Craig-Fishing in the Northern Isles of Scotland

and Notes on the Poke-Net

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In coastal areas, particularly where the resources of the land are minimal, fishing from the rocks has been common from earliest times. Amongst the poorer people it has often been an absolute necessity, and it is significant of the state of the family economy in late eighteenth-century Shetland that amongst the essential equipment for starting off married life were the fish basket or 'buthie' and fishing rods, along with a cow for milk, a spade to cultivate the soil, a peat spade or 'tusker' to cut fuel, a pot, a rug, and a blanket (Dishington 1792:II. 574). This was the domestic basis for survival, giving a subsistence foothold on the land whilst the man of the house devoted most of his energies to fishing for the laird, using long-lines in open boats. This type of deep-sea or 'haaf' fishing has been frequently discussed in print (*cf.* Goodlad 1971:Chapter 4), but the humbler, everyday forms of fishing from the rocks have received relatively little attention. Nevertheless, they are much older in date and have continued alongside the various phases of commercialisation of the fishing industry.

The Craig Seats

The craig-fishings were assets of great value to the ordinary folk, as aptly expressed by one writer when he said they were 'to the ancient dweller of our islands what the fishing boat is to the modern fisherman' (Spence 1899:34). Proprietary rights were claimed in them and up till about the mid-nineteenth century it appears that 'sanguinary encounters' to defend these rights were not unknown (*Shetland News* 21 October 1899).

Craig-seats were well-known and much frequented places, especially when the population was at its height in the early nineteenth century, and all had their particular names. In Fetlar, for example, two or three places were called 'da Trow's (troll's) Seat', because they were situated adjacent to caves where the trolls were said to hide if anyone came and disturbed them. Moving west around Fetlar from Snap Point, the following names have been recorded by James Laurenson:

> Stream Tonga, Gambla Hellicks (Gamla Helliks),* Skukkies, Green Tua, Sheek o' Lang Rivva, Salkness (a troll's seat), Staves Geo, Bogadens, Hylla-roga-ness, Denels Bench, Sheek o' da Mare's Holl, Lequolk (Likilk), Skerry o' da Lee, Peerie Cupla, Muckle Cupla, Fluteris Tonga, Gerdes Bergs (Gerdiesberg), Hivda Cudda, Blo Geo, Bratta Comb (Brecka comb),
>
> * Bracketed forms are from the Ordnance Survey map.

Winya Tonga (Winna Tonga), Inner Tonga, Hammar, Ruan, Soond, Hylar, Higgi, Beadies, Manna Soe, Hellena-quoda, Easter Bench, Waster-ness, Soders (Sodis-)-Keem, Trusgal (Trustgill), Hyal o' Hubie, Britie Geo, Brough, Gerts (Garths), Daal, Big-holm, Sunker, Lam-hella-kodis (Lambhellia-cuddies), Ret o' Mailand, Shenniberg (Sinniberg).

Funzie seats: Wimbligill (Wimligill), Stucks, Virda Berg, Staakens (Stackens), Hylla, Arties' Steen, Keenens (Keenings), da Virr (The Vir), Oxnie Geo.

Gruting Wick.

Mare of Tarrigeos, Scamro, Littlasand, Stattens, Fladrick, Kelsweek, Gurasteen, Grutness, Soond and Boond, Honganess, Shuos, Klubbens, Clay Berg, Mussie-Geo, da Hellicks, Kogie Geos, Hammers Berg.

In the South Mainland of Shetland, in the mile of coast between Noss and Spiggie, there were at least six craig seats, named 'da Scolt, da Sillock Gates, da Gray Beard (? Bard), da Bogie, da Gardie Stane and Laurie Eunson's Steps'. Laurie Eunson was a local worthy born in 1798 who took his peats with him and grilled his fish on the spot (Venables 1956:116–17). Throughout the Northern Isles, wherever the rocks were suitable, such craig-seats could be found.

The name given to them was *craig sitting*, *craigasoad*, or *craigstane*. The men who fished from them were *craigers*, and the phrase applied to fishing for coal-fish with a rod was 'to go to the craigs' (Edmonston 1866). *Craig* and the compounds noted here are Scots in origin, but another term, *bersit* (Spence 1899:32) or *bergset* (Jakobsen) must go back beyond that to the period of Norse occupation, for it is compounded of two Norse words, *berg*, a rock, and *sæti*, a seat. The terminology, therefore, not only points to long continuity of use, but also to historical change.

Craig fishing with rods is still practised, more for pleasure than from necessity, in order to get fresh fish or to lay in a stock to be dried and salted for winter. At present, as in earlier times, the fish chiefly caught are coal fish, especially in their younger stages when they are known as 'piltock' and 'sillock'. When they reach the later 'saithe' stage of development they are more often caught offshore. The pollack or *lure*, resembling the coal-fish, but of an inferior flavour, was also caught, and occasionally mackerel (Saxby 1932:201; *New Shetlander* June–July 1947:2).

Craig-fishing was a job for the men (Plate I), but boys also took to it early (Plate III), as noted in Shetland by Robert Monteith in 1633 with reference to 'young Sheaths (saithe), called by the Inhabitants Pelltacks, which in fair Weather come so near the Shore, that Men, yea Children, from the Rocks with fishing Rods, caught them in abundance' (Sibbald 1845:23). Monteith, who was an Orkney laird, knew the young coalfish by the name 'podlines' (*Ibid.*).

Techniques and Equipment

Three methods of fishing from the rocks of the shore have been recorded. The first is with a rod and line of fixed length, the second with a length of cord and a float, the third with a circular net.

PLATE I Peter Scott, Setter, Papa Stour, with his 'piltock waand' (rod for coal-fish) and home-made 'docken büdie' (basket made of dried dock stalks). (Photo: A. Fenton 1967.)

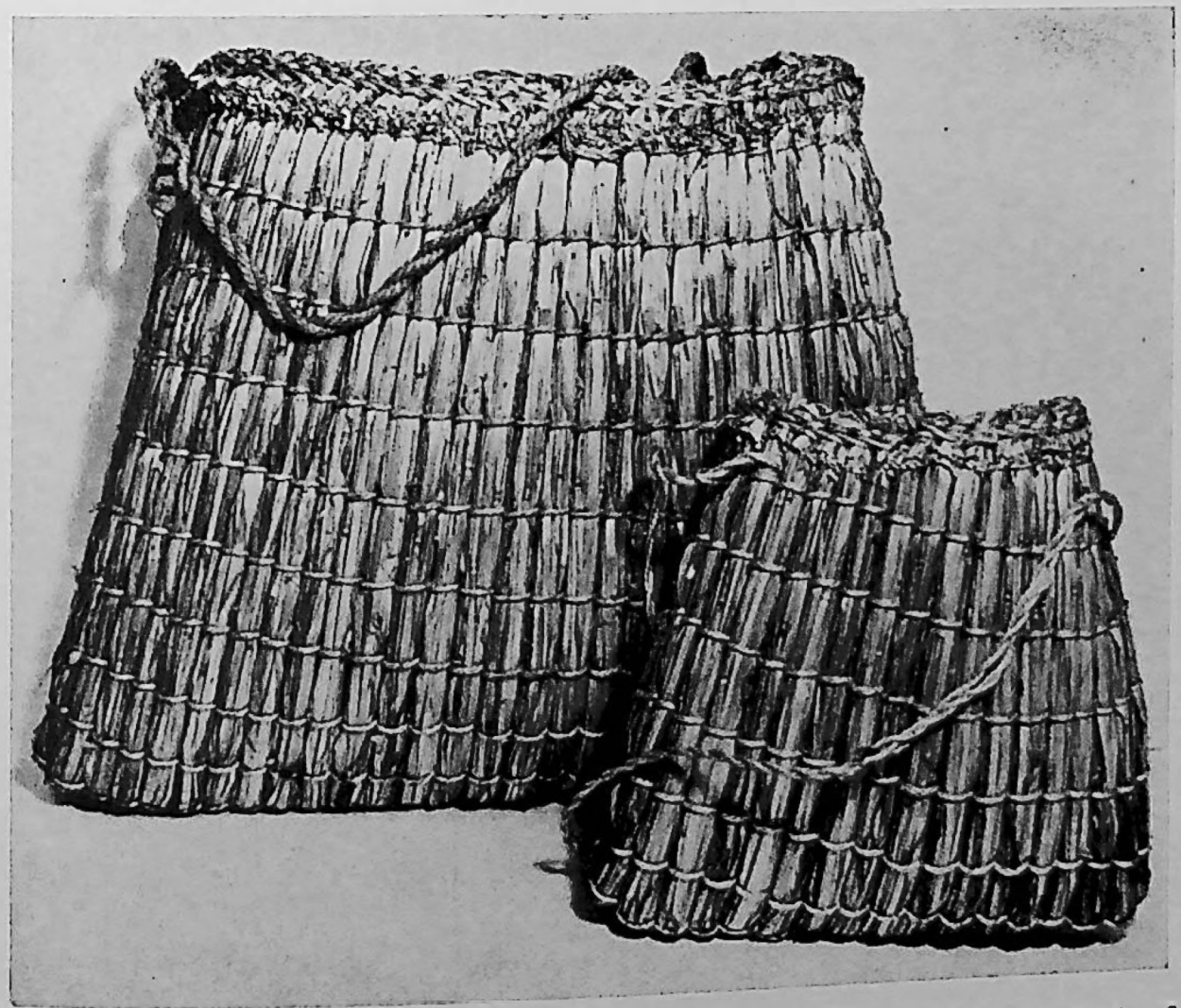

PLATE II A fish 'büdie' (left) and a limpet 'cuddie' (right) for carrying bait, both of straw and twine. Made by W. Stout, Houll, Fair Isle, Shetland, in 1963.
(Photo: National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland.)

PLATE III A Shetlander fishing with a 'poke-net', and boys fishing with rods for coalfish. (From F. Barnard, 1890.)

1 *The Fishing 'Wand'*

The fishing rod or *wand* as used in Shetland was home-made, of two or sometimes three lengths of wood, with an average length of about 11 feet. Bamboo was used if available. The wooden parts were scarfed together, and served with twine over the oints to give strength and flexibility. Like an angler's rod, the craig-fishing rod gradually tapered from the main part or *lim* towards the point, which was known as the *tap* or *mull* (Jakobsen). Unlike an angler's rod, however, there was no reel, and the line was of a fixed length, so adjusted that when the fish was lifted from the water it swung in convenient to the fisher's hand.

The line was secured to the point of the rod with a whipping of yarn, called the *mulin* (Jakobsen), and an extra length was brought back down the body of the rod, through a ring, to be fastened approximately half-way down. In Fetlar, the name *undertome* was given to this extra piece.

The cast or *tome* was made of horse-hair. This was twisted by hand, resin or peat-ash being applied to the thumb and forefinger to provide a better grip. Alternatively, twisting could be done by means of a hooked spindle, frequently consisting of a cylinder of hard peat, 3–4 inches across by 2 inches deep, into the centre of which was driven a notched piece of stick. The 2 inch depth is the normal thickness of a Shetland peat. The spindle method of twisting hair-lines was by no means confined to Shetland, and was also used in the fishing towns of mainland Scotland, where a stone or weight with a hook attached served as the spindle (Macadam 1880–1: 148–51).

In course of time, horse-hair lines were replaced by fine hempen cord with a short length of gut to which the hook was attached. The readier availability of gut led to the disuse of the old horse-hair *tome* and single hook, and to their replacement by the 'sillock and piltock flee' (young coalfish fly). The fly consisted of a number of 9 inch lengths of gut knotted on to each other seriatim, in such a way that a two-inch length of each, called the *bid*, was left dangling. The lure, usually a tuft of white hair known as the *buskin*, was attached to the end of the *bid* along with the hook, and the whole unit was fixed to the line by a short length of cord. The multiple hooks of the 'sillock and piltock flee' greatly increased the catching power of the rod.

Limpet Bait

An essential adjunct to craig-fishing was the use of limpet bait. A limpet-knife, in Fair Isle called an *ebb-pick*, often consisting of the broken blade of a kitchen knife fitted in a wooden handle, was used to lever limpets off the rocks, and they were collected in a limpet *cuddie*, a small handmade basket of straw and bent grass (Plate II), or a small wooden box, in Fair Isle called a *truan*. They were then parboiled, and taken by the *craiger* to his craig seat, as dusk was falling.

The limpet bait was either attached to the hook, or mashed to serve as ground bait.

The first step was to prepare the mashed bait, called *soe*, and as a rule this was done in cup-shaped hollows associated with the craig-seats, some of them natural, others artificially formed. These hollows have been the subject of learned antiquarian discussion from time to time, but their purpose does not seem to be in any great doubt. A letter that appears to sum the matter up in a convincingly practical manner appeared in the *Shetland Times* for 17 January 1885:

> Sir,—My investigation into the cup-holes has been confined to the sea-board, and chiefly those places frequented for rod fishing. With this limitation, I proceed to say what I have found. First, I have not found cup-holes on the shores of quiet voes, but on rocks exposed to the open sea, and consequently to the tides. On some places a small mussel grows visible at half-tide; at other places these mussels—locally called pills—are not to be found. I have never found these cup-holes but in the neighbourhood of these mussels. In some places I have found one hole only, in other places two, and frequently three. Where there are three, one is larger than the other two. All are of the same depth—about six inches or so, and no doubt made by human hand. Second—their apparent use. If they have had a mysterious use, I must leave that for others to discover. Fishing from rocks exposed to the tides the fish won't stay. A lure called 'soe' is needed to bring the fish, and this has to be repeated every now and then. The best lure known is these small mussels pounded into a jelly. This can be done with a handy stone and smooth bed, but this process is often inconvenient. You have to bring the stone each time, as you find the sea has washed away the one you brought before. Then a clean surface is rare, and the least weed on the rock spoils the lure. On the other hand, the hole is clean, and no stone is needed. A pounding stick, or even the butt-end of a fishing rod answers well. Third—the process. On a rock where six or eight may have sat down to fish, two boys are told off to prepare this lure. A small quantity is put into the little holes, and when well pounded put into the centre big hole, and so on until the big hole is full. This commonly serves while the fishing lasts for the time being. The men of former times were practical, if anything; they spared no pains or tact to secure success, and these cup-holes, whatever other end they secured, were the things wanted to successful fishing. My impression is that no higher end was intended by the cup-hole makers.—Yours, etc. A.

When the lure of mashed limpets was seen to be doing its work and the first fish appeared, the *craiger* would take several limpets between his teeth and chew them to the correct degree of softness before putting them on the hook. An expert was said to be able to bait the hook by slipping it into the chewed limpet gripped between his front teeth, but lesser men took the bait between their fingers first.

The chewing of limpets brought into the mouth a great deal of saliva, which, when forcibly spat out on the water, added its quota of attraction to the coalfish. The 'sillock and piltock flee', however, did away with the need to use chewed limpets as bait.

For successful craig-fishing, an offshore wind was required. The wind on the fisherman's back and a smooth sea with a good *lioom* from the oil in the belly of the limpets helped to bring the fish *at*, but in the fall of the year the young sillocks were often close in to a good craig-seat, and little bait was necessary.

In Orkney the oily patch made by throwing or spitting out limpet bait was called a

glee, *ligny*, *linyo* or *uthy*, and the bait itself was *furto*, *raa-saithe*, or *saithe*. It was said that the true old *furto* 'consisted of chewed limpets which had been previously "leeped", or scalded, to take off the shells. Fishermen then chewed these limpets into small portions and "spat out furto", which caused an oily smooth patch. . . . Nowadays, people are usually too "nice" to chew the *furto*, and chop it up instead with a stone on the rocks' (Marwick 1929: *s.v. furto*). If the wind was not suitable on one part of the coast, the geography of the islands often made it possible to cross to the other side of the land to get the wind on the back.

When the fisherman left the seat the stone pounder was taken out of the *soe-hole* and laid for safety in a hollow well above high-water mark, so that it should not be washed away by breakers.

A skilful angler could handle two rods at a time (*New Shetlander* June-July 1947:2). Whilst one was lifted to take off the fish, the other was gripped between his knees. The practice of holding a 'wand' in each hand was also known in the early 1800s (Neill 1806: 92).

The fish as they were caught were put into a basket of straw and bent grass, or of docken-stalks and bent grass, called a *büdie* (Plate II). It was the custom with older fisherman to empty out the catch and count it, whether it was large or small. Counting has only been discontinued in recent years. When he came home, the craiger would say how many score he had got.

The prevalence of craig fishing in earlier times and its close integration with the life of the ordinary folk is amply demonstrated by the beliefs and lore associated with it. For example, scum or froth on the limpet brew was reckoned a good sign for fishing, as was a number of birds sitting on the craig seat. Seals were not regarded very favourably around the fishing places. If a fisherman had left anything behind, he would not go back into the house to get it, but would shout outside for someone to bring it to him. He was also careful to avoid women when going to the fishings, but if he met one by chance, he spat three times when she had passed. On the other hand, however, there was no superstition about women if they came laden with provisions and tobacco to the fishing lodges where the men involved in line-fishing had been leading a bachelor life.

2 *The 'Steepa-Dorro'*

As an alternative to the fishing-wand, there was another form of tackle much used by older men on the craig-seats. This was known in Fetlar as a *steepa-dorro*. It consisted of a length of heavy cord several fathoms long. At one point a cork float was attached, and from it hung a length of about 6 feet of line, at the end of which was a hook with a fairly large limpet as bait. The shore end was anchored to a suitable stone on the craig-seat, and the float and tackle were thrown out as far as required. Agitation of the float showed when a fish had taken the bait, and the tackle was then pulled in.

Fish caught in this way were chiefly rock cod, large piltocks, and small *tusk* or cod, which lived a little further off the rocks than the young coalfish.

The significance of the first element of the Fetlar name is not certain, but the second is cognate with Norwegian and Old Norse *dorg*, a trailing fishing-line. There can be little doubt that this device was used from Norse times or even earlier as an alternative or complement to the rod with which fish were taken much closer in.

3 *The Poke-Net (in Shetland)*

A third method of fishing from the craig-seats was by means of poke-nets, or 'sillock-pocks'.

These were not as widespread in use as fishing rods, partly because they were much more expensive and time consuming to make, and partly because the range of craig-seats from which they could be worked was much more limited. A poke-net required an easily accessible cleft or *geo*, with room to work.

Poke-nets were 'made in the form of a parachute or umbrella suspended from the top of a long pole, and thereby let down into the sea' (Armit 1845:122). The diameter of the net was commonly 5–6 feet in Shetland (Barnard 1890: Plate XVII; Venables 1956: 116), but in Orkney it ranged up to 8–10 feet (Ellison MS *a.* 1911; Marwick 1929. *s.v. pock*). According to James Laurenson in Fetlar, the mouth spread was 3½–4 feet.

The ring was of iron to give rigidity and weight, for when in action the net was sunk beneath the surface. The bag was made of cord, and tapered towards the bottom. Three or more ropes were attached to the perimeter of the ring at equidistant points, and where they came together they were fastened to a single rope that led to the end of the stout wooden pole by which the net was raised and lowered (Plate III).

To sink the bag to the required depth in the sea, a stone was put in as ballast. As bait, salt herring could be put in the bag, but additionally or instead pounded limpets, sometimes mixed with mashed potatoes, were thrown into and over the body of the net as ground bait to attract the young coalfish. The effect of this could create a kind of frenzied excitement in the fish that brought them swarming together, when they could be caught in huge numbers, by lifting the net through the swarm, emptying it, and getting it back into the water again as quickly as possible. A five foot net could scoop up about half a hundredweight of fish at a time in such conditions (Venables 1956:116).

The usual technique was to keep the net sunk for three or four minutes after spreading the bait, and then to raise it. This the operator did

> by a peculiar process. Planting the hinder end of the pole on the rock, he sits across it, grasping it higher up with both hands. His fulcrum thus established, he slowly falls backward, the weight of his body acting as counterpoise, and the pole moves towards the perpendicular, hoisting the dripping net, from which water pours in a thousand streamlets, while some thirty or forty hapless victims flounce and tumble in the meshes they cannot escape from (Barnard 1890: Plate XVII).

It is, however, the fishing rod with its fixed line, and the line with a float, that represent the oldest and most enduring subsistence fishing equipment in the Northern Isles, for the use of the poke-net seems to accompany changing living standards and an increasing commercialisation of fishing.

Use of the Poke-Net in Orkney and elsewhere

In Orkney, Stromness harbour provided a safe and convenient place for a more commercial use of the poke net. George Ellison has recorded in his manuscript *Reminiscences of my Twenty Seven Visits to the Orkney Is^ds.—1884–1911* (preserved in the Stromness Museum) how sillocks were caught there with a poke net, in water one to four fathoms deep. The net consisted of an iron hoop 10 feet in diameter with a net of ½ inch square mesh about 6 feet long, rounded at its base. It was attached by a number of thick cords some 9 feet long, all fastened together at one point, to a single rope whose length could vary depending on the depth of water (Fig. 1). The net was lowered on a stout pole from the stem of a yawl in the harbour, and was generally allowed to rest on the bottom. A bait of mashed crabs was thrown out, and the net was hauled as soon as the sillocks had gathered. This usually took place in November. In frosty weather when the fish were plentiful, no bait might be needed.

The fish were sold for a few shillings a cartload for manure in the fields, or were kept in large floating boxes for bait for the long-lines of the trawlers that went to the fishing banks of North Faroe, Iceland, and elsewhere.

This practice was on a bigger scale than the more domestic poke-net fishing of Shetland, or of the Caithness island of Stroma in the Pentland Firth.

The closest analogy to the poke-net in the Northern Isles is the hoop-net for fishing lobsters, used until the introduction of creels in the early 1800s. The hoop-net differs from the poke-net in that it has no pole, since it is always fished from a boat, but the iron ring of 4–5 feet in diameter, the bag, and the arrangement of ropes are similar. The hoop-net has an additional string or fastening across the middle of the ring, to which the bait was attached (Fig. 2). This type of hoop-net for lobsters was by no means confined to Northern Scotland, and was also used, for example, in North Jutland, where it was called *kranje*, and was fished on stony bottoms (Rasmussen 1968:n.p.).

Poke is a Lowland Scots word meaning a bag, and therefore refers to the shape of the net. The generalised nature of the term is emphasised by the fact that in the salmon fishing rivers and estuaries of Scotland a different type of fixed net also has the same name. The name, therefore, does not in itself give any clues to the age and origins of the net, nor have any early references been found to it in the Northern Isles. The situation is broadly parallel to that on the Åkær River in Kolding, Jutland, where square nets with counterbalanced poles mounted on fixed uprights were used to catch sea-trout. The sources here cannot be followed back beyond 1800 (Rasmussen 1949:126, 129).

Nevertheless, square nets of this type, called by Sayce 'dip-nets' (Sayce 1945:51),

with the pole mounted on a stand or held by the fisherman, are extremely widespread in the world. They are to be found, for example, in China (Rasmussen 1949:132), Polynesia (Forde 1964:194), Central Europe (Moszyński 1967:1. 107), Germany (Rasmussen 1949:130–1), France (du Monceau 1769:30–2; Sayce 1945:51), Italy (Rasmussen 1949:131), and Scandinavia. Even at the present time it is one of the pleasant sights of Stockholm to watch the men with their dip-nets (circular), fixed to the sterns of their small boats, fishing in the water below the royal palace.

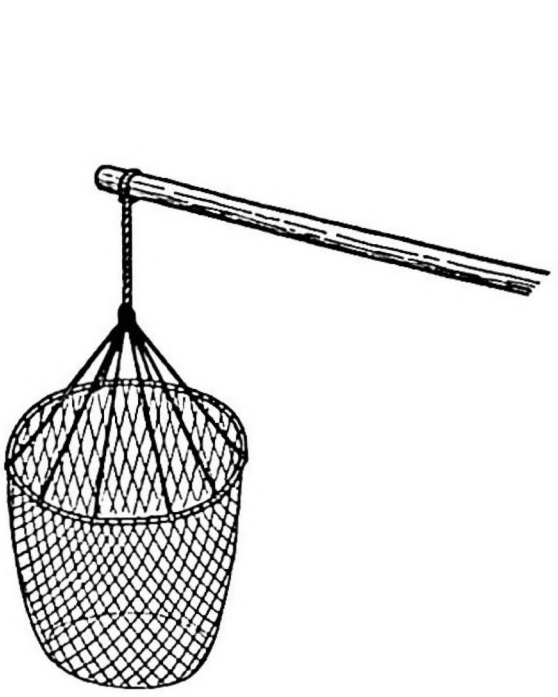

FIG. 1 An Orkney 'poke-net', ante 1911, of the type used in Stromness harbour. (After Ellison, 1884–1911.)

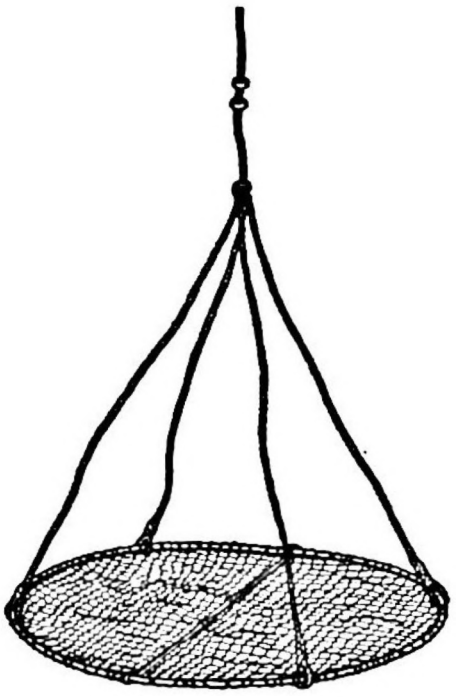

FIG. 2 A hoop-net for lobsters. (After Thomas, n.d.)

In most of these instances the nets are square, a form sometimes reflected in the nomenclature, such as French *carre* and *carrelet* (Augé 1946 *s.v.*, with illustration), and Italian *rete quadra*. The poke-nets of the Northern Isles and Caithness, however, are characterised by their circular form. It is possible that the poke-nets of these areas have been influenced in their form by the hoop-nets for lobster, and that they are a relatively late development, for iron and cord was too expensive for ordinary folk to make much use of before the nineteenth century. However, comparable types of circular nets on iron frames are to be found, for example, in Sweden, where fishermen used them to hoist herring out of seine nets (Andersson 1917:127, 129). This use and form may also be late in date, however. Andersson described such a net as a 'biz' *håv*, which is the term normally applied in Scandinavia to a kind of scoop net with a circular or bow-shaped frame to which a wooden shaft is attached, for use by hand. Such hand-nets were also called *glip* in Danish and Swedish dialects, a name borrowed into Finnish as *lippo*. They can be seen in regular use, for example, at fishing stations on the Torneå river in Swedish Lapland. A derivation from circular hand nets having fixed shafts, therefore, must also be regarded as possible for the north Scottish *poke-nets*.

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