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EARL & MORMAER  
*Norse-Pictish  
relationships  
in Northern Scotland*



*Barbara E. Crawford*

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**Groam House Museum** is situated 15 miles north east of Inverness in the Black Isle sea-side village of Rosemarkie. It is an award winning Pictish Interpretive Centre, run by Groam House Museum Trust. It houses the famous Rosemarkie Cross Slab decorated with enigmatic Pictish symbols. Also displayed are fourteen other sculptured stones all of which were found within the village, the most recent in 1994. The museum includes a gallery where temporary exhibitions on aspects of local history and of Pictish interest are displayed.

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### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank all those who have made my visits to Easter Ross so pleasant and interesting; particularly Susan Seright of the Groam House Museum and Jane Durham of Scotsburn for their hospitality. The invitation to deliver the Groam House Lecture in 1994 was an occasion for me to focus on a subject which had become of absorbing interest since giving a talk in Dingwall the previous year during 'Viking Week'. The discussion after that lecture had raised the question of the supply of timber from the forests of Ross to the earls of Orkney for their naval requirements. This immediately gave me a ray of understanding as to why the earls, and Thorfinn the Mighty in particular had fought so hard to control this locality, being the nearest source of easily available good timber to the treeless Norse earldoms in the north. From this idea, and the many discussions which I have had with people since - such as Bridget MacKenzie, Mary MacDonald, Monica Clough, David Alston, Rosemary MacKenzie, Adrian Clark and Gareth Williams - has developed the following study. Much of it rests on the difficult but fascinating material of Norse place-names, and for any errors or misunderstanding of the material, I bear full responsibility. Only, however, through exchange of ideas and sharing of knowledge will our appreciation of the role of the Vikings in the history of Ross and their relationship with the Celtic population become better informed. I am grateful to all those who have deepened my understanding of this one corner of Norse influence in the Celtic world.

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## **EARL AND MORMAER**

### **Norse-Pictish Relationships in Northern Scotland**

My title focuses on the powerful: the rulers of medieval political groupings and their influence on political history. There has been a growing tendency in recent decades to ignore political history and focus on the social and economic factors underlying the political surface. Political history is deemed boring and too much concerned with battles, bishops and kings. What about the real people and their way of life? Archaeology and the tremendous growth of popular interest in what is found under the ground has helped to point us in the same direction, for archaeology is all about how people lived, what they ate and what diseases they suffered: the precious objects which were the possessions of the rich are now considered to be of less importance to our understanding of the past than the cess pits and rubbish heaps of the urban dwellers. However, historians still recognise that it was the deeds and activities of the powerful in society which dictated the events and thus the conditions which prevailed in which ordinary people lived. Unfortunately we cannot interpret past societies without knowing about the battles and the rulers whose success or failure decided the welfare and even existence of the peoples who lived under their protection. We cannot in fact interpret the state of past societies in an environment free of domination by the powerful. Their political fortunes determined the culture which would predominate in a particular island, region or country; and this is as true of the 9th century as of the 19th century.

Some areas lying in a frontier zone between two cultural groups might find their political overlords changing overnight according to the fortunes of one group or another. So it was in Easter Ross from the 9th to the 12th centuries, lying as it did between the Scandinavian Vikings to the north and the Celts of the Scottish province known as Moray to the south. This is not the first time that I have studied Easter Ross as a frontier zone. Some years ago I put forward ideas about why it formed a battleground between Norse and Celt, in trying to understand the socio-economic situation underlying the political struggle (Crawford, 1986). This present study is a continuation of my attempt to progress towards a better understanding of what was at stake in the control of the area called in that publication the 'Firthlands' (Baldwin, 1986).

## I. Political struggles between Norse and Celt over Ross

All power struggles are a competition for resources, and early medieval rulers, or ‘warlords’ as we can call them, were also competing for resources and for the control of land or routeways which provided them with the wealth which they needed to pursue their ambitions. Such ambitions were essentially bound up with military endeavour for the control of more resources, and booty too with which the warlords were able to reward their military followers and keep them happy. The sway of one political grouping or another rested entirely on the success of the warlord in battle and his continued military success in keeping out and defeating rivals.

Of course in the present discussion the mutual rivals were the earls and the mormaers: the political rulers of Norse and Celt in northern Scotland. Two cultural groups were striving for control of that area, and in particular for control of Easter Ross which lay sandwiched between the earldom of Caithness (which included Sutherland) and the mormaerdom of Moray. It is necessary first to recap the background to the political situation which I will be discussing in more detail (see map of north Scotland, fig. 1).



*Fig. 1. The Provinces of Northern Scotland in the early Middle Ages, with areas of Norse settlement in Ross shaded*

At just the same time in the 9th century A.D. there were two arrivals on the scene in this area; the Scottish tribe of Cenél Loairn from Argyll, and the Vikings from Orkney, who were attacking and dismembering the established Pictish kingdom in north Scotland. The latter had been settled in Orkney for most of the 9th century and by the 870s the powerful dynasty of Møre from western Norway had established control in the islands and in effect brought into creation the earldom of Orkney. The former- a tribe of the Dalriadic Scots- had moved north-east out of their Argyll base and by way of the Great Glen had expanded into Moray.<sup>1</sup> Just as their cousins of the Cenél nGabráin took over the kingdom of the southern Picts, *they* took over the heartland of the northern Picts at the mouth of the Ness, and proceeded to establish a powerful political tribal lordship in Moray and Ross. It was a kingdom in all but name, and in the Irish Annals and the *Orkneyinga Saga* in name also. The ruler of Moray was called ‘rí Albann’ in the Annals of Ulster and ‘king of Scots’ in the saga.<sup>2</sup> But to the MacAlpin dynasty of the southern kingdom these men were ‘mormaers’, that is, ‘great stewards’, an official title given to the rulers of particular regions in the 10th century (Lynch, 1991, 47), and in the case of Moray a title used by the dynasty which inherited its position in an ‘unofficial’ way (that is, it was not the purely official office that the MacAlpin kings would have wished, for mormaers were not meant to be hereditary dynasts).

The first hostile activity recorded, although we always have to remember that there may have been much more hostile activity which went unrecorded, is of the partnership of Earl Sigurd I of Orkney and a Viking from the Hebrides, Thorstein the Red who **‘conquered the whole of Caithness and a large part of Argyll, Moray and Ross’** in the late 9th century (OS. Chap.5) (see Genealogical Tree, fig. 2). We can only accept at face value this bland statement of the saga writer which gives us so little information about How, How Much and for How Long! We also have the additional problematical statement in the saga that Sigurd built a fort ‘south in Moray’ which certainly suggests that there was need to have some form of defence for the maintaining of Norse authority in newly-won lands in the locality, including Ross. Sigurd the Mighty was a famous warrior in Norse legendary history and is remembered as having died while campaigning against a Celtic warrior called Maelbrigte somewhere in our region, for he was buried on the banks of the Oykell, evidently on the north side of what was an important frontier between Norse and Celt (Crawford, 1987, 58). It would seem probable that this

period saw the first attempts at long-term colonisation by the Norse in the area of the Firthlands, but how permanent was it?

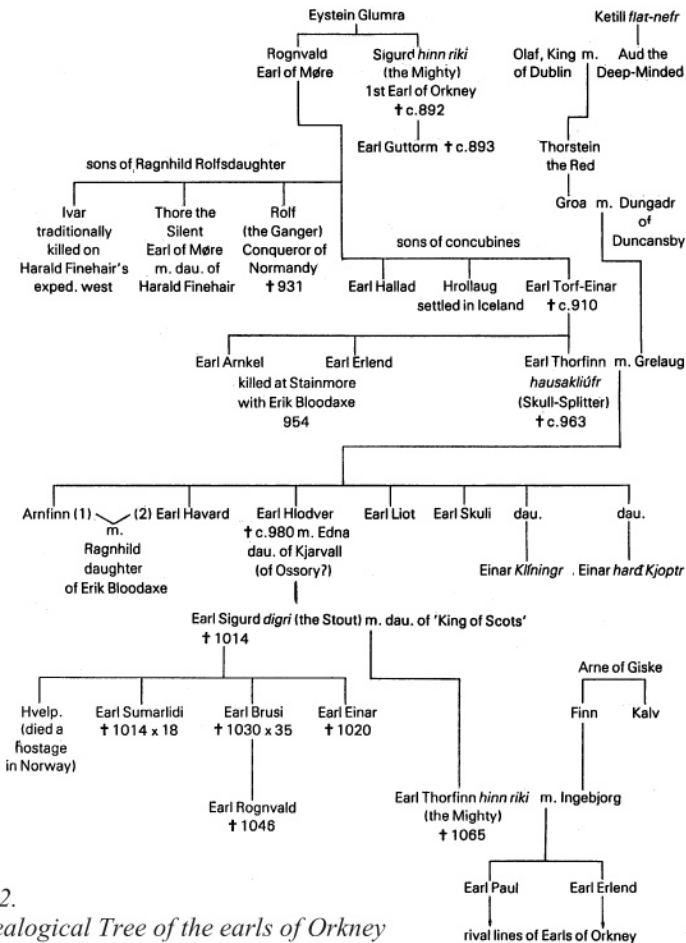


Fig. 2. Genealogical Tree of the earls of Orkney

The tenth century was a period of some disruption throughout the Norse coastal zone. In the Hebrides and the Irish Sea it was a period of difficulty for the Norse, and in northern Scotland one can see through the pages of the *Orkneyinga Saga* that the struggle between Norse and Celt was hard-fought in Caithness. Thorfinn Skull-Splitter, earl of Orkney, married a native princess from Caithness called Grelaug, and such marriages are an important indicator of political requirements; that is, they

tell us that her family was considered important and powerful enough to be worth allying with. From this we can deduce that native families were still in possession of positions of authority in Caithness. Earls Liot and Sigurd II fought battles at Skitten Myre, near Wick, with an 'earl' MacBeth and an 'earl' Finnlaech, who from their names are very likely to have been members of the Moray dynasty. But we should note that relations between Norse and Celt were not always hostile, for rival earls might seek the support of the Moray family, like Skuli who was given 'a large following supplied by the king of Scots and Earl Macbeth' (OS. chap.10). (The problem of knowing who was meant by the 'king of Scots', whether a Moray ruler or a member of the southern MacAlpin dynasty is exemplified in this quotation). The Vikings everywhere negotiated and allied with native warlords if it suited their purposes.

However, by the late 10th century a new phase started, when one of the best known of the Orkney earls, Sigurd II 'the Stout' was powerful enough to defend Caithness against the Scots (OS. chap.11). In other Icelandic literature Sigurd's territories are said to have '**included Ross, Moray, Sutherland and Argyll**' (*Njal's Saga*, ch. 86) and he was clearly a powerful and successful warrior. He married a daughter of Malcolm 'King of Scots', who is generally thought to have been Malcolm II. This marriage also indicates that the Orkney earl was considered important enough on the wider political stage to be worth allying with by this date. He and his son Thorfinn, (the offspring of Sigurd's union with the daughter of Malcolm) thereby gained a powerful ally and protector against the middle force, the mormaers of Moray who were a threat to both of them. Once Thorfinn had come of age and established his control over Caithness and part of the islands he turned his attention southwards and Ross again appears in the saga story.

Thorfinn's great protagonist in this section of his saga is 'Karl Hundason' who was called 'king of Scots' by the saga writer and who was a powerful warrior. His identity has puzzled historical commentators but it seems very likely that the saga writer was again referring to a ruler in Moray and the most likely candidate is that ambitious and misinterpreted figure in the history of Scotland in the first part of the 11th century, Macbeth, son of Finlaech.<sup>3</sup> Macbeth married his brother's widow, Gruoch, and through her inherited a claim to the throne of the MacAlpin dynasty as well as a commitment to pursuing vengeance against the southern royal family for the murders committed by Malcolm II. But before he

succeeded in becoming king of the southern kingdom in 1040 Macbeth would certainly have been pursuing his family's expansionist claims in the north and, as the saga said, he 'claimed Caithness, just as the earlier Kings of Scotland had done, and expected the same payment of tributes as from elsewhere' (OS. chap. 20). This time however he had the young and ambitious Thorfinn Sigurdsson to overcome who 'refused to pay any tribute for it'. A nephew of King Karl, called Muddan, was sent north but was chased south again by Thorfinn who in this campaign '**subdued Sutherland and Ross**'. This campaign was fought c.1029-30 and the extent of Thorfinn's control in these provinces is confirmed by the information that his right-hand man Thorkell Fostri is said to have '**raised forces throughout Sutherland and Ross**'. The young earl then consolidated his position by the two famous victories which he won against King Karl, off Deerness in Orkney, and at Torfness '**south off Oyke**' which is usually understood to be Tarbatness. Such a victory would have given him full control in the Moray Firth area, and if we are to believe the saga his success allowed him to conquer much further south, as far as Fife, which he laid under his rule.

The saga writer clearly had no idea what happened to Karl Hundason after the battle of Torfness: 'some people say he was killed there', but he then proceeds to quote skaldic poetry about the battle which says nothing about the fate of Karl, (therefore suggesting that he had not been killed). By taking up power in southern Scotland Macbeth was of course far removed from close supervision of events in Moray and must have delegated authority to someone else during the period of his rule in the south (1040-1054). Maybe his nephew Muddan was supposed to be his deputy in the north while he focused on winning power in southern Scotland. Thorfinn and Thorkell Fostri were however able to run rings round Muddan who went to see King Karl at Berwick 'and told him how badly things had turned out'. Karl was furious when he heard how his territories had been looted, which suggests that he was not anywhere near his Moray homeland at that point. Despite gathering a large force and facing Thorfinn in battle at Deerness and Torfness he was worsted in these encounters.

One might surmise that by moving south Macbeth's position with regard to the earl changed, and finding that he was unable to keep Thorfinn at bay he allowed him to rule his northern territories for him. Certainly there would have been a power vacuum in Moray which Thorfinn would

have determined to fill, whether with Macbeth's permission or without, and the saga account gives convincing details about the extent of Thorfinn's raids 'deep into Scotland... conquering all the way south as far as Fife'. From this point on in the saga there is no more mention of any struggle with a 'king of Scots' which suggests that Macbeth was occupied with ruling the southern kingdom and Thorfinn was given a free rein to govern northern Scotland. These circumstances would have lasted for as long as Macbeth was king of Scotland and while he was occupied with maintaining his throne against Earl Siward of Northumbria and the aspiring claimants of the MacAlpin dynasty whom Siward had in his care. This surely must have been the period when Norse colonisation and settlement was consolidated in Ross, and perhaps extended to the coastal parts of Moray also. What evidence we have for Norse settlement in the form of place-names in the inland valleys of Ross most probably dates from the time of Earl Thorfinn's period of domination in the 1040s and 1050s. It is the political situation which must be understood as forming the most suitable background allowing social and economic developments to take place<sup>4</sup>.

So long as the earls of Orkney and Caithness remained a powerful force in the north their control of Ross would remain active, although it should be noted that the province was never, as far as we know, formally part of a Norse earldom. It was, however, controlled by a son of Earl Harald of Orkney in the early 13th century before becoming a separate Scottish earldom (Crawford, 1986, 44-5).

## **II: Vikings in Ross: Archaeology and Place-Names**

If we turn now to the social and economic situation which resulted from political domination we cannot rely on the historical sources to be of much use to us. In fact the *Orkneyinga Saga* is notorious for its lack of information about anything other than the rise and fall of individual earls and the interplay of political rivalries. All students of early medieval history have at some time or another to attempt to use very different sources of evidence to help provide a fuller understanding of the impact of political events on the social and economic situation. The name of the game is 'multi-disciplinary' and as historians, or archaeologists, or linguists we have to be able to use and know how to use the source evidence of other disciplines. Historians have so little written evidence,

despite our fortune in possessing the saga of the earls, that we need to be able to use the material remains of the Vikings, and the linguistic survival of their toponymical nomenclature (place-names), in order to gain a fuller understanding of their impact on the history of Scotland in general, and of the extent of their power and influence in Ross in particular.

If we ask what archaeological remains have been recorded of the Vikings in Ross the answer is disappointing. The map of pagan Viking graves in Scotland (see Crawford, 1987, Fig. 31) shows that not a single find from Ross has ever been recorded from a grave: the only association with Norse culture is the silver hoard found at Tarbat. The Dornoch Firth-River Oyckell frontier is clearly a significant archaeological frontier just as it was regarded by the Icelandic saga-writer Snorri Sturlason as a significant political frontier (see Crawford, 1987, 57). The cluster of pagan graves from south-east Sutherland is clear evidence for an establishment of Viking settlers in the pagan period (see fig. 3). Does the absence of any such finds indicate that the raids of Sigurd the Mighty and Thorstein the Red in the late 9th century had resulted in little Norse settlement taking place south of the Oyckell at that time? The fact that Sigurd is said specifically to have been buried in a mound on the (north) bank of the Oyckell suggests pagan ritual was then being followed, and one would have expected any of his followers who had taken land south of the river to have been buried in similar fashion. The total absence of any pagan grave finds does suggest that settlement at that time may have been sparse and possibly not permanent, even though it is always dangerous to argue from negative evidence. The struggle in the following century, mentioned above, between the earls and the mormaers in Caithness certainly tells us that the Celts had successfully seen off the Vikings from Ross (and possibly even Sutherland) during the course of the 10th century. When the opportunity arose again for settlement south of the Firthlands the Vikings had been sufficiently influenced by Christianity to abandon any pagan burial practices.

Turning to the place-names reveals a very different picture. Here we have a linguistic body of evidence which has not been fully studied or utilised in any assessment of the Norse impact on Scotland. Although the Scandinavian place-names of Orkney, Shetland and Caithness have been studied in some depth (and used to categorise the chronology of Norse settlement and the expansion of Norse settlement) the areas of mixed Gaelic-Norse nomenclature in the north-east and north-west are only now

receiving similar attention (Crawford, 1995). Of course the place-names of Ross formed the subject of an invaluable study by the great linguist, W.J. Watson, who was more interested than most Celtic scholars in Norse place-names. But although he helps us to identify and interpret these names, he does not attempt to see them in their entirety, understand their geographical distribution or explain their historical significance. Two, more recent, brief studies, have looked at the geographical distribution of Norse place-names in Ross and considered the relationship of Norse and Pict (Small, 1986) and Norse and Celt (Fraser, 1986). Both these studies stress that when lost names are taken into consideration 'this was an area where Norse settlement was considerable, if not dominant' (Fraser, 1986, 29) and 'the extant distribution is only a fragment of a much larger original pattern denying the traditional view that there was very little Norse settlement in Easter Ross' (Small, 1986).

Most commentators have focused on the *-ból* names as indicating permanent settlement by Norse farmers and the *-dalr* names are left in a sort of limbo. The former is a habitative element, that is it tells that a farm with such a name must once have been owned by Norse speakers who possessed it for long enough for the name to pass into local speech. The latter is a toponymical element which was applied to a topographical feature by a Norse speaker and, it is argued, may not indicate the name of a settlement. The *-dalr* names were dismissed by Nicolaisen as no evidence for settlement at all (1969, 16; 1975,7;1976,94-5) and he argued that in western Scotland, where there are large numbers of them but very few habitative *-ból* names, they represent merely spasmodic seasonal influence. This may not however accurately reflect the significance of all *-dalr* names. It is now appreciated that they - along with other topographical names - were often the first names given to a locality, and that they could have been the original names for Norse-controlled estates, before a later settlement stage when such an estate was divided and the component parts given secondary habitative names like *-ból* (Crawford, 1987, 1995). *-Dalr* names should therefore be considered seriously as evidence for Norse control in an area where there is a lack of habitative names (Fraser, 1978, 20).

As can be seen from fig. 3 the *-ból* or *bo* names of the Firthlands are coastal in their distribution and on the best arable stretches of land. The *dalr* names however, relate essentially to non-coastal features and were

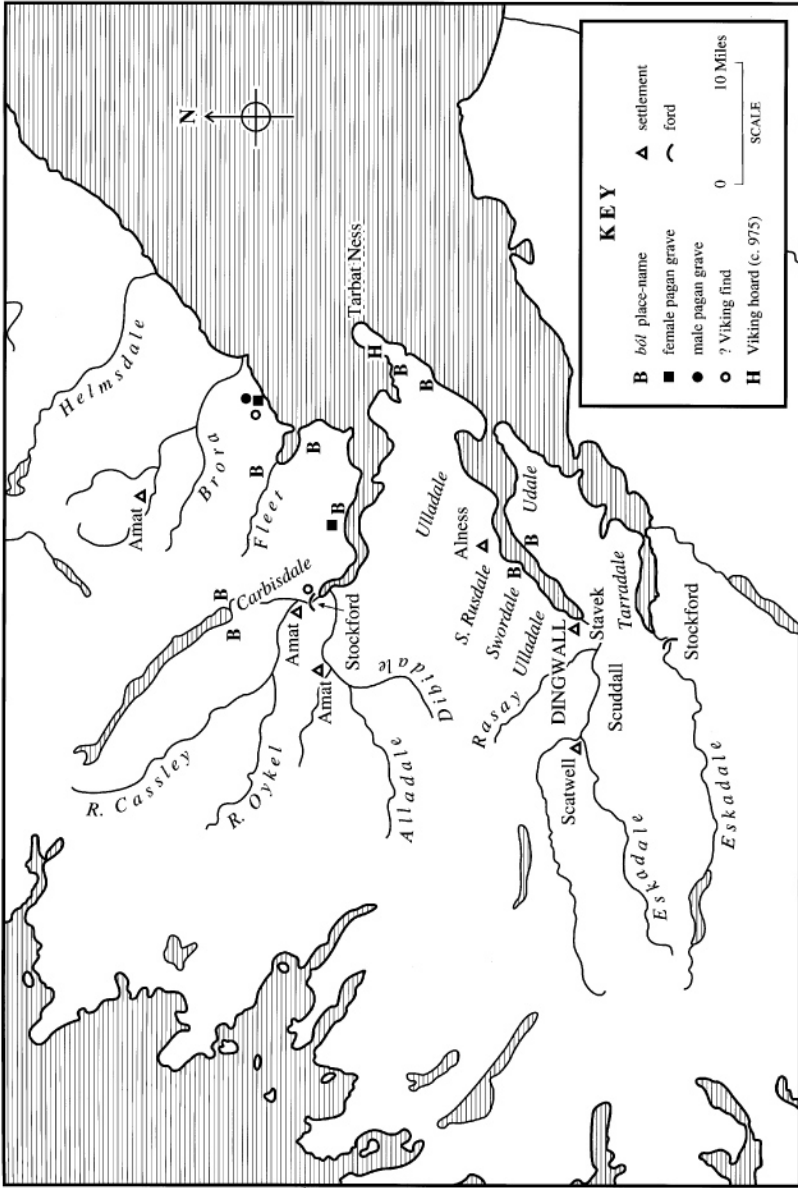


Fig. 3. Map of Easter Ross showing Norse place-names discussed in the text

given to river valleys running up into the higher land to the west and some of them deep into the central mountain massif. This shows a rather surprising infiltration into the inhospitable mountainous areas which were usually left to the Celtic - speaking population (from the evidence further north in Sutherland and Caithness). A name like Scatwell at the confluence of the Conon and Luichart is indisputable evidence for Norse settlement for it is a settlement name of a sort (although perhaps not 'habitative' in the same way as *-ból* or *-staðir*). Whatever the exact meaning of the name<sup>5</sup>, it stands out in the toponymic landscape of upper Strath Conon as clear evidence for a Norse farm (and indeed a good farm for so far upriver). Norse settlement names are also found up Strath Carron and along the Shin as well as along the river valleys of south-east Sutherland. The 'Amat' names (discussed in the Appendix) and the *-dalr* names certainly tell us that Norse settlers controlled these river valleys of easter Ross for some purpose. What could that purpose have been?

### **III: Economic and Naval Considerations; the Timber Resources of Ross**

One possibility, discussed by me in connection with the Great Glen (Crawford, 1986, 40-4; 1987, 25) is that the Norse needed to control the through routes between the Firthlands and the west coast. This was probably important to them for their political domination of north Scotland at the time when we know that the earls of Orkney were campaigning in the west. But not all of these valleys led to passes through the central mountains and it is likely that we need to think also in terms of the resources of this area which the Norse wished to control. There was one very important and obvious resource in Ross which was vital to the Viking way of life and their success in raiding and trading: Timber. For a society whose way of life was based on control of the seaways, and particularly for the earls of Orkney who were constantly striving to extend their power around the coasts of north and west Scotland, access to timber must have been a prime requirement. Where did they get it from? No-one has ever asked this simple question before. It was probably thought, if thought at all, that they would renew their vessels in Norway, or at least acquire the timber for renewing them in Norway. Indeed we know from *Orkneyinga Saga* that ships were acquired in Norway, sometimes as gifts from the kings (OS. chap.25; Earl Rognvald returned to Orkney with a large, well-equipped ship supplied by

King Magnus). But the more involved the earls became in Scottish, Irish and even English affairs, the greater their need for constant and ready access to timber nearer home. It need hardly be said that they did not have much access to timber within their island earldom! There can never have been, even in prehistoric times, availability of wood sufficient for ship-building purposes in the Northern Isles. This may well have been a very good reason why the earls strove so hard to expand their power onto the Scottish Mainland, and there may have been more woodland in Caithness and Sutherland in the early historic period than there is today. But *access* to the stands of timber is as important as the suitability of the wood itself, and for this the right sort of river system and water transport has to exist. In 1732 the minister of Creich, describing the oak and birch woods along the Shin, Cassilly and Oykel, mentions how 'all these woods grow near the said rivers on the banks so that they may hurdle them to the river, and they are very soon carried to the sea which by reason of its narrowness in these parts, occasions that the timber may be easily taken' (MacFarlane, *SHS*, lii, 1907, 203). When the earls were looking for good ship-building timber which could be easily brought to the coast for transport or ship-building they needed to look no further than the Firthlands of easter Ross and south-east Sutherland.

Although it is very difficult to know exactly how wooded Ross was in the pre-historic and early historic periods, one can assume that it was more heavily wooded than it is today. As Pennant said (of the uplands of Sutherland and Caithness) in 1769 'the tradition is that all these Highlands were then forest and wood, but now there is scarcely any wood' (1774, 344).

All the earlier travellers comment, however, on the fine pines in Strathcarron, 'clothed with particular tall firs' which 'supplies neighbouring and distant places with timber' (MacFarlane, 1907, 203). James Robertson in 1767 saw 'firis the finest I have seen in Strathcarron. One tree rearing a straight uninterrupted trunk to the height of 30 or 40 feet measures in circumference 8 1/2 feet....The timber of these trees is as red and good as any brought from Norway' (quoted in Steven and Carlisle, 1959, 209). The fine size of oak trees on an island in the River Beauly in Strathglass is specifically recorded in the mid 19th century, some of which measured 20 feet in circumference, and all of which had been felled at the beginning of the century (Cheape, 1993, 51). The usage of timber from this area is well documented from recent times.



*Fig. 4. View of remnant natural pine forest in Upper Strath Carron (R.M.M. Crawford)*

Jean Munro (1988, 157), while discussing the contracts for the extraction of timber from the Speyside forests refers to a contract of 1630 for the felling of wood in Glencalvie, Strathcarron<sup>6</sup>. Indeed the place-name Kincardine tells us that the Carron valley system must have been notable for its woods in the Pictish period: the element *carden* (= wood) is one of the few Pictish words which have survived unchanged although in this instance with the addition of the Gaelic *cean* (at the head of) (Fraser, 1987, 70)<sup>7</sup>. (See figure 5).

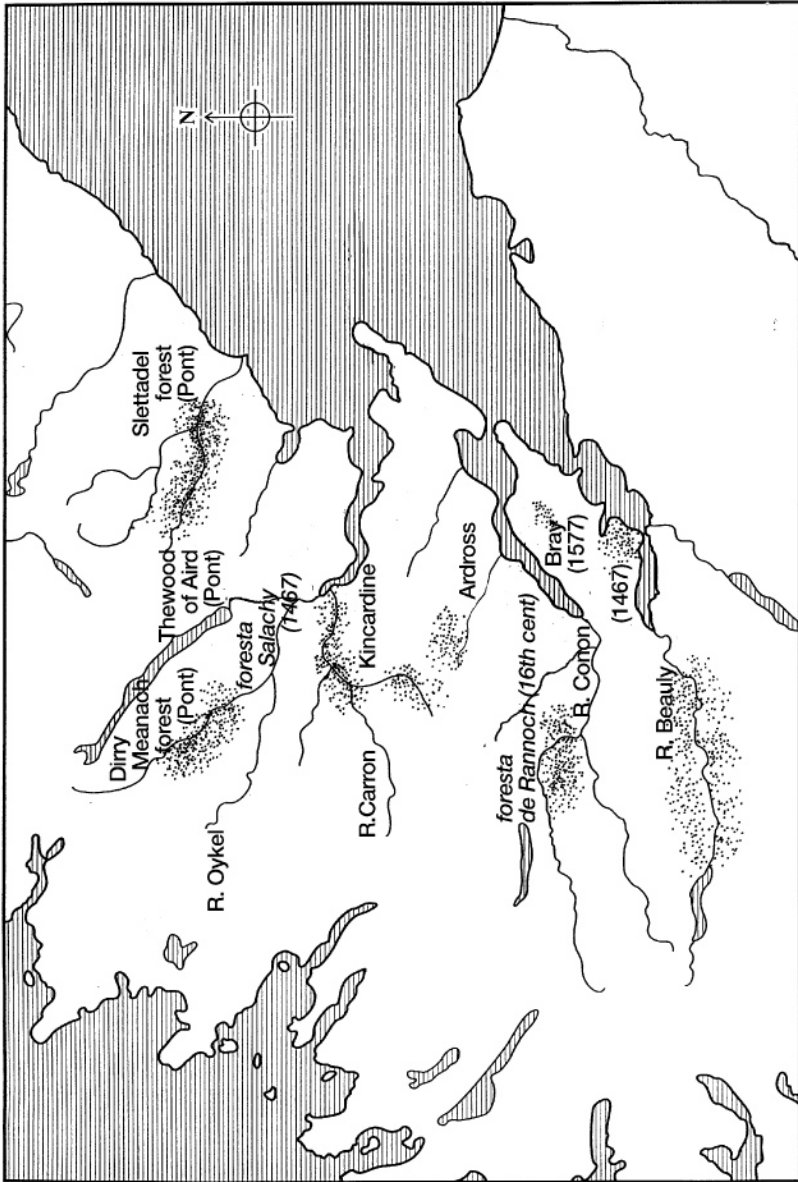


Fig. 5. Forested areas of Easter Ross and south-east Sutherland as recorded in early maps and documentary sources.

The earliest documentary records for the area, few though they are, also have references to '*foresta*' and the importance of the usage of timber. The 'forests of Alveyn and Salchy' were granted to the abbot of Fearn Abbey in 1467: *necnon et usum lignorum et arborum per totum nostrum comitatem Rossie et praesertim usum lignorum et arborum in parochia de Kilmure* (as well as the use of timber and trees through the whole county of Ross and especially the use of timber and trees in the parish of Kilmure) (Munro and Munro, 1986, no.90). This was moreover the confirmation of an original grant made by Ferchard of Ross to the abbey in 1227. The map showing the location of documented forested areas (fig.5), is based on Pont's maps (c.1600), and Joseph Avery's Map drawn up 1725-30 for the York Building Co. (Inverness Public Library), as well as earlier documentary references from the Scottish public records.

The evidence of every period (Pictish place-name; grants by the earls of Ross to favoured religious foundation; commercial contractors of the 17th century; government contractors like Samuel Pepys for the British navy; the York Building Company) provides invaluable record of man's use of the timber of Ross throughout history. We can safely assume that this was a resource every bit as desirable for the Vikings, and that when the historical record shows the earls of Orkney striving to control Ross it was control and exploitation of timber resources which was probably one of the main motivations for their aggressive expansion policy.

It is not easy to try and make some assessment of the timber required for the building, repair and maintenance of a fleet of Viking ships. It has been calculated that for a single 20-25m longship 50-58 cubic metres of wood would be required, which is about equivalent to eleven trees each 1m in diameter and 5m in length of trunk, together with a 15-18m long tree for the keel (Ole Crumlin-Pedersen's figures cited in Graham-Campbell, 1980, 51). The single oak timber required for the 18m keel of the Gokstad ship would be hard to find today, but although oak was preferred, pine was also used, particularly in Norway. Obviously the quality of the timber was important and for the keel a long straight trunk which had grown straight up before the crown spread out was essential (Christensen, 1994,140). Other qualities were required for the stem and stern posts, and the ribs, when curved timber was looked for. Masts were usually of pine and the figure of 70' is given in a poem for the length of a mast on one of Magnus Bareleg's ships (1090s). If oak was scarce then elm, alder, ash or lime were used in Viking ships. Birch and willow also

had specific properties for certain requirements (see Wagner, 1986, 131, for species of wood used in the Skuldelev ships). Most of these woods were available in the forests of Ross, and the *-dalr* names of some of the river valleys may specifically refer to the availability of certain trees in them (See Appendix).

Evidence for the actual construction of ships in Norse Scotland is sparse (although there are the archaeological remains of boats found in graves in the Northern and Western Isles; see Ritchie, 1994, 38-9). There are however two incidental pieces of information which give us very specific proof about boats which were built, one in Caithness and one in Inverness. The first reference is in the Book of Settlements (*Landnámabók*), which tells the story of Aud the Deep-Minded, one of the most famous female settlers of Iceland who moved north during the difficult period in the Hebrides after the death of her son Thorsteinn the Red in the 870s. The account in *Landnámabók* says that while in Caithness 'she had a boat built secretly in a forest' (1972, 51) in which she sailed to Orkney. Caithness as a province included the whole of northern Scotland north of the Oykeil so that this may have taken place in south-east Sutherland where suitable trees would have been available. Why the boat-building had to be secret is not elaborated, but it may have been because the local rulers - Norse or Celtic - would not allow incomers from the Hebrides to help themselves to their timber resources!

The second piece of evidence is of a commercial arrangement and is very important historical proof that ship-building was a skilled and famous craft in this locality in the middle ages, not long after the Viking period. In the Chronicle of Matthew Paris (one of the best known of the English medieval chroniclers) we are told incidentally that a French crusader, Hugh, count of St. Paul and Blois, had a 'wonderful ship' (*navem mirabilem*) built in Scotland, at Inverness in Moray (*in regno Scotiae in Ylvernes, scilicet in Muref*) in 1249, in which he sailed to the eastern Mediterranean (*Chronica Maiora*, Rolls ed. V, 93). This tells us that ships from this locality were valued sufficiently for a French crusader to have one built and for it to be known to Matthew Paris as a vessel of some wonder. The quality of the timber available must lie behind the evident skills of the Inverness ship-wrights. One can only speculate whether these skills had been inherited from Norse traditions of ship-building in Ross!

Skills of this kind were developed where there were the military leaders who could provide the patronage and who needed ships for naval campaigns. The earls of Orkney must have been the most important of such military leaders in northern Scotland in the early middle ages, although it is known that rulers of Moray had ships of sufficient quality to lead campaigns to Orkney as 'Karl Hundason' did in the 1030s (not discounting the possibility that he might have used ships built by Norse ship-builders and manned by Norse sailors who had been recruited by him in the mixed Celto-Norse political world of northern Scotland). But the earls are without a doubt the naval supremos of the area from the 9th to 12th centuries and this is one area of economic evidence where the saga does supply us with useful information.

Before the naval battle of Deerness Thorfinn is said to have 'five well-manned longships' with him 'so that he had a considerable force' (chap. 20). King Karl had eleven longships, most of which must have fallen into Thorfinn's hands after the defeat of the Scots. When Thorfinn and Rognvald Brusison fought the battle of Robery, Rognvald had collected thirty large ships together from Norway, Shetland and Orkney, while Thorfinn gathered troops in Scotland and the Hebrides, and ended up with sixty ships 'most of them quite small' (chap. 26). Although 'he himself had a big ship, well fitted-out' he suffered heavy losses because of the small size of the ships in his fleet, which were 'put out of action' and so presumably badly damaged. The Norwegian exile Kalf Arnason who came into the battle brought six large ships which were probably Norwegian built, and he was able to clear the decks of Rognvald's fleet 'since his own stood so much higher'. This may suggest that the ships built in Scotland were generally smaller than those sailed over from Norway, except for the earl's ship which is specifically said to have been a big one, as one would expect. Nonetheless the number of vessels said to have been involved in this one battle gives some indication of the scale of these affairs and the need there would be for repairs and replacements after such an encounter. The maintenance of their fleets and the constant need to renew vessels lost and damaged by war and weather must have made access to timber resources a number one priority for the earl and his military following.

#### **IV: Norse Settlement and Dingwall**

Ships were vital to the success of the Vikings in every part of northern and

western Europe. Their requirements of timber must always have been an important aspect of economic policy and the control of resources. The eventual decline of the independent Icelandic Norse community was intimately bound up with their increasing difficulties in acquiring the necessary timber and their reliance on Norway to provide it for them. The earls of Orkney must always have put the requirements of timber high on their list of economic priorities. The excellent timber resources from the river valleys of Ross provide the most satisfying explanation for the efforts expended by the earls on winning control of the Firthlands, and provide a most suitable background to the Norse settlements which were established along the valleys of the Beaully, Conon, Carron, Oykeell and Shin. They were bases for the control and exploitation of timber in locations where it could be logged downstream to the sheltered but open waters of the Firths. The description of 'ideal' could be used of this situation.

To what extent this control was forcibly imposed on the resident Pictish communities is unknown; but it is possible that many of the Norse settlements in the river valleys were newly-established in territory which was unexploited by the Picts. From the evidence of Pit place-names and of Pictish sculpture it looks as if it was the fertile coastal parts of Ross which formed the main settlements of the native population. Obviously there was overlap in the coastal zone and the process of integration or domination has gone unrecorded. The likelihood that it was a planned process of settlement by colonists brought in under the protection of the earls is indicated from the important position of Dingwall in the province. It was certainly central to the Norse settlement, and may have been an important Pictish centre also<sup>8</sup>. Why did the Norse settlers choose this location for their social and administrative centre?<sup>9</sup> It must have been geographically suitable, and geographically central, and it would seem to have been located not only for the coastal Norse farmers (if it had been, a site in the outer reaches of the Cromarty Firth would have been more convenient). It is at the head of the Firth on an important estuary, which suggests that it was central to the whole river valley system of the Conon equally with the Cromarty Firth (and easily accessible from the Beaully River basin too). Dingwall's suitability as a centre of government for easter Ross is clearly demonstrated by the fact that it became the chief town of the earldom of Ross, the *caput* of the earls, the site of their castle and the administrative centre of the region up to the present day. It was well chosen.

But by whom was it chosen? The general tenor of my argument in this paper would suggest that it must have been the earl, whose policies and protection were so important to the establishment of Norse settlement in Ross. Yet it has to be admitted that the general belief about the earls does not suggest that they were strong supporters of a system of Things - public assemblies which are usually reckoned to be a symptom of the democratic spirit of Norse society and dominated by the *Bonder* (farmers). Nonetheless a legal structure of assemblies did exist in the earldom and they were attended by the earls in the saga period (Crawford, 1987, 204). The difference between the earldom of Orkney and the kingdom of Man in this respect lies in the continued importance of Tynwald (= *thingvöllr*) in Man and the declining importance of Tingwall in Orkney in the Middle Ages. The fact that the Manx assembly could thrive in a lordship dominated by a powerful ruler shows that the two institutions were not inimical, so long no doubt as the assembly was under the king's influence. In Ross therefore the establishment of Dingwall can be seen as part of the policy of control in the area established by the earls. The fact that it was certainly the centre of administration of the later earls of Ross may suggest that it had also been a power centre in the Norse period, and as suggested above possibly a Pictish power base previously. In general however *thing* sites were not power centres; neither in Orkney or Man did the earl or king have a residence close to Tingwall or Tynwald (although not too far away either - at Birsay and Peel). Nowhere else did a Tingwall become an administrative centre with a castle in the post-Norse period. So there are some features about the Ross Dingwall which are peculiar to it. (The particular circumstances of its establishment as the centre of Norse settlement in Ross are further explored in note 10).

Whenever and however it was founded we can understand Dingwall to have functioned as a social, economic and perhaps religious centre for the Norse settlers of the Cromarty Firth, Beaully Firth and dales of Ross. There are hints of a much stronger Norse nomenclature in the area than is evident today; Somerby (= 'summer farm') is still a settlement name nearby<sup>10</sup>. Sadly the remains of the supposed assembly site at Greenhill, with its seats in a semi-circle on the terraced hill, so reminiscent of Tynwald, is no more (Macrae, 1923, 5). The dedication of the parish Church, or annexed chapel, to St. Clement, is just another of the intriguing relics of Dingwall's Scandinavian past which deserve further study (Crawford, 1992). The medieval term 'kirseth' which was used in some Scottish burghs for the temporary exemption from payment of dues

granted a new settler is recognised as having an ON derivation (*kyrr- setja* = ‘to sit quietly’). It occurs in the burgh charter granted to Dingwall in 1226 (*DOST sub kirset(h)*).

In conclusion, then, we can regard the founding of Dingwall as integral to the earls of Orkney’s policy for the control of Ross and of its valuable economic resources. Access to readily available sources of suitable timber for ship-building was basic to the continued success of the earls as sea-kings of the north, and as the suppliers of mercenary naval forces to other rulers of the British Isles (Crawford, 1987, 86). Recognition of this requirement may help to explain the expansion of their authority down the west coast of Scotland as well as the east, for the woods, particularly the oakwoods, of western Scotland must have been a valuable timber resource also (and which this study has not been concerned with). Nor would their control of the Ross woodlands have been valuable only for their own naval requirements, but also as a very useful source of income by means of trade. Viking chieftains strove hard to establish and control trade routes and centres of exchange. This may well have been another of the functions of the assembly and a reason for it growing into a market centre and eventual urban community- not the usual development of *thing* sites in the Norse world, but Dingwall’s location must have proved peculiarly suitable for commercial transactions. Perhaps it was the timber which came down the Conon, Orrin, Meig and Rasay rivers and which could be collected together at the mouth of the waters of Stava (*ON stafr-á* = ‘staff-river’; see Appendix) at Stavek (*ON stafr-vik* = ‘staff-bay’) which created the commercial potential for the nearby assembly site at Dingwall. If we can see its growth and development in this light we can be sure that it was not a result of chance but of economic planning and commercial foresight which has been noted as the mark of Viking exploiters elsewhere.

My assessment of the relationship of Norse and Pict has developed into a re-assessment of the impact of the Norse on the Pictish province of Ross. This is heavily reliant on the use and interpretation of place-names, which is a dangerous field for a historian to enter alone. In the absence of archaeological evidence it is however the last untapped source which can throw light on the scale and intensity of Norse influence which we know from the saga was fought for by powerful and successful warlords who had a secure and rich power base in the Orkneys. It is my suggestion that these warlords fought to control Ross for sound economic reasons

and that the toponymic material may help to provide supporting evidence for the earls' interest in promoting settlement for their own gain. The extent and the organisation of their use of the valuable timber resources of Ross may never be known. In western Scotland the Vikings earned an unenviable reputation for destroying and burning the woods (Cheape, 1993, 54). Although the traditions about this can hardly be used as historical evidence about the process of reduction of Scotland's natural forest cover, we should perhaps be prepared to reconsider the Viking requirements which may have contributed to the decline of this wonderful resource. Their needs were greater than most.

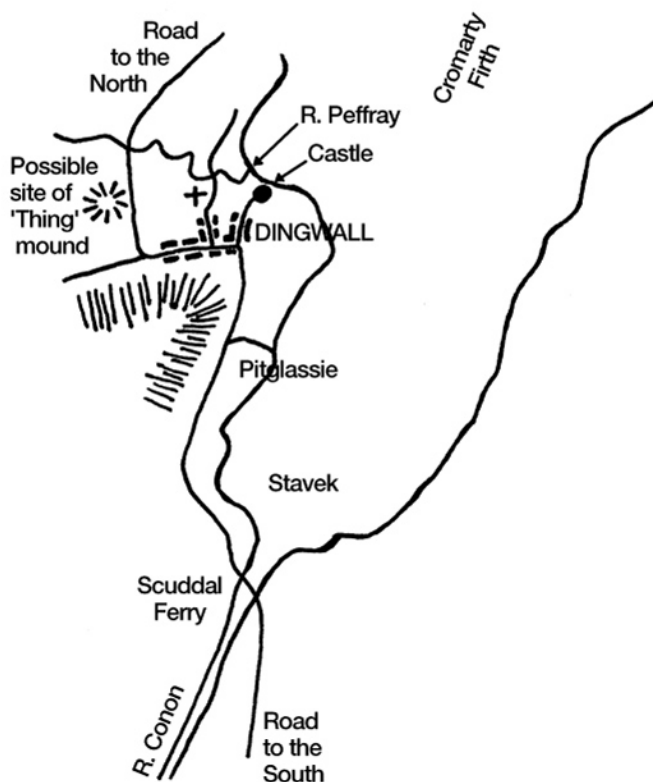


Fig. 6. A conjectural sketch of medieval Dingwall based on Taylor and Skinner's Road Atlas (1776), and plan of Dingwall lands (1777) in N. MacRae A Royal Burgh. Dingwall's Thousand Years.

## Notes

1. The process may have begun before the 9th century but it is not unlikely that the disturbances caused by the Vikings in Argyll had hastened the process and forced both branches of the Scottish settlement in Argyll to abandon their western seaboard power base.

2. In this period of early medieval history titles are fluid and have not yet come to be the more rigid designations of the twelfth century and later.

3. See arguments presented by Crawford, 1987 and Cowan, 1986, in favour of this identity.

4. We know from quite separate sources of information that both Thorfinn and Macbeth went on pilgrimage to Rome. The whole of chapter 31 of the *Orkneyinga Saga* is devoted to Thorfinn's famous journey through Denmark and Germany to Rome where he 'had an audience with the Pope and received absolution from him for all his sins'. This was probably about 1050. Macbeth's pilgrimage is recorded in the annals of Marianus Scotus who lived in Rome and noted that Macbeth 'scattered gold like seed to the poor' when in Rome (*ES*, I, 588). His visit is very surprising considering that he had many enemies waiting their moment to seize the Scottish throne for themselves; but if we accept the evidence then such a visit must also have taken place in 1050. The significance of this coincidence is not that one therefore assumes the two men are identical! (as in Dorothy Dunnett's *King Hereafter*). Pilgrimages were not uncommon in the eleventh century. In fact many northern rulers accomplished the visit to Rome-such as Cnut in 1027; and it may be that aspiring lords of other northern lands wished to emulate the great Cnut, or that he had made it easier for them to do so. The significance may rather be that the two rulers, former enemies, went on pilgrimage *together*, or joined up in Rome to make amends for their past hostilities. There are instances of others doing the same at this period such as Sitric of Dublin and Flannacan, king of Brega in 1028, and Echmarcach of Dublin and Donnachad M'Brian, who both died in Rome in 1065.

5. In 1986 (p.46) I took up Watson's derivation of Scatwell from *ON skattr* (= tax) with enthusiasm (1904, 149) and drew conclusions from it about the imposition of earldom taxes in Ross. However since then I have noticed that an identical name in Norway -Scatval- is derived from

two very different elements. The descriptive *Scat-* from an ON word for the ‘top of a tree’, or ‘the furthest end of something’ (*NSL*) and the generic from a noun *vál*, which is easily confused with *-völlr* but which is used of land which has been felled and cleared by burning (Rygh, *NGN*, Inledning sub *váll*; *NSL*, 279). Maybe the explanation of Scatwell lies with these meanings rather than with the ON word for tax, particularly - as I noted in 1986 - there are no ounceland or pennyland divisions in Ross (p.43).

6. A contract was arranged by Peppiatt, agent of Pepys, with the Rosses of Pitcalny for the usage of timber from the woods of Amat (information from Mrs. R. MacKenzie of Tain Museum).

7. It is interesting that there is also a Kincardine in the Forest of Abernethy (Moray). The Gaelic name for the province - Ross - is itself one which has a connotation with wooded areas although in Scotland more specifically with ‘promontory’, and in Welsh ‘moor’. (Watson, 1926, 116,496-7). With regard to the name of the province it probably refers to the promontories of Tarbat and the Black Isle which are such important geographical features extending out from the mainland. I am grateful to Simon Taylor for guidance in understanding the meaning of the element *-ros* in both Scotland and Ireland.

8. From the evidence of the Pictish stones in Dingwall and Strathpeffer.

9. The ON word *thing* (= ‘assembly’) as the qualifying element for a place-name is met with in all parts of the Norse world in many different compounds, and indicates the location site of the judicial assembly of the surrounding population. The system of legal assemblies is a very significant and important aspect of Norse society and one which they transmitted to other peoples (Crawford, 1987, Chap. 7, ‘Law and Society’).

10. It might be the case that an in-depth study of the place-names of Ross would supply some indication of the origin of the Norse settlers. Where are they likely to have come from? If they were brought in to exploit the forest resources one might very well ask if they were of Norwegian origin, as any Norse settlers from Orkney or Caithness would be unlikely to have the requisite skills. Thorfinn certainly had close family connections with Norway and particularly with the powerful

Arnmødlings. He was married to Ingebjorg, the daughter of Finn Arnsson, and her uncle Kalf spent some time in exile in Orkney in Thorfinn's entourage during the reign of Magnus Olafsson (1040-50) (*NBL*, VII, 186-8). Kalf is said to have been always at Thorfinn's side during the period after the murder of Rognvald Brusisson. Thorfinn's quarrel with Rognvald developed because of his need for Rognvald's third of the earldom due to the 'large following' which Kalf brought with him 'which placed a heavy burden on the Earl's finances' (OS. chap. 25). Thorfinn used Kalf in his ruling of his extensive dominions; perhaps it is not too fanciful to suggest that in a more peaceful period he might have used Kalf's 'following' to settle Ross - in an environment familiar to Norwegians from Møre and Inner Trøndelag. Kalf held Inner Trøndelag as a fief from the earl of Lade (*Hms. The Olaf Sagas*, 341). These would be men able to exploit the forests with the necessary expertise. Only a close comparison of the place-names of Møre and Trøndelag with Ross will provide support for such a theory; but it is worth noting that the other Skatwell/Skatval name (mentioned above) is located in the Inner Trøndelag, and was a royal farm!

## **APPENDIX on Topographical place-names of Norse origin in Ross**

It is notable that some of the *-dalr* names in Ross appear to have the names of different kinds of trees as their specific first element.

ESKADALE was the name of two valleys :

1. the middle reaches of the Beaully River (still current).
2. the valley of the River Meig which lies only just to the north of the Beaully Eskadale (Map in Bain).

These may be the 'two Eskdales' (*duobus Eskatellis*) which appear in the accounts of the Lordship of Ross in the 1560s in the Exchequer Rolls (*ER*, viii, 596; ix, 59, 116, 403, 533) and the Register of the Great Seal (*RMS*, ii, 1318). There seems little doubt that the name must refer to the ash tree (ON *askr* = ash), which was a most useful wood for many purposes in the past, and was much used in ship-building when pine or oak was in short supply. It was also used for house construction, turned bowls, spear-shafts; as well as having magical and medicinal purposes.

ULLADALE. Again this was the name of two valleys in Easter Ross:

1. near Strathpeffer.
2. Logie Easter; the old name of the Scotsburn valley.

Although generally thought to have a pers. name as a specific I would suggest that it is far more likely that two valleys given the same name so close together were named after natural features rather than because of ownership. There are two possibilities from tree names; either ON *alm* = elm, or *ölr* = a sort of alder (CV). The identical place-name to Alness (north shore of the Cromarty Firth) in Norway is Alnes, which is interpreted as ‘elm-tree ness’ (*NSL*). See Watson 1904, 75 for his discussion of a possible Celtic derivation.

ALLADALE - a valley leading into the Upper Strathcarron is surely more likely to be derived from ON *ölr* = alder (cf. Scots ‘aller’), rather than from the pers. name Ali. Alladale is recorded by Steven and Carlisle (1959, 208) as having scattered birch and pine today (but alder was probably not considered worth recording by them).

Both elm and alder were used along with ash in shipbuilding when oak was scarce.

CARBISDALE. The first element has been derived from ON *kjarr* = copsewood or brushwood.

CASSLEY/CASLA (Pont). The river valley which joins the Oyckell, and after which the river itself is named has been derived from ON *hasl-á* = hazel river. Hazel was another useful wood employed particularly in cask-binding and for wands.

It is perhaps strange that neither ON *furu* (= pine) or *eik* (= oak) seem to appear in surviving Norse place-names in Ross, (from a cursory knowledge of the nomenclature) although the Gaelic *doire* does. It was suggested by Watson (1904, 77) that FYRISH contained ON *furu* in its first element, but he later seemed doubtful about this (p.277). I have noticed a place called FERNESS in Moray, which needs investigating further.

AMAT. This name occurs three times in this locality, in Strath Oykel,

Strath Carron and Strath Brora. In each situation it is at a confluence and is clearly derived from ON *á-mót* (=river meeting) by Watson (1904, 6, 18). Although the name does not appear in the Conon river system, there is the interesting ON name of Scatwell at the confluence of the Conon and Luichart. Control of these confluences by the Norse may have been an important part of their organisation of the river system for the transport of timber.

If we look more closely at the Conon-Beaully river system we find there are some significant names which are half-forgotten and can only be collected together with more painstaking research than just looking at the OS I inch map. But in the past these names were well-known and signified important places in the transport of men and goods by sea or road.

The STOCKFORD of Ross was an important crossing point at the mouth of the Beaully, where the river could be forded at low tide. First recorded in Wyntoun's Metrical Poem (late 14th century) when he refers to Alexander I in 1116 pursuing some rebels north '*And to the Stokfurd in to Ross He chasit thaim*'; even riding across on the rising tide '*At the Stokfurde made stoppage. Al lyk to let hym for to ryde. Ye Kynge rade our it in yat tyde*' (Wyntoun, 370-1). In fact a ? 17th century map shows another '*stock ford of Ross*' on the northern boundary with Sutherland at the head of the Dornoch Firth (cover of *Togail Tir. Marking Time. The Map of the Western Isles*, by Finlay Macleod, 1989). The first element in both these names would appear to be the ON and Scots word for a beam of wood or a post, and may refer to wooden markers at the fording point.

If the origin of the second element at least in Stockford is Scots rather than Norse, we can be surer that the origin of another 'lost' name, at the mouth of the Conon -STAVEK - is 'plainly Norse' (Watson, 1904, xviii), which he derives from ON *staff(r) -vik* (= 'staff-bay'). The first element is the same as in stave-kirk and is also to do with wooden timbers or straight and upright posts. It looks as if this first element is also present in a Dingwall record of 1587 of the 'waters of Stava' (Macrae, 96). There are river names in Iceland called Stava (ON *staffr- á*) where it seems to apply either to long, straight stretches of water, or to staves set as boundary markers. Mrs Bridget MacKenzie has suggested to me that the staves in question may have been driven into the river bank to form a landing stage.

SCUDDALL is the older name for the Lower Conon where a ferry crossed before the Conon Bridge was built. The second element can hardly be other than ON *-dalr* but the name as a whole seems to have no parallels in Norwegian place-names. In fact the only Norwegian word that it seems to relate to is the name given to fast, small ships, or cutters, called *skuta* (*skut-stafr* is the tail-stem of a ship's stern). I note that Watson refers to a name in Kincardine parish- Skuitchal (1904, 18), the first element of which he derives from G. *Scuit*, loc. of *Sgot*, 'a piece of land cut off from another, a small farm'. So perhaps the exact derivation of Scuddall should be left uncertain, but with the likelihood that it may be ON in origin.

It is not only on the lower reaches of the Conon that ON names are found on waterways. The lucky chance that the minister's report in the Old Statistical Account mentioned that the previous name by which the Contin Blackwater was known - RASAY - gives us the ON name for that river which would not otherwise be known. Although Watson thought it could derive from ON *hross-á* (= 'horse river'), it would appear far more probable that it is derived from ON *rás* (= 'course' or 'channel', cognate with English 'race'). Such a name would fit this watercourse, along which tumble the Rogie Falls. One suspects that other Blackwater river names in the locality may have had Norse names at one time.

SIKKERSUND - the ON name for Cromarty Firth first recorded in Geoffrey of Monmouth. Although Scotticised to '*Sikker*' (= safe/sure) the first element must have meant something different in ON (the Scandinavian word 'sikker' is a late import from either Old English or medieval High German and does not exist in Icelandic; information from Paul Bibire). It could possibly be from the ON pers. name Sigurd and the temptation to link the name with one of the earls called Sigurd would be compelling!

These are some of the names which I explored while researching my Groam House lecture. I hope they serve to show that ON place-names have great potential for helping us to understand the natural conditions of the locality, and the vegetation and tree cover during the early centuries of the Middle Ages. They may also be hidden pointers to many other

aspects of the economy of the Norse settlers; hidden because we do not fully understand what the significance is of some of the nomenclature. One element which I have become interested in through this study is the ON generic found so often in farm and settlement names in north Scotland and which has become transmitted as -well or -wall, but which has nothing to do with wells or walls. That is the second element of Langwell, Rossal, and indeed Dingwall. It is said to derive from *völlr*, which translates as 'field' or 'level place', but which is also used in Norway of *seter* or shielings, particularly in Trøndelag (*NSL sub voll*). It would seem that in Northern Scotland the element developed out of a particular requirement, or certain circumstances of the settlement process, because of the dominant place which the element has in the ON toponymy. It should be asked whether some of the -well names may originally have been *seter* names in the inland valleys which then became farms in their own right (this is the presumed development of *saetr* names in Shetland). There is also the possibility that the -well element may have been *váll* (see note 5) and impossible to distinguish now from *völlr*. A fuller study of these names than is possible here would certainly lead to some useful information about the nature of Norse settlement in the dales of Ross and Sutherland.

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Barbara Crawford has lectured in Medieval History in the University of St. Andrews since 1971. Her doctoral research was a study of the history of the earls of Orkney-Caithness from the late Norse period until the pledging of the islands to Scotland in 1468. She has been a foremost proponent of the inter-disciplinary approach to Norse studies, conducting her own excavation of a Norse farmhouse on the island of Papa Stour in Shetland, and using place-names as a historical source for understanding Viking settlements in Scotland. This inter-disciplinary approach underlies her study of *Scandinavian Scotland* (1987), and she has recently edited a book of essays on *Scandinavian Settlement in Northern Britain*. As a member of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, Chairperson of the Treasure Trove Advisory Panel for Scotland, Vice-President of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and a member of the Scottish Records Advisory Council she is deeply involved in the protection and advancement of Scotland's cultural heritage.

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Dr. Barbara Crawford delivered the Annual Academic Lecture for Groam House Museum in 1994, in which she explored the importance of Easter Ross to the earls of Orkney in terms of timber resources. Drawing on the fascinating subject of Norse place-names she has explored why the earls, and Thorfinn the Mighty in particular fought so hard to control this locality. Dr Crawford's illustrated text is now published.

