

THE NORSEMEN IN ROGART

There is not much written evidence of the Norsemen being here, and we have to rely heavily on the evidence of local place-names. This means we are dealing with the early settlement period, what is misleadingly known as the Early Viking period, in our case the years between 870 A.D. and the end of the 900's. We could probably even narrow it down to about 70 years, between 870 and 940. Not a long time. x x

Place-names are always evidence of settlement, and they are one reason why I like to talk about the Norsemen rather than the Vikings. All Vikings were, of course, Norsemen, but not all Norsemen were Vikings. Vikings were Norsemen who had taken to the high seas as pirates, and made a living by plundering other shipping and raiding coastal settlements. The Norsemen who went overseas to settle, even if they took their land by force, were not Vikings ; possibly former Vikings, but most of the Norsemen never were Vikings at all.

Let's get rid of a few misconceptions about the Vikings while we're at it : The Vikings did NOT wear horned helmets, and they were NOT motivated by a burning desire to destroy Christianity and plunder churches. To all Norsemen, Viking or otherwise, horns were for drinking out of and not for trimming their hats ; and many of the Norsemen who settled in Scotland were already Christian themselves, even at this early date. So forget all the Victorian rubbish.

The Norsemen who came here did not leap ashore from their longships and come storming up the strath. They came by land, over the Ord from Caithness, as settlers authorised by their overlord, the Earl of Orkney, and they settled, as has everyone with any choice in Sutherland before or since, in the fertile land, in the glens and straths, along the waterways and along the coast. They were looking for good land in sheltered corners, as you would expect.

They must have lived alongside the remaining Picts, and a few recognizable Pictish names in this area have survived the subsequent Norse and Gaelic invasions. All names beginning with Pit- are Pictish : Pittentrail, Pitfour, Pitgrudie. These have survived, but in Gaelic Pit- is often changed to Baile-, so that Pitfour is Bailefuir in Gaelic. There are some other Pictish names, such as the Doll, and Dola, from Pictish dol "meadow"; and many Tulloch or Tullich names, from Pictish tulloch "hill". Monadh "mountain" often appears as -mony, and carden "copse, small wood" as -cardine. But most Pictish names were absorbed into Gaelic. The Picts in this district spoke a form of Celtic known as "p-Celtic", in the same Celtic family as Welsh , Cornish and Breton, and the Gaels who came later spoke "q-Celtic", like the Irish and the Manxmen.

So who were the earliest Norsemen, and how do we know when they came, and where from ?

The main source is the well-known Orkneyinga saga, which means literally "the story of the men of Orkney" although it really deals with the Earls of Orkney. This work must be treated with caution. It was an Icelandic work, written in the late 12th century in Iceland by an Icelandic monk. It tells of the earliest days of the Orkney earldom, going back to about 870. If you think of the 300-year gap between ourselves and the 1690's you will appreciate that the version in the saga is not exactly an eye-witness account, but only the 12th century's idea of what was happening in the 9th. But it is all we have, apart from a few general references to the settlement of Sutherland, and some dubious details given in later sagas which are fictional. None of them mentions Strathfleet or Rogart by name.

You probably know the story as told by the saga writer - but where did he get it ? He was writing a serious history of Orkney, not a story for entertainment. He must have had access to oral traditions about Orkney : perhaps he had lived there, or his mother belonged there, or a fellow-monk was trained there - some reason for his interest in Orkney and his knowledge of its traditions. He would also have had notes written on scraps of vellum : anecdotes, names, oddities that someone had thought interesting enough to jot down. He would have had old verses which are thought to be the only contemporary evidence, composed at the time of the events they describe. The snag about these is that they are very difficult to understand, and they use a kind of poetic language that is maddeningly unspecific - but names are usually well-preserved in them. And the saga writer had a work called Torf-Einars saga, not as long as Orkneyinga, dealing with the life of one man, whom we shall meet again later. This shorter saga is now lost, but we know it existed. It was written in the 11th century describing events in the 10th, so the gap is narrower and the traditions fresher.

So that's what the writer was drawing on, and the story he compiled is well known. He tells us that the King of Norway, Harald Finehair, was having problems with some pirates in the Hebrides, and he sent out an expedition to put them down. This was led by his right-hand man, Rognvald Eysteinsson, who came from Western Norway, near Bergen. It is thought that many of the settlers in this district came from that area, just north and south of Bergen. All the settlers in the part of Scotland came from Norway. The Danes confined themselves to regions further south in Britain.

On the expedition, Rognvald took his eldest son and heir, a young lad of about 12 years old, whose name was

Ivarr. And during the fighting in the islands, young Ivarr Rognvaldsson was killed. This was around 870 A.D.

In my opinion, it is quite likely that Ivarr is to be identified with the young, high-born warrior boy whose body was found a year or two ago buried in the dunes at Balnakiel, near Durness. I wrote to the Northern Times to say this, and Robert Gourlay, the then Regional Archaeologist, sent a letter in which he said the burial was 10th century and could not possibly be as early as 870. Knowing that in archaeological terms it is not possible to distinguish between 870 and 900, I was not surprised when Dr Colleen Batey, who was in charge of the Balnakiel dig, intervened. She agrees with me that the burial could certainly be 9th century, and that the body could be that of young Ivarr. Nobody is saying that it definitely IS young Ivarr, only that it could be. Certainly there would not be many twelve-year-olds of high birth buried with their armour, in that area and at that time.

When Rognvald got home, the King was obliged by law to compensate him for the loss of his son in the King's service - and he offered something that Rognvald did not want, the lands of Shetland and Orkney, and the title of Earl of Orkney. Why did Rognvald not want them? We can only guess. It seems probable that he was busy pursuing his career at Court as the King's indispensable man and had no wish to be exiled to the islands in the west, Orkney and Shetland. So he offered them to his younger brother, Sigurth, who was one of the Commanders in the King's forces. Sigurth was an awkward cuss, outspoken and aggressive, always likely to fall out with the King and wreck Rognvald's career. It may have been that Sigurth was already out of the King's favour and glad to get away to the islands: anyway, he took the gift, and became the first Earl of Orkney. He was known as Sigurth the Mighty, and was greatly feared. This was around 872.

Sigurth was an ambitious, ruthless man, a second son who had not much property of his own, just one tremendous asset, his brains. Needing men and ships, he joined up with someone who had both, a distant cousin of his called Thorsteinn the Red, a wild, drunken pirate. Sigurth had what Thorsteinn needed, military experience, organizing ability, a grasp of tactics, and a considerable intelligence. Together, they made a formidable pair.

They crossed from Orkney into Caithness and attacked the Picts there, driving their forces back over the Ord into what became Sutherland. On they went, across Ross, then Moray, and right into the heart of Pictland, in Perthshire. There the Picts had finally to submit, and agree to terms.

Under these terms, the Norsemen would hold Shetland, Orkney, Caithness and the land which was now called Sutherland - everything north of the Dornoch Firth. South

of the Firth was returned to the Picts, ruled by their local leaders or Mormaers.

Sutherland is the "southern land" of the Norse Earldom, but the name was accurate for only about 100 years. By the end of the 10th century, The Norse had pushed down to the Beaully Firth, and established the great trading post of Dingwall, and the name Sutherland was already out of date - yet the name survived for over a thousand years, an example of how adhesive placenames can be. We do exactly the same, of course : we talk about "Newcastle" where the castle has not been new for many centuries. X

The Earl took possession of his new lands, and the first thing he needed to do was move in settlers, to occupy and maintain his territory. Thorsteinn was easily dealt with : all he wanted under the terms of the peace treaty was the right to call himself "King of Northern Scotland", a privilege which Sigurth was happy to grant him. Sigurth knew it was only a matter of time before one of three things happened : either Thorsteinn would drink himself to death, for which he was practising diligently; or the King would hear of his new title and would send someone to marmalize him; or Thorsteinn's incessant boasting and gloating over the local Picts would drive them to attack him. It was this last that happened : Thorsteinn was murdered in his home, his stronghold in Caithness, by the local Picts who served him, and Sigurth was left in undisputed command of all those men and ships.

He ruled for about 25 years, a long time in those days, when a man of 50 was an old old man. Sigurth was not a nice man. He was greatly feared and respected, but not loved or trusted. His own wife hated and feared him. A big, strong, tall man, he was cold and ruthless, ambitious, calculating, treacherous, outspoken, and he always went his own way even in defiance of the king - and he was clever enough to know when he could get away with it.

He was the overlord of this district, and would have overseen the settlement of the whole area with people of his choice. Each district would have its own leader, answerable to him, who would be in charge when Sigurth was away. I think his headquarters in Sutherland would have been Skibo, in the perfect strategic position. This was when the big farms with names ending in -bo or -bol were set up : Skibo was Skithabol, "Skithi's farm" (this man Skithi was probably the first district leader for the Dornoch area); Embo was "Eyvind's farm" ; Skelbo was "shell-sand farm" (shell-sand was a valuable commodity used for making mortar and as fertilizer for the fields).

Torboll, and Torroble near Lairg, may belong to this earliest settlement, or may be about twenty or thirty years later. I will return to this. It is possible that Golspie belongs to this period, too. The ending seems to be -by, the name of an important farm. The first element

could be the name Kol, which was very common among the people of mixed Celtic-Norse descent, especially in the Hebrides. So Golspie may be "Big farm belonging to a Hebridean called Kol". Collabol, on Loch Shin, may be another form of the same name.

Normally this primary settlement would be followed by secondary when the first settler gave away little parcels of his land to his friends and family, and smaller farms with names ending in -stathir or voll would spring up. The only area where this is found is below Skibo, where a cluster of Norse farms is found on the fertile land near the coast : Eaglefield, Cuthill, Ciderhall, Rosebank, and some names no longer in use but well documented :
Allistie and Steanford.

In Strathfleet we find voll names. These were originally field names, the word voll meaning a field or a cleared space, but early on, in Norway before settlement overseas began, voll seems to have become a farm name, and it was used to denote a secondary farm in Phase II of normal settlement. Langwell is a voll name, lang-voll, "long field" ; so is Rossal , hrossa-voll "horses' field"; and Breackue is brekku-voll "hillside-field". These were all secondary farms which must have belonged to a bigger estate. Was this Torboll ? Skelbo ? Or was there another primary farm in Strathfleet whose Norse name has now been lost ? Certainly there is no trace of it in the records, and we know that in 1525, Pittentrail and Little Rogart belonged to Skelbo. Perhaps Langwell, Rossal and Breackue were part of the original Norse estate of Skelbo.

Torroble in Lairg, and Collabol on Loch Shin, show that the same process was taking place in the Shin strath, but again there is not much evidence of secondary settlement.

Life must have been precarious for the Norsemen who settled here. The Picts were an ever-present threat, and although the Norsemen had dominance over them, there was a need for vigilance, especially when Sigurth was away in Caithness or the Northern Isles. The farms below Skibo were there to maintain the garrison : Skibo gave them protection in exchange for a supply of men, horses and food from the farms. The settlements in Strathfleet would have the same function : support for the defences. The whole area was a frontier zone at that time, its economy geared to manning the defences and defending the boundaries of the Norse territory.

Sigurth was strong enough, and clever enough, to keep it all going, but as he grew older, he became tired of the Picts forever giving him trouble, so he called a summit meeting between himself and the Pictish leader in Ross, the Mormaer Maelbrigte (Mael means noble lord, prince). Sigurth proposed a meeting somewhere near the head of the firth, where the two territories met, and the arrangements were the usual formalities in such cases (or at least the 12th century's idea of what the formalities

would have been, anyway) : each leader would come in person, bringing with him, for his own protection, forty men, armed and on horseback. Maelbrigte was there first, and saw Sigurth's forty horsemen riding up the firth. It was not until they were too near for the Picts to make a run for it that it became obvious what Sigurth had done. On each horse, sticking out below the long riding cloaks of the riders, were two legs on each side where there should have been only one. And the Picts realized, too late, that they were outnumbered two to one. And whatever Sigurth had in mind, it certainly was not peace talks.

Maelbrigte then addressed his men in heroic terms, telling them that they were about to die, but they should go bravely and each take a Norseman with him as he fell. And the attack began, and all the Picts were wiped out.

Then the Norsemen did something completely alien to them, something the Norsemen never did : they cut off all the Picts' heads, and hung them from their saddle-bows as trophies of victory. This was a terrible insult to the Pictish people. Sigurth took Maelbrigte's head, and as they turned to ride for home, the dead Pictish leader had his revenge : his dangling head swung round, and his protruding tooth gashed Sigurth's leg. A minor scratch, but blood-poisoning set in. Nothing could be done for him, and within days, Sigurth was dead. He died at Skibo. *almost certainly*

Now this is a story. A piece of fiction. It is of great interest because it is told entirely from the point of view of the Picts. The author makes a perfunctory attempt to knit it into its context by saying that Sigurth planned the trick because he feared treachery from the Picts, but this is mere window-dressing - he then paints the Picts as brave and noble victims of evil treachery. This tells us that the origin of this story is Celtic, not Norse, and sure enough, the same story appears in tales told in Ulster, in Irish. So the saga writer was here using an Irish source, possibly through a Pictish intermediary, and the whole fiction has been used to embellish the bare facts - which were probably that there was a skirmish between the Norse and Pictish forces, and that Sigurth was victorious but later died from a minor wound received in the fight. The irony of this would appeal to the author - the saga writers were great ones for irony - and he would be reminded of that great Irish story he had heard, and he incorporated it into his account. That's how history gets written.

We know that Sigurth did die there, at Skibo, because of his grave. The saga says he was buried "Under a mound on Ekkjalsbakki", that is, on the bank of the Dornoch Firth. We know from other sagas that they called the Dornoch Firth "Ekkjal", their version of the name Oykeall. Ekkjalsbakki, the bank of the Dornoch Firth, was at Ciderhall Farm, between the Firth and the Evelix River, below Skibo.

Ciderhall is a name which has been anglicised and refined ; the older of my neighbours in Birichen call it by its former name, Sidera, and the forestry plantation beside the farm is called Siddera. Sidera and Ciderhall are two versions of the same name, and both can be shown, through numerous spellings over the centuries, to be a corruption of the Norse name Sigurthar-haug, which means "Sigurth's grave-mound".

At the north-east end of the farm there are strange ridges called eskars, left by glaciers after the last Ice Age. They are known locally as "The Skardies", a name taken from the Gaelic name for one of them, "Cnoc Sgardaidh". To cut a long story short, it can be shown that this Gaelic name Cnoc Sgardaidh is also a corruption of that Norse name, Sigurthar-haug "Sigurth's burial mound", this time corrupted by Gaelic speakers. So all those names, Sigurthar-haug, Sidera, Ciderhall, Cnoc Sgardaidh and the Skardies, are all different forms of one and the same name. And among those ridges we find the site known to local people as "The Viking's Grave".

British archaeologists do not agree about this site. Scandinavian experts have no doubts, but British have problems with it. It is an oval site, now flat, with a shallow ditch around it. It measures approximately 16 yards by 13 yards. Originally the central oval would have been heaped up with stones and earth, to a height of five or six feet. I have been there with a specialist in prehistoric archaeology, and he tells me it is a henge monument from about 500 B.C. I have been there with a Pictish expert who says its rounded lines make it quite definitely Pictish. I have taken an 18th century enthusiast there, and he assures me that it is the foundation of a building considerably later than you might expect ... As a Norse enthusiast I am convinced it is a Norse grave, and I will tell you why.

It is not easy to find a comparison for a Norse grave as early as this. We want to look at the grave of a chieftain buried at the end of the 9th century, and as luck would have it, there is one at a place called Borg, on the south coast of Iceland. In Iceland there can be no question of it being prehistoric, as there is no prehistoric archaeology there. The grave at Borg is the burial place of a local leader who emigrated early to Iceland from Norway, was a contemporary of Sigurth, probably a distant relative, and had known Sigurth personally when they were both boys. His name was Skalla-Grim, the father of the saga hero Egill. When he died, Egill buried him in a mound on an oval base, with a shallow ditch around it, of just slightly smaller dimensions than the site at Ciderhall - this is not surprising, since Skalla-Grim was a less important chief than Sigurth. Both Skalla-Grim and Sigurth were almost certainly pagan and would have been buried sitting up, with their possessions around them, perhaps even a horse's head or a sacrificed slave-girl, for company. I

must say I like the idea that here at Ciderhall in the south-east corner of the county we have the uncle of the wee boy buried in the north-western corner - but I must not jump to conclusions.

(Slides of the site, old spellings of the names, and of other Norse grave sites would follow at this point)

There was Sigurth, dead and buried, and the Norsemen suddenly left leaderless, and the Picts seething across the water in Ross. Sigurth's son was useless, and died soon after his father. The title then reverted to the sons of Sigurth's brother Rognvald, but they proved inept. There can be little doubt that the Picts would seize their chance and begin to encroach back into their rightful territory. The settlements here, in Strathfleet and up the hill on the Heights, were not in the front line, but if Skibo had fallen to the Picts, there was no chance of their continuing to live here in peace. There must have been considerable anxiety among the settlers in these years, at the end of the 890's and the turn of the century.

Then, when the legitimate heirs had failed and withdrawn, Rognvald sent an illegitimate son to see what he could do to bring the situation under control. He proved to have most of the qualities of his uncle Sigurth, and was a strong and effective leader for some 30 years. His name was Einar, known always as Torf-Einar - the saga says this was because he introduced the idea of burning peat as fuel, which is absurd since peat had been burnt for centuries. I think it is much more likely that he introduced the idea of building large structures from peat blocks, and it is possible that the names Torbol and Torroble belong to this time, early in the 10th century. Both names seem to be derived from Torf-bol "turf-farm, farm built from peat".

Torf-Einar, like Sigurth, was a large, tall, strong man of exceptional intelligence. He was, however, of a more genial disposition than Sigurth had been, and he was well liked. He was not attractive to look at, being very thin and with only one eye, but he was a man of culture, an excellent poet, and under him the art of court poetry flourished, especially in Orkney. He was Earl from about 900 to 930.

He set about stopping the erosion of his boundaries, and one of his measures was the establishment of garrison-farms in all the glens that could lead the Picts to the north. Ospisdale is one of them, nearest to Skibo, and Spinningdale, Migdale, Swordale, Ausdale are others, with Astle, formerly Asksdale, over the hill to prevent an enemy coming up the Evelix river from attacking Skibo from the rear.

After Einar's death, around 930, chaos followed again, and it was not until near the end of the 10th century

attack on
Skibo from
the rear by
an enemy
coming up
the Evelix
river.

that another Sigurth, this one known as Sigurth the Stout, became Earl. The Picts by now were strong and bold enough to sail up the coast, land in Caithness and attack the Norse settlements there. Sigurth the Stout had to put a stop to this nuisance, which was coming from Easter Ross. He did as his ancestor had done, attacked the Picts and swept them south, this time to the far side of the Beaully Firth, and to keep them there, he settled Ross, including the north side of the Black Isle, with his own people. Dingwall became an important centre for the sale of timber, and the name of the Cromarty Firth was now Sigurthar-sund "the Sound, or deepwater inlet, of Sigurth (the Stout)". This name was later corrupted to Sikkersund, the name of the firth for many centuries.

Norse names in Easter Ross are not thick on the ground but are found in a regular spread, with occasional clusters, e.g. in the Tain/Portmohomack area, where there is a large number of farms apparently of secondary settlers, similar to the cluster below Skibo.

That is the background of the Norse settlement in this area, the background against which the settlers in Rogart lived and against which we must look at their place names.

I will plunge in at the deep end, and have a look at the Great Mystery Name of Rogart itself. There are three related problems here :

1. What does Rogart mean ?
2. What language is it ?
3. Why are there the two distinct pronunciations, Rogart in English, and Rao'ird in Gaelic ?

First we must look at the old spellings, taken from legal documents over the centuries. Note in particular the 1222 form Rothegorth, obviously of great interest, and we must not lose sight of that one. Note that most of the other early spellings accord well with the present-day Gaelic pronunciation, until the end of the 1500's when we find evidence of the two pronunciations existing side by side : Rogartmoir in 1584, Roartmoir in 1590.

Another name which may be relevant here is Rovie, which may have the same first element as Rogart. Professor Watson makes a good case for Rovie being a Pictish name, Ro-mhaigh, where mhaigh is from magh "plain, field, flat land" and ro is an intensitive which is always followed by aspiration of the next consonant, so that we have mh rather than m. Ro intensifies the meaning of the next word, so that this name means "excellent field".

On this pattern, Rogart could possibly be the corresponding contrast, ro-ghoirt. Goirt is an adjective meaning "sour, acid, poor quality", and ro would mean "very" : "very poor (land)". This would give the form used by Gaelic speakers today, with the internal g sound aspirated and eroded away - BUT this does not accord with the 1222 spelling Rothegorth, nor with the modern

pronunciation Rogart. It has been said that this is a spelling pronunciation, but based on what ? Most of the old spellings have no g at all.

Back to the drawing board.

Rothegorth looks like the Pictish (p-Celtic) word roth, which later became rath in Gaelic. It has a number of meanings, and it seems that the oldest was "plain, a piece of cleared land, land which had been interfered with by man in some way". This led to "mound," then to "fortification", to "fort, stronghold, building, village, town", and even to "royal residence". I do wonder if it is coincidence that both Rovie and Rogart were the sites of old churches - it is a very short step from "royal residence" to "sacred building, holy site", and it is at least possible, though not provable, that roth had a local dialect meaning of "church, holy place" peculiar to this area. Compare the word ruigh which in standard Gaelic means "slope, hillside" but in S.E. Sutherland has the specialized meaning "shieling". These local dialect meanings may well be left over from Pictish times.

Anyway, roth could be a Pictish word for some sort of structure, possibly associated with the church. 1222 Rothegorth probably represents the later Norse version of the name which may have started as Pictish Roth-goirt "building of the enclosure" or "building with a wall round it". Gort was an old Celtic word for a wall, walled enclosure or garden.

Along came the Norsemen, and found this name Roth-goirt. Aha, they said, Roth-goirt, a church building. Rationalisation set in. Of course, they said, identifying with words of their own which looked or sounded similar - it is clearly Norse rotha-garth "the building with the cross" or possibly "the enclosure of the cross", either a church with a cross on top or inside it, or a standing cross with a wall round it. This Norse form would give the 1222 Rothegorth and would also yield the modern form Rogart. Note that the Norse word rotha is not normally used in Norse placenames until after about 1100, but in a rationalization it could have been used, as the nearest similar form. It may also be relevant here to quote a spelling used in Gaelic by Rob Donn in the mid-18th century : Roghard. The modern Gaelic form is a genitive after Sgire, which obscures the original name. Rob Donn's spelling appears to agree with both the Gaelic and the English forms, to some extent.

If Rogart was Pictish Roth-goirt, was Rovie perhaps a Roth name, too ? Since Rovie was aspirated in the middle (or we would today be saying Romie), it would seem that it must be Ro-mhaigh, and the two names Rovie and Rogart do not have the same first element after all. But it may be due to analogy with Rovie, Rowie that the Gaelic form of Rogart has internal aspiration. Compare the development of the Sigurthar names : the name (in the genitive) Sigurthar has come to us in three forms :

Sigurthar > Sider-, later Cider
Sigurthar > Sgardaidh, later Skardie
Sigurthar > Sikker.

The first has no g at all, the second has a change in stress and the g preserved, the third has the g/k preserved in the middle. How to account for these variants ? Again, analogy and rationalization have played their parts.

There is another local dialect word sgardaidh, a Gaelic word which means "made of loose, shifting sand banked up". There is a bank with this name near Tain. At Ciderhall, the ridge called Cnoc Sgardaidh is not of loose shifting sand but of extremely hard impacted gravel, and the name is not appropriate. But the name Sigurthar was meaningless to later Gaelic speakers, and some form of it sufficiently like the familiar word sgardaidh for it to be adopted here - the familiar pattern of rationalization.

And Sigurthar-sund was also rationalized, but this time by English- and Dutch-speaking sailors coming into Cromarty with the fishing fleets. To them the name Sigurthar was just as meaningless as to the Gaelic speakers, but to them it sounded like the familiar word Sikker, meaning "safe". So Sigurthar-sund "Sigurth's Sound" became Sikkersund, "Safe Sound".

I suggest this might be a parallel to the development of Rogart : Gaelic speakers aspirated that middle g on the analogy of Rovie, Rowie, which made sense to them ; and they produced the form Rowert, Rowart when the Norse/Scots/English form preserved the original g in Rogart.

That is the best I can do with Rogart. By the mid- 1700's the written form was always Rogart, but written meant almost always written in English, and usually by non-Gaelic speakers. The Gaelic form persisted in documents until into the 17th century, and then became mainly an oral form.

I will run quickly through some of the Norse names in the district, beginning with Siberscross and Aberscross. Neither of these names has anything to do with crosses or the church. Siberscross is Norse, Aberscross is Pictish. Siberscross is from Norse Sigbers-skiki "strip of land beside the river belonging to a man called Sigber". A skiki was a strip of flat land beside a river or a loch, a sort of freshwater machair. It usually gives -scaig, as in the names beside Loch Shin, Overscaig, Arscaig, etc.

Aberscross was Abersgor, from a Pictish word Aber meaning the meeting of two burns or rivers, and sgor meaning a notch or deep cut in something. Here the name means "The place where two burns meet in a deep ravine", an excellent description of Aberscross. And do not listen to people who tell you it has to do with the Pictish church.

The s is a plural - E.t.W. Abersgor > Abersgors
to save writing
it out twice

Fleet is Norse fljot, "tidal river", an appropriate name until the Mound was built in the early 1800's. Ouness was the name of the headland on the south side of the entrance to Loch Fleet, from Norse uva-nes "widgeon-headland". The Norse used uva to describe any small brown wader such as widgeon, knot, dunlin, ringed plover. An appropriate name near Loch Fleet.

Torboll was probably "Turf-farm", "Farm built from peat blocks". The name is sometimes derived from the Norse names Thor or Thorir, but both of these would give an s in the middle : Thorsbol. A form without s would be Thoru-bol, "the farm of Thora", but this is a woman's name. Women had rights of property in Norse society, but it is extremely unlikely that a woman would hold a primary farm in a frontier zone at such an early date. torf-bol is much more likely.

Eiden may be an obscure Pictish name, but could be from Norse heith-endi "Edge of the moor, margin of the uncultivated land". This may well be a rationalization, of course.

Morness is Norse Mor-nes. The meaning is "Headland of the peat moss". Mor meant moorland, as in English, but it early took on the specialized meaning of "Peat for fuel" (or presumably for building). The interesting thing about this name is that it has retained the Norse pronunciation -nes, which usually became -nish in a Gaelic speaking area. The reason may be a Norwegian dialect pronunciation of nes, closer to nas, which would prevent -s from becoming -sh - but this is conjecture. *How is Morness pron. in G?*

Breackue was Norse brekku-voll, "field on a slope". It is the same name as Breakwell, near Migdale, which has been anglicized.

Langwell is lang-voll "long field", a very common name in the north.

Rossal is hrossa-voll "field of horses", that is, of horses in general, not specifically mares or stallions. This farm may have been purely a horse farm, for breeding the horses used by the men of the district. It seems to have been established early in the settlement period. Rossal is the same name as Rosehall, which has been anglicized. *↑ made posh*

Teanga is a Norse word which was borrowed into Gaelic as a full loanword. It comes from Norse tungi or tangi "tongue of land", and although it became a full Gaelic word it is often found in an area where there are Norse settlement names. In this instance it is a tongue of land between two converging burns.

Ramarscaig is probably Hrafna-skiki "strip of land belonging to a man called Hrafni".

Cracail is probably kraka-voll "field of crows".

Croic is sometimes said to be a Gaelic word for a cattle pen, but it is noticeable that wherever the name Croic or Croik is found, there is a sharp bend in the river or burn close by. This indicates that the name is Norse kra-vik "sharp corner, hooky bend".

Grumby is a puzzling name. It looks Norse, and the ending -by usually indicates a primary farm on a prime site (as in Golspie); but Grumby is not on a prime site, being

high and exposed, and the first element is obscure. Is it Norse grim "grim, unpleasant"? This does not go well with -by. Names which begin with Grum- are often associated with a chambered cairn or ancient burial site, sometimes with a stone circle. The word seems to be the Celtic root gruam- which is used to denote a supernatural being of some sort, a ghost or a monster, a spirit of the dead, some presence arising from the nature of the site. It is clearly much older than the Norse period, and I would be inclined to assume that Grumby is one of these sites. It is a place of many ruins, and a chambered cairn may well *have* been one of them.

A name we would expect and would hope to find is a Thing name. A Thing was a district assembly or council, attended by all the people of the district. We would expect to find the meeting-place, which would probably be called Thing-voll "assembly-field" (as in the names Dingwall, and Tynwald), at some place where several glens meet, or several routes converge, to give access to as many inhabitants as possible. Such a site would be exactly where we are tonight, at Rhilochan, where Strathbrora, the Golspie glen and the Rogart settlements meet. And the ideal site for a Thing-voll was by a smallish, steep-sided hill where the Assembly could gather below the Law-speaker and listen to him recite the laws of the community before the necessary communal decisions were taken. Here at Rhilochan there is such a hill, and its name is Cnoc Ard an Tionail. In Gaelic this means "High Hill of the Assembly", the last word being . Tional, "assembly, gathering, council", apparently an entirely Gaelic name. But if this was also a Norse assembly site, the name Thing-voll would yield exactly the same form, tional, when adopted by Gaelic speakers; I am convinced that this was in fact a Norse Thing-voll, and tionail is the Gaelic rationalization of the Norse name. ~~It is~~ fortuitous that the two words have almost the same meaning?

The list of Norse names in S.E. Sutherland shows that the density is not great but the spread is wide. It is not the blanket coverage we find in Caithness, Orkney, Shetland, Lewis and Skye. Does the thinness of the spread indicate that co-existence with the native Picts, and later with the Gaels was always somewhat uneasy? As this part of Sutherland is considered to be the most fertile and to enjoy the best climate, we might expect a more fully developed settlement pattern. The lack of this has not really been explained. There is no apparent reason why further settlement should not have taken place after the first wave which was inhibited by the dangers of settling in a frontier zone. Once Easter Ross was settled, S.E. Sutherland could have become a desirable area, but evidently did not. The reason remains obscure.

It should be borne in mind that when the Norse period came to an end - and there were still Norse speakers in Scotland as late as 1400 (apart from those in the

Northern Isles, who spoke Norn until the 17th century)-
the Norsemen did not just pack up and go home, as the
Romans did when their empire fell. This was not a sudden
catastrophic event : the Norsemen were intermarried with
the Gaels, the Norse blood was not being renewed from
Norway, and gradually Gaelic

blood came to dominate, and Norse influence waned, until
all that was left was the Norse legacy to Scotland :
place names, personal names and quirks of speech, plus a
strong influence on domestic architecture and the world
of boats. Both the Gaelic and English languages were
affected by the Norsemen, but their most obvious and
lasting contribution was their placenames.