

Island Place-names

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The names of Scotland's islands are a fascinating window into the country's linguistic landscape; the languages of the Gaels, the Vikings and the Angles have all left their mark across the north-western seaboard.

The Earliest names

Evidence from historical sources suggest there may have existed an unknown language in Scotland prior to the arrival of the later, historic languages. This language might have been utterly forgotten were it not for a handful of names of rivers, islands and regions. Many theories have been put forward as to the identity of the language from which these names derive and what the names may have originally meant, but the jury is still out on the majority of them. Names such as Mull, Unst and Uist all defy analysis. Likewise, Islay is from Gaelic Ìle, the -s- in the English form was inserted on analogy with words like *isle* and *island*, but its original meaning has nonetheless been lost. Lewis appears to be from a Norse word Ljóðhús meaning 'song house'; this is rather an odd name to be given to an island, maybe the Norse adapted it from an earlier unknown language?

Norse Names

At least in the north, the first historical people to make their linguistic mark on the Scottish seaboard were the Norse or the Vikings. Being a seafaring people, it is no surprise that most Norse place-names appear round the coast of Northern Britain. In general, island names ending in -aigh, -ey, -ay and -a are of Norse origin, reflecting the Norse word for island, *øy*. Due to the Scottish historical situation nearly all these names have passed through Gaelic and now into English. Examples include the aptly-named Jura from Dýr-øy 'deer island' via the Gaelic form Diùra. Colonsay or Gaelic Colbhasa is likely from Norse Koll-vangsøy 'island of Koll-vangr' where Koll-vangr would be a place-name meaning 'hill field'. Oronsay or Gaelic Orasa is from Norse Orfrisøy, 'tidal island' pertaining to the fact that the island is accessible by foot only at low tide. The -n- has crept in into the English form as if it meant 'Oran's isle'.

Not all Norse names of islands use this element however, Harris is from Norse Herað '(the) district'. Shetland is Norse Hjaltlandi 'hilt land', the meaning of this is not clear, and Hilt may be a personal name. Norse *sker* 'sea rock' is a word borrowed into Gaelic as *sgeir* and English *skerry*. It appears in the name of many small skerries around the North-west seaboard, for example, Heisker or Theisker is from Norse Heið-skер 'heather skerry'.

Gaelic names

Gaelic came to the Scottish islands at various different times; in the south it may have been spoken since time immemorial, whilst in the north it supplanted the Norse language at a much later date. Ironically, most names in the Western Isles – which we traditionally think of as a Gaelic stronghold – are of Norse origin, but the Inner Hebrides and the North West coast contain many names of Gaelic origin, and the names of islands are no exception.

Skye is now in Gaelic An t-Eilean Sgitheanach but was of old called simply Sgithe, it likely relates to an element meaning ‘winged’ in the sense of being ‘split,’ denoting the islands many large headlands. Eigg is Gaelic Eilean Eige, most likely meaning ‘notch island’ after the low strip of land running through an otherwise mountainous isle. Muck is Eilean nam Muc ‘the isle of the pigs’; Lismore is Lios Mòr ‘large enclosure’ in relation to its role as a centre for Christianity in the seventh century.

There are several Gaelic words for island, but by far the two most common are *innis* and *eilean*. *Innis* is often anglicised as *Inch* and can mean not only an island in the way we are used to think about it, but can also mean a dry patch in a boggy area. It is more common in the south and east of Scotland; the Firth of Forth has several famous examples: Inchcolm is Innis Choluim ‘Columba’s Isle’, Inchkeith is either a Pictish name meaning ‘wooded isle’ or denotes a bishop of Iona called Coeddi. Inchmickery however is not an *innis* name; it was known until the nineteenth century simply as Mickrie or Muckrie, so it is likely to be Gaelic Mucraidh ‘pig place’. Likewise, Loch Lomond boasts many islands beginning with Inch-, for example Inchfad, Gaelic An Innis Fhada ‘the long island’ and Inchcailloch, Gaelic Innis Cailleach ‘nun island.’

Along the west coast *eilean* is the *de facto* term for island and appears hundreds of times. An t-Eilean Tioram or Eilean Tioram means ‘the dry island’ and denotes a tidal island, the Gaelic version of Oronsay.

Several other words describe different sorts of smaller islands and sea rocks. *Sgeir* mentioned above is a skerry. An excellent example of the difference between Norse and Gaelic names can be seen in the two island names Sgeir nan Sgarbh and Sgarbhsgeir. Both use words deriving ultimately from Norse, *sker* ‘skerry’ and *skarv* ‘cormorant’ and both mean ‘cormorant skerry’. The former however is Gaelic whereas the second name derives directly from Norse.

Bogha is a rock only visible at high tide, a common element on Islay and Jura. A grim story based in Loch Tarbert on Jura relates how a man used to tie his victims to Na Boghachan Bàithte ‘the drowning rocks’ and leave them to their doom.

Sometimes the names of islands simply describe the way they look to seafarers. The Gantocks, dangerous rocks for sailors off the coast of Dunoon, are in Gaelic Na Gamhnaichean ‘the stirks’ from their appearance. The same

Gaelic name appears just off Soay near Skye, next to An Coileach ‘the cock’ and A’ Chearc ‘the hen.’

Scots and English names

Very few names of Islands are from Scots or English, most likely because they were all already named by the time the English speakers reached the coastal areas. Some English names however are simply translations of earlier Gaelic ones. For example, The Burnt Islands in the Kyles of Bute are in Gaelic Na h-Eileanan Loisgte. For some reason the Rabbit Islands in the Kyle of Tongue are called Eilean nan Gall ‘the island of the strangers.’ Holy Island off the Isle of Arran was previously called Eilean MoLaise ‘the island of MoLaise’; where MoLaise is the name of a saint.

The Ferry between Ullapool and Stornoway traverses the Summer Isles – a translation of the Gaelic Na h-Eileanan Samhraidh. Three of these islands have English names: Priest Island is An Clèireach literally ‘the cleric’; Horse Island is a translation of Eilean nan Each. Likewise Bottle Island is a translation from Eilean a’ Bhotail; it is also called Eilean an Droma Bhriste ‘the island of the broken ridge’.

Finally, Ellen’s Isle in Loch Katrine has an interesting history. The name was coined by Walter Scott in his influential poem ‘Lady of the Lake’, first published in 1810. The name of the heroine was Ellen, who gives her name in that book to Ellen’s Isle. The original Gaelic name of the island was An t-Eilean Molach, ‘the lush isle’. As discussed above, Eilean in Gaelic means ‘island’, but seems to have been taken by Scott to somehow be the name of the heroine as ‘Ellen’. Scott’s poem was so popular that this name was put onto Ordnance Survey maps in preference to its authentic Gaelic form.