

# FROM DÁL RIATA TO THE *GALL-GHÀIDHEIL*

Andrew Jennings and Arne Kruse

The distinctive pattern of Norse settlement names in western Scotland, together with two seemingly unrelated historical events, the disappearance of Dál Riata from contemporary records and the mysterious appearance of a new ethnic group, the *Gall-Ghàidheil*,<sup>1</sup> in the Irish annals, appear to be inter-linked phenomena. By examining the extent and nature of Norse place-names it becomes possible to suggest a geographical origin for the *Gall-Ghàidheil*, which we would suggest was the territory of Dál Riata.

## *Gall-Ghàidheil in Contemporary Sources*

In the mid-ninth century, the shadowy group of people called *Gall-Ghàidheil* make a brief appearance in the contemporary Irish annals. The *Annals of Ulster* (*AU*) refer to them on three occasions while the *Chronicon Scotorum* (*CS*) provides an additional reference to them in 858:

(1) *AU* 856: Cogadh mor eter gennti ocus Mael Sechlainn co nGall-ghoidhelaib leis.

[Great warfare between the heathens and Mael Sechnaill, supported by the *Gall-Ghàidheil*.]

(2) *AU* 856: Roiniudh mor re nAedh m. Neill for Gallgaeidhelu i nGlinn Foichle co ralad leis ar dimhor diib.

<sup>1</sup> Here in Scottish Gaelic spelling.

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**Abstract:** Taking a multidisciplinary approach, including onomastics and historical analysis, this paper will present the hypothesis that Ketill Flatnefr was a real warlord from Sogn who, at the beginning of the Viking Age, conquered the Kingdom of Dál Riata. The direct result was the appearance of the *Gall-Ghàidheil* in Ireland and the report of their activities in the Irish Annals. A further result was that the culture of Dál Riata was reflected in Icelandic traditions surrounding Ketil's family in Iceland. The name Dál Riata may even lie behind the Icelandic district of Dalir.

**Keywords:** Hebrides, Sogn, onomastics, Scotland, Gaelic

[Aed son of Niall inflicted a great rout on the *Gall-Ghàidheil* in Glenn Foichle and a vast number of them were slaughtered by him.]

(3) *AU* 857: Roiniudh re nImar agus re nAmlaiph for Caittil Find cona Gallgaedhelaibh hi tiribh Muman.

[Ímar and Amlaibh inflicted a rout on Ketill the Fair and his *Gall-Ghàidheil* in the lands of Munster.]

(4) *CS* 858: Maidm ria Cerball & ria n-Iomar a ccrich Aradh Tíre for Cinel Fiachach go Gall-Gaoidhealaibh Leithe Cuinn .i. .cccc. ar se míle a lin side.

[Cerball and Ímar inflicted a defeat on the border of Ara Tíre on Cenél Fiachach with the *Gall-Ghàidheil* of Leth Cuinn to the number of six thousand four hundred.]

In ninth-century Ireland *gaill*, amongst other terms, was being used for the Scandinavian foreigners who had become such an unwelcome feature of daily life. The name is one of a number of related terms used by the Irish in the 850s as they began to distinguish between different Scandinavian fleet-borne groups, others being *Finnngaill* 'Fair Foreigners / Norwegians' and *Dubngaill* 'Black Foreigners / Danes'. However, in the case of the *Gall-Ghàidheil*, *gall* is being used as an adjective, which suggests *Gall-Ghàidheil* could mean 'Scandinavianized-Gael'. The term could also refer to a mixed bunch of Gaels and Norsemen fighting together in one band under a common leader. The former meaning appears to be the one understood by a twelfth-century interpolator in the *Fragmentary Annals* (*FM* 856):

Áed, king of Ailech, the king of greatest prowess in his time, gave battle to the fleet of the Gall-Ghàidheil (that is, they are Irish, and foster-children of the Norse, and sometimes they are even called Norsemen).

And again under 858 when he describes them as 'men [Gaels] who had forsaken their baptism and they used to be called Norsemen, for they had the customs of the Norse, and had been fostered by them'.

Although these interpolations from such a late source are poor evidence for the behavior of the *Gall-Ghàidheil* they show what the name implied to a Middle-Irish speaker: Gaels who had been in intimate contact with the Norse and had adopted their customs. However, it is unlikely that they had forsaken their baptism because *AU* 856 refers to the *Gall-Ghàidheil* fighting *gennti*, or heathen.

### Activities

The few mentioned annal entries show that the *Gall-Ghàidheil* were present in Ireland for at least two years and their activities extended from Ulster, Glenelly,

near Strabane, in the north, to Munster, Co. Tipperary (*Ara Tíre*), in the south. Two facts about them come through clearly: they appear to have been present in large numbers, and militarily they were singularly unsuccessful. They may have been pursuing a series of disconnected raids throughout Ireland, although there is no association of their name with attacks on churches or monasteries, or, as they are twice mentioned in alliance with Irish forces, they may have been following a coordinated policy, perhaps as mercenaries. The *Gall-Ghàidheil* had the same enemies as Mael Sechnaill, the formidable king of the Clann Cholámáin, the major dynasty of the Southern Ui Néill, having a particular aversion to the Vikings of Dublin. The major preoccupations of the last decade of Mael Sechnaill's life were the conquest of Munster and countering the threats to his kingship posed by his most serious rivals, Aed Finnliath, king of the Northern Ui Néill, and the Scandinavians of Dublin, led by Ímar and Amlaib. Their actions become coherent if they are seen as supporting Mael Sechnaill as mercenaries in these endeavours (Downham 2008, 17).

### Origin

The annal entries do not tell us where the *Gall-Ghàidheil* came from. They appear out of the blue and disappear just as mysteriously, until the term re-emerges in 1034, when both the *Annals of Ulster* and the *Annals of Tigernach* record that 'Suibne son of Cinaed, king of Gall-Ghàidheil, died'. In the twelfth century the term is used to denominate the dominant ethnic group in south-west Scotland, and the modern name 'Galloway' is derived from this ethnonym (Woolf 2007, 253; Clancy 2008). Alex Woolf (2007, 297–98) compares the shifting ethnic borders of the south-west of Scotland in this period with the ethnic complexities of the Balkans and the spreading of the *Gall-Ghàidheil* with the success of the politically fluid and decentralized early Slavs. Clearly, the 'home' of the *Gall-Ghàidheil*, when we first meet them in the ninth century, need not be coterminous with twelfth-century Galloway. (The subsequent association of the *Gall-Ghàidheil* with Galloway, the region which carries their name, is comprehensively covered in Clancy 2008.<sup>2</sup>)

<sup>2</sup> Due to the fact that both articles were initially intended as contributions towards a conference report on the *Gall-Ghàidheil*, we have had mutual access to each other's articles through various stages of the editing process. We are grateful to Professor Clancy for allowing this.

As either a war-band of Scandinavianized Gaels, with Norse leaders, or just a mixed band of Gaels and Norse fighters, the *Gall-Ghàidheil* must have come from an area where both Gaels and Norse were free to become warriors (Green 1998, 85–87). Prior to the 850s, such war-bands are unlikely to have existed in Ireland because, despite the extensive Irish annalistic evidence, no reports exist of Scandinavian settlement there prior to the establishment of the first Scandinavian bases in 841. If they had originated on Irish soil one might have expected the annalist to have linked them with some Irish tribal group, as in *AU* 847 when a group of Irishmen take the opportunity to copy the behaviour of the Norse, and they are identified and villified by the annalist:

Toghal Innsi Locha Muinnreair la Mael Sechnaill for fianlach mar di maccaibh bais Luigne & Galeng ro batar oc indriudh na tuath more gentilium.

[Mael Sechnaill destroyed the Island of Loch Muinremor, overcoming there a large band of sons of death of Luigni and Gailenga, who had been plundering the territories in the manner of the heathens.]

Instead, there is no attempt to link the *Gall-Ghàidheil* to any known tribal group and they are given the generic title of *Gàidheil*, which suggests they could not be tied into the intricate pattern of tribal kingdoms. The *Gàidheil* settled in Alba offer an alternative. Dál Riata experienced a good deal of early Norse activity. Alex Woolf (2007, 64, 100), in his recent interpretation of the evidence, claims that Dál Riata was occupied from *c.* 793 to 806 by the Norse, whom he identifies as the *Hörðar* from Hordaland on the west coast of Norway. Actual Norse settlement in western Scotland may have been taking place from around 825, the last recorded date of an attack on Iona during the ninth century (Jennings 1998, 41). However, the settlers probably came from Sogn, also on the Norwegian west coast (see below). The logic of this position is that a resident Norse population would tend to deter later raiders. The kingdom may have rallied briefly under its native kings, until Aed son of Boanta was killed in 839. Woolf suggests the Frankish chronicler, Prudentius of Troyes, under 847, recorded the conquest of the island portion of Dál Riata and the effective ending of its existence: ‘the Northmen also got control of the islands all around Ireland and stayed there without encountering any resistance from anyone’ (Nelson 1991, 65; here quoted after Woolf 2007, 100).

### **Caittil Find / Ketill Flatnefr**

In *AU* 857 the leader of the *Gall-Ghàidheil* is given as *Caittil Find*. E. W. Robertson (1862, 44) was the first to identify this historical Caittil Find with the

legendary *Ketill Flatnefr*, a figure from Icelandic tradition and ancestor of several important Icelandic families. If the identification is correct, the Icelandic material could be used to further our understanding of the *Gall-Ghàidheil*, their origins, and their nature. Unfortunately, the identification has recently been heavily criticized by Alex Woolf (2007, 296), largely on the basis of inconsistencies between the contemporary Irish sources and the later Icelandic material, for example, and most noticeably, the difference between the nicknames of *Caittil* and *Ketill*. However, if the Icelandic stories are viewed in their proper context and regarded as genealogical and legendary traditions current in twelfth-century Iceland, these problems lose some of their weight. Over time traditions can easily be mistaken, misinterpreted, or transferred. In spite of this they should not be summarily written off as void of any historical value.

The Icelandic tradition around Ketill and his daughter Auðr is found in several central sources and must have been first written down by Ari Þorgilsson the Learned (1067–1148), Iceland's prominent first medieval chronicler, responsible for *Íslendingabók* and most likely substantial parts of *Landnámabók*. The fact that Ari is the likely source for the lives of Ketill and Auðr (also referred to as *Unnr*, written *Öpr*) gives certain validity to the information. Ari was a direct descendant of Ketill and Auðr, and he grew up at Helgafell on the Breiðafjörður, where Auðr first landed and eventually settled not far away. Ari's great-grandmother, Guðrun Osvidóttir, central in *Laxdæla saga*, lived to be a very old woman and probably died only a few years before he was born and brought up in her home by Guðrun's son, Gellir Þorkelsson, a prominent Icelandic leader (Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson 1969, 22–23; see also the comments in Finnur Jónsson 1930). Guðrun was married to Þorkell Eyolfsson, whose great-grandfather was Áleif feilan, Auðr djúpaúðga Ketilsdóttir's grandson. Ari's family history thus will have passed through enough generations to become muddled and mistaken in parts, but even so it is likely to contain other parts that can be close to the historical truth.

The identification of Caittil Find with Ketill Flatnefr has had its advocates; W. F. Skene (1880, I, 311–12) accepted it and A. P. Smyth (1977, 118–26; 1984) made a strong argument in its favour. However, other scholars have been less convinced. A. O. Anderson (1922, 315) believed there was not enough evidence. A. Woolf (2007, 296) believes the evidence is weak, although he does not actually claim that the identification is impossible. He points to the nickname difference, the lack of a suggestion in Icelandic sources that Ketill was active in Ireland, and the story that Ketill's daughter was married to Áleifr hinn hvíti, whereas Caittil and Amlaib were enemies. Donnchadh Ó Corráin (1978–79, 301) criticized the idea that a figure named in a thirteenth-century saga could be assumed to be the

same as a man of a similar name in southern Ireland in 857. Claire Downham (2008, 18) has agreed with this view. However, why Ketill should be singled out when other ninth-century figures in Icelandic tradition such as Kjarval Írakonung and Áleifr hinn hvíti are happily identified as the Cerball of Osraige and Amlaib king of Dublin from the annals is not explained by the critics. What makes the identification of these characters defensible is similar to that of Ketill/Caittil.

Ketill's floruit in the Icelandic sources seems to be equivalent to that of Caittil Find. According to the traditions preserved in *Landnámabók*, Ketill's daughter Þórunn hynna married Helgi inn magri, the grandson of Kjarval Írakonung (Cerball of Osraige) and his other daughter, Auðr djúpaúðga, married Áleifr hinn hvíti who won *Dyflinni* (Amlaib of Dublin). Of course, the fact that Ketill is associated with these figures, also draws him into the same political sphere as Caittil Find, namely Irish politics of the mid-ninth century. The traditions surrounding Ketill's family also fit the *Gall-Ghàidheil* profile: some are given Gaelic nick-names and some are Christian. Helgi bjólan, his son, has a Gaelic nickname *beolán* 'little mouth'. His great-grandson Áleif feilan, has the Gaelic nickname *faelán* 'little wolf'. Örlygr, his nephew, was supposedly fostered with a bishop Patrek in the *Sudreyjar* and built a church dedicated to Columba at Esjuberg. Ketill hinn fíflski 'the foolish', his grandson, was probably given his nickname because he was a Christian. His daughter Auðr, easily the most important female in *Landnámabók*, raised a cross and requested to be buried below the high-water mark because she did not want to be buried in unconsecrated ground in heathen Iceland.

Difficulties in the identification, such as the difference in the nicknames, or the apparent friendly relations between Ketill, Kjarval, and Áleifr (although marriages in the ninth century do not necessarily imply friendship between rulers), can be put down to the legendary nature of the sagas. In legendary tales details can be mixed up or forgotten. There is no exception in Ketill's family; according to *Eyrbyggja saga*, Björn, Ketill's son, was fostered on a jarl Kjallak in Jämtland, which is unlikely, as he has a Gaelic name. We would suggest that the difference between the nicknames of Ketill and Caittil is either a reflection of how two different physical features were found characteristic in the two ethnic milieus he moved in, or it is simply down to one of those errors in transmission. There is a possibility that the nickname *inn hvíti* 'the white', applied to Áleifr/Amlaib in Icelandic tradition, could originally have been borne by Caittil Find. It is clearly not impossible for the same figure to bear more than one nickname. Guðrøðr, who was instrumental in founding the Kingdom of Mann and the Isles, was called Goffraigh *Meranach* 'not right in the head' in his obit in *AU* 1095, but in tradition he is known as Goraidh *Crobhan* 'white hand'.

Ketill's link with ninth-century Ireland is made clear by the marriages, although there is, of course, a possibility that they actually did not happen. In general it is fair to say that the twelfth-century Icelanders remembered many of the illustrious names but not much of the historical details of the ninth and tenth centuries. These few memories were often reformulated into the legendary material of a family saga, and when one of Ketill's daughters, Auðr djúpaúðga, married King Áleifr hinn hvíti and another, Þórunn hynna, married Helgi inn magri, grandson of Kjarval Írakonung, it may well be exactly that: namely, legendary. This is a corollary to what happened in the *Völsunga saga*, where the wars between the Goths and the Huns of the fourth and fifth centuries were converted into family relationships and tragedy. The history of that period cannot be accurately reconstructed from the saga, but the names of Atli and Jörmunrekr were real enough.

Still, the tradition around Ketill is unusual in many ways. Not only is it from the family tradition of one of Iceland's most respected medieval chroniclers. The survival of Celtic names and nick-names over about 250 years clearly shows there is genuine tradition underlying these stories. Particularly interesting in this regard is the figure of Erpr, son of a Jarl Meldún of Scotland, who was a freedman of Auðr. He bears a Pictish name (Drust son of Erpr was a legendary king recorded in the *Pictish Chronicle*, see Skene 1867) which could have been current in the mid-ninth century, but not in the twelfth. From him sprang an Icelandic family, the Erplings.

What does the Icelandic tradition say about Ketill and what value can be placed on it? Bearing in mind the earlier comments about the errors of transmission which may have crept into the Icelandic accounts, perhaps we can mine a couple of likely historical nuggets from the legendary material.

Firstly, Ketill is clearly linked with Sogn in Norway. This is extremely interesting, because the archaeological evidence shows that this is the area of Norway whence the earliest raids originated (Wamers 1997, 12–13). *Landnámabók*, regarded as the most reliable of the sources, claims Ketill was the son of a great *hersir* 'lord' Björn Buna, son of the chieftain Wether-Grim of Sogn. *Laxdæla saga*, probably the least reliable source, which places him in Romsdal, still reports his father was Björn Buna. Romsdal touches the region of the north-west coast of Norway where the very earliest insular material (i.e. from the British Isles) is found in graves from c. 800 (Figure 1).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> There is a striking absence of insular finds from Hordaland, both from the outset of the Viking Age and from later in the ninth century. This speaks against the hypothesis that the early Viking contact with Scotland was by *hördar* (Woolf 2007).

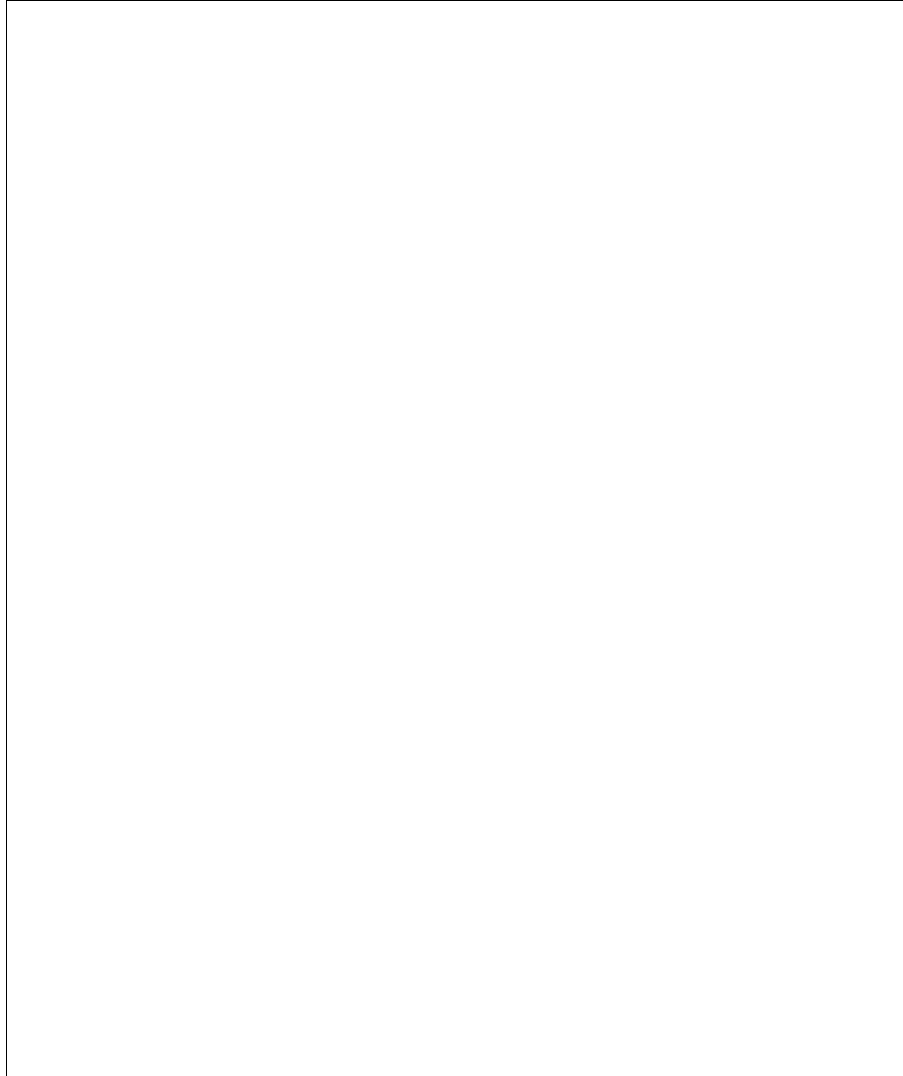


Figure 1. Insular artefacts in Norway *c.* 800  
(from Wamers 1997, 13, with kind permission).

Secondly, he was contemporary with and involved in some way with Cerball of Osraige and Amlaib of Dublin.

Thirdly, he conquered territory in the Hebrides and the west of Scotland. According to *Landnámabók* 13, 'hann lagði undir sig allar Suðureyjar og gerðist



höfðingi yfir' (he conquered the entire Hebrides, and became chieftain over them). *Eyrbyggja saga*, ch. 1, claims:

En er Ketill kom vestur um haf átti hann þar nokkurar orustur og hafði jafnan sigur. Hann lagði undir sig Suðureyjar og gerðist höfðingi yfir. Sættist hann þá við hina stærstu höfðingja fyrir vestan haf og batt við þá tengdir en sendi austur aftur herinn.

[After having landed in the west, Ketill fought a number of battles, and won them all. He conquered and took charge of the Hebrides, making peace and alliances, with all the leading men there in the west.] (Hermann Pálsson and Edwards 1989, 25)

*Laxdæla saga*, ch. 4, seems to have a slightly different tradition:

Ketill flatnefur kom skipi sínu við Skotland og fékk góðar viðtökur af tignum mönnum, því að hann var frægur maður og stórættaður, og buðu honum þann ráðakost þar sem hann vildi hafa. Ketill staðfestist þar og annað frændlið hans nema Þorsteinn dótturson hans. Hann lagðist þegar í hernað og herjaði víða um Skotland og fékk jafnan sigur. Síðan gerði hann sætt við Skota og eignaðist hálf Skotland og varð konungur yfir.

[Ketill Flatnose made land in Scotland, and was well received by men of rank there, for he was famous and of noble birth; they invited him to stay on his own terms. Ketill settled there with all his kinsmen except his grandson Thorstein the Red. Thorstein went to war at once. He raided far and wide throughout Scotland and was everywhere victorious. Later he made a treaty with the Scots and became king over the half of Scotland they ceded to him.] (Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson 1969, 51)

Fourthly, his family was influenced heavily by Gaelic culture before they left to settle in Iceland some time after 874, the traditional date for the beginning of Icelandic settlement. Ketill's nephew Orlyg Hrappsson is explicitly linked to the Celtic church of the Hebrides and is a follower of St Columba when he settles in Iceland (*Landnámabók* 15).<sup>4</sup> Likewise, Ketill's daughter Auðr is described in the Icelandic sources as a fervent Christian when she eventually ends up in Dalir by Breiðafjörður in the north-west of Iceland.

If we regard these legendary traditions about Ketill in the light of his identification with the Caittil Find of the 850s, we can present a reasonably coherent picture of events. At some point in the early ninth century a war-leader from the Sogn area in Norway, where the earliest insular material in Norse graves is found, established himself in the west of Scotland, conquering some or all of the Hebrides (the extent of his conquest may have been exaggerated). Perhaps this event was linked to the 847 annal entry, although it may have been a generation earlier,

<sup>4</sup> The comment in *Landnámabók* (23–24) that Orlyg was fostered by 'the Holy Bishop Patrick of the Hebrides' should not automatically be written off as pure fantasy or confusion with St Patrick of Ireland.

around 825 (Ketill's daughter possibly married Áleifr hinn hvíti). This leader appears in a contemporary source as Caittil Find, leading a mixed ethnic force of *Gall-Ghàidheil* in Ireland in the 850s, a term created by the Irish to describe a new phenomenon, Gaels and Norse fighting alongside one another.

We would like to suggest the real possibility that Ketill actually took control of Dál Riata with its islands. Hence the veneration of Columba amongst his family, the tradition in *Laxdæla saga* that his grandson Þorsteinn became king over half of Scotland (perhaps a transferred tradition about Ketill himself), and a very peculiar correspondence between the Norse name for Argyll, *Dalir* 'Dales', and the name of the area in Iceland settled by Ketill's daughter Auðr djúpaúðga.

*Orkneyinga saga*, ch. 100, reports:

[Sumarliði] hafði ríki í Dölum í Skotlandsfjörðum. Sumarliði átti Ragnhildi, dóttur Óláfs Suðreyjakonungs bitlings. Þessi váru börn þeira: Dufgall konungr, Rögnvaldr ok Engus; þat er kölluð Dalverjaætt.

[(Sumarliði) had dominion in *Dalir*, in Scotland's Firth. Sumarliði had married Ragnhild, the daughter of Olaf Morsel, the king of the Hebrides. These were their children: king Dugald, Ronald, and Angus (Engull). That is called the family of the *Dalverjar* (Dale-dwellers).] (Anderson 1922, I, 255)

Sumarliði is Somerled, ancestor of the MacDonaldis and *Ri Airer Goidel* 'King of Argyll'. It was pointed out by Skene (1880, I, 390) that the name *Dalir* was likely to be linked to that of Dál Riata. Obviously, the names have different meanings, but the possibility clearly exists that this is a Norse rationalization of the existing Gaelic name, especially as it refers to the district of Argyll, the later name for the territory of Dál Riata. For the Norse, the name *Dalir* (indef. pl. of *dabr*, m. 'valley, dale') had meaningful semantic content; one just has to consider the great number of dales which exist in Argyll, for example, in Kintyre: Carradale, Torrisdale, Saddell, Ugadale. All of them are today names of settlements of a primary character carrying the name of the distinct topographical features they occupy (Jennings 2004; Kruse 2004).

What is most intriguing is that when Auðr, as one of the most prominent early settlers in Iceland, took a large region in Breiðafjörður in western Iceland for herself, it was called Dalir or Dalaland: 'Auðr nam öll Dalalönd í innanverðum firðinum frá Dögurðará til Skraumuhlaupsár' (*Landnámabók* 95). This is the present day Dalasysla or Dalabyggð, where once Auðr gave land to her companions and freedmen. The two similar-sounding area names *Dál Riata* in Scotland and *Dalir* in Iceland may of course be pure coincidence; of all the hilly regions of Scotland and Iceland these two areas, both linked to Auðr Ketilsdóttir's family, just happen to be given similar names. There are, however, other place-names in the

Dalasylla area which indicate that there is more than chance at play. In general, commemorative names are highly unusual in a medieval setting (Kruse 2007); for instance, *Landnámabók*, the epic inventory of the early settlements of Iceland, has no clear example of an Icelandic farm which is named after the farm the settlers left behind in Norway. Furthermore, and in spite of the fact that a substantial part of the Icelandic gene-pool carries Celtic markers, Celtic-related place-names are rare in Iceland. However, in the Breiðafjörður area there is an indisputably nostalgic Celtic precedent for quite a few names. Several islands are called *Írland* 'Ireland' and another is called *Pjattland* 'Pictland' and on the north side of the fjord is *Pjattasteinn* 'Boulder of the Picts'; a bay is *Dímunarvogur* (*dímun* is a borrowing from Irish found elsewhere in Norse North Atlantic place-names); and north of Breiðafjörður are *Patreksfjörður* and *Trostansfjörður*,<sup>5</sup> commemorating two Celtic saints (Hermann Pálsson 2000, 35). It is just possible that Auðr or someone else in her family attempted to re-create the lost territory of Dál Riata in western Iceland in the form of nostalgic place-names.

### ***Gall-Ghàidheil* in Bute**

We would like to reiterate that the identification of Ketill Flatnefr with Caittil Find, leader of the *Gall-Ghàidheil*, should not be dismissed lightly, and, further, that certain traditions surrounding Ketill's family imply a link with the Gaels of Dál Riata. We believe this is not a coincidence. Corroboration of a direct link between Dál Riata and the *Gall-Ghàidheil* is provided by an entry in the Irish text the *Martyrology of Tallaght*: 'Blaani epscopi Cinn Garad i nGallgaedelaib' (*MT*, 62) ([Feast of] Bláán, bishop of Kingarth in *Gall-Ghàidheil*). The entry is a reference to St Bláán (St Blane) of Kingarth in Bute. This text provides a firm geographical location for the *Gall-Ghàidheil*, namely the island of Bute in the Firth of Clyde, which was part of the territory of the Cenél Comgaill of Dál Riata. Fraser (2009, 157) suggests that Little Dunagoil close by Kingarth was their royal centre.

The *Martyrology of Tallaght* is found in manuscripts of twelfth-century date and later. Ó Riain (1990) has dated the core text to the 820s or early 830s, while Dumville (2002) has argued it is probably a bit later, it being impossible to be certain of a date before *c.* 900. Clancy (2008, 30) argues that there is no likelihood

<sup>5</sup> These references to Picts and Pictish saints do not weaken the case for a relationship between Dalir and Dál Riata. For much of the eighth and early ninth centuries Dál Riata was under Pictish suzerainty.

that the entry which mentions the *Gall-Ghàidheil* is any later than the early tenth century.

We agree with Clancy (2008, 30) that this is a profoundly significant piece of evidence and with his assessment that Bute was considered within *Gall-Ghàidheil* territory not much later than 900, that is, not more than fifty years after the appearance of the *Gall-Ghàidheil* in the Irish annals. In other words, what had been a part of Dál Riata was now considered, in a contemporary Irish source, to be part of the lands of the *Gall-Ghàidheil*.

There are a number of Norse place-names on Bute which indicate Norse settlement (Clancy 2008), and the name *Dunagoil* (*Dún nan gall* ‘Fort of the Foreigners’ or *Dún a’ Ghaill* ‘fort of the foreigner’) seems to indicate that the Norse took over the *caput* of the Cenél Comgaill. Its original name has been lost. A bronze-capped lead weight of clear Norse character and late ninth-/tenth-century date, for use with a portable balance, has been recovered from a partially excavated settlement on the coast at Little Dunagoil (Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998, 98; a further archaeological frame for the area is drawn up in the recent report on nearby *Inchmarnock* (Lowe 2008)). In a speculative vein, could this have been where Caittil/Ketill was based? Where better for a conquering lord to establish himself than the stronghold of a previous ruler. As well as being *i n Gallgaedelaib*, was Bute in the *Sudreyjar*, which feature so strongly in the traditions concerning Ketill’s family? Duncan and Brown (1956–57, 192) claimed Bute was part of the ‘Isles’, namely the territory ruled by the Manx kings at some time, but that it was not part of the *Sudreyjar*. However, they are surely wrong; Bute was part of the diocese of Sodor created in *c.* 1100. Therefore, from an early twelfth-century Norse perspective, at the time *Landnámabók* was being compiled, Bute would have been seen as a *Sudrey*.

### *Place-names and the Gall-Ghàidheil*

We have argued several times (Jennings and Kruse 2005, 2009) that the onomastic evidence shows that there was great variation in the Norse impact on western Scotland, with the islands being more strongly affected than the coastal strip. There was a region where a native pre-Norse society with its own place-names survived and a region where the pre-Norse population with its place-names seems to have disappeared. A Gaelic-speaking society survived within the mainland territories of Dál Riata, and probably on Mull, more clearly on Arran and Bute, but apparently not on Islay, Coll, and Tiree, whereas the pre-Norse society of Skye and the Outer

Hebrides, which we have argued was Pictish, did not survive the Norse onslaught. Its onomastic signature disappeared, being completely replaced by Norse (Gaelic therein being a post-Norse phenomenon). We would like to revisit these arguments in some detail with reference to the question of the genesis of the *Gall-Ghàidheil*.

### Two Zones of Norse Settlement

Based on the distribution of Scandinavian place-names, Western Scotland can be divided roughly into two zones (see Figure 2). The outer zone has a western and insular aspect, consisting of the Western Isles, Skye, Tiree, Coll, Mull, and Islay. Here there are settlements bearing Norse names comprising topographical elements such as *vík*, *nes*, and *dalr*, and here there are settlements with habitative naming elements, such as *bólstaðr*, *staðir*, and *setr*. The inner zone lies to the east of the outer zone and consists of Arran, Bute, Kintyre, and the western mainland littoral. Here, as in the outer zone, there are settlements with Norse topographical names. However, there are very few settlements bearing Norse habitative elements. W. H. F. Nicolaisen (1976)

identified a few names in *bólstaðr* in the western mainland districts, such as *Ullapool*, and a larger number in Sutherland. However, these names may be *ból* ‘farm, settlement’ or *bæli* ‘farm’ (Gammeltoft 2001, 314–15). Although the implications of these elements have not yet been explored, it is in this context sufficient to say there are only very few in the relevant area of our study.

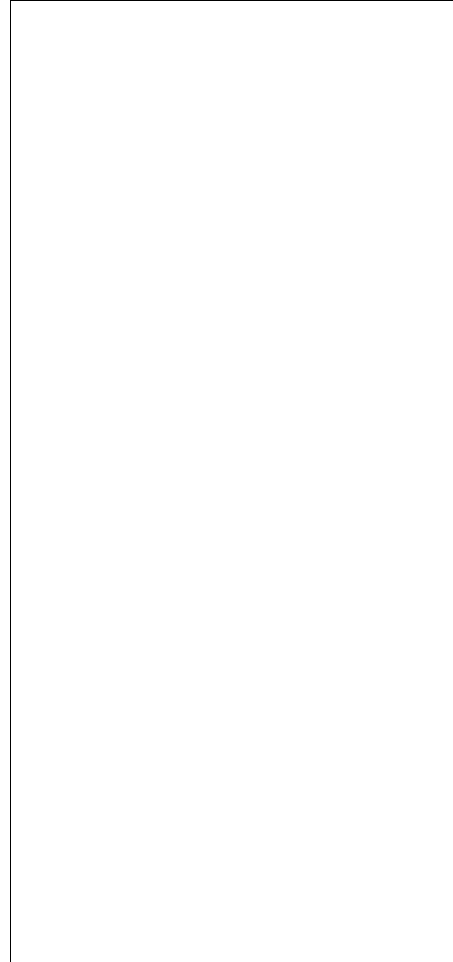


Figure 2. The two zones of the west coast of Scotland. The squares represent place-names with the Norse element *bólstaðr* (adapted after Gammeltoft 2001, 81). The extent of eighth-century Dál Riata is indicated as a box.

W. H. F. Nicolaisen was the first to identify this interesting distribution pattern, best explained in his book *Scottish Place-names* (1976, 87–96), which he used to establish a model of the chronology and intensity of Norse settlement in Scotland. According to Nicolaisen, the area with habitative Norse naming elements, that is, the outer zone, can be described as *the* Norse settlement area. The distribution of the habitative element *bólstaðr* indicates, he claims, the extent of Norse settlement in the Hebrides (see Figure 2), while the distribution of the element *dalr*, where it extends beyond the distribution of *bólstaðr*, shows ‘the sphere of Norse influence’, *not* settlement (see Figure 3). His argument is that *bólstaðr*, as a habitative element, specifically indicates a settlement, while *dalr*, as a topographical element, primarily indicates a topographical feature and may never have been used to indicate a settlement. Nicolaisen believes the existence of these Norse topographical names in the inner zone is due to the influence of Norse seasonal visitors, making use of grassland, timber, and fish on the mainland, and bringing local Gaels with them so that the Norse names could be passed on to the native Gaelic population.

We have on other occasions argued in detail against this view from a theoretical perspective (Kruse 2004) and in a local study of the place-names of Kintyre (Jennings 2004). Nicolaisen’s distribution maps are very important in that they help delineate two zones of Norse activity. However, the implications drawn from the division have been wrongly interpreted. Both zones experienced Scandinavian settlement. The difference between the zones indicates a difference in the development of the settlement, primarily due to the nature of the relationship between the Scandinavians and the native population.

The underlying premise upon which Nicolaisen’s hypothesis is founded is implausible, namely that Norse seasonal visitors could have left behind a large number of Norse topographical names on the mainland without having settled there. Resident farming populations hardly ever adopt place-names from itinerant ones (Kruse 1998). Further, the idea that only habitative naming elements (such as *setr*, *staðir*, *bólstaðr*) indicate Norse settlements is rapidly losing support. In Norway settlements with topographical names without the definite article, such as *Vik*, *Dal*, *Nes*, as a rule of thumb indicate the oldest, richest, and most prestigious farms within a given area. There is now increasing agreement among scholars that topographical names were also used in the Scandinavian colonies to designate settlements, indeed the very first settlements. (See e.g. Crawford 1987, 111 and Barbara E. Crawford in Crawford 1995, 10–13.)

Already in the 1950s Hugh Marwick recognized the importance of settlements with topographical names, which, he said, in Orkney ‘have undoubtedly to be

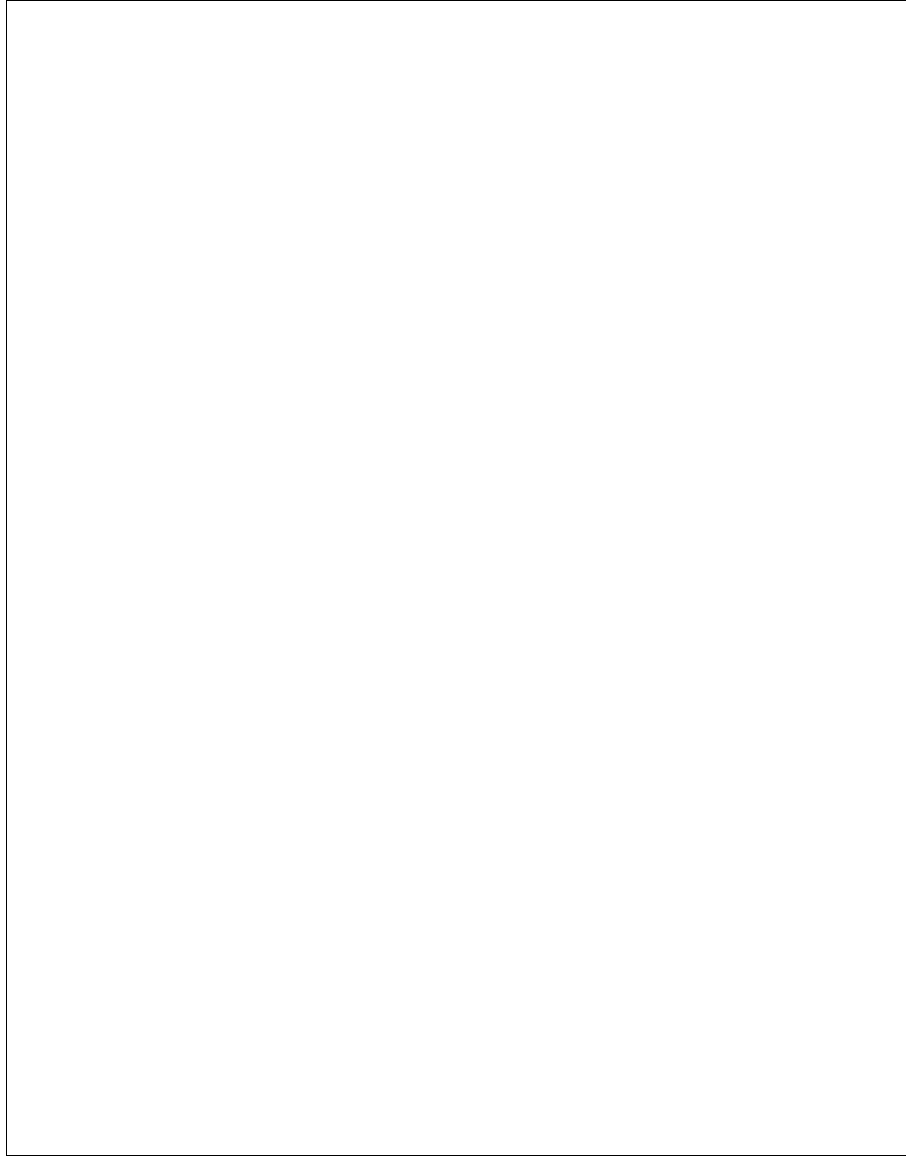


Figure 3. Place-names with the Norse element *-dalr* in Scotland  
(Nicolaisen 1976, 95, with kind permission).

classed among the very earliest settlements' (1952, 248). With the application of archaeological, geographical, and fiscal methods, scholars have been confirming this. Lindsay Macgregor (1986) shows that this is the case in the Faroes and

Shetland. David Olson (1983), in a multidisciplinary study of the settlements in certain areas of Lewis, Skye, and Islay, concluded that the settlements with Norse topographical names were amongst the oldest and first established by the Norse. In addition, Ian Fraser (1995, 98, fig. 21) implicitly regards the Norse topographical names in Wester Ross as referring to settlements. Fraser lists forty Norse names (including one single habitative name, *Ullapool*) from this section of the coastline and twelve Gaelic names, most of which he regards as post-medieval (97).

To recapitulate, the zones do not define areas of settlement and influence, because the Norse population established itself in both the inner and the outer zone. They used prominent topographical features to name their primary settlement sites in a fashion that would also indicate important settlements in Norway. The frequency and distribution of Norse names show that this initial land-taking must have been intense and surely deeply disruptive to the local population wherever it took place in Scotland. A recent investigation of the place-name inventory of Islay shows that the initial Norse settlement on this southern Hebridean island was as intense as the Norse settlement on Lewis. The fact that there are now considerably fewer Norse place-names on Islay compared to Lewis is due to land reorganization in the course of the last four hundred years (Macniven 2006).

The importance of the division into two zones, however, becomes clear when habitative generics are considered. Habitative generics generally appear to be attached to secondary settlements. The habitative element *bólstaðr* has been studied in detail by Peder Gammeltoft (2001). With the use of linguistic and extralinguistic criteria, he finds that the element is likely to have been productive in Shetland, Orkney, and the Hebrides from the end of the ninth century. This is one hundred years after the first registered Viking raids on the west coast of Scotland, and a couple of generations after the likely land-taking period. Therefore, *bólstaðr* was probably not used during the first settlement phase in Scotland. Gammeltoft confirms this when he analyses the topographical and economic characteristics of farms bearing this element. Rather than being used to name the first farms established by the Norse, *bólstaðr* is used to name farms that are chronologically of a secondary character, created when larger farming units were split up into several smaller units. Unfortunately, we lack similar detailed studies for the other habitative elements, but there is good reason to believe that *setr* and *staðir* are also of a similar secondary character. For example, the frequent use of personal names in compounds with these elements strongly suggests that they were used when larger farming units were divided and shared between several individuals.

It would appear, when the secondary nature of habitative generics is taken into account, that the outer zone was an area where Norse settlement, represented by



the topographical generics, developed and secondary settlements were created within a Norse-speaking milieu, while the inner zone was an area where Norse settlement did not develop beyond the primary phase. The zones, of course, provide relative dating, not calendar dates.

### ***Gall-Ghàidheil* and the Outer Zone**

Where might the *Gall-Ghàidheil* fit into this pattern of Norse settlement? Could they have originated in the Western Isles and Skye? There are several reasons why this is unlikely. Firstly, as said, it is not at all clear that the majority of the inhabitants living in this area prior to the Norse onslaught were Gaels. The population was probably Pictish (Fisher 2001, 11–12; Kruse 2005, 148–51).

Further, there is no convincing onomastic or archaeological evidence in the Western Isles to suggest that the previous population, whether Gael or Pict, survived to live alongside the Norse after their settlement (Jennings and Kruse 2005). The prevailing view amongst scholars since George Henderson (1910, 185) is that the Norse names form the oldest stratum in this area and that there was total discontinuity between the pre-Norse and the Norse periods (see MacBain 1922, 70; Watson 1926, 38–39; Fraser 1974, 18–19; Fraser 1984, 40; and Stahl 1999, 365).

Alan Lane (1983, 1990, and discussed further in Jennings and Kruse 2005) makes the case for an archaeological parallel between the Outer Hebrides and the Faroe Islands. There is a sudden change in the pottery tradition in the Outer Hebrides and Skye around AD 800 with a completely new style and technique. The transformation is so dramatic that Lane (1983, 379) observes: ‘I can see no evidence to derive the Viking-age style from the Dark-age style. The difference in form and construction methods seems overwhelming.’ The closest connections in time and style to this new Hebridean pottery are the northern Irish Souterrain Ware assemblages in Co. Antrim, and Lane suggests that ‘new potters’ either may be the Norse who themselves have learned to make pottery in Ireland before settling in the Hebrides, or alternatively, they may have imported Irish slaves to make pots for them. Lane (1983, 348) further makes the observation that pottery of a very similar type is also found in the Faroe Islands, the only other Scandinavian settlement area in the West Atlantic with a pottery tradition. The Celtic historical presence on the Faroe Islands is notable in the genetic composition of the present population (Jorgensen and others 2004), there are Gaelic loan-words in the Faroese language, and Gaelic even appears in Faroese place-names (Jakobsen 1902, 1915). The Irish-style pottery both in the Faroe Islands and in the Hebrides as well as the

linguistic traces of Gaelic in Faroese are most likely to be indicative of Gaelic-speaking slaves.

In the outer zone, the general impression is that Norse immigration during the ninth century provides the earliest onomastic evidence, and it suggests that the Western Isles and Skye had a predominantly Norse ethnic identity which lasted long after the time period considered here, because secondary place-name development continued within a Norse-speaking context. It is an extraordinary fact that, bar some of the island names, no pre-Norse place-names appear to survive in the islands of the outer zone. Richard Coates (1990, 5–7) confirms that discontinuity of settlement is ‘a strong possibility’ on St Kilda. In her doctoral thesis on the place-names of Barra, Anke Beate Stahl (1999, 365) found no linguistic evidence for a pre-Norse place-name stratum. Ian Fraser, in a study of Lewis says that ‘we are dealing with what Nicolaisen calls “a toponymically bare landscape” at the beginning of the Norse settlement period. The complete lack of identifiable pre-Norse place-names in Lewis tends to support this’ (1984, 40). The same conditions also seem to have applied in the previously Gaelic-speaking islands of Dál Riata: Coll, Tiree, and Islay. Anne Johnston writes about Coll and Tiree that ‘none of the Gaelic place-names can be said with any certainty to date from the pre-Norse period [...]’ (1995, 112), and Alan Macniven (2006) has found the same to be the case in Islay. His findings suggest that Norse at one stage dominated Islay to the extent that there appears to have been a blanket replacement of place-names. The Norse language was clearly used on the island at the later stage of farm division when habitative place-name elements were employed, and it still seems to have been spoken into the eleventh century. Other than the possible exception of a few early exploratory names (further discussed in Kruse 2005 and Jennings and Kruse 2009), we see complete discontinuity in the onomastic record, which is highly significant, as it links the nomenclature of the Outer Hebrides, Coll, Tiree, and Islay with that of the Northern Isles. In both places we know there were settlements when the Norse arrived, but there is no evidence from the onomasticon that the inhabitants of these settlements ever existed.

As mentioned before, Gammeltoft (2001) suggests *bólstaðr* had its productive period towards the end of the ninth century, perhaps half a century after the appearance of the *Gall-Ghàidheil*. Norse appears to have continued as the dominant language of the outer zone for at least another two centuries.<sup>6</sup> It is of course likely that Gaelic would have been spoken on the islands during the Norse period (see Cox

<sup>6</sup> For further evidence of Norse linguistic continuity in the Western Isles into the twelfth century, see Jennings 1996, 69–72.

2002, 114–18), as it probably was for a period in Iceland and the Faroe Islands. However, in these cases Gaelic was probably spoken by enslaved Scottish and/or Irish Gaels, and not by free men entitled to become warriors. In sum, the insular, outer zone is not a likely home for the Gaelic component of the *Gall-Ghàidheil*.

### **The *Gall-Ghàidheil* and the Inner Zone**

Only a resident ethnic Norse community can explain today's pattern and frequency of Norse place-names on the west coast of Scotland. This is as true of the inner as the outer zone. The Norse topographical names along the western littoral are indicative of a geographical continuum of settlements where Norse was once spoken. The invaders made use of the most prestigious naming elements that they knew from Norway in order to name farms in a rugged landscape that invited and enforced the use of topographical naming elements. There is hardly any use of the traditional habitative elements to indicate division of farms or the clearing of new land in this zone. This strongly suggests that the Norse-speaking community did not remain Norse-speaking for long, but was rather using Gaelic for the formation of secondary settlements.

The Carradale area of Kintyre provides an illustration of a scenario where the transition to Gaelic is likely to have happened at an early stage. Here all the major settlements bear the Norse generic *-dalr* (see Figure 4). However, there are no Norse habitative names and there are secondary Gaelic elements, in *achadh* 'field' (*Auchnasavil*, secondary to Norse *Rhonadale*) and *peighinn* 'pennyland' (*Dippen*, secondary to Norse *Carradale*, *Lephincorrach*, secondary to Norse *Torrisdale*, and likewise *Lephinmore*, secondary to Norse *Saddell*). The classifications 'primary' and 'secondary' are based on a set of favourable factors that characterize the settlements. A secondary settlement is characteristically further from the sea or possesses a poorer harbour than a primary settlement, the soil quality is poorer, and there is more limited area for expansion and for grazing, etc.<sup>7</sup> This is usually reflected in the taxation value. For Kintyre we are lucky to have rentals from 1503. In these *achadh* can be seen to refer to secondary farming settlements. Auchnasavil (*Achinnasawle*) is valued at 2 merks, while Rhonadale (*Rynnadill*) is valued at 4 merks. Similarly, in the case of Dippen and Carradale, the former (*Dwpeyn*) is valued at 3 merks while the latter (*Ardcardale*) is valued at 4 merks.

<sup>7</sup> For a full discussion of the terms 'primary', 'secondary', and 'peripheral' and their application to settlements, see Olson 1983, 33–42 and Gammeltoft 2001, 178–214.

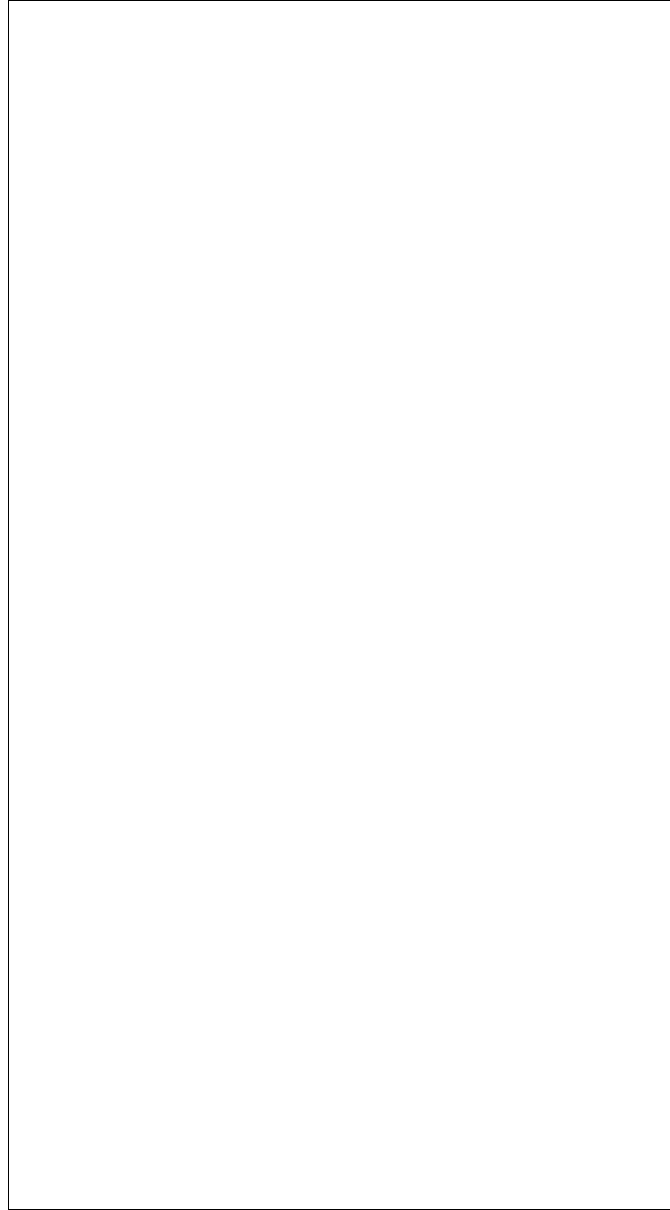


Figure 4. Norse farm names with *-dalr* on the east coast of Kintyre. Secondary Gaelic-named farms are written in italics. The broken line shows the 100 m contour, indicating the distinct valleys of the area. (Illustration: Andrew Jennings)

The Norse who settled in the inner zone appear to have settled in clusters. In any given area there tend to be either several Norse names or none. For example, along the peninsula of Kintyre, the Norse names stretch in a continuous distribution along the east coast while they are found only in two limited clusters along the west coast. This is highly suggestive of the survival of a pre-Norse population. It is interesting that, in the case of Kintyre, the Norse place-names appear to avoid the area with the greatest concentration of pre-Norse archaeological sites, where presumably there was the greatest density of native settlement. The duns on the western side of Kintyre may have been inhabited during the ninth century (Alcock and Alcock 1987, 131).

In contrast to the outer zone, there is an undeniable continuity of a pre-Norse, Gaelic-speaking population in the inner zone, namely the eastern and inner part of Dál Riata, consisting of Arran, Bute, Cowall, Kintyre, and the rest of the mainland north to Ardnamurchan. This is indicated by the survival of a number of pre-Norse names. These survive along the western littoral such as the royal sites of Dunaverty (*Aberte AU712*), Dunadd (*Duin Att AU683*), Dunollie (*AU714*), and the monastery of Applecross (*Apor Crosán AU673*), and although the major name Cenél nGabrain and Dál Riata itself did not survive, the tribal names Cenél Loairn and Cenél Comgall endured the Norse impact in present day Lorne and Cowall, as did the tribal name *Cenél Báetáin* in Moidart which was recorded in an act of John Balliol as *Cenel Vadan* in the thirteenth century (Fraser 2009, 245).

The Norse place-names of the inner zone tell an intriguing story. At some point the Norse settled in sufficient numbers amongst the indigenous Gaelic-speaking population to establish a Norse community, coining the topographical settlement names. From the existence of the many originally Norse names on today's maps of this area it is safe to deduce that the Norse must have been a very important user-group of these names, otherwise the names simply would not have been passed on. However, the Norse cannot have been completely dominant, because, unlike in the outer zone, they must have undergone a process of naturalization before any significant secondary settlement took place. This process, involving the adoption of the Gaelic language, might not have taken longer than a generation or two. Indeed, it must surely have been well under way by the time there was a need for *bólstaðr* or the other habitative elements, sometime in the latter part of the ninth century, otherwise they would have used the Norse generics like their neighbours in the outer zone. It is unsurprising that Gaelic came to be the predominant language relatively quickly after an intense Norse settlement period, when it is remembered that the Scandinavian settlers in Normandy, where they lived in a similar mixed ethnic milieu, adopted French within three generations. It was presumably after

this linguistic transition that the territorial term *Airer Goidel* ‘the coastline of the Gael’ came into existence, reflecting the fact that Gaelic was now *the* language spoken by inhabitants of the mainland littoral. The creation of the term *Airer Goidel* can probably be dated to the late ninth or early tenth century as it is equivalent to, and probably contemporary with, the term *Airer Saxan* ‘the coastline of the Saxon’ (referring to Galloway) which occurs in *AU* 913.5, when the ‘new fleet’ of the Ulaid was defeated by *geinti* ‘heathen’ *i nairur Saxan* (see Clancy 2008, 43, 44).

### Conclusions

To find the *Gall-Ghàidheil* one must find either an area where Norse settlers and a pre-existing Gaelic-speaking population mixed or a source of free Gaels who could join a Scandinavian-led war-band. The onomastic evidence shows that Dál Riata, unlike Ireland, is clearly a region where such developments could have occurred. The place-names reveal that Dál Riata experienced a great deal of Norse settlement. On the islands of Islay, Tiree, and Coll the Norse settlement was so intense and long lasting that there appears to have been a break in continuity with the pre-Norse Gaelic past. On these islands we find secondary habitative Norse settlement elements like *bólstaðr*, which indicate that the Norse language was still productive in coining new place-names in the latter part of the ninth century. In the heartland of Dál Riata the Norse settlements are also clear and unequivocal, although here there is also clear evidence for the survival of the Gaelic population. Norse settlement is also indicated by the Gaelic place-names *Loch Goil* and *Ardgoil*, off Loch Long, and the fort of *Dunagoil* on Bute. Here Goil is the anglicized version of *Gaill/Goill*, plural or genitive singular of *gall* ‘foreigner’. *Loch Goil* is near the eastern border of Dál Riata. If the topographical place-names of Norse origin are superimposed on a map showing the political borders of the west of Scotland, it is interesting to note that there do not appear to be any found within the borders of the kingdom of Strathclyde, while the kingdom of Dál Riata has many (see Figure 3). This fact might indicate a difference of political will, or the military ability, of these two kingdoms to withstand the pressure from the west. It is clear that place-names show mainland Dál Riata, particularly Kintyre, was a fertile area for the growth of a mixed Norse-Gaelic population. If the Norse settlement took place from around 825 a mixed population could have been in existence by the 850s, if that is what the *Gall-Ghàidheil* are. However, if the mixing took place at a later date, this area could still have provided a population of free Gaels who could have joined a Norse-led force into Ireland. The link between the *Gall-Ghàidheil* and Dál

Riata is made explicit with the entry in the *Martyrology of Tallaght* from *c.* 900 when it places Bute *in Gallgaedelaib*. Dauvit Broun (1994, 22) suggested that there was not much left of the kingdom of Dál Riata after a couple of decades of Norse settlement in the Western Isles and western seaboard. The kingdom had vanished from contemporary historical records by the mid-ninth century. Indeed, the last contemporary record of the name is with the death of Donncorci, king of Dál Riata, in 798. We would agree with Broun: old Dál Riata did disappear — it fell under Norse control — just before 847 (*Annals of St Bertin*), and the Gaelic component of the *Gall-Ghàidheil* were in fact the people of the Dál Riata, either with Norse admixture (see also Woolf 2004, 96) or merely Norse leaders. One could hypothesize that when Cinaed became king of the Picts in 843, Dál Riata was left in the hands of the Norse aristocracy, who then appear at the head of the *Gall-Ghàidheil* in Ireland a decade later. Of course, Norse settlement may have provided a push-effect encouraging Cinaed, who ruled Dál Riata under Pictish suzerainty, to move against the southern Picts and the sons of former King Wrad, with whom he may have disputed kingship over the Picts, and establish himself in the Tay Basin. It may also lie behind the transfer of Columba's relics from Iona to Dunkeld (Woolf 2007, 93–101). We would argue that the identification of Caittil Find with Ketill Flatnefr should be taken seriously, as should the Icelandic traditions which link his descendants to Dál Riata. It could well be that the Norse chieftain Ketill Flatnefr from Sogn took control of Dál Riata in the early ninth century and led the *Gall-Ghàidheil* into Ireland in the 850s.

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