive singular *steins-,* and the genitive plural *steina-.*

The greatest difficulty in this as in other fields of place-name research is the reconstruction of the original forms

of the names. The reconstruction of old names may be difficult enough where only one language need be taken into account, and becomes even more intricate when two (or more) languages are involved. Here, it is not enough to be acquainted with the general rules of phonetic development in each language; it is also necessary to work out a theory of the process of phonetic and phonemic adaptation that took place when names originating in the loan-giving language came into use in the recipient one. If, as is the case with Norse names in Gaelic territory, the borrowing of linguistic material may reasonably be assumed to have taken place over a period of several hundred years, both the loan-giving and the recipient language will probably have changed so much during that period that an early loanword (whether place-name or not) may have been adapted by means of a technique considerably different from that applied to a late loan. One and the same Norse element may, therefore, appear in different shapes according to the time when it was admitted into Gaelic. It may also vary according to the Gaelic dialects of the various localities where it is found today, and possibly even according to the Norse dialects from which it was taken.

Experience in this and other fields of bilingual study shows that it is necessary to work on the basis of the following axiom: A word or name once borrowed will develop phonetically and phonemically according to the general rules of development in the recipient language, unless there is evidence that the borrowed item has (a) been subject to continued influence from later stages of the evolution of the loan-giving language or (b) received an "irregular" treatment due to such factors as analogy, popular etymology, and influence from other dialects of the recipient language. This axiom must not be overlooked in bilingual place-name study.

The material for the present investigation consists (a) of names excerpted from the Ordnance Survey "One-Inch" maps, (b) of my own field notes and tape recordings from

parts of the area (mainly Lewis, Benbecula, and South Uist), and (c) of information from other sources, notably C. Hj. Borgstrøm's dialect descriptions (particularly *The Dialect of Barra* and *The Dialects of the Outer Hebrides)* and his unpublished field notes, some of which he has kindly allowed me to copy for my own use.

The Ordnance Survey spellings should, whenever possible, be checked against the actual Gaelic pronunciation, as they are very unreliable. Only in some instances do they reflect early spellings which, in their turn, may be more or less successful attempts at rendering the contemporary pronunciation. Ordnance Survey spellings will, in the following, be given between double quotes. Spellings from early written sources are not plentiful, and such as are found are often unreliable because the documents where they occur are nearly always written in English, with corrupted spellings of the Gaelic names.

A hill at Shader on the north-west coast of Lewis is called "Steinacleit" [s'ť'e:nəgl'aht, s'ť'e:nə-kl'eht'][1]). The place is characterized by the remains of a stone circle. "Clachan Mora Steinacleit" or 'the big stones of S.'. This name must necessarily represent O. N. *Steina-klettr* 'hill of the stones'.

[1]) The transcription given between square brackets is a simplified phonetic/phonemic one. A colon after a vowel indicates that the vowel is long. An acute accent after a consonant denotes palatal pronunciation of the consonant. The symbol [s'] should be read approximately as English *sh*. Capital letters [N L R] indicate velarization except when followed by the acute accent [N' L'], in which case they denote strongly palatal pronunciation. [y] and [ø] are back or central vowels, unrounded (not front rounded), the former high, the latter mid. The stops [p t ť' k k'] are postaspirated (as in the Scandinavian languages and most varieties of English) when word-initial or preceded by a hyphen in the transcription. The letter [h] before such a consonant and after a vowel denotes preaspiration (a breathed continuation of the vowel). [b d d' g g'] are voiceless unaspirated stops as in Icelandic and Danish. [x] is the voiceless velar fricative of German *ach;* [γ] is its voiced counterpart ("spirant g").

The element *steinn* is almost certainly found also in the following names: "Steishal" [s't'e:s'aL] in Lochs Parish (Lewis); "Steishal" in the lake name "Loch Steishal" (pronunciation unknown) in Uig Parish (Lewis); "Stenscholl" (Gaelic spelling *Steiseal* according to E. Dwelly's *Gaelic-English Dictionary*, probably wrong for *Stéiseal)* in Kilmuir Parish (Skye); and "Steinisval" [s't'e:N's'əvaL] in Uig Parish (Lewis). All these represent O. N. *Steins-fiall*[1]) 'stone mountain' or possibly 'Steinn's mountain', from the man's name *Steinn*, identical with the appellative. Further, there is a promontory called "Steinish" near Stornoway (Lewis) and a village of the same name some three miles east of Tarbert (Harris). Although I have no information on the pronunciation of this name or on prominent stones on the premises, I find it very likely that the name represents O. N. *Stein-nes*, or possibly *Steina-nes* 'stone promontory' in both cases. "Steisinish", a promontory on the small island of Killegray (Harris Parish), may be O. N. *Steins-nes* 'stone promontory'. The name may have some connection with a nearby *dùn* (fortified place) although the form of the name points to some prominent single stone. "L.[och] Steinavat", near the road between Lochmaddy and Sollas (North Uist) may be O. N. *Steina-uatn* 'stone lake'.

These names, as far as their pronunciation has been ascertained, render the O. N. diphthong *ei* by the long vowel [e:]. This is also the case in a wealth of other place-names, such as "Breinish" [br'e:nis'], a village in Uig Parish (Lewis) from O. N. *Breið-nes* 'broad promontory' (its situation confirms the meaning of the name, which is found also on the minor island Pabbay (Harris Parish) and on North Uist); "Breivig" [br'e:vig'] (Barra) from O. N. *Breið-*

[1]) [-vaL], also [-aL] after consonants, is the usual Mod. G. equivalent of O. N. *-fiall* or *-fell* 'mountain' (in the Hebrides also applied to quite low hills). As it is now impossible to decide which of the two Norse forms was preferred in the Hebrides, the form *fiall* is arbitrarily chosen here.

uík 'broad bay' (another "Breivig" is found north of Stornoway"); [g'e:d'am], an islet near Bernera (Lewis), not named on the One-Inch map, from O. N. *Geit-holmr* or *-holmi* 'goat islet'; "Tob Leiravay" [tɔ:b l'e:r'əvaj], a bay south of Stornoway, from O. N. *Leiru-uágr* 'bay of the river *Leira*' (*Leira*, in its turn, means 'the clayey one'; "Loch Leiravagh" [Lɔx k'i-L'e:r'əvaɣ], Gaelic spelling *Loch Cinn Léireabhagh*, a sea-loch on the Benbecula coast, likewise from O. N. *Leiru-uágr* which in this case is derived directly from *leira* 'clay'; "Leiregeo" [L'e:r'əg'aɣ], a coastal gorge in Uig Parish (Lewis) from O. N. *Leiru-giá* or *Leir-giá* 'clay gorge'; "Loch Erisort" [Lɔx e:r'əsɔRd], a long sea-loch on the east coast of Lewis, from O. N. *Eiríks-fiǫrðr* 'Eric's fiord'; "Eriskay" [e:r'is'k'æj], the well-known island between South Uist and Barra, from O. N. *Eiríks-øy* 'Eric's island'. To these might be added a number of names in which the correspondence between Mod. G. [e:] and O. N. *ei* is highly probable but less certain than in the names already mentioned.

In hereditary Gaelic words, [e:] almost invariably corresponds to C. G. *é*, as found in Old and Middle Irish. Accordingly, O. N. *ei* must have had a pronunciation resembling C. G. *é* more than any other C. G. vowel or diphthong at the time when these names were adopted by the Gaelic-speaking population. When C. G. *é* was preceded by one or more consonants, these were always palatal or palatalized, hence the substitution, in the process of adaptation, of O. N. *st-* by Gaelic [s't'-]. But the correspondence between Gaelic [e:] and O. N. *ei*, although by far the most frequent, is by no means universal. The township name "Stoneybridge" [sty:N'əbr'ig', sty:nəbr'ig'] (South Uist) corresponds to O. N. *Stein(a)-bryggia* 'stone bridge', probably referring to stepping-stones across one of the many fords in the neighbourhood (the element *-bryggia* is extremely rare in Norse place-names, and my interpretation will certainly be met with objections, but I think they can

be overruled). Another inhabited locality nearby is called "Snishival" [sNy:s'əvaL], probably from O. N. *Sneis-, Sneisar-,* or *Sneisa-fiall,* where *sneis* 'stake, pole, post' may have referred to some sort of landmark once erected on the summit of the ridge on whose slopes the houses are, or possibly to the summit itself (I have not inspected the place; the shape of the ridge is important in judging of the latter possibility). The vowel [y:], in hereditary Gaelic words, nearly always represents the older diphthong which, in Old and Middle Irish, was variously written *áe, aí, óe, oí.* There were originally two diphthongs, one with *a* as its first element and another with *o,* but they fell together already during the Old Irish period, i. e. before about 900 A. D., and were later monophthongized. In Modern Irish and Scottish Gaelic the spelling is *ao (aoi* before palatals); the pronunciation varies considerably. In the beginning of the ninth century, when Viking colonization was in its initial stages, the two original diphthongs must have fallen together and constituted one phonemic unit, whether diphthongal or monophthongal. A consonant or consonant cluster preceding this unit was always non-palatal; following consonants, however, could be palatal or non-palatal. In all likelihood the unit had two distinct allophones, one used before non-palatals and the other before palatals. Without committing ourselves to any definite pronunciation, we may symbolize the former allophone by *áe* and the latter by *aí.* The names [sty:N'əbr'ig'] and [sNy:s'əvaL] show that the O. N. diphthong *ei,* at the time when the names came into use in Gaelic speech, was identified by the Gaels with their own *aí* and not with the monophthong *é,* in which case the initial clusters *st-* and *sn-* would have been replaced by palatals in conformity with the Gaelic phonemic system. The same phenomenon appears in the Mod. G. appellative *saoidhean* [søijan] 'coal-fish, saithe' which is certainly derived from O. N. *seiðr.* The diphthong [øi] is, as in hereditary Gaelic words, the result of a merging of

monophthongized *aí* with a following palatal fricative that was lost in the process.

This presupposes that the O. N. diphthong had not yet developed into the *æi* or *ei* found in the earliest literary sources (second half of the twelfth century) but was still pronounced [ai] as in Proto-Scandinavian and Common Germanic, with a back or central *a*.

Accordingly, those Norse words in which the diphthong *ei* became C. G. *aí* in the process of adaptation must have been borrowed earlier than those which received C. G. *é*. Exactly how early it is impossible to tell, but insofar as we can infer anything from contemporary runic inscriptions, which render the diphthong first as *ai*, later also as *i*, *æi*, and *ei*, the change from *ai* to *æi*/*ei* is likely to have taken place during the eleventh century.

If we combine these conclusions concerning the development of Gaelic and Norse, we must ask ourselves why Norse *ai*, in the earlier stratum of loans, was rendered by C. G. *aí* and not, for instance, by C. G. *áⁱ* (long *a* followed by palatal consonant), as it actually was at one stage of Irish (see Marstrander, *Bidrag* pp. 68–9). The inevitable answer is that *aí* was phonetically more similar to Norse *ai* and therefore almost certainly still a diphthong. As we cannot expect Norse place-names to have been adopted by the Gaels in the earliest decades of Norse colonization, we may fairly safely conclude that C. G. *aí* was a diphthong at least until the middle of the ninth century and probably still longer: its other allophone, *áe*, is rendered by runic *ai* in the name *mailbrikti* (for Gaelic *Máel Brigte)* on the Kirk Michael cross in the Isle of Man as late as the first half of the tenth century. It is, therefore, reasonable to suppose that the C. G. phonemic unit *áe*/*aí* remained more or less clearly diphthongal until about 1000 A. D. The same date may tentatively be assumed to be the turning-point in the history of Hebridean Norse when the old diphthong *ai* began to develop steadily in

the direction of *ei*, although there may have been earlier tendencies towards such a development.

A corollary of these reflections is that Mod. G. words and names with [y:] or [øi] corresponding to O. N. *ei* must have entered Gaelic during the first two centuries of Norse colonization in the Hebrides. Another inference is the following: As Mod. G. [e:] corresponding to O. N. *ei* is the rule, and [y:/øi] the exception, the vast majority of Norse loans containing O. N. *ei* must have entered Gaelic later than the period about 1000 A. D., many of them probably much later. And as there is no reason to believe that words with *ei* occupied a special position among the Norse loans, the same statement must be valid for Norse loans in Hebridean Gaelic generally.

There are a couple of additional names which one is immediately temped to associate with O. N. *steinn*. These are [staiN´əvaL], a hill on Benbecula with a stone circle on one of its slopes (not named on the One-Inch map but called "Stiaraval" *(sic)* on the large-scale map of six inches to the mile), and "Steisay" [s´t´eis´aj], an islet near the south-east coast of Benbecula. But as the phonetic development of these names raises new problems, and as there are other names with similar diphthongs with which they must be compared, they will not be dealt with here. These, as well as names containing *steinn* as a last component and those consisting of *steinn* alone, will be discussed on some later occasion.

ÚRTAK

Greinin er ein gjøgnumgongd av ný-gælisku formunum av suðuroya-staðanøvnum av norrønum uppruna við liðinum *steinn* sum fyrstaliði. Ymissu endurgevingarhættirnir av tvíljóðinum *ei* í hesum og øðrum norrønum lán-liðum í gæliskum gera, at líkindi eru til

1. at tvíljóðið *ei* í suðuroya-norskum hevði eldra framburðin *ai* til o. u. ár 1000, og

2. at samgæliska tvíljóðið *aí/áe* (tíðliga samanfallið við *oí/óe)* varð ikki einljóð so tíðliga, sum vanliga verður hildið, men varðveittist sum tvíljóð til fram at árinum 1000, ið hvussu er í hesum partinum av gæliskt-talandi økinum.