

The Name 'St. Kilda'

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Introductory

This paper is an inquiry into the origin and meaning of the place name *St. Kilda*. It is based upon material which the writer has collected over the past fifteen years—much of it cartographical, and some of it linguistic, bibliographical and topographical.¹

St. Kilda has always puzzled students of place names, both the amateurs and the professionals. It has all the appearance of a saint's name, and this has been a 'popular', if sometimes hesitant, interpretation for a long time. Martin Martin, who wrote the first book about *St. Kilda* in 1698, assumed that there was a saint when he wrote (edn. 1934: 414):

There was a large well near the town, called *St. Kilder's Well*; from which this land is supposed to derive its name.

The Rev Kenneth Macaulay, author of the second book on the islands, refers (1764: 102–3) to a female saint called *Kilda* in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, Book III, Chapters 24 and 25. He thinks it improbable that her name or the fame of her miracles could have travelled to *St. Kilda*. But this sensible observation was unfortunately beside the point, for Bede's saint was not *Kilda* but *Hilda*. Indeed, no saint of the name *Kilda* is known.

If hagiography fails us, we must look elsewhere for an explanation of the name, which has been well established since 1698 as the English name for the main island in the group lying 40 miles west of the Sound of Harris. It appears thus, for example, in the title of the map of the islands by J. Mathieson and A. M. Cockburn published by the Ordnance Survey in 1928: *Map of St. Kilda or Hirta with adjacent Islands and Stacs*.²

As the evidence for the origin of the name is varied and somewhat complex in character, it may be helpful at this stage to explain how it will be set out and dealt with.

First, starting from Martin, the paper traces the name backwards to its earliest extant forms and their connotation. By 'connotation' is meant the geographical feature to which a name-form is applied. The sources are maps, charts and sailing directions. All the forms that seemed to be crucial are set out along with the titles and dates of their sources; and their significance is discussed. They extend back into the sixteenth century.

Secondly, an attempt is made to establish the archetypal form and its connotation.

For this purpose, use is made of the methods of textual analysis and carto-bibliography—the bibliographical relationship of the maps referred to—as well as of historical data. This study concludes with a digression, but it is thought a useful one, into the relation of the archetypal form to *Hirt*, which is the Gaelic name of the main island.

Thirdly, after an exploration of how the name took its 'saintly' shape, the results of the preceding retrospective study are re-expressed as a forward, chronological development. This starts from the archetypal form in mid-sixteenth century and ends with Martin in 1698. This reconstruction is shown in a diagram as a textual tree or *stemma*.

Fourthly, an etymology is proposed for the archetypal form.

Fifthly, there is a discussion of the possible original location of the name.

I

A quotation from Martin (edn. 1934: 409) is our starting point:

This isle is by the inhabitants called Hirt, and likewise by all the Western Islanders; Buchanan calls it Hirta; Sir John Narbrough, and all the seamen call it St. Kilda; in the sea maps St. Kilder, particularly in a Dutch sea map from Ireland to Zeland, published at Amsterdam by Peter Goas in the year 1663.

Martin, it will be seen, quotes two forms: *St. Kilda* and *St. Kilder*. These will first be examined separately, and later in conjunction.

Martin's *St. Kilda* can be traced in the form *S. Kilda* or *S.Kilda* (and applied to the main island) through the seventeenth century and back to 1592, but no further. The second form, without a space between the full stop and the *K*, is the older form; its significance will emerge later.

Martin gives Admiral Sir John Narbrough (1640–88) as his first authority, but no trace of the name has been found in his published writings. None of his recorded voyages would seem to have taken him near St. Kilda, but this does not mean that he would not know the name.³ Martin's reference to him would be consistent with having information that Narbrough had used the name orally.

It has also been impossible to identify the particular chart of Goas or Goos to which Martin refers.

Other sources, however, are ample in number. They consist of charts and of 'rutters', *i.e.* sets of sailing directions for coastal waters. One or two seventeenth-century examples are given below, together with the earliest one dated 1592:

S. Kilda 1671 John Sellar, 'A Chart of the Hebrides', in *The English Pilot*, Part I, London. Derived from Blaeu below.

S. Kilda 1668 Pieter Goos, 'Eylanden van Hebrides', in *The Lightning Colonne or Sea-Mirroure*, 4th edition, Amsterdam. Derived from Blaeu below.

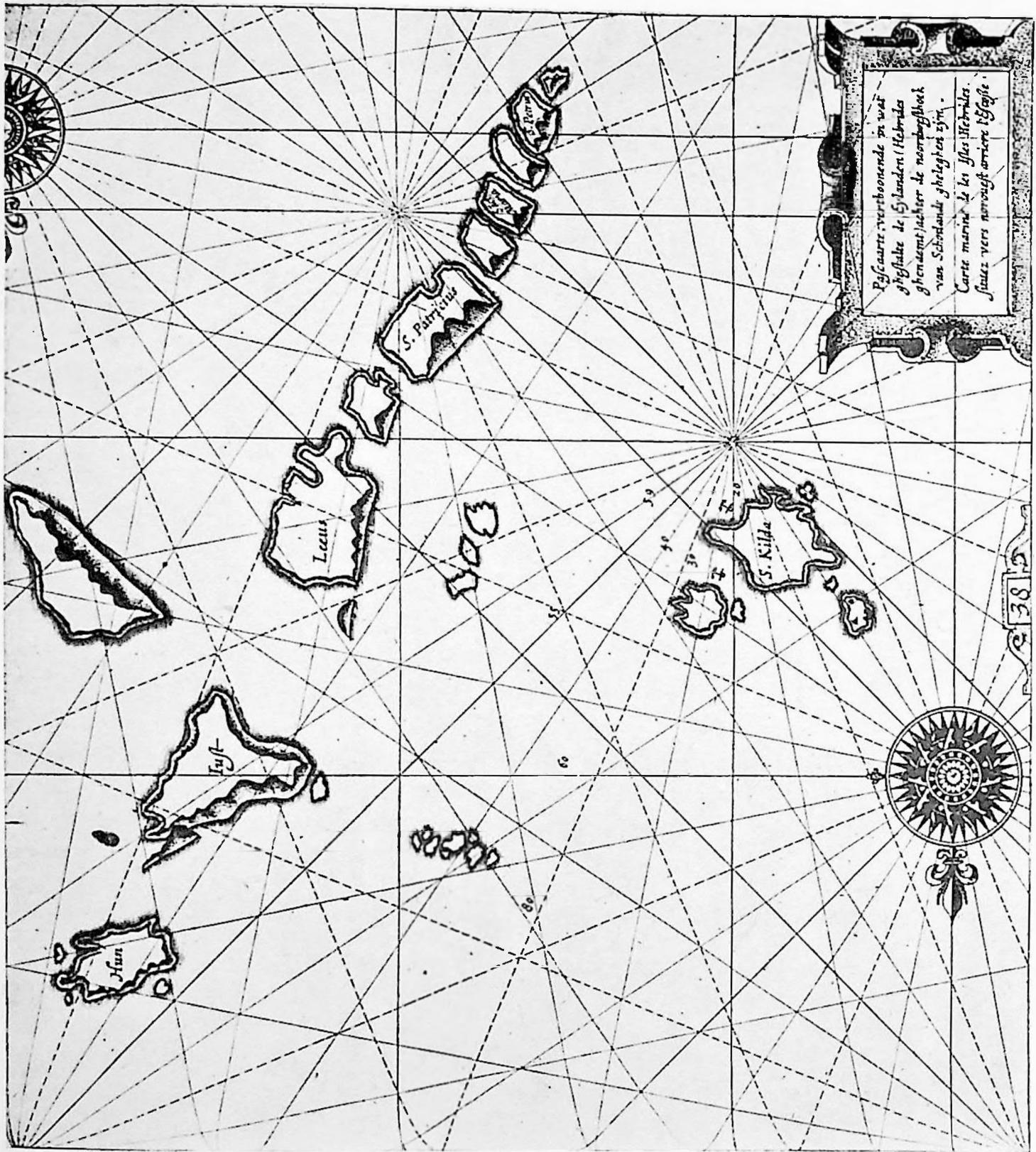


PLATE VII W. J. Blacu, Pascaarte . . . de Eylanden Hebrides ghenament, 1608

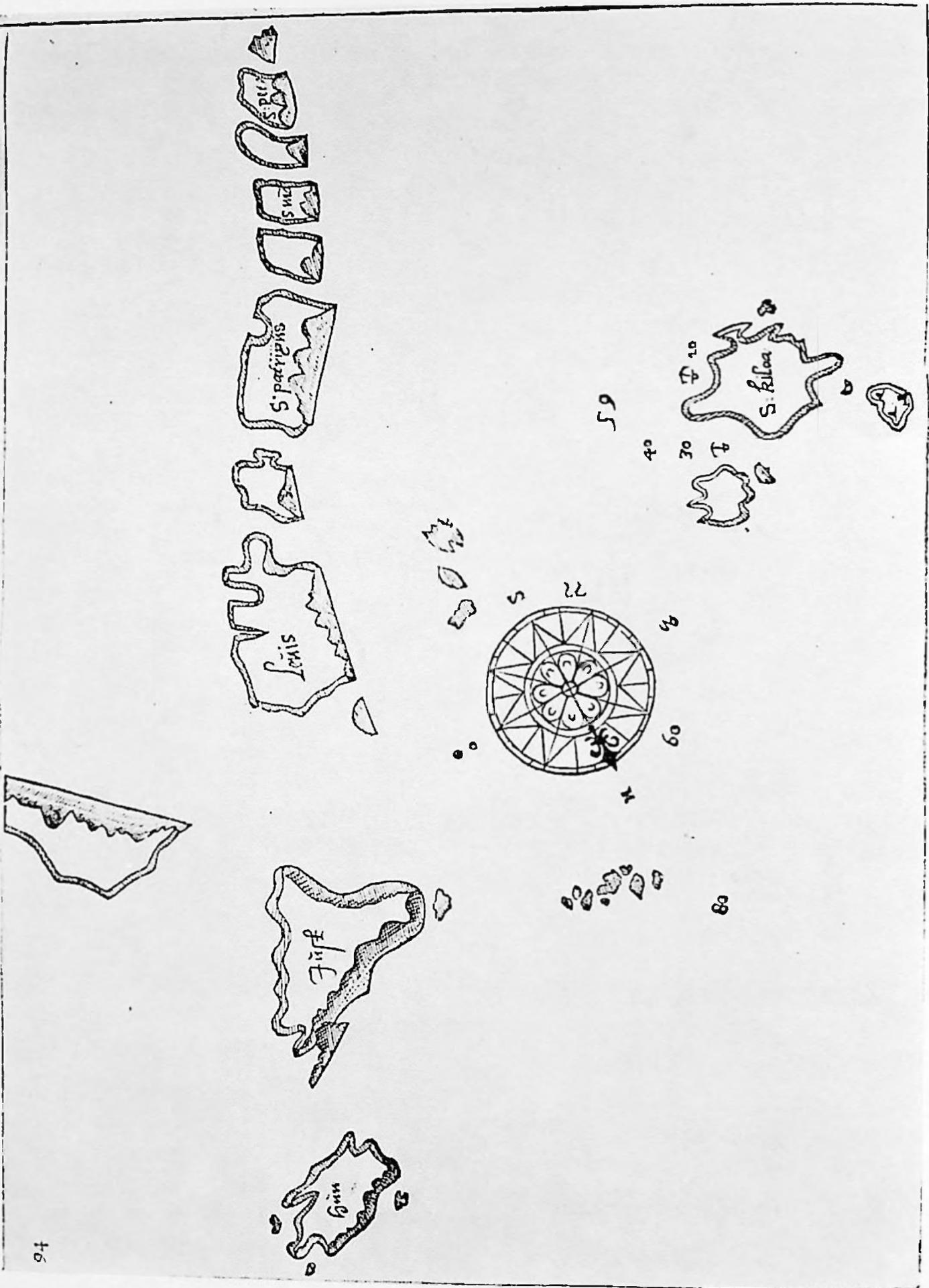


PLATE VIII L. J. Waghenaer, Chart of the Outer Hebrides, 1592

- S. Kilda* 1608 W. J. Blaeu, sailing directions and a chart entitled 'Pascaarte . . . de Eylanden Hebrides ghenacent', in *Het Licht der Zeevaert*, Amsterdam, Part II pp. 104, 105. Second edition in English, *The Light of Navigation*, Amsterdam 1612. Facsimile of 1608 edition, Amsterdam 1964. Directions and chart derived from Waghenaer below. The form in the directions is *S. Kilda* rather than *S. Kilda*, which is the form in the chart as shown in Plate VII.
- S. Kilda* 1592 L. J. Waghenaer, sailing directions for the north-west of Scotland in *Thresoor der Zeevaert*, Leyden, pp. 92, 93. Facsimile edition, Amsterdam 1965. The name appears in the text five times as *S. Kilda*. In the chart (Plate VIII), which is a slightly crude woodcut, the name *S. Kilda* has been erroneously copied as *S: Kiloa*—or apparently so, as the error may possibly have arisen from a broken block or faulty printing. The letter *d* appears complete in the French edition published in Calais in 1601.

Lucas Janszoon Waghenaer (c. 1535–1606) of Enkhuizen in Holland was a seaman who took to chart-making and publishing in the 1580s. His sea-atlas of 1592, consisting of sailing directions with charts and coastal 'profiles' brought together in handy form, set a fashion which held for many years. W. J. Blaeu followed in his steps, and as his sea-atlas of 1608 had many editions in the seventeenth century he probably did more to give currency in that century to the form *S. Kilda*.

When we turn to Martin's *St. Kilder*, we find that it goes further back than *S. Kilda*.

The form that is found most frequently at first as we trace the name backwards is *S. Kilder*. It appears in numerous maps and charts—but not in any sailing directions so far as has been discovered—and where it occurs it is applied to a small island, usually almond-shaped, placed about 15 miles west of the headland of Aird Bhreidhnis on the west coast of Lewis. Following are some examples of this form, beginning with one in 1703:

S. Kilder 1703 John Thornton, *The English Pilot*, London. 1668 Pieter Goos, chart of British Isles, in *The Lightning Colonne or Sea-Mirroure*, Amsterdam, 4th edn. This chart also has *S. Kilda* applied to Hirta. 1635 W. J. Blaeu, *Scotia Regnum*, in *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum sive Novus Atlas*, Amsterdam.

S. Kilder 1610 John Speed, *The Kingdome of Scotland*, in *The Theatre of the Empire of Great Britain*, London.

S. Kilder 1603 Hans Woutneel, *A Description of England, Scotland and Ireland*, London. The map of Scotland is based upon Oetelius' map of Scotland, 1573.

(It may be noted that the Blaeu *Atlas* of 1654 shows neither *S. Kilda* nor *S. Kilder*, probably because the page used was not wide enough for either to appear. The absence of the outer group of islands was not due to ignorance, for the map of Scotland in the 1662 edition has the following inscription north of the islands of *Helskyr*, west of the Sound of Harris: *Ab his insulis Helskyr Insula Hirtha abest ad occasum æstivum ultra 50 milliaria*.)

The earliest occurrences of the form ending in *-er* in the sixteenth century are:

S. Kilder 1578 John Leslie, *Scotiae Regni Antiquissimi Nova et Accurata Descriptio*, Rouen 1586. Reproduction in *Imago Mundi* 7, 1950:103.

S.Kylder 1573 A. Ortelius, *Scotiae Tabula*, in *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, Amsterdam. Reproduction in *Early Maps* 1936:28.

Side by side with these forms in the sixteenth century, however, are three occurrences of a form beginning with *Sk* unseparated from the remainder of the word by either space or full stop. These three forms are of importance, and require some discussion. They occur in three charts, and are:

Skilda(r) 1583 Nicolas de Nicolay, chart of Scotland in his *La Navigation du Roy D'Escosse Jaques cinquiesme . . . autour de son Royaume*, Paris. Reproduction in *Early Maps* 1936:48. Designated 'B' below. Part of chart shown in Plate IX.

Skildar Late 16th cent. [Nicolay], *Charte de la Navigation du Royaume d'Escosse*. Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, MS Hamilton 38. Reproduction in *Imago Mundi* 19, 1965:84. Designated 'C' below.

Skaldir Late 16th cent. Anon., *Carte of Scotlande*. BM. Add. MSS 37024. Reproduction in *Scot. Geog. Mag.* 71, 1961:41, and in *Imago Mundi* 19, 1965:83. Part of chart shown in Plate X. Designated 'A' below.

The *r* in the first of these forms is enclosed in brackets because it is obscured by a rhumbline crossing the chart. Scrutiny indicates that a letter is present, but only through knowledge of the other two charts can one be reasonably sure that the letter is *r*. Without this knowledge the form could easily have been taken as *Skilda* by a copyist. The significance of this will be shown below.

It may be noted incidentally that although the *Sk*-form occurs in three charts, it does not appear anywhere in the rutter that accompanies each. This is a gap in the evidence which it would have been helpful to have had filled.

To sum up at this point, Martin's two forms each go back to recorded forms in the latter half of the sixteenth century. *St. Kilda* goes back to *S.Kilda* in 1592. *St. Kilder* goes back to *Skildar*, once in 1583 and once undated; and to *Skaldir*, undated. In the three charts where the *Sk*-forms occur they relate to a small island off the west coast of Lewis.

II

The next step is to seek to establish and if possible to date the archetypal *Sk*-form, even if it is hypothetical.

The question whether the three *Sk*-forms are related to one another in such a way as to have a common archetype is dependent upon the presence or absence of such a textual relationship among the three charts in which the forms occur. The writer has already made a study of this aspect of the three charts. In a paper in *Imago Mundi* (1965), he has shown that there is in fact such a relationship, and that the charts are derived from a single archetype, now lost. This archetype he designates 'a'. The relation of the three charts (A, B, and C) to 'a' is shown in the paper to take the form of a stemma thus:

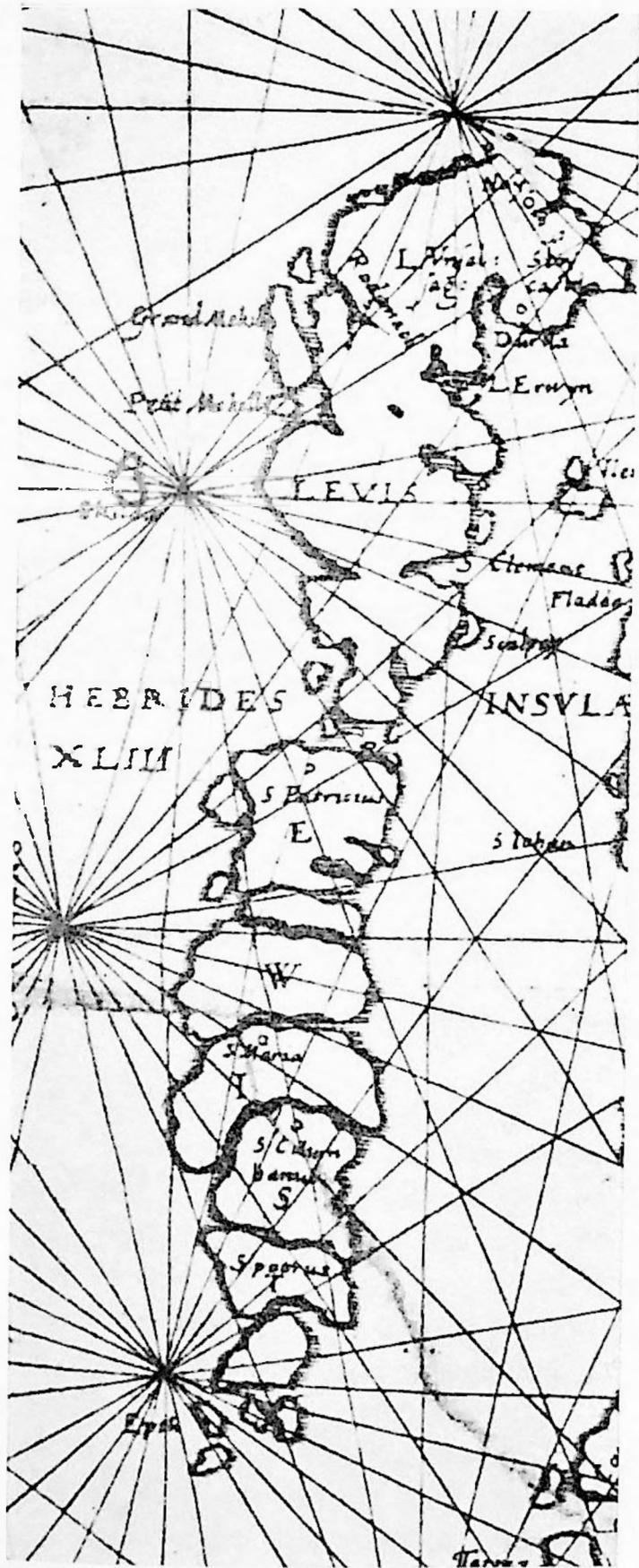


PLATE IX From Nicolas de Nicolay, Chart of Scotland, 1583.

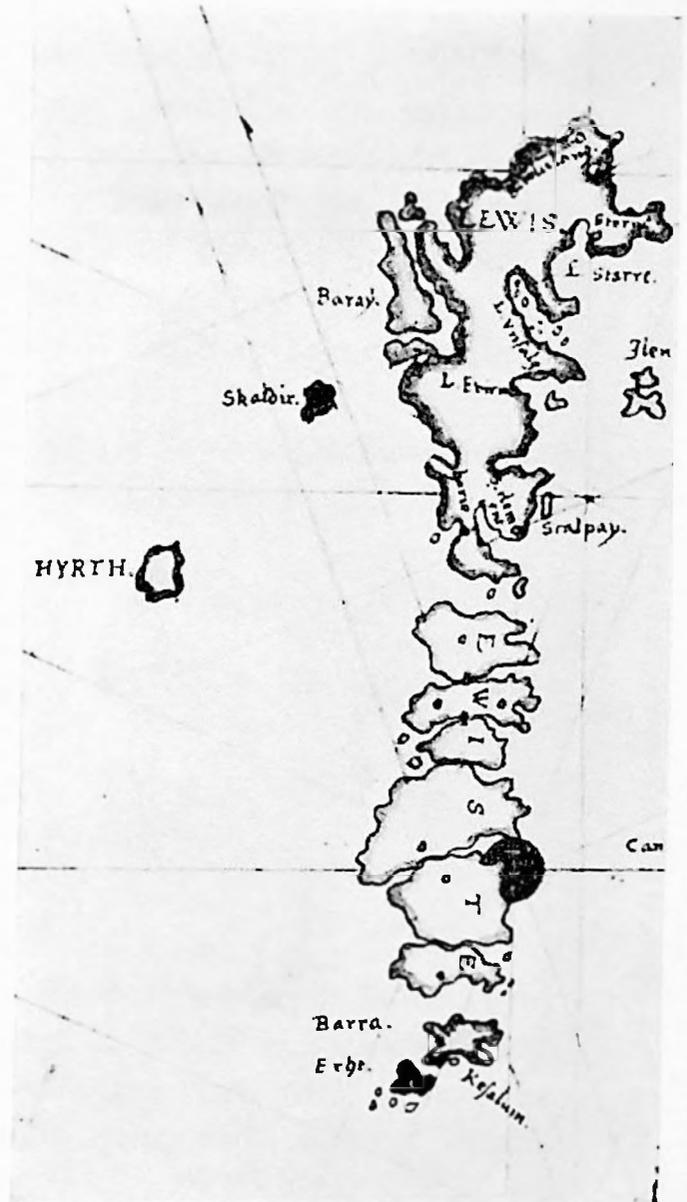


PLATE X From *Carte of Scotlande*, BM. Add. MSS. 37024, late sixteenth century.

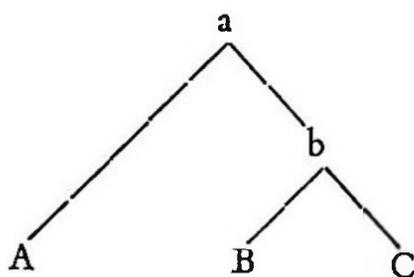


FIG. 1

It will be seen that there is a (lost) sub-archetypal chart 'b' between BC and 'a'.

The method by which this stemma was evolved was a textual analysis based upon techniques devised by Vinton A. Dearing of the University of California (1959). His techniques provide for a rigorous comparison and analysis of textual variations, and produce results which in the writer's view are capable of wide application in both literary texts and cartographical material. In the case of the three charts, Dearing's techniques were applied to the corpus of 179 names which they have in common, although in varying forms and spellings.

The stemma thus derived and shown in Figure 1 can be applied specifically to the *Sk*-form, with the result shown in Figure 2:

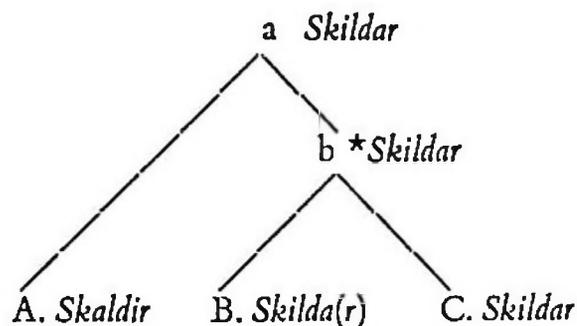


FIG. 2

In Fig. 2, **Skildar* in chart 'b' has been chosen as the necessary archetype of the forms in charts B and C. In chart 'a', **Skildar* has been preferred to **Skaldir* as the hypothetical archetype. *Skaldir* in chart A is the 'odd' variant, occurring only once; the copyist of chart A (or an intermediary) seems to have erroneously transposed *i* and *a* in **Skildar*.

The Dearing techniques of textual analysis do not provide us with the date of the lost archetype 'a', except to the extent that it must be earlier than the only one of the charts that is dated—Nicolay's chart of 1583.

Fortunately there is bibliographical and historical evidence which helps us to date both 'b' and 'a'. This evidence has been skilfully pieced together by E. G. R. Taylor (1931: 59-62), and the present writer's further studies have done no more than expand her conclusions at various points.

The key authority is Nicolas de Nicolay, Sieur d'Arfeville (1517-83), painter, cartographer, traveller, commissioner-ordinary of artillery, and chief cosmographer to

the King of France. He was also the author of several books. These include an account of his journey to Constantinople, and the book published in Paris in 1583 containing what has been called chart B above. This chart—as well as chart C—is accompanied by a rutter in French of the coasts of Scotland, from the Humber round to the Solway. It is followed by a treatise on navigation, and is preceded by a long dedicatory epistle in sycophantic terms to Anne, Duc de Joyeuse, Admiral of France.

Nicolay's dedicatory epistle explains how the rutter and chart came into his hands and provides evidence as to when this happened. He attributes the rutter and the chart to a Scottish pilot called Alexander Lyndsay, of whom nothing else is known. He says that his first French version was translated from 'a little book' written in Scots which he received while in England from Admiral Lord Dudley; and from what he says it can be deduced with reasonable certainty that he received it with its related chart in 1546. The rutter and chart of 1546 are now both lost; but the chart, being a direct ancestor of chart B of 1583, cannot be other than sub-archetype 'b'. The episode throws some light on the interest in maps at this period as military documents, and the relevant sentences from the epistle, translated from the edition of 1583, are worth quoting:

In the year 1546 when Lord Dudley Admiral of England and subsequently Duke of Northumberland came on behalf of Henry 8, his King, to conclude peace with the great King Francis, having been informed . . . of a chart and geographical description of the Island and Kingdom of England in which I had observed several noteworthy and uncommon matters . . . he persisted until he obtained it from me . . . Seeing peace was so well established I readily agreed to go home with him, where I stayed about a year, very well treated and favoured . . . In order to draw me more fully into his designs, he communicated to me a little book written by hand in the Scottish language, containing the navigation of the King of Scotland James Fifth of that name, made round his Kingdom and the Island Hebrides and Orkney, under the direction of Alexander Lyndsay, a Scotsman, an excellent Pilot and Hydrographer with all the outstanding particulars worthy of note in such a navigation; together with the sea chart rather roughly made.

And considering with how much labour this small amount of paper had been written, I was unwilling to part with it without retaining a copy of it; and returning to France, on the accession of the good King Henry the Second to that Crown [1547], I had the said little book translated into French . . . and having made a fair copy along with its chart, I presented it to his Majesty.

This passage implies that the sub-archetypal chart 'b' and also the island **Skildar* must be as old as 1546.⁴

It also implies that the archetypal chart and the name may be as old as Lyndsay's original rutter. The voyage which James V made to the Western Isles took place, according to Scottish sources, in 1540.⁵ Lyndsay would seem to have prepared the rutter and the chart for this voyage, and this chart would be archetype 'a'.

The above would appear to confirm **Skildar* as the archetypal form. But here one must pause. There may have been intermediate versions of the chart between Lyndsay's

original of 1540 and the copy lent to Nicolay in 1546, and variations may have crept in. Furthermore, we must not neglect the forms *S. Kylder* 1573 and *S. Kilder* 1578. These early forms represent a tradition in which the ending was not *-ar* but *-er* in their sub-archetype—and possibly also in their archetype.

All requirements would seem to be met by postulating an archetypal form **Skildar* or **Skilder* dated 1540–6. It is not possible to say which was the original Scots spelling; either might have preceded the other.

We now turn from the archetypal form to its archetypal connotation.

Since the three charts apply the *Sk*-form to a small island off the west coast of Lewis—and not to the present St. Kilda—it can be deduced that the archetypal form was also so applied. There is specific confirmation of this in chart A. To demonstrate this, however, requires digression about *Hirt*, the Gaelic name for St. Kilda.

The writer has dealt with *Hirt* in detail in a paper on 'The Norsemen in St. Kilda' in the *Saga-Book of the Viking Society* (1968), and the main findings are summarised in the following paragraph.

The name is now pronounced with minor regional variations; in Lewis it is pronounced [hirʃtj]. A review of the evidence shows that it is not and cannot be of Celtic origin, and previous theories based upon this assumption must be discarded. The name can be traced back to 1202. In that year an Icelandic ship under Guðmundr Arason touched at an island on the west of the Outer Hebrides called *Hirtir*. *Hirtir* is the plural of ON *hjörtr*, 'a stag'; and 'Stags', it is suggested, is a very suitable name for a seaman approaching the islands to give to their rugged outlines rising out of the sea. A lengthy list of later forms of the name is given in an appendix to the paper. It first appears in Scottish sources in the fourteenth century as *Heryte*, *Hyrte*, *Hert* and *Hirth*. It is found Latinised in the sixteenth century as *Hirtha* and *Hirta*.⁶

The relevance of all this is that chart A shows both *Hyrth* and the *Sk*-island and does so in quite different cartographic representations. *Hyrth* is shown as a single island about 30 miles west of the Sound of Harris. *Skaldir* is shown as the off-shore island, pear-shaped rather than almond-shaped, about 12 miles from the west coast of Lewis. Their position can be seen in Plate X. There is thus proof that to one cartographer (at least) there were two separate islands with two separate names.

III

Having worked our way backwards to an archetypal form of 1540–6, we can now start the journey forwards, with a view to showing how all the later forms developed from that archetype. This will be shown at the end of this section in the form of another and larger stemma.

Before such a stemma can be constructed, however, a gap in the chain of evidence has to be filled. An explanation has to be found for the transition from a form beginning *Sk*- to a form beginning *S.K*-. The archetypal *Sk*-form did not have the shape of a

saint's name. It must at some point of time have been re-interpreted and re-shaped as a saint's name—or rather at two points of time, once into *S.Kilder* and at another time into *S.Kilda*. How and when did these changes take place?

It is common in the maps of Western European countries in the sixteenth century to find churches, or settlements containing churches, which are identified by a saint's name in the form *S.Peter* or *S:Peter*. This applies to maps and charts of Scotland, and is particularly noticeable for Orkney and the Western Isles, for reasons that are not clear. For example, Ortelius' *Scotia Tabula* 1573 has twelve such dedications in Orkney and eight (including *S.Kylder*) in the Western Isles. Indeed, any copyist or engraver of this map could not avoid noticing that several small islands in the north and west had no name associated with them at all except the name of a saint to which a church or chapel was presumably dedicated.

The writer has been unable to trace the ultimate source of *S.Kilder* in Leslie 1578 and of *S.Kylder* in Ortelius 1573. In a valuable paper on Leslie, R. A. Skelton (1950:105) has shown that his large scale map of Scotland was based primarily, although not wholly, upon that of Ortelius 1573. But the sources of this particular map of Ortelius appear to be lost and it would be unwise in the present state of knowledge to offer any conjectures.

There are good reasons for believing, however, that *S.Kilda* in Waghenaer 1592 has its origin in Nicolay's *Skilda(r)* in his chart of 1583. Waghenaer's sailing directions for the west of Scotland contain a list of the names of 35 western islands derived from Nicolay's chart. The evidence for this statement is consigned to a note.⁷ The copying of the names has sometimes been inaccurate, and two of the errors are of special interest to us here. *Two* of Nicolay's island names have been turned into the names of saints. One of these is Nicolay's *Skarbo*, now Scarba on the coast of Argyll, one mile and a half north of Jura; this appears in Waghenaer as *S.Karbo*. The other is Nicolay's *Skilda(r)*, which appears in Waghenaer as *S.Kilda*.

Waghenaer was probably influenced by seeing four other islands in Nicolay's representation of Uist apparently identified by the names of saints—*S Patricius*, *S Maria*, *S Columbanus*, and *S Petrus*, all without a full stop after the *S*.

It must be assumed that the final *-r* in *Skilda(r)* was accidentally omitted. This is quite probable since, as has been explained above, it is not clearly legible in Nicolay's chart.

The name *S.Kilda* in Waghenaer's sailing directions of 1592 thus seems to have been the result of scribal re-interpretation of a name in Nicolay's chart of 1583, accompanied by the transfer of the chart name from an island 12–15 miles west of Lewis to about 25 miles further west. It is not clear whether we must blame Waghenaer himself—as has been implied above—or some one employed by him, or some preceding copyist working between 1583 and 1592.

It must be noted here by way of parenthesis that *S.Kilda* 1592 is not the only variant derived (apparently) from Nicolay's *Skilda(r)* 1583. Two other such derivatives have

been found, but both without the 'saintly' shape. The first occurrences of these variants are:

Schilda c. 1592 Petrus Plancius, *Nova Francia* (a chart of the North Atlantic), Amsterdam. Applied to three small islands lying north and south about 20 miles west of Lewis. *Sch-* appears to be a Dutch orthographic adaptation of *Sk-*. Reappears in several subsequent charts of the N. Atlantic, e.g. W. Barents 1598 and G. Tatton 1610.

Skilda 1610 Hermann Janszoon, MS chart of Western Europe, Paris, Bibl. Nat. Cartes Rouleau 548. Photograph, Royal Geog. Society, London. Applied to Waghenaer's island of *S.Kilda*.

In theory, *Skilda* and its connotation constitute a textual variant intermediate between *Skilda(r)* 1583 and *S.Kilda* 1592. The date 1610 conflicts with this, unless, as is conceivable, Janszoon was using a source dated between 1583 and 1592. But the writer has found no independent proof of such a source, and it has been considered imprudent to treat *Skilda* as such an intermediary. *Schilda* and *Skilda* will therefore be shown as terminal variants in the stemma; that is, at the end of individual branches of the textual tree.

It is now possible to attempt an expansion of the stemma in Fig. 2 into a larger stemma extending from 1540 to Martin's forms in 1698. This stemma is shown in Fig. 3, which is based upon the evidence and discussion in this paper up to this point.

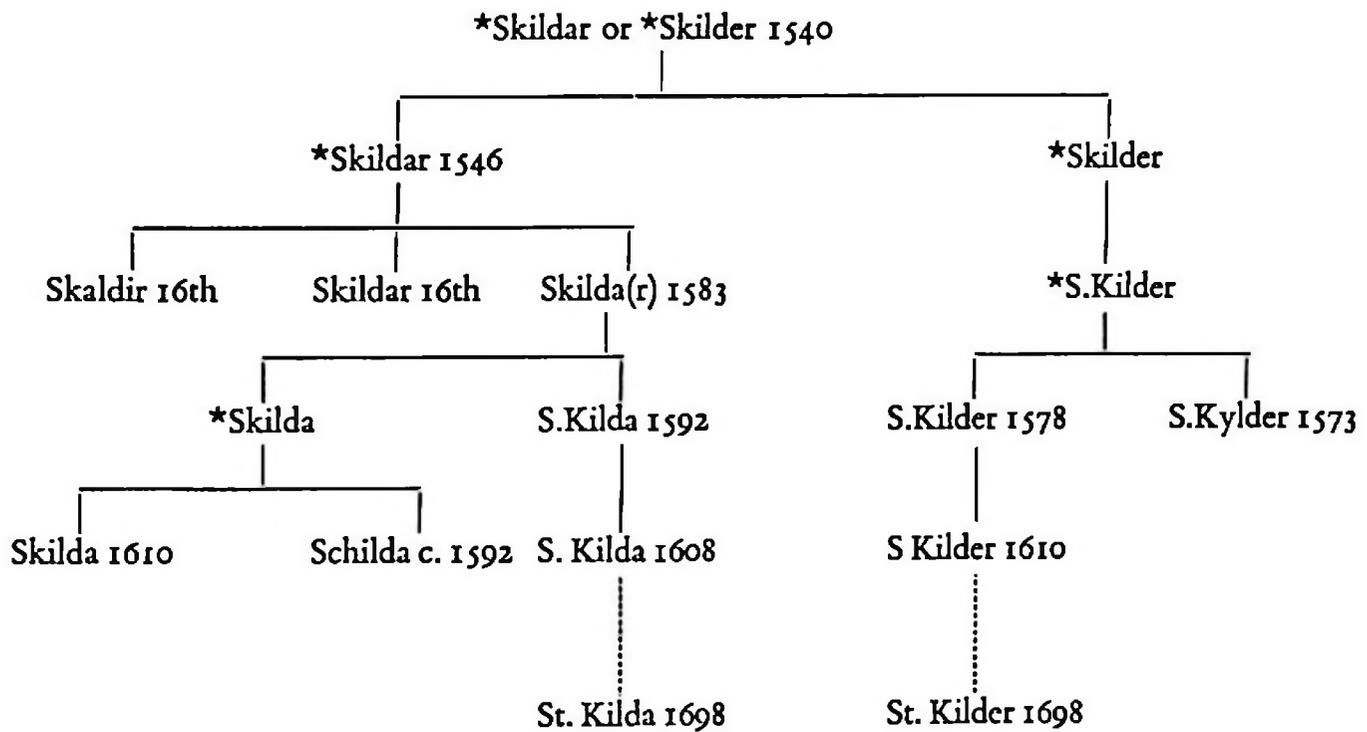


FIG. 3 Stemma of *St. Kilda* from 1540

The dates of the forms are the dates of the sources that have been quoted.

The stemma is the best that the writer can construct on the basis of the present evidence. It is subject to reconsideration if fresh evidence comes to light.

IV

We can now turn from charts and rutters to etymology.

The *Sk*-forms confirm that the saint is an illusion, and *Saint Kilda* as an etymon disappears.

The *Sk*-forms also dispose of a persistent theory that *Kilda* was a common noun derived from ON *kelda*, 'a well'. The main well for the village on Hirta was in fact called *Tobar Childa*, the first element being the Gaelic word for 'well' and the second word being a Gaelic form of ON *kelda*.

Martin (edn. 1934:414) was the first to suggest a connection between the name of the island and the name of the well; to quote again:

There is a large well near the town, called St. Kilder's Well; from which this land is supposed to derive its name.

Macaulay (1764:108) commented, with a little caution:

From the name of the fountain, which gave me some encouragement to offer it, the island is in all probability termed *St. Kilda*, though of late only.

Macaulay deduced correctly that the name was 'late'. Henderson (1910:183) wrote:

Those map-makers who could not speak Gaelic named the island on their maps *St. Kilda*, thinking that was the name of the saint by which the well was called, whereas it was simply the Norse name for 'well'.

Watson (1926:98) wrote:

The name evidently arose from confusion with the name of the well at the landing place which is still called *Tobar-Childa* . . . Probably the Dutch fishermen, who were active in the seventeenth century, were in the way of taking water from the well.

All of these suggestions, however, were made without knowledge of the sixteenth-century forms *Skildar* and *Skaldir*, and must be regarded as invalid.⁸

There are really two questions to answer: If the archetypal **Skildar* or **Skilder* was an island (or group of islands) close to the west coast of Lewis, what was the origin of the name? And what was the island or island-group?

The name has not survived locally so far as can be ascertained. It is not Gaelic, English or Dutch.⁹ But it sounds very like ON *skildir*, plural of *skjöldr*, 'a shield'. *Skjöldr* was also used of shield-like objects, including small islands on the west coast of Norway in the form *Skjöldø*.¹⁰

This usage is singular, and no island-groups with the plural form have been traced in Norway or elsewhere. But there seems no reason why the plural should not have been applied to a group of islands that look like shields lying flat on the surface of the sea when viewed from the western shore of Lewis or Harris or North Uist.

Are there in fact 'shield-islands' with which ON *Skildir* could be identified?

While on a visit to the Outer Hebrides in 1963, the writer took the opportunity to examine all the main islands lying off their western shores. The St. Kilda group and Haskeir Islands are too craggy and irregular to be described as 'shields'. The Monach Islands are too flat. Shillay looks like a single shield and so, to a less degree, does Pabbay. But Gaskeir looks like two small shields when seen from West Loch Tarbert in Harris; and Haskeir Eagach looks like a row of five shields when viewed from the north-west shore of North Uist. Profiles of the two last groups as the writer saw them are given in Fig. 4.

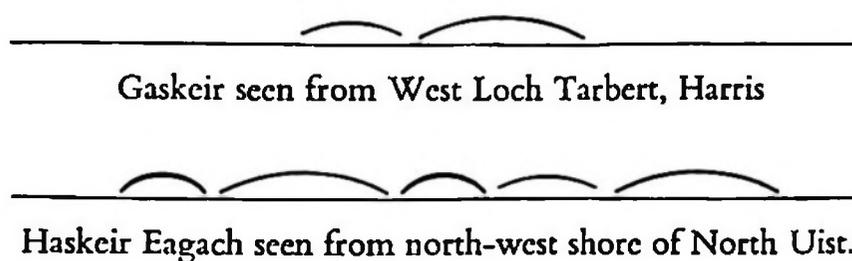


FIG. 4 Profiles of island-groups

Skildir, 'Shields', fits the appearance of the Haskeir Eagach group best. It might be argued that these islands already have a name of their own, but the antiquity of its present name may be questioned seriously. The first element is ON *há-sker*, 'high skerry', and is the same name as that of the craggy Haskeir Island lying a mile to the north. The second element is a Gaelic word meaning 'indented'. It would seem that the island group has in Gaelic-speaking times been given a duplex name to link it with, but distinguish it from, its craggy neighbour. There is thus room for *Skildir* to have been the original Norse name for the group.

But it is not necessary to press one particular identification. The visit showed that there are in fact off-shore islands that could suitably be described as *Skildir* or 'Shields', and the name and location are reasonably consistent with representations on sixteenth-century maps.

Summary

There is cartographic and other evidence that the place name *St. Kilda*, earlier *S.Kilda*, was originally applied in a Scots archetypal form **Skildar* or **Skilder* to an island or island group much nearer to the west coast of the Outer Hebrides.

This archetypal form beginning *Sk-* makes it clear beyond doubt that the name was not originally a saint's name. It also invalidates a long-standing theory that the name is derived from ON *kelda*, 'a well'.

The archetypal form is probably derived from ON *skildir*, 'shields'. There are in fact at least two groups of islands off the west coasts of Harris and North Uist which have the appearance of shields lying flat on the surface of the sea.

The name was first transferred further westwards to Hirta, in the form *S.Kilda*, in a set of sailing directions and a chart in L. J. Wagenaer's *Thresoor der Zeevaert*, Leyden 1592. This is the first recorded occurrence of the name in the shape of a saint's name. Its form and its application appear to be the result of faulty copying of *Skilda(r)* in Nicolas de Nicolay's chart of Scotland, Paris 1583.

Thus, although now securely established as a place name, *St. Kilda* received its present form and connotation as the result of orthographic and cartographic error in the late sixteenth century.

NOTES

- 1 The writer recorded the first results of his investigations in a short article in *The News Letter* of the National Trust for Scotland in 1957. Some of the evidence in that article has been modified by subsequent discoveries, and the article should be regarded as being superseded.
- 2 For a valuable general survey of the character and occupance of the islands, see Macgregor (1960).
- 3 Narbrough's voyages are described in some detail in Florence E. Dyer, *Life of Admiral Sir John Narbrough* (London 1931).
- 4 Another French version of the rutter and chart was presented by Nicolay to the Cardinal of Lorraine in 1559. The rutter is preserved, without the chart, in B.M. MS Harl. 3996. An examination of the text shows that it has the same source as the rutters associated with charts B and C. It has no relevance to the present study, however, except by providing supporting evidence for the existence of 'b'.
- 5 The expenses of James V's expedition, which had the object of receiving, or forcing, the allegiance of the leading men in the north and west, are recorded for the year 1540 in *The Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland 1538-41*, p. 7; see *Isles* and *Salamander* (the flagship) in the index. There is unfortunately no mention in the account of any chart or rutter or indeed any aid to navigation for the purpose of this voyage, which began at Leith and ended at Dumbarton. The date is confirmed in a letter of James V to Henry VIII of 29 July 1540, in *The Letters of James V*, ed. Denys Hay (London 1954), p. 404.
- 6 There was some confusion in the first half of the sixteenth century about the position of *Hirtha*. Hector Boece, *Historiae* (1526: xiii) gives his *Hirtha*, for reasons not explained, a latitude of 63 degrees north. Influenced by Boece (or by Boece's source), George Lily's map *Britanniae Insula* (Rome 1546) shows *Hirtha* as a large island north of Lewis. (The island has, for reasons awaiting enquiry, the rough outline of Lewis and Harris turned round east to west.) Lily's representation was followed in numerous subsequent maps, including Bishop Leslie's small and large scale maps of 1578. The maps of Scotland of Mercator 1564, Ortelius 1573 and Nicolay 1583 do not repeat this error; instead they have a much smaller island, a little further south and they call it (properly) *Rona*. Skelton (1950: 103) has useful comments on this transitory cartographic aberration which, after careful examination, has been found to have no relevance to the history of the name *St. Kilda*.
- 7 The dependence of Wagenaer's list of 35 western islands upon Nicolay's chart of 1583 rests upon three sets of evidence:
 - (i) All the island names in Wag. are also in Nic., although sometimes in variant form.
 - (ii) Some of the variants in Wag. are 'directional errors' from forms that are themselves errors on Nic. That is to say, they are errors which could only have been made if they had succeeded those in Nic. in point of time and not vice versa. *E.g.*:
Hun Wag. from *Ilen Hunda* Nic. (error for *Ilen Handa*); *grand Melul* Wag. from *Grand Mekill* Nic. (probably an error for *Grand Barry*, now Great Bernera)

(iii) Several of the errors in Wag. are identical with errors in Nic. which are not found in any other map prior to 1592. E.g.:

Lismont Nic., Wag. (error for *Lismore*). *Cotte* Nic., *Cutte* Wag. (error for *Colle*, now *Coll*).

Epth Nic., Wag. (error for *Erth*, now *The Aird*, headland east of Barra Head, Outer Hebrides.)

- 8 Watson's derivation from Old Norse *kelda*, 'a well' has been frequently adopted by subsequent writers on *St. Kilda*, and in view of the evidence now available it is hoped that it will now be silently dropped.
- 9 Watson (1926:98) suggested that *S. Kilder* might perhaps denote an islet with the Gaelic name of *Ceallasaidh*. The writer has not seen this island, nor indeed has he been able to identify it. It would not seem to be an island of sufficient importance to a sixteenth-century pilot to find its way on to the charts of the period. The phonological connection between the two names also seems dubious.
- 10 O. Rygh, *Norske Gaardnavne* XII: 11, XVI: 313, which indicate that *Skjölden* is found as a name of a farm or a skerry, and *Skjöldø* occurs as an island name.

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