

NOTES ON SCOTTISH PLACE-NAMES

27. *Thurso*

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At the Fifth Viking Congress held at Tórshavn (Faroe Islands) in July 1965, Professor Per Thorson, of the University of Bergen, read a paper entitled "Ancient Thurso, a Religious and Judicial Centre". Although this has not yet appeared in print, Professor Thorson kindly sent the present writer a copy of his typescript, and the following is a comment on that part of the paper which deals with the derivation of the name *Thurso*; for Professor Thorson asks us to reconsider the etymology to which we have been accustomed.

The argument for Professor Thorson's interesting new suggestion may be summarised like this:

In the *Orkneyinga Saga* (about A.D. 1210) and in other early Norse literature the settlement-name Thurso appears as *þórsá*, "the river of Thor the god", a name which also occurs as a river-name in North and West Iceland. Professor Thorson is of the opinion that the Icelandic river-name (he only mentions one of the two) "was named under very special circumstances, which are not to be reckoned with in the case of Thurso in Scotland". Basing his argument on three thirteenth-century forms of the name found in Latin sources—*Thurseha* in Roger of Hoveden (about 1200), *Turishau* (1275) and *Thorsan* (1276) printed in the *Diplomatarium Katanense et Sutherlandense* (Johnston 1909-14)—he comes to the conclusion that *-ha*, *-hau*, and *-au* (for *-an* in the text) cannot represent Norse *á* "river" but rather point to Norse *haugr* "elevation, natural or artificial mound", as we find it, for instance, in the Caithness name *How* (parish of Wick). The original *þórshaugr* "Thor's mound", for which he cites as a parallel the Norwegian *Torshaug* in the Trondheim area, Professor Thorson is inclined to identify with "a conical mound" in front of Thurso Castle on which the so-called Ulbster Stone has been placed. Since, from 1527 onwards, the second component is never *-hau* or *-au*, but our modern *-o*, the old termination appears to have been replaced, as in the *Orkneyinga Saga*, by the word for "river". The older name of the river itself Professor Thorson sees in the place-name *Skinnet*, recorded in the thirteenth century as *Scynend* or *Scynand*, seemingly from Norse *Skínandi* "the shining one".

At first sight, this new proposition is an attractive one, especially if the identification of "Thor's mound" is correct. However, everything hinges on the linguistic implications of the three spellings *Thurseha*, *Turishau* and *Thorsau* (or *-an*) in thirteenth-century Latin documents. It is their provenance and reliability, therefore, which we must check. If we take the spelling from Roger of Hoveden first, we find that it is part of the phrase *ad Turseham, villam praedicti Haroldi* (IV:10). This is probably intended to be a Latinised accusative of a nominative **Turseha* as Professor Thorson assumes, following the third edition of *Johnston's Place-Names of Scotland* (Johnston 1934), although the initial consonant is there given—and the original supports this—as *T-*, not *Th-*. It is, however, just possible that it is not an accusative but has been mistaken for a place-name in Early English *-ham* "village, homestead". For this there would be a parallel in the same author's enumeration "quinque civitates, Lindicolniam, Snotingham, Deorbeiam, Leogereceastriam, et Stanfordiam" (the five cities, Lincoln, Nottingham, Derby, Leicester and Stamford), in which *Snotingham* is the odd one out because its ending is only superficially identical with those of the other four. However, even if we accept **Turseha* as the nominative of the name Roger of Hoveden had in mind, there are still difficulties. Not only are we dealing with a writer who, for example, perpetrates such spellings as *Ilvernarran* and *Dilvernarran* for *Invernarran* (Nairn) but the number of "superfluous" *h*'s in his place-name forms is considerable (*Haia* and *Heya* for Eye, Suffolk; *Haxiholm* for Axholm, Lincolnshire; *Heli* for Ely; *Herkelou* for Arklow, Ireland; but also internally *Barhud*, *Barhut* for Beirut, Syria; and many others). The *-ha(m)* in this isolated reference to Thurso may therefore be for *-a(m)*; it certainly cannot be trusted as it stands.

Turishau and *Thorsan*, quoted by Professor Thorson from the *Diplomatarium*, both occur in the so-called Bagimond's Roll of 1275 and 1276 (Dunlop 1939:51 and 68), concerned with the collection of teinds for the Crusades. This document, which is in the Vatican Archives in Rome, "is a transcript made by Roman clerks" who had obvious trouble with unfamiliar names rendered in Gothic script (*op. cit.*: 21). *Thorsan* for **Thorsau* is a typical error, as are *Clatmanan* for *Clacmanan* (Clackmannan), or *Lynlichtu* for *Lynlithcu* (Linlithgow). "Superfluous" *h*'s also abound, as in *Huckermukedy* and *Hughtermukedy* for Auchtermuchty, *Huchtermunsi* for Auchtermunsie, *Halaham* for Aldhame, *Hughterardor* for Auchterarder, *Hupsetlingtoun* for Upsetlington,

and *Herihot* for Herriot. The contrast *Turishau*—*Thorsau* also shows that the *-h-* in *Turseham* is probably not generic.

This demonstrates quite clearly that neither Roger of Hoveden nor Bagimond's Roll can be trusted, as far as place-name spellings in general are concerned, and that they are particularly unreliable with regard to the distinction between radical and intrusive *h*'s (in *Keth Undeby* for Keith Humbie an initial *H-* is omitted!). One therefore wonders whether a name **þorshaugr* really has any support in the evidence which has survived from the Middle Ages; there appears to be no reason whatever why the second element should not have been *á* from the beginning, the implication being that the name as a whole was an original river-name (see also Gaelic *Inbhir Thòrsa* and Norse *þórsdalr* below).

When rejecting *haugr* and accepting *-ā* as a second element, we automatically also question the interpretation of the original first part of the compound name. Professor Thorson recognises the difficulty of having the name of a water-course involving the name of the God *Thor* (see p. 171 above), hence his attempt to explain the *second* element differently. If, however, we regard the name as being of hydronymic origin, we must somehow solve the problem of the *first* element. Personally, I am still inclined to think that, because of Ptolemy's *Tarvedu(nu)m* < Early Celtic **Tarvo-dūnon* "bull-fort" for one of the headlands near Thurso, the original river-name was **þjórsá* "bull's river" (the identical Icelandic river-name was possibly named after it); this has been assumed by such scholars as MacBain (1894:276; and 1922:6-7), Henderson (1910:155), Watson (1926:36), Brøgger (1929:97), Johnston (1934:310) and others (although there have been some who would prefer *þórsá* as the original). It would indeed reasonably account for some kind of human contact between the existing Celtic population and the Scandinavian incomers. In fact, this is probably the only explanation required, and two further factors which have sometimes been taken as proof for this derivation, in this writer's opinion, rather weaken than strengthen the case.

Henderson in particular (1910:27 and 155) claims that the Gaelic name for Thurso is something like *Inbhir-Thiōrsa* "Thursomouth", but whereas this name does give support to the opinion that we are here dealing with an original river name,¹ the palatal quality of the initial consonant in **Thiōrsa* is not borne out by field-work. The correct transcription is therefore not *Inbhir-Thiōrsa* or *Inbhir Theòrsa*, as Thorson has it,

but *Inbhir Thòrsa*. The local Gaelic pronunciation of this name in Sutherland does not preserve for us any trace of the original **þjórsá*² but is rather based on the later re-interpretation *þórsá*³ which is the usual spelling in the Orkneyinga Saga. Only once does the spelling *þjórsá* (Guðmundsson 1965:119 n4) occur, but this is by no means a survival of the original spelling because it is found in a manuscript (325) which, according to Taylor (1939:10) "has many slips of the pen, and proper names are frequently misspelt, so that, although it is an early MS., it is of limited textual value". Its position in the genealogy of manuscripts of the Orkneyinga Saga (*op. cit.*: 11) also does not allow any claim as to greater originality than all other versions. Thorson is therefore quite right in commenting that "the saga writer must have used *þjórsá*⁴ by chance, with the well-known Icelandic river-name *þjórsó* unconsciously in mind".

Neither the modern Gaelic pronunciation of the place-name nor the isolated spelling *þjórsá* may consequently be used as evidence for an earlier *þjórsá*, but despite this we still prefer this form as the original name. One only has to remember the large number of names of animals, birds, fishes, insects, etc. which enter into our Scottish river-nomenclature in all linguistic strata in order to understand this preference (see Nicolaisen 1957:226-7, and the table on pp. 234-5). The various Gaelic river-names based on *tarbh* "bull" are particularly instructive parallels.

We would suggest a sequence starting with a Celtic river-name related to **Tarvodunon*, perhaps **Tarvo-dubron* "bull's water" or simply *Tarvos* "bull". This was translated into Norse **þjórsá* "bull's water" which, in turn, was before sagatimes re-interpreted as *þórsá* "Thor's river" (producing also *þórsdalr* for the valley of the river, which we interpret as a shortened form of **þórsardalr* "Thurso-dale").⁵ *þórsá* had before the writing of the Orkneyinga Saga become the name of the settlement at the mouth of the river to which it originally applied, but Gaelic *Inbhir Thòrsa* "Thurso-mouth" shows that its primary function was still well known, if not the exclusive one, when Gaelic speakers adopted it. It later passed into English, possibly at least partly through Gaelic mouths, as Professor Thorson deduces from the various "spellings with final -a in the seventeenth century".⁶

Does this simply mean that we are back where we started? Not at all. Perhaps the most important contribution of this part of Professor Thorson's paper is the realisation that the

“old faithfuls” amongst our place-name derivations must not be copied uncritically—each generation of scholars has to accept or reject them anew in the light of all the evidence.

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- ¹ Similarly, Invernairn and Inverayr are now Nairn and Ayr, respectively.
- ² That all is not well, however, concerning the background to the spelling of our name in this particular instance (chapter 55), is shown by the fact that another manuscript has the equally singular *þórsey* “Thor’s island” instead (Guðmundsson 1965:199 *na*). Names in *-ey*, of course, abound in the text, and the copyist may have been influenced by these. It is difficult to believe that he really thought of the place as an island.
- ³ Another case of Scandinavian re-interpretation would be, for instance, the consistent *Beru-vík* of the Orkneyinga Saga for (North) Berwick (Vigfusson 1887:30). A re-interpretation of *þjórsá* as *þórsá* would not be difficult as the phonetic difference between the two would not be very great, and as the element *þjórs-* is rare in place-names whereas names with *þórs-* are quite numerous. The fact that our name is a fairly important local one, close to the Norse-Gaelic boundary, may have added to the uncertainty and confusion. It is quite possible that both names existed side by side for a considerable time.
- ⁴ Thorson’s spelling *þjórsó* indicates that he, too, considers Old Norse *á*, as a feminine *ō*-stem, to have been “rounded” in Caithness pronunciation. This we must assume for all spellings in *-á*.
- ⁵ The valley-name may, of course, have arisen earlier, at a time when the river-name was still **þjórsá*. We would then have to imagine a parallel development **þjórsá > þórsá* and **þjórsardalr > þórs(ar)dalr*. The end result would be the same.
- ⁶ If *Skinnet* < Norse *Skinandi* “the shining one”, is also a name of the River Thurso, it may have been an alternative name or it may have referred to a certain stretch of the river only. Both possibilities are by no means unknown in the naming of water-courses. My colleague, Mr. S. H. Pálsson, who very kindly read the typescript of this note, much to its benefit, tells me that in Iceland river-names in *-andi* usually refer to fast flowing rivers or to the faster upper stretches of water-courses.

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