

‘*Fae da nort tae da suddart*’:
Norse settlement in Shetland
with special reference to Unst
and Old Scatness

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‘*Fae da nort tae da suddart*’ is what a Shetlander might say when describing travel from Unst in the north of Shetland towards Scatness in the south (Fig.1). Extremities are often the focus of interest, as Thomas Eliot said in an entirely different context in his poem *Gerontion*, when he noted that ‘The end is where we start from’. In fact, the image of the end as merely another starting point can be further extended and applied to a Shetland place-name project, currently in its gestation period. In a sense, the embryonic project is at the end of something, in that the idea for it was inspired by the work done in Shetland by the Faroese scholar, Jakob Jakobsen, at the end of last century. Jakobsen did an immense service to the study of Shetland place names when he collected material for his book *The Place-Names of Shetland* (Jakobsen 1936), but his method was to list Old Norse elements followed by a few examples of Shetland place names which, in his opinion, contained these elements and, as a result, coverage of place names in his book is not exhaustive.

It is time for a more holistic approach and for a rigorous re-assessment of Jakobsen’s work and it seems very appropriate, given his connection with the University of Copenhagen, that information should have been relayed at a conference held in Copenhagen, organised jointly by the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters and the Royal Society of Edinburgh, about the beginnings of a new research project, the aim of which is to collect detailed information, from both oral and written sources, on all Shetland place names currently in use or preserved in diverse written records, incorporating the numerous names of Norse origin along with all the names of other linguistic origin – principally Scots and English. The aim is to make this information available to all interested parties by entering it in a relational database.



The English translation of Jakob Jakobsen's study of *The Place-Names of Shetland*, first published in 1936 (Jakobsen 1936), was reprinted in 1993 and, as Gillian Fellows-Jensen noted in her introduction to the reprint:

'It was the Carlsberg Foundation in Denmark that gave this project the financial backing that made it possible for Jakobsen to spend three years collecting material (1892-95) and it was largely thanks to the same Foundation and the Danish state that he was able to spend the rest of his life preparing this material for publication.' (Jakobsen 1993 reprint, XVIII)

Little changes in terms of fund-raising: the Carlsberg Foundation is still generous in its funding and, in Shetland, the Shetland Amenity Trust is trying to raise money for the late-20th-century equivalent of Jakobsen's investigation of Shetland place names, also planned for three years in the first instance, although the study is very likely to extend beyond that period.

While application for funding for the larger project is in preparation, I have been employed by the Shetland Amenity Trust on place-name surveys at either end of Shetland, organised in tandem with archaeological excavations taking place in Unst and at Scatness. Both of these place-name surveys are still in progress, although, for the last two years, my work has concentrated on the area at the southern tip of Shetland, around Scatness in the parish of Dunrossness. Most of the work done thus far has been field work with informants who speak the dialect and who have lived either in Unst or the Scatness area most of their lives and have an extensive knowledge of local names and their locations.

It is generally accepted that the names of the Northern Isles of Unst, Yell and Fetlar may be pre-Norse (Fellows-Jensen 1984, 152; Stewart 1987, 20) but, these island names excepted, the 'Language Map of the Shetland Islands', which is the frontispiece of Jakobsen's book, illustrates clearly, through its plethora of place names of Norse linguistic origin, that his investigation of the fate of the Norse language was guaranteed to meet with considerable success in Shetland. Many of the Norse terms used in coining the place names on Jakobsen's map were still current in the local dialect of Scots at the end of the nineteenth century when Jakobsen visited Shetland and, to a lesser extent, that is still true at the end of the twentieth century. The extensive place-name vocabulary of Norse settlement in Shetland reflects the centuries of survival of Norn – 'the distinctive form of Scandinavian speech that developed in the Northern Isles' (Barnes 1998, 1). In fact, Michael Barnes, in his recent study of the Norn language of Orkney and Shetland, suggests that 'The time at which Norn died can be put at the middle of the eighteenth century in Orkney and perhaps as late as 1800 in Shetland –

in the sense that it was then that the last of the native speakers (those whose first language had been Norn) went to the grave' (Barnes 1998, 26).

In other words, the language died out approximately one century before Jakobsen arrived in Shetland but it left behind a substantial Norse substratum in the lexicon of Shetland Scots which is particularly evident in topographical place names. Norse habitative place-name elements, on the other hand, such as *staðir*, *bólstaðr* and *setr* all of which point to the establishment of homesteads – appearing in place names such as Baliasta, Ungirsta, Ulsta, Girsta (*staðir*) and Nesbister, Wadbister, Fladdabister (*bólstaðr*) and Aithsetter, Mangaster, Hestinssetter and Dalsetter (*setr*) – are not understood by present speakers of Shetland Scots, although commonly occurring in Shetland place names.

Baliasta, to select an example of one of these habitative names, is one of the small number of Shetland place names which occur in the sagas; it is, unfortunately, rare to be able to date Shetland names with such certainty. The name appears as 'a Bollastøðum' in the Longer *Magnúss Saga* and A. B. Taylor, in his article entitled 'Shetland Place-Names in the Sagas', identifies it as Baliasta in Unst (Taylor 1954, 115). Taylor states that 'The name does not occur again until 1654 when it appears in Blaeu's map as *Balyesta*' (Taylor 1954, 116) but the name does, in fact, reappear in a document dated about a century before that in 1543-44, as 'Ballista' (Ballantyne & Smith 1999, 50) and as 'Balyeistay' in 1578-79 (Ballantyne & Smith 1999, 242). Its 'kirk' or 'church' also appears as the venue for a sheriff court (a court which has the jurisdiction to deal with most civil actions) on 20th March, 1571:

'Ane schiref court haldin at the kirk of Balyestay the xx day of Marche 1571 be ane honorabill man Arthuir Sinclar of Eisweck, schiref deput of Yetland for the time to ane mychte and potent Lord Robert Stewart, feware and lyifrentar off the samin' (Ballantyne & Smith 1999, 144).

Ronald Cant identifies Baliasta, along with Lund and Norwick, as a major ecclesiastical site in medieval Shetland (Cant 1996, 165).

That there was a general lack of understanding of Norse habitative generics was almost certainly true of the state of the language in Shetland at the end of the nineteenth century as well, when Jakobsen was collecting his evidence, although place-name generics which are recorded in combination with the English definite article in its Shetland dialect form 'da' [də] (Graham 1979, 16) may still have been on the

borderline between lexicon and onomasticon at the end of last century. An example could be ‘Da Setters’ in Unst which is the name a local informant gave for the site where the excavations undertaken by archaeologists and students from the University of Copenhagen, led by Steffen Stummann-Hansen and Anne-Christine Larsen, were taking place when I first began my field work in Unst in July, 1996. In fact, the informant took care to explain that ‘Da Setters’ was a place where cattle were put out to graze on the hill during the summer months, but he was using the past tense to describe a pastoral practice which is no longer followed. Thomas Edmonston from Bunes, Unst, included *setter* in his 1866 glossary of Shetland and Orkney dialect words and commented that it was ‘always indicative of good pasture for cattle’ but he only noted examples of *setter* as ‘common affixes to names of places in Shetland’ (Edmonston 1866, 96). In other words, he no longer believed that *setter* was fully in use as a dialect word, beyond the narrowly onomastic context, in the mid-nineteenth century.

Garðr is another Norse element which, like *setr*, is found in quantity in all parts of Shetland and, also like *setr*, it can appear with the definite article ‘da’ and, sometimes, with English plural ‘-s’; as in “‘de Gerts o’ Scatness” (Dunrossness)’ to which Jakobsen makes reference, saying that it ‘may be either “garðr” or the derived form “gerði”’ (Jakobsen 1993, 43). The outlying walled enclosure at Da Gerts o Scatness is very typical of a location where *garðr* would be used. Both of these habitative generics – *garðr* and *setr* – could have been coined at any point during the centuries when Norn was still in use in Shetland and their use does not necessarily indicate survival of the names in which they occur from the early period of Norse settlement. If such names do appear in early written record, the researcher is fortunate but, for the most part, they are difficult to identify because they are numerous and it is often difficult to distinguish between one Setter and another because the places to which they apply are generally insignificant and only appear in written record by accident of ownership or, more specifically, as a result of disagreement over territorial boundaries.

The other archaeological survey which is being conducted in Unst, Yell and Fetlar at present is, of course, the chapel-site survey described in this publication by Professor Chris Morris, which concentrates on a very specific aspect of Norse settlement – that of the adoption of Christianity. Evidence of religious activity can be gleaned from Norse place-names such as Kirkaby in Unst, although lack of early forms makes it very difficult to be certain of the antiquity of a name such as Kirkaby or

‘church farm’. Cant assigns the chapel site at Kirkaby to the pre-Norse period (Cant 1975, 8) and the name could be as old as the ninth century when the first Norse settlers arrived but there is no documentary evidence, which, in itself, makes the antiquity of the name questionable. Gillian Fellows-Jensen has pointed out that, in the Danelaw, it is assumed that the Vikings gave names in *kirkju-bý* to settlements in which they found a church on their arrival, even before their own conversion (Fellows-Jensen 1984, 156), but the *bý*-names of Shetland generally refer to later, secondary settlement and, as Fellows-Jensen has also pointed out, ‘seem most likely to contain *-bær* in a sense such as ‘home-field’, a meaning which is also recorded (by Matras 1932, 17) for *-bøur* in the Faroes’ (Fellows-Jensen 1984, 157).

Superstition still preserved memory of Kirkaby as a religious site in the earlier years of this century, when Kirk Knowe, a field adjacent to Kirkaby, was called ‘Bonüs’ by local fishermen (Stewart, Shetland Archives, Lerwick)¹ rather than being referred to by its own name, because it was thought to be unlucky to refer directly to churches, and their appurtenances, when at sea. In the Faroes, the word *bønhus* was used for the smaller chapels of which there are only a few traces today (MacGregor 1984, 9). The sea-name for Kirkaby itself was ‘Bo’ [bu:] which is reminiscent of a place name ‘Bowayre’ [bu'ejər], recorded from Sand on the west mainland of Shetland, with reference to a fishing booth or ‘bød’ on a gravelly beach (ON *eyrr*) near the late medieval church (Waugh 1996, 250). There are five examples of the more common compound, Kirkabister (ON *bólstaðr*) in Shetland (MacGregor 1984, 10), but none of the five is located in Unst or Dunrossness.

In fact, the habitative generic *bólstaðr* itself is not common in Dunrossness names. There appears to be only one late example – Lunabister – which is something to ponder in the wider study of place names in the south of Shetland. In this short paper, however, having given a glimpse of some of the Norse habitative generics in Unst, I shall concentrate, in the southern part of Shetland, on one example of a place name with the Norse topographical generic *nes*, i.e. Scatness itself. There can be no doubt about the origin of the generic in Scatness but, thereafter, certain-

¹ The information about the name ‘Bonüs’, spelt thus, appears in notes made by John Stewart during field work in Unst in the middle years of the twentieth century. The notes are now kept in the Shetland Archives, 44 King Harald Street, Lerwick, Shetland, and I am very grateful to the Stewart family in Whalsay for granting me permission to read them.

ty ends and the specific in the name has been the topic of much discussion since the start of the Old Scatness project; *Old Scatness* being the mode of reference used by some local informants for the area where the archaeological dig is taking place.

Jakobsen does not comment on Scatness, although, as previously indicated, he does include a reference to “de Gerts o’ Scatness” (Jakobsen 1993, 43). The fact that he makes no comment on Scatness itself, probably points to his perception of it as a relatively minor topographical name. John Stewart, in his book *Shetland Place-Names* suggests derivation of the specific in Scatness from *skata*, f., ‘a skate, which it resembles’ (Stewart 1987, 219). It is possible to persuade the eye that it sees many things in the landscape but place-name references to fish more commonly relate to fish caught and consumed in the vicinity. Did the Norse, living at Scatness, consume skate in significant quantities? The middens excavated thus far do not substantiate this supposition and, indeed, the site is multi-period and reflects the habits of pre-Norse occupants as well, none of whom would appear to have eaten skate in any quantity.

At first view, the specific in Scatness might seem to be ON *skattr* ‘tribute or tax’ but tax was not generally levied on a ‘ness’ (ON *nes*) or headland, although early forms do not run counter to this suggestion:

Ballantyne & Smith 1999:

1506: ‘...xx markis, the quhilk I bocht fra hym in Scatness...’, 26

1525: ‘... ane half mark land lyand in Scatnes callit Brendsowss ...’, 35

1546: ‘...the vther thre mark land lyand in Scatnes in the parichin of Sanct Gregorii ...’, 55

1578: ‘... 4 marks land in Skattisnes ...’, 238

Register of the Great Seal:

1589-90: ‘...4 marc. in Skattisnes...’, Vol. V, 590

1605: ‘...the 20 merkland of Scatnes...’, Vol. VI, 607

1605: ‘...toggidder also with the pasturage of 20 wedderis within all the boundis of the Lokitnes of Scatnes...’, Vol. VI, 608 (cf. Ballantyne & Smith 1994, below)

Ballantyne & Smith 1994:

1588-9: ‘The 60 marks land in Sowndbroche, Skatnes and Ulsness in the parish of Dunrosnes...’, 56

1589: ‘...91/2 marks land in Southhous in Scatnes, 12 marks land in Newhous (*rectius* Mewhous) in Scatnes, 16 marks land in Scollandis in Scatnes...’, 66

1592: ‘...the 20 marks land, 6 pennies the mark, of Skaitness, in the parish of Dunrosnes...’, 85

1592: ‘...together with the pasturage of ‘twentie wodderis within all the boundis of the lokitnes of Skatnes...’, 86 (cf. RMS, Vol. VI, above)

It is worth considering whether or not *skattr* might be the specific because ‘scat’ could have been collected from the arable portion of the ‘ness’ inside the dyke which walled off the outer grazing land stretching out to the Ness of Burgi, which is the name for the outermost point of the peninsula of Scatness. It is possible that the local distinction between Scatness, the inner part, and the Ness of Burgi, the outer part, might reflect a centuries-old distinction between the scatted and unscatted part of the ness. An 1873 Lerwick Sheriff Court document entitled ‘Decree Arbitral by the Arbiter in Division of Scatness’ would tend to confirm that the perception of division between the ‘ness’ of Scatness and the ‘ness’ of Burgi was current among the men engaged in the 1777 division of Scatness (D8/385/3/2), which was eventually finalised in the 1873 document, in which the following summative statement is made:

‘Further I find that the total extent of the land forming the subject of division as finally settled in the course of the proceedings before me and including the whole arable and grass lands of the town of Scatness, the Ness of Scatness, the ness of Burgie or Bergie, and the separate property amounts to 383 acres, three roods 11 poles’ (SC12 53/13).

None of this, however, amounts to solid proof that the specific in the name Scatness derives from ON *skattr*. The likelihood is that the specific in a topographical name will be descriptive of the land and a strong contender must be ON *skati* ‘something long and thin, probably protruding’ and thus most appropriate in naming a promontory. There is a difficulty in that the word only seems to be evidenced in Old Norse in the meaning ‘man’, but the examples are all from poetic language (e.g. a poem in *Egils Saga Skalla-Grimssonar*) and it is reasonable to assume that a similar word existed in the everyday language with a more gener-

al meaning, such as that suggested here. Various place names in *Norske Gaardnavne* have been suggested by the editors to contain the common noun *skati* in the sense of ‘protruding part’ (eg Skattum vol. IV,2, 70; Skaten vol. XI, 46; Skatland vol XI, 101) (Rygh, 1897). The personal byname, *Skati*, is based on the same likeness to something long, or tall, and thin, but it is unlikely that a personal name would be combined with a topographical element such as *nes*.

This single example will suffice to highlight the complications and uncertainties of topographical name study in Shetland, bedevilled always by lack of written records which could prove conclusively that a place name existed at a particular period in history. The most satisfactory aspect of research into local names is, in fact, the contact with present-day local informants who are invariably helpful in interview and who have a real interest in the way in which verbal identity tags, in the form of place names, have been attached to their environment by their predecessors – both immediate and distant. The observed distinction between north and south, which was mentioned in the abstract of this paper, relates to the collection of Shetland place names which have not been recorded previously on maps or in other documentary sources. Local informants from Unst can provide more previously unrecorded place names than their counterparts in the Scatness area, where the building and development of the airport has interfered, to some extent, with retention of local names, because the places to which they refer are now buried underneath the runways or because the outline of the land has been altered by airport construction. Since reading this paper at the conference in Copenhagen, however, I have interviewed an informant from the Scatness area whose knowledge of previously unrecorded local names was most impressive and I find myself in the paradoxically pleasing position of having to qualify my earlier statement. The satisfaction of finding a very knowledgeable informant is one of the great pleasures of place-name research.

It is to be hoped that the planned survey of Shetland place names ‘fae da nort tae da suddart’ will materialise and afford the opportunity to bridge the geographical gap between north and south, and to record and analyse the many local similarities and differences which undoubtedly exist, before it is too late. As a famous literary Dane once said, albeit in a very different mood and context:

“’Tis a consummation devoutly to be wish’d”.

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