

NOTES AND COMMENTS

A. NOTES ON SCOTTISH PLACE-NAMES

11. *Ljóðhús*—*Lewis*

This paper is not a complete study of the place name *Lewis*. It attempts to examine *Ljóðhús*, its Old Norse counterpart, and to discuss briefly some of the implications of this form of the name.

Ljóðhús appears first in the fifth of a series of verses composed by the skald Björn Kreppendi or Cripplehand about the war-cruise of Magnus Barelegs in the Western Isles of Scotland in 1098. These verses may have been written on the voyage or soon after, and it is customary to date them “*circa* 1100”. They survive through being quoted by Snorri Sturluson in his *Heimskringla* over a century later. The earliest manuscript of Snorri’s work, *Kringla* (c. 1260), has *um lióðhus* “over, all over *Ljóðhús*”—the latter being the form as normalised for the Old Norse of this period. To show the name in its context, the first four lines of Björn’s verse may be translated thus:

“The fire played up to heaven over *Ljóðhús*. Far and wide did the folk seek to flee. Flames shot up over the homesteads.”

The name also occurs in other contexts in thirteenth-century Old Norse manuscripts—seven contexts, to be precise—and these show the name with different cases of the noun *-hús*. Twice the name appears with the genitive plural ending *-a*; and three times with the dative plural ending *-um*. (A full list of the O.N. forms will be deposited in the place-name archive of the School of Scottish Studies.) O.N. *hús* is a neuter noun, meaning “house” or “homestead”. Björn’s *Ljóðhús*, taken by itself, might be either accusative singular or accusative plural. But these other forms show that it was accusative plural—the nominative plural being also *Ljóðhús*.

The first element *Ljóð-* meant either “song” or “people”. In the latter sense it appears in other compounds; Fritzner’s *Ordbog over det gamle norske Sprog* gives *Ljóðbiskup* “bishop of the people”, and *ljóðheimar* “home of the people”, i.e. “the world”. *Ljóðhús* therefore seems to mean “homesteads of the people, dwellings of the people”.

In this sense the name has parallels in Norway, not as an

island name but as a settlement name. There are several examples in Rygh's *Norske Gaardnavne* (1897-1919). As one instance one may take *Lvs* [løs], Borre, which appears in *Biskop Eysteins Jordebog* (c. 1400) as *i Liod husum* (Rygh vi: 117). Rygh takes the name to mean "a place where people gather together, perhaps a market".

There is another apparent parallel in *Lödöse*, the old market town in West Gothland which appears in *Sverrissaga* and *Brennu-Njálssaga* as *Ljóðhús*. In a note in Rygh vii:211, however, it is recorded that the Swedish Committee on Place Names considered that *Lödöse* was from O.N. *lauðr* "foam" or "scum" and *oss* "a river mouth"; it was suggested that the form *Ljóðhús* in the two sagas was the result of the influence of the Norwegian settlement names. Without venturing to comment on this theory one might nevertheless suggest that in using the name *Ljóðhús* for part or parts of an island on the west coast of Scotland the early Norsemen had at the back of their minds a settlement name well known to them in Norway.

No doubt they used the name in the Western Isles long before the visit of Magnus Barelegs in 1098, perhaps as early as the early Norse voyages in the ninth century. But the sense of a settlement name seems to linger on in the verse quoted from Björn who, in referring to *Ljóðhús*, presents a picture of groups of homesteads being pillaged one after another by his dauntless patron.

One may now consider the relationship of the Old Norse name to the modern name—Gaelic *Leòdhas* [ˈljoːəs] or [ˈljoːs], of which the English rendering is *Lewis*.

The English form goes back as far as:

Lewes 1382 RMS i:742.

Lewys 14th (16th) Fordun i:44.

The Gaelic form goes back still further:

i crichaib Leódús ("in the territories of *Leódús*") 12th Book of Leinster fol. 171b; *i crichaib Leodús* 12th *ibid.* fol. 172a.

a Leodus 12th (14th) *War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill* 152.

Subsequent to these two Middle Irish forms there are numerous other forms surviving from the following four centuries. Some of these may be renderings of how a Norse-speaker pronounced the name, some of how a Gaelic-speaker did so, and some may be scribal variations of forms in preceding written sources. Here are some of these forms, the list not being exhaustive:

Leothus c. 1173 Reginald of Durham 251
Leodus c. 1257 Chronicle of Man 5
Lodhus c. 1257 Chronicle of Man 16, 17
Lodws c. 1257 Chronicle of Man 20
Lodoux 1292 Acts of Parliament i:91
Leogos 1297 Stevenson's *Documents* ii:188; *Leogus* 1582;
 Buchanan's *Historia* 11
lediz, ledres 1467 Portolan chart of Benincasa; and other
 portolan charts of this period.

Here is variety indeed. I feel that I must leave it to a Celtic scholar to trace the development of the name, through such of these forms as are phonologically significant, to Modern Gaelic *Leòdhas*. I should add that the loss of a medial consonantal sound in *Leòdhas* has a parallel in the Norwegian place name *Los* from O.N. *Ljóðhús*.

Another question that arises is whether *Ljóðhús*—

- (a) is an original O.N. name, "invented" by an early Norse sea-farer; or
- (b) is a Scandinavianised form of an Old Irish name represented by the twelfth century form *Leodus*; or
- (c) has some other derivation.

As to hypothesis (a), the early Norse seafarer might have given the name *Ljóðhús* to a single settlement in a single bay, and this name might have been transferred with the passage of time to the whole island or to the greater part of it. Satisfactory parallels for this, however, are difficult to find. In any event, while the early Norsemen often "invented" names for the smaller islands, their commonest method of naming the larger islands and larger land districts seems to have been to devise a Scandinavianised form of a native name; e.g. O.N. *Skíð* from O.Ir. *Scith*, O.N. *Katanes* from some O.Ir. territorial name containing the tribal name *Cait*. Hypothesis (a), then, is not impossible, but seems improbable; and one may properly look at Hypothesis (b).

As to Hypothesis (b), neither Watson (1904:263) nor MacBain (1922:72) could offer a Celtic derivation of the name that satisfied them. If this is accepted, then *Leodus* must be taken as being derived from *Ljóðhús*, and not *Ljóðhús* from an earlier form of *Leodus*. We may therefore move on to Hypothesis (c).

Hypothesis (c) is a temptation to speculation, but there are certain facts which seem worth recording because they perhaps point the way to the derivation of *Ljóðhús*. The Irish

scholars MacNeill (1912:102) and O'Rahilly (1946:538) have established a connection between Ptolemy's *Ebudae* and the Old Irish name for their inhabitants. To quote O'Rahilly:

"Ptolemy in his account of Ireland speaks of five islands called *Ebudae* lying to the north of Ireland, and he gives their names as *Ebuda* (two islands so called), *Rikina*, *Malaios*, and *Epidion*. . . . The corresponding Irish name is applied, not to the islands, but to their inhabitants, viz. **Ibuid* (<**Ebudi*), gen. **Ibod*. It has been preserved in the phrases *Tuath Iboth* and *Fir Iboth*" ["the tribe of the **Ibuid*"].

It seems just possible that there may be some connection—a pseudo-semantic one—between *Ljóðhús* and these two early tribal names. *Ljóðhús* is not a translation of *Tuath Iboth* or *Fir Iboth*. Let us suppose, however, that an early Norse seafarer attempted to translate each part of either of these two tribal names separately. O.N. *Ljóð-* "people" might have been his translation of *Tuath* or *Fir*. O.N. *-hús* "a settlement" is not a translation of *Iboth*; it might, however, have been a mistranslation through confusion with M.Ir. *both* "a dwelling" or "settlement". When he had translated the two parts, the result would remind him and his fellows of the settlement name *Ljóðhús* that they knew in Norway, and this would assist in giving currency to his new place-name.

There are other errors in the translation of compound place-names into Old Norse. The name *Orkney* offers an example. O.N. *Orkneyjar*, found in many of the sagas, is derived from O.Ir. *Insi Orc* "the islands of the tribe **Uirc*"—a name meaning literally "pigs". We would have expected the O.N. form, however, to be **Orka-eyjar*, shortening to **Orkeyjar*, and giving a modern name **Orkey*. It is all the more surprising that the O.N. name was not **Orka-eyjar* when we find in *Orkneyingasaga* 273 that the mound of Maeshowe was called *Orkahaugr* "the mound of the **Orkar*"; and that the element *Ork-* or *Orka-* is found in several place-names in Orkney and Shetland. Except for one or two scribal errors, however, the intrusive *-n-* appears in all spellings of the name in Old Norse sources. *Orkneyjar* meant "scal-islands"—a not unsuitable name indeed, but an erroneous rendering of the native name. It would appear that the Norsemen who coined the name *Orkahaugr* knew that they were dealing with a tribal name, but not so the Norsemen, probably of an earlier period, who coined their own form of *Insi Orc*.

It cannot be claimed that the formation of *Orkneyjar* is an

exact parallel of that suggested for *Ljóðhús*, but it has been discussed at some length to illustrate the risks to which the less familiar elements in native compound names were subject in the process of transference to the Old Norse tongue.

The particular process of "translation-cum-mistranslation" suggested above is therefore offered as a possible, but by no means unchallengeable, explanation of a connection between *Tuath Iboth* or *Fir Iboth* and *Ljóðhús*. While the exact nature of the connection may be uncertain, it is difficult to avoid the view that a connection of some kind exists.

Summary. The Old Norse name for Lewis (Gaelic *Leòdhas*) was *Ljóðhús*, a Norwegian settlement name in plural form meaning "homesteads of the people". The first recorded occurrence of *Ljóðhús* is in a verse, *c.* 1100, by the Norwegian skald Björn Crippelhand, but the name may be as old as the ninth century. It was probably derived, by some process of faulty translation which cannot be explained with certainty, from *Tuath Iboth* or *Fir Iboth* ("the tribe of the **Ibuid*"), names given in certain early Irish writings to a tribe in the Western Isles of Scotland. It was rendered *Leodus* (with uncertain accentuation) in certain Irish manuscripts of the twelfth century. The subsequent phonological history of the name awaits further study, there being a varied series of forms of the name in later records as a basis for this.

NOTE

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12. *Nevis*

Although dealing with one of the most important geographical names in the whole of Scotland and, indeed, in the British Isles, this little note is not intended to give a final answer to all the problems which *Nevis* offers. It is only meant to clear up one or two misconceptions as to the meaning and formation of this name, perpetuated in the form of "question and answer" by the public press (see, for instance, *The Sunday Post*, Edinburgh, 17th August 1958, p. 6).

At least four geographical features bear this name. There are, on the one hand, *Ben Nevis*, the highest mountain in Britain, the *Water of Nevis*, the river which skirts its southern flank, and *Glen Nevis*, the valley through which the river flows; and there is, on the other hand, *Loch Nevis*, a sea-loch between Morar and Knoidart, opening out into the Sound of Sleat. All these features are in Inverness-shire. There is, in addition,

Knocknevis, a hill about one mile south of Clatteringshaws Loch in Galloway.

According to Johnston (1934:262), early forms of *Nevis* are *Nevis* 1532, *Neuess* 1552, *Nevis* 1769, but he does not specify if these are forms of the river- or the mountain-name, nor does he indicate from which sources he derived this information. The local pronunciation has been recorded by several writers. MacBain (1922:47 and 149) has *Nibheis* (English *Nivesh*), Watson (1926:471) gives the alternatives *Nimheis* or *Nibheis*, as “*mh* can hardly be distinguished from *bh* in pronunciation after *n*, which makes the syllable nasal in any case”, and Diack (1920-1:113) distinguishes between [N'evaʃ] and [N'ivaʃ] for the river, glen and mountain on the one hand, and [N'ëvaʃ] for the loch on the other (*ibid.*:114). Neither MacBain nor Watson makes this distinction, the validity of which seems to be doubtful, and it is also to be assumed that the velar quality of the vowel in the unstressed second syllable of Diack's transcriptions does not represent the true pronunciation because there is nothing in the Gaelic form to warrant it. Johnston's *Néevush* (1934:262) is presumably intended to imitate the second form which Diack gives for the river and mountain.

Any interpretation of the name can rule out Livingstone's *ni-mhaise* “no beauty” (1888:266) and Taylor's “snowy mountain” (n.d.:4 and 336) which he queries himself in the second reference cited. Livingstone suspects that the latter derived the name “from the Latin *nix*, *nivis*, snow” which, of course, would not be permissible. As Watson's alternative spellings of the Gaelic name indicate, any attempt at an etymology has the choice of either of two roots. He himself (1926:472) chooses the first, *Nimheis*, which he regards as a genitive to a nominative *Nimheas*, earlier *Neimheas* (gen. *Neimheis*), going back to an even earlier *Nemess*. This he connects with the Irish river-name *Neim*, *Nem*, an old name of the Blackwater River (cf. Hogan 1910:554b), and Old Irish *neim*, Scottish Gaelic *neimh*, *nimh* “poison”, which would give a meaning “the venomous one”. In spite of the poetry quoted by Watson in support of such a meaning, we feel that this is not really convincing. If we compare *Neim*, *Nem* and the Luxemburg stream-name *Nims*, older *Nemesa* in Ausonius, as Watson does (1926:522; cf. also Diack 1920-1:114), and the Lithuanian river-name *Niemen* = *Nemunas*, derivation from the root **nem-* “to bend” would be more applicable, for *Abhainn Nimheis* is

certainly a winding river. As far as the Celtic languages are concerned, this root is, however, better known in a different context, as Gaulish *νεμητον* “holy grove” and Old Irish *nemed* “sacred place; privilege, privileged person” show. Only a *t*-participle from the reduction grade **nm̥-* comes anywhere near our meaning, cf. Gaulish *nanto* “valle” and Welsh *nant* “valley, burn” < **nm̥-tu-* (Pokorny 1954:764.)

For this reason, we prefer to base our derivation with MacBain (1922:47 and 149) and Diack (1920-1:113) on the root **nebh-* “moist, water”, rather than **nem-*. Pedersen has shown (1909:255 and 387) how *b(bh)* underwent nasalisation > *mh* in early Irish in the case of Old Irish *nem* (-es-stem) “heaven”, Gaelic and Irish *neamh*, Welsh and Cornish *nef* (see also Pokorny 1950:315), so that the “popular etymology, as if from *neamh* ‘heaven’,” which Diack (1920-1:114) mentions as “still current in the district” in the case of *Loch Nevis*, is not very far off the mark. A translation as “loch of heaven” is, however, more than unsatisfactory. The original meaning of the root becomes much clearer when we compare Greek *νέφος*, -ους “cloud, mist” and Sanskrit *nábhas-* “mist, haze, heaven, etc.”, and thus the *River Nevis*—and the loch, for that matter—can be explained as “the moist one; the one that abounds in water”, or possibly as “the misty one”. This etymology avoids reference to “water-divinities” or “nymphs” whose names Diack (1920-1:114) and MacBain (1922:47 and 149) see in *Nevis*. Both compare the Gaulish river-name *Nebis*, now *Neyva* in Spain, and Diack (*ibid.*:113) and Förster (1923:89) add *Nevisca*, also in Gaul. The *o*-grade **nobh-* of our root is evidenced in the *River Naver* < **Nabaro-|-ā* in Sutherland, as well as in *Afon Nevern* (Pembrokeshire) < **Nabernā*, *Nabalia*, fl. *Batavorum* (Tacitus), and *Nablis* = Unstrut (Germany: Venantius Fortunatus), which are probably pre-Celtic.

Whilst the stem *Nev-* can be explained quite satisfactorily in this way, the ending poses a bigger problem. MacBain (1922:47 and 149) thinks of **Nebestis* or **Nebesta*, particularly the latter, and Förster (1923:89) suggests an Early Celtic **Nevaskā*, probably on the strength of the Gaulish *Nevisca*. It is not clear if these forms are to be considered as containing *t-* or *k-*suffixes, respectively, extending an *-es-stem*, or if *-st-* or *-sk-*suffixes are envisaged. The latter are extremely rare in Scottish river-nomenclature and in the hydronymy of the British Isles in general, and it looks as if, on the whole, we are in the same position as regards the *River Thames* which contains

a similar suffix: the stem can be etymologised, but the ending remains doubtful.

At the beginning of this year, Krahe devoted an article in *Beiträge zur Namenforschung* to the discussion of some river-names with an *st*-suffix, particularly of some belonging to an Indo-European but pre-Celtic stratum of European hydronymy. He demonstrates (1959:16-17) that this ending must have been employed as a morphological element in the creation of this early nomenclature, although not as commonly as the better attested formations in *-a*, *-ra*, *-na*, *-nt*, *-ma*, *-sa*, etc. He explains its rarity by assuming that the element must have fallen out of use fairly early in most districts covered by names belonging to this early period, except in the Baltic and Slavonic areas; this explanation is certainly most satisfactory as far as the situation in the British Isles is concerned which, as we hope to have proved (Nicolaisen 1957), also shows survivals of this pre-Celtic river-nomenclature. As, however, the root **nebh-* could be ascribed to a Celtic stratum without any difficulty, it is not absolutely necessary to regard *Nevis* as being of pre-Celtic origin, although this derivation is undoubtedly an attractive and plausible alternative, in view of the fact that *-st-* formations are extremely uncommon in later Insular Celtic, i.e. Brythonic and Gaelic, names of Scottish water-courses.

However, even without being able to suggest a concrete original form of the name, this note has, we hope, helped to throw light on its meaning and etymological connections. These make it quite certain that *Nevis* is primarily a river-name and that the glen as well as the ben were named after it. This was already stated explicitly by MacBain (1922:47), and others like Diack (1920-1:113), Förster (1923:89) and Watson (1926:471-2) have implied it; but it seems to be worth stressing again, as the order of naming has been misunderstood several times since. *Beinn Nibheis* is the ben of the River Nevis, just as *Gleann Nibheis* is the glen of the River Nevis. *Ben Lawers* (Perthshire) is another case in point. It is named after the stream which is now called *Lawers Burn*, entering Loch Tay at *Lawers*. Whether the name *Loch Nevis* is also based on an original river-name as Diack alleges (1920-1:114), can only be decided when more documentation has come to hand. *Knocknevis* in Galloway could possibly point towards a name like **Nevis* having been replaced by the modern Clatteringshaws Loch.

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B. OTHER NOTES

Book Review

The Silver Bough. Volume I. Scottish Folk-Lore and Folk Belief. By F. Marian McNeill. William Maclellan, Glasgow. 1957.

The title, *The Silver Bough*, was, according to the author, chosen as a reference to Sir James Frazer's "stupendous work", and one may perhaps agree with the author that the choice "may seem pretentious". The idea was that as the Golden Bough was part of the tree of classical mythology so the Silver Bough was of Celtic growth, and the author's hope was that