Gaelic *taom* — a Norse loan?

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Professor Chr. Matras's interest in Gaelic-Norse relationships is well known. In *Fróðskaparrit* he has published a number of very scholarly articles on Gaelic loanwords in Nordic, especially in Faroese. It seems appropriate, in a volume dedicated to him, to attempt a further contribution to Gaelic-Norse lexicography by discussing a possible Norse loan in Gaelic.[1]

The total number of surviving Norse appellatives in Gaelic is surprisingly small in view of the wealth of Norse place-names in Gaelic territory.[2] As a rule these loans are easy to identify, easier than many of the place-names, because their meanings are closely related to those of their Norse models and because the differences in form are readily explained (a) by a set of complicated but reasonably consistent phonetic correspondences and (b) by the identification of Gaelic derivational or inflectional terminations which have sometimes replaced a Norse word-final element or simply been added to the Norse word stem in its Gaelicized form. Gaelic has, however, a small residue of unexplained or unsatisfactorily explained words which sound somewhat like Norse lexical

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[1] The term 'Gaelic' includes, in this paper, Irish and Scottish Gaelic. Manx has been left out of consideration due to lack of easily accessible material. Where specification is required, the abbreviations Ir. (Irish) and Sc.G. (Scottish Gaelic) are used. O.N. is used for Old Norse.

[2] On this subject, see *Scottish Gaelic Studies*, Vol. IX, Part 2, Aberdeen, 1962, pp. 116—27.

items with similar meanings, but whose Norse origins have never been definitely established.

One of these words is the verb *taom*,[3] which exists both in Irish and Scottish Gaelic. In most places where this morpheme is found as a verbal stem, one of its several meanings is 'to bale', used either transitively: 'to bale a boat (of water)'; 'to bale water (out of a boat)', or intransitively: 'to bale', with the object understood. The vowel written *ao* is pronounced as in other Gaelic words in which it is found between non-palatal consonants (e.g. *taobh* 'side'). In most Sc.G. dialects and many of the northern dialects of Irish this is a long, back-to-central high unrounded vowel. In other North Irish dialects it belongs to the phoneme /i:/ but has the allophonic lowering and retraction characteristic of that phoneme in non-palatal environments. In some Sc.G. dialects the vowel is mid instead of high, and sometimes labialized under the influence of the following *m*, which makes its auditory effect very similar to that of [ø:] for any listener accustomed to rounded front vowels. For the southern dialects of Irish I have found no indication of the pronounciation of *taom*, but there is little reason to doubt that the word, if used at all, would be pronounced whith the same vowel as /te:v/ *taobh* 'side'. The Ir. variant spelling *taodhm* hardly reflects a different pronunciation. The vowel is always long, and nasalized in those dialects where nasalization is common, indicating that the vowel has been in direct contact whith the *m* for a long time.

The meaning 'to bale', taken in conjunction with the not infrequent [ø:]-like pronunciation of the vowel written *ao*, makes it almost unavoidable to attempt an identification with O.N. *tǿma* (Modern Icelandic *tæma*, Faroese and western Norwegian *tøma* (*tøme*), eastern Norwegian and Danish *tømme*, Swedish *tömma*) 'to empty', derived from the adjectival stem *tóm-* 'empty'. Such an indentification was, how-

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[3] Gaelic verbs are cited in their stem forms, which, in the regular verbs, are identical with the 2nd person singular of the imperative. Their English translations are given in the infinitive.

ever, emphatically rejected by Alexander MacBain[4] and — much later, and with less confidence — by myself.[5] My attempt at identification failed (a) because I was reluctant to admit that the O.N. sound sequence *tøm-* could have developed into *taom* in a loanword transferred to Gaelic, and (b) because I found it difficult to reconcile the meaning of the Norse word with that of the Gaelic one: I knew, at that time, Gaelic *taom* mainly in the meaning 'to pour', as a liquid or granular substance from one receptacle into another, while the nearest semantic counterpart to O.N. *tøma* was, to my knowledge, the verb *fal(a)mhaich*, derived from the Gaelic adjective *falamh* 'empty'.

Subsequent studies have shown that I was wrong as regards both form and meaning.

(a) F o r m. It is true that Gaelic *taom* from O.N. *tøma* is not what one would predict as the most likely development. In the material collected and analysed so far there are very few examples af the Gaelic treatment of O.N. *ø*, but in the few certain instances I have (the best are the two Hebridean place-names *Gréineam* from O.N. *Grønholmr* and *Gréineabhal* from *Grønafjall*), O.N. has originally been rendered as Middle Gaelic *é* and later leveloped accordingly.[6] The expected Middle Gaelic rendition of O.N. *tøm-* would, therefore, be **tém*, which would subsequently have developed into such forms as Modern Gaelic **teum, *tèam, *téam*, pronounced either with a long [e:] or, as often happens before non-palatal consonants, with a secondary diphthong [ia]. The expected initial would be a distinctly palatalized [t'], not the non-palatal [t] of *taom*. There is actually a Sc.G. verb *teum*, with a noun of the same form, but this verb means essentially 'to bite or snatch', and the noun means, among other things, 'a

[4] *An Etymological Dictionary of the Gaelic Language*, Stirling, 1911, p. 359.

[5] *The Gaelic of Leurbost, Isle of Lewis*, Oslo, 1956, p. 86.

[6] See *Norsk Tidsskrift for Sprogvidenskap*, Vol. XVII, Oslo, 1954.

bite or morsel', which made Holger Pedersen[7] compare it with a Brythonic noun: Welsh *tam(aid)*, Cornish *tam*, Breton *tamm* 'a bite or morsel, a piece'. But this word stem is obviously pre-Norse Celtic and can have no connection whatever with O.N. *tøma*, although one of the meanings of Ir. *taom:* 'jot, particle' shows that an earlier Ir. *tém* has changed its form (cp. footnote 7) and become homonymous with *taom*.

Gaelic *taom* cannot be shown to have had a palatalized initial at any time. Its earliest recorded occurrences are listed in *Contributions*[8] as a noun, *taem* or *toem*, with several meanings (the spellings *ae* and *oe* denote one and the same phoneme in Middle Irish). A derived verbal noun *taemad* (equivalent to Modern Gaelic *taomadh*) had, already in Middle Irish, the meaning of 'emptying, baling out'.

These are the reasons why it has been so difficult to connect Gaelic *taom* with O.N. *tøma* from the point of view of historical phonology. But the material on which we have built our rejection of the hypothesis is far too scanty. If we have a few examples of O.N. *ø* being represented by Modern Gaelic /e:/, this does not preclude the possibility of O.N. *ø* having been rendered by other Gaelic vowels at different times, in different localities and in different phonetic environments. In fact, it seems most unlikely that O.N. *ø* should have been constantly replaced by *é* in Gaelic borrowings, especially in view of the fact that Gaelic, in the Viking Ages, cannot be shown to have possessed any long vowel that was particularly similar to [ø:].[9] The Norse language of that period had at least nine simple vowels of long prosody: /i: e: æ: a: y: ø: u: o: ǫ:/, while Gaelic had six at most: /i: e: a: u: o:/ and the antecedent of

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[7] *Vergleichende Grammatik der keltischen Sprachen*, Vol. II, Göttingen, 1909, p. 60.

[8] *Contributions to a Dictionary of the Irish Language*, Fasciculus *T - tnúthaigid*, Dublin, 1943.

[9] Holger Pedersen's postulated *ö* in Early Irish (*op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 339 f.) may have been somewhat similar in quality but was probably always short. Its lengthening in certain environments is a later development.

Modern Gaelic *ao* when the latter ceased to be a diphthong (tenth or eleventh century?). O.N. also possessed three long falling diphthongs: /ei/ (/ai/ in the earlier stages), /au/ and /øy/, none of which seem to have been very similar to members of the Gaelic inventory of diphthongs during the period of linguistic contact: in Gaelic borrowings from Norse, the O.N. diphthongs are almost invariably rendered by Gaelic monophthongs. Thus, /e:/ in modern Hebridean place-names and other Norse loans may represent O.N. *e̅, æ̅, ǫ́, ei* and *øy* which have, in these cases, been rendered in Middle Gaelic as *é*. Similarly, /o:/ or /ɔ:/ (Middle Gaelic *ó*) often represents O.N. *au* as well as *ó* and *ǫ́*.

In an earlier article in *Fróðskaparrit*[10] I have shown that one O.N. vowel or diphthong could, in principle, develop in different directions in Gaelic, either during or after the process of borrowing. This may very well have happened to O.N. *ǫ́*. Marstrander[11] has demonstrated the probability that the Middle Gaelic man's name *Elóir*[12] represents a hypothetical O.N. cognomen **helǫ́ri*. All spellings show that the *l* must have been non-palatal and followed by a vowel which, to the Gaelic ear, was non-front. This interpretation, if it is correct, confirms the reasonable assumption that *ǫ́*, as the *i*-umlaut of *ó*, had not reached its position as a front vowel in the early stages of Norse-Gaelic contact.[13] It must, naturally, have been different from *ó* and moving towards the front position which

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[10] "Norse *steinn* in Hebridean Place-names", *Fróðskaparrit*, 13. bók, Tórshavn, 1964, especially pp. 228 ff.

[11] *Bidrag til det norske sprogs historie i Irland*, Oslo, 1915, especially pp. 50 and 145.

[12] Written *Eloir (Four Masters* 888 and *Chronicon Scotorum* 886), *Elóir (Four Masters* 885), and *Eoloir (Annals of Ulster* for the year 885).

[13] It may or may not be significant in this connection that Faroese /ø/, whether long or short originally, is to this day treated as if it were a non-front vowel after the consonants *k* and *g*, which have not become palatalized in this position: /kø:va/ 'to choke, to extinguish' (O.N. *køfa*), /gø:a/ 'to fatten' (O.N. *gǿða*). *Phonetically* it is nevertheless a rounded front vowel in the modern language.

it reached later in the period of contact (the names *Gréineam* and *Gréineabhal*, cited above, would then be later loans). If the O.N. morpheme *tøm-* was borrowed into Gaelic in an early period, the non-palatal Gaelic *t* and the diphthong or vowel spelled *ae* or *oe* (now *ao*) would be quite plausible substitutes for the O.N. sounds. Accordingly, from the point of view of historical phonology, all arguments against Gaelic *taom* as a loan from O.N. *tøm-* can be dismissed.

(b) M e a n i n g. One of the reasons why it has been difficult for linguists (including the writer) to recognize Gaelic *taom* as a borrowing from Norse is the fact that it is so common for many of the languages of Western Europe to distinguish rather sharply between the notions of 'pouring' and 'emptying'. The direct object, if any, of the English verb *to pour* is the substance transferred by the action; the direct object of the verb *to empty* is normally the receptacle from which the substance is removed. Thus we have:

	I	II
English	*pour (wine)*	*empty (the glass)*
French	*verser (du vin)*	*vider (le verre)*
German	*Wein (giessen)*	*(das Glas) leeren*
Icelandic	*hella (vín)*	*tæma (glasið)*
Faroese	*stoyta, hella (vín)*	*tøma (glasið)*
Norwegian	*hella (vin)*	*tøma (glaset)*
Welsh	*arllwys (gwin)*	*gwacáu (y gwydryn)*
but		
Sc.G.	*taom (fìon)*	*fal(a)mhaich (a'ghloine)*

As will be see from this highly simplified table, Sc.G. *taom* comes in the 'wrong' column. This is one of the reasons why I, for one, rejected it as a Norse loan. It was only later that I realized that this clear-cut distinction between 'pouring' and 'emptying' is often a schoolmaster's distinction, imposed upon us by formal education and with very little foundation in unsophisticated speech. Lexicographers almost invariably define *tøma* and its modern Nordic equivalents as 'to cause (a recepta-cle) to become empty' because they know the derivation of

the verb from the adjectival stem *tóm-*. A Norwegian school-child who writes *ho tømde litt kaffi i koppen* 'she "emptied" a little coffee into the cup' will have this corrected, by any conscientious teacher, to *ho helte litt kaffi i koppen*, even if the child, as is often the case, speaks a variety of Norwegian where *tøma* is normal and, by local standards, correct for 'to pour'. In some Norwegian dialects the verb *hella* simply does not exist, having been supplanted entirely by *tøma*. In other dialects, such as my own (south-western Norway), the verb *tøma* exists in both meanings but can no longer have the designation of the emptied receptacle as its direct object: *tøm utor den bytta!*, literally 'empty out of that pail!' is the only idiomatic expression for 'empty that pail!'. In colloquial Swedish we find such expressions as *töm i koppen lite!* 'empty (i. e. pour) a little into the cup!'. In Faroese one can *tøma mjólk í spannina* 'empty milk into the bucket' and *tøma mjólk úr spannini* 'empty milk out of the bucket'. And even in Modern Icelandic, the most conservative of all Nordic languages from a lexical point of view, the expression *tæma eitthvert í eitthvert*, literally 'to empty something (a substance) into something (a receptacle)' is not unknown, although un-mentioned in the dictionaries. A similar phenomenon may be observed in English, especially in some of its colloquial varieties. *She emptied water into the pail* and *she emptied the garbage* are examples I have heard in colloquial American English (Wisconsin).

The above remarks should suffice to prove that the sharp lexical distinction between the notions of 'pouring' and 'empty-ing', now prevalent in the standard Nordic languages, is largely artificial and due partly to an etymological bias on the part of our lexicographers, partly to the tendency towards more logical precision in the literary languages. In unsophisticated colloquial language the concepts of 'pouring' and 'emptying' are frequently both represented by the original word for 'emptying'. If this development could take place in the Nordic languages and, to some extent, also in English, it could just as

easily take place in Gaelic. It is also possible, although hardly probable, that O.N. *tøma* had already developed both meanings when it was borrowed into Gaelic. All this implies that Gaelic *taom* may be considered as a loan from O.N. *tøm-* from the semantic point of view as well as from the formal one.

I do not, however, maintain that Gaelic *taom* is always a borrowing from Norse. My hypothesis is that there are several Gaelic word stems with the form *taom-*, and that one of them is a borrowing from Norse. The English pair of homonyms *teem* (1) and *teem* (2) suggests itself as a parallel. The first *teem* 'to be prolific or abundant; to be stocked to overflowing' is hereditary Anglo-Saxon; the second, which is dialectal or technical and means 'to empty, to discharge, to pour out' is a borrowing from O.N. *tøma*.

In Gaelic we have, apparently, the following *taom* stems:

(a) Ir. *taom,* Sc.G. *teum* stands apart as the only case in which the form of the word stem is fundamentally different in the two Gaelic languages. Its verbal meanings are, as already mentioned, 'to bite' or 'to snatch'; as a noun it means 'a bite or morsel, portion (of), degree (of)' (and, with a negating or privative particle, '[not or without] a scrap, particle, jot'). There is no question of Norse influence here; for a possible etymology of the word, see Holger Pedersen, *loc. cit.* (footnote 7).

(b) Ir. and Sc.G. *taom* 'a fit, a paroxysm, an attack' (as of feeling, passion, anger, or illness) cannot reasonably be connected with Norse, although its origin is not clear.

(c) Ir. and Sc.G. *taom* 'to empty, to bale, to pump; to pour' is the Norse loan (O.N. *tøma*) discussed above. Its similarity to the Norse word, in form and meaning, is too great to be incidental. Moreover, this *taom* and its derivatives[14] seem to have their widest distribution in Scotland and the northern districts of Ireland, where Norse linguistic influence

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[14] Especially Sc.G. *taoman,* Ir. *taomán* 'baling vessel' and Sc.G. *taomair,* Ir. *taomaire* 'a pump; a pumper'.

has shown itself stronger than in most other Gaelic-speaking areas. The morpheme *taom* may conceivably have been influenced in form by the already existing non-Norse stems *taom* (b) and *taom* (d), but it is not necessary to assume this: as shown above, *taom* may very well have developed from the Middle Gaelic rendition of O.N. *tǿm-* quite independently.

(d) Ir. and Sc.G. *taom* 'jet, gush, torrent' is somewhat difficult to place. Its semantic affinity to liquids might tempt us to associate it with the Norse word; its element of suddenness or violence rather suggests an affinity with *taom* (b). I prefer the latter possibility, but *taom* (d) may very well be a sort of connecting link between b and c, as its meaning combines the semantic elements of suddenness and liquidity. This may be the main reason why all lexicographers regard *taom* as one word stem rather than as a set of homonyms.

(e) Middle and Early Modern Irish also had *taem*, *taom* in the meaning 'sinful action, sin'. This might perhaps be connected with *taom* (b): 'an action performed recklessly, as in a fit of passion'. At any rate there is no connection with the Norse word here.

All this, of course, may and should be condensed. It is obvious that the element *taom* does not constitute five separate homonyms. *Taom* (a), Sc.G. *teum*, may safely be put aside as a morpheme of its own, connected etymologically with Brythonic *tam-*. I think that (b), (c), (d) and (e) might conveniently be grouped as follows:

taom- (1) 'jet, gush, torrent; fit (as of emotion, etc.); (obs.) sinful action (as the result of a fit of emotion), sin.' [The etymology of this morpheme falls outside the scope of the present paper, as it is non-Norse and pre-Norse in Gaelic.]

taom- (2) 'emptying, baling, pumping; pouring'. From O.N. *tǿma* 'to empty', derived from the adjectival stem *tóm-* 'empty'.

ÚRTAK

Gælisku málini írskt og skotskt gæliskt hava ein orðstovn *taom-*, sum bendingar- og avleiðsluformar hjá sagn- og navnorðum kunnu verða gjørdir av. Stovnurin hevur fleiri merkingar: 'oysa (bát; vatn úr báti); pumpa; tøma; hella, stoyta, skeinkja; goysa, spræna, sprænur; bíta, glepsa; biti, sindur, petti; herðindi, ríð; synd, syndig gerð'. Av tí at hann í ljóði og merking er so líkur norrønum *tøma*, er tað freistandi at telja hitt gæliska *taom-* lán úr norrønum. Henda skyldskapargreining hevur áður verið burturvíst, bæði av høvundinum og øðrum. Í hesi grein roynir høvundurin at sýna, at gæliskt *taom-* er ikki bert *ein* orðstovnur, men heldur ljóðligt samanfall av minst trimum ólíkum orðstovnum: 1) Írskt *taom*, ið samsvarar við skotskt gæliskt *teum* í merkingunum 'bíta, glepsa, biti, sindur, petti', er ein samkeltiskur orðstovnur við samlíkum í brittonsku málunum walisiskum, korniskum og bretonskum (*tam(m)*, *tamaid*). 2) *Taom* (írskt og skotskt gæliskt) í merkingunum 'oysa, pumpa, tøma, hella, skeinkja' er lán úr norrønum *tøma*. 3) *Taom* (írskt og skotskt gæliskt) í merkingunum 'goysa, spræna, sprænur, herðindi, ríð, syndig gerð, synd' er fyri-norrønur orðstovnur av óvissum uppruna.