

Maps of Space – Maps of Time*

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This paper has from its very inception been intended to be a rather unusual one, from my point of view, insofar as it contains a great many questions without the concomitant balance of just as many answers. In addition, its basic attitude of critical interrogation is not directed at others, as is customary in scholarly enquiry, but rather at myself and at much of what I have tried to do with place names, especially in Scotland, over the last thirty years or so. This is an uncomfortable, sometimes even painful, posture to take in public; but since persistent private questioning along the same lines has not been productive, because of an obvious lack of objectivity and distance, I feel that I have to take my disquiet to a forum such as the readership of this journal in the hope that the name scholars, cultural geographers, historians, archeologists, and dialecticians among the readers of *Names*, as well as others well versed in the construction and interpretation of maps, will assist me in my plight. In particular, the person whom this special issue honors, Dr. Meredith Burrill, who has done so much to enlighten us on the geographical dimension of place names, may well be able to bring his experience and wisdom to bear on the problem which worries me.

My discomfiture and plea have their origins in, have certainly been accelerated by, the ever-growing awareness – based on quotations, footnotes, offprints and personal communications – that other scholars are increasingly using some of the results of my research and are building their own strategies and conclusions on them. While this is naturally gratifying on the one hand, this realization has also, on the other, created a new recognition of my responsibility toward others so that what I have been pleased and fortunate to find, or thought to have found, in my repeated encounters with *Scotia Onomastica* now appears to be no longer

*This is a revised version of a paper first read under the title of “Chronology and the Spatial Distribution of Names” at the Seventh International Congress of Celtic Studies in Oxford, England, July 10–15, 1983. In its present form it is dedicated with heartfelt thanks to the great interpreter of the onomastic landscape, Meredith Burrill. With regard to the maps mentioned in the text, readers are encouraged to consult them in either of the two published sources referred to in notes 1 and 2. Although this may be somewhat inconvenient, there seems to be no justification for reprinting these maps yet another time.

the intellectual property of an individual, curious and playful, but part of a larger body of knowledge to which others, with or without my consent, have easy access and which these others approach with, to me, an amazing trust in its validity and seemingly solidly grounded persuasiveness. I find this to be not only an amusing but also a quite frightening position. Call it an academic mid-life crisis, the need for a confessional, a longing for reassurance, or just the inevitable consequence of becoming an “authority” – whatever the reasons, I am prompted to re-examine and reassess some of the tacit assumptions under which I have been working, and consequently some of the results based on these assumptions.

In the study of Scottish place names my major preoccupation has been with that aspect of primary research which toponymic material everywhere serves so well, i.e., the importance of names as evidence for settlement history and linguistic stratification. It is only natural therefore, that I have found it necessary to translate, convert, and process their obvious spatial scatter into some kind of distribution in time. In fact, a large part of my book on Scottish place names,¹ owes its organization to this approach and derives its substance from the sequential exploration of linguistic strata as implied or suggested by place-name evidence. Many of the maps which give that evidence a visual dimension not only are included in the *Medieval Atlas of Scotland*² but also have been reprinted in several other publications. Are they reliable enough to warrant publication for my own immediate purposes, accompanied by relevant name lists, etymologies, and their detailed discussions, and also to merit republication in other contexts, often without much or any of the toponymic evidence itself?

There is no doubt in my mind that – human error apart – a name containing a certain generic element does indeed exist in the locality which is indicated by a dot or other symbol on my maps; that kind of reliability is expected of all good trait mapping. But I do have two main concerns. First, the general relationship between maps of space and maps of time; and second, the temporal conclusions that I have drawn, over the years, from spatial distributions. Let me briefly attend to the first and then discuss the second in more detail.

Place names, and by that I mean names of any kind of geographical feature, whether natural or manmade, are onomastic items that have a definite locus and can be pinpointed on a map by coordinates. Place names have a definite “there,” answering the question “where?”; they identify a location. That location and the name attached to it, identifying it, are eminently mappable, whether this is done to record their very existence or as part of a survey conducted with particular objectives in

mind. Like all names, place names exist not in isolation but should be considered in relation to other place names, thus helping to hone their identifying function in a number of ways. Place names, apart from their general identifying function, also share with other place names certain characteristics, the same generics perhaps, or the same specific, or the same linguistic origin, or the same meaning, or the same kind of referent (mountain, bay, street, etc.), or some such quality. They exist in loosely arranged clusters or in more tightly structured onomastic fields. Such shared properties can be individually selected and comparatively easily plotted on two-dimensional maps. We can note and describe their geographical distribution in terms of other major named features – the field names of a farm, the street names of a city, the stream names of a certain catchment basin, names beginning with *Kil-* in a south of Scotland, Norse names in Lewis, names containing the Pictish element *Pit-* from the Firth of Forth to the Moray Firth, and so on. We can say where they are, and we can draw isonyms around the various mapped location of certain selected name types or elements, and establish the existence and extent of onomastic dialects, especially toponymic dialects.³ While we are doing these and many other things with place names, we are in essence treating them as spatial phenomena, as items that have horizontal distribution in a two-dimensional framework; and a map of, let us say, place names beginning with *Pit-*, while inclusive of, it is hoped, all of these in its symbolic representation, is at the same time exclusive of – the white spaces – all other names not sharing that particular, very specific feature. The names mapped in this selective fashion have been deprived of their primary function of turning a chaotic, potentially threatening wilderness into a structured, habitable landscape and have instead become manipulated raw material for scholarly investigation. There is nothing wrong with that, and I am simply noting it here, not condemning it.

Place names do, however, also have a “then” answering to the question “when?,” identifying a location in time: Old Aberdeen, medieval Glasgow, Sir Walter Scott’s Edinburgh, or Shetland under Earl Patrick. The names themselves have a temporal dimension as well as a spatial one. They have continuity of existence, from 800 to the present day, let us say, or from the fifteenth century to the seventeenth century. They have changed as well as continued in time, pronunciation, morphology, and their semantic status. Many of them have undergone a development from easily accessible lexical meaning to complete semantic opacity; many of them have outlived the various languages that coined them. Their very capacity to be lexically meaningless while onomastically functional has given them a remarkable power of survival. Names are in time as well as

in space, but it is much more difficult for us to pinpoint their temporal location when we lack, or can only approximate, the co-ordinates of time, and when we have to rely to a large extent on their spatial distributions to obtain a glimpse of their temporal ones.⁴ And this is where the crux of the matter lies! How is the translation from one dimension into another achieved? How is temporal continuity made visible in spatially static representations? Do we have the means by which to apply the same, or at least similar, levels of rigor and reliability to an investigation of the former as to the latter? Or does time, which gets the better of us so often in our lives, thwart us here, too?

As I see it, the problem is twofold: One, we have to come to grips with the temporal dimension of the total extent of a particular linguistic stratum in contrast to all other strata, as indicated by the place name evidence. Two, it is incumbent upon us to establish, if possible, sequential layers within each discrete linguistic stratum. In pursuit of the former, distribution maps of selected toponymic material serve primarily, although probably not exclusively, as visual illustrations, so that one can claim, for example, that a map of the distribution of all compound names beginning with *Pit-* shows the maximum extent of the area in which the historic Celtic-speaking Picts once settled, or that a map of the Scottish place names containing the generic *baile*⁵ says the same about Gaelic-speaking Scotland, or that the distribution of place names containing Norse *bolstadr*⁶ provides us with a spatial image of the extent of Scotia Scandinavica in the north and west of the country. In all these instances, there is no other toponymic element referring to human habitation, in the three languages concerned, that has a wider distribution.⁷ So far so good. We may even be able to say without much fear of contradiction that in all three instances names containing these elements were capable of being newly created throughout the whole period during which the languages in question are likely to have been spoken in Scotland, from the third to the tenth centuries for Pictish, let us say; from about 800 to the thirteenth century (or a little beyond) for Norse; and from the fifth century till the present for Gaelic. Naturally, that chronological framework is not derived from the toponymic material itself but from extra-onomastic sources. What we cannot say with ease, however, is when the place names concerned reached their peak of productivity and whether that peak coincided with the most extensive use of the respective languages in Scotland. It is very probable that more names beginning with *Baile* (*Bal-*) were created after Gaelic had already begun its retreat from English than before; similarly the majority of the surviving *Pit-* names appears to have been coined when Pictland had already become heavily gailincized. In contrast, it is possible

that *bolstaðr*-names reached their productive peak long before Norse political, economic and linguistic power began to decline.

In addition, it is probably legitimate to claim that, as a rule of thumb, distribution maps like these tell us more about final stages, or even the end, of any given toponymic usage than about its beginning. After all, any place-name element or type known in the “homeland” at the time of colonization might well have been employed from the very start to create new place names in the territory to be colonized. For this purpose, it was not necessary for names or their morphological components to have accessible lexical meaning or to be of the latest and most fashionable type in the homeland. Anything in existence in the place nomenclature of the country of origin at the time of the emigrants’ departure might serve as a model for inexperienced namers. Our maps are almost completely silent on this question. Nevertheless, they are valuable and valid visual orientation aids in the determination of the ultimate extent of the settlement areas of certain linguistic people. One only has to look at statements concerning the location of Pictland made before Kenneth Jackson’s illuminating place-name map of the mid-fifties (to the best of my knowledge, the first published toponymic distribution map of any kind in Scotland)⁸ and compare these pronouncements with similar statements after its publication, in order to sense the way in which what was originally intended to be mere illustration of descriptive data began to generate new thinking and new perceptions and a much greater feeling of security. The map, as one end-product of rigorous research, thus became the stimulating beginning of further quests. Watson’s very full name lists, with their excellent documentation and analyses, had been around for at least thirty years,⁹ but it was not until after Jackson’s map had appeared that the notion of Celtic-speaking Pictland took on some kind of recognizable shape. We are visual people living in an eye-oriented society and world.

Of the three maps referred to so far, the *baile*- and *bolstaðr*- ones are, apart from certain parts of the Hebrides, largely complementary and reinforce each other’s chronological implications. If, as is likely, the Norsemen began to settle Caithness in the ninth century, then the Gaels cannot have reached that part of Scotland any earlier but probably rather simultaneously or a little later, because otherwise the strict division into a toponymically Scandinavian north-eastern section and a Gaelic south-western one, with only a narrow boundary zone, cannot be easily explained.¹⁰ Thus these two maps define each other with regard to temporal qualities. Of course, the fact that one map represents a Celtic language and the other a Germanic one helps enormously.

We are on much less certain ground when it comes to an evaluation of names created by one *p*-Celtic language in contrast to those coined by

another *p*-Celtic language. After all, not all toponymic generics of *p*-Celtic origin support the definitive and quite unequivocal pattern set by the *Pit*-names.¹¹ In fact, as it turns out, *pit*- is the only element which demonstrates such territorial exclusivity. Other generics, like *pert*, *lan-erc*, *pevr* and *aber*, which in Scottish terms are mostly to be found in the area delineated by *pit*-, have exact counterparts in Wales; and *penn*, *pren*, *cair* and *tref* hardly occur in the *pit*- area, while being quite common in southern Scotland and, of course, also in Wales and Cornwall. For *tref* we have the peculiar situation that it predominates in southern Scotland as a first element but is also quite common in the northeast as a second component. Are we really doing this complex linguistic situation justice by calling all evidence north of the Forth-Clyde line “Pictish” and all evidence south of that line “Cumbric”? Are we perhaps over-exaggerating the separating force of elements like *pit*- in the face of so much shared material? Is the toponymic evidence sufficient to warrant the postulation of two different Celtic languages – Pictish and Cumbric – rather than of two closely related *p*-Celtic dialects with common affinities to Welsh and Cornish and perhaps Gaulish? Is there anything in these maps which might help us to understand the individuation of these early, pre-Gaelic Celtic languages in Scotland or must one simply be content with regarding the evidence we have for them as rather late and perhaps not fully representative of their most extensive distribution in both time and space? I view these maps at this stage as visual devices of description or depiction, the full implications of which are as yet not at all clear.

The problems just enumerated are, however, almost insignificant when compared with those which confront us when we make an attempt at breaking up the temporal continuity of a particular place nomenclature by establishing earlier and later phases of it through the use of spatial distribution maps. I indicated above that the distribution of names beginning with *baile* demonstrates the Gaelic-speaking settlement area as its most extensive. By definition, therefore, all other distribution maps of Gaelic toponymic elements should be less extensive than the *baile*-map, certainly not more extensive, if *baile* is indeed to be found wherever Gaelic has been or still is spoken in Scotland. Maps showing the scatter of other generics should therefore show either regional variations in the lexical or onomastic dialects, or chronological differences, or a mixture of both. I have, in the last twenty years, constructed a large number of such distribution maps and have found that only very few of these permit chronological conclusions. The others appear all to be regionally dialectal, and while this may be of interest to the lexicographer of Gaelic, it has little bearing on the question which we are discussing.

At one stage, for example, I made lists of all sorts of generics present in

Gaelic mountain names and plotted them on maps; practically all of them turned out to have more or less limited distributions, sometimes mutually exclusive, sometimes overlapping, which allowed them to be read as spatial maps and nothing else.¹² Only one of them seemed to show some promise with regard to the potential identification of an early stratum of Gaelic names in Scotland, the element *sliabh*, or *slew*, in its Anglicized form. Its almost exclusive occurrence in the two parts nearest Ireland and known to have been settled earliest by the Scots, i.e. the Scottish *Dal Riata* and the Rinn of Galloway and adjacent parts, led me to conclude boldly that

The distribution of *sliabh* in Scottish place-names reflects the geographical extent to which Gaelic was spoken in Scotland a few centuries after the Dalriadic settlement, mainly in Galloway, Argyll (with special emphasis on Islay and Jura) and in the upper reaches of Tay and Spey. The exact point in time at which *sliabh* ceased to be productive toponymically is, of course, impossible to determine but it should be put well before the ninth century when Gaels and Norsemen confronted each other in the Hebrides and Caithness, and when Gaelic had already begun to infiltrate Pictland. *Sliabh* is conspicuously absent from all these areas, and the seventh century might well be considered (as) the end of the use of this element in place-names, at least in the northern parts of its geographical scatter.¹³

This confident statement requires some modification. While I still regard *sliabh* as one of our earliest Gaelic elements and quite vociferous as such, I was perhaps a little too hasty in trying to get my hand under the Norse “blanket” – toponymically speaking, that is – when I assigned the end of its productivity to the seventh century. It is, after all, well possible that *sliabh*, after its initial impact, continued to serve for several centuries as a creative *regional* place-name element in a limited area and that many of the *sliabh*- or *slew*-names were actually given much later than I had first envisaged. This does not invalidate them as evidence for early settlement, just as the many Picto-Gaelic hybrids do not invalidate *Pit*- as an important marker of the area of Pictish settlement, but caution is certainly the watchword for those trying to read relative chronological sequences out of spatial patterns, and one must keep one’s eyes open for alternatives. More limited distribution is not always, as I once simplistically thought, an indicator of an earlier linguistic stratum, just as less density in distribution is not always a sign of a late phase. Such phenomena may occur at any time within the lifespan of a nomenclature.

I consider myself on much firmer ground, however, with regard to another important Gaelic place-name element – *cill* “church or churchyard.” In its distribution, it is somewhere halfway between *sliabh* and *baile*.¹⁴ Theoretically, it may therefore have been a feature either of a phase before the greatest extent of Gaelic-speaking settlement, or after it. I am, however, convinced that my conclusions derived from its scatter still stand:

Kil-names had ceased to be created when Gaelic speakers moved into Pictish territory proper on any appreciable scale, and before Gaels and Norsemen stood facing each other in Caithness . . . *Kil*-names in the northern part of Scotland . . . are in general not likely to be younger than 800.¹⁵

It seems unlikely that this does not apply to the rest of the country too, although *Kirk*-names and *Kil*-names may have alternated in the southwest a little longer. Why this confidence? The datable saints' names which occur as specifics with *Kil*- all commemorate saints of the sixth and seventh, and sometimes eighth, centuries, and there is no reason to believe that other, later, saints' names would not have been involved if *Kil*-names had been created at a later date.

It is rare for us to have such datable evidence when drawing chronological conclusions from spatial toponymic patterns but the saints commemorated in the *Kil*-names nevertheless point to a potential way out of our dilemma – the humble recognition of the limitations of place-name evidence and the use of appropriate and relevant extra-onomastic support material. This can come from a variety of sources: Absolute historical dates like the conversion of the Angles of Northumbria to Christianity in 627 A.D. to date the earliest English names in Scotland; the first recorded instance of a name as a *datum ante quem*; geographical information as to the quality of a named site (soil analysis, shelter value, altitude above sea level, distance from other sites, etc.); geological data; social contexts; information about phonological and morphological changes; archaeological finds and other excavation results; legal and church history; and so on.¹⁶ There seems to be much extra-onomastic evidence to facilitate the kind of relative and absolute dating which names themselves, even in their spatial distribution patterns, are so loathe to reveal. Obviously, there remain sizable gaps in our avowed endeavor to turn maps of space into maps of time or, to be more precise, maps of spatial orientation and illustration into maps of temporal evidence, but perhaps the problem is not as perplexingly intractable as it seems, especially if close co-operation with experts in neighboring disciplines, such as cultural geography, can be achieved.

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Notes

¹W.F.H. Nicolaisen, *Scottish Place-Names: Their Study and Significance* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1976).

²Peter McNeill and Ranald Nicholson (eds.), *An Historical Atlas of Scotland c400–c1600* (St. Andrews: Conference of Scottish Medievalists, 1975).

³W.F.H. Nicolaisen, "Onomastic Dialects," *American Speech*, 55 (1980), 36–45.

⁴See K.H. Jackson, "The Pictish Language." In: *The Problem of the Picts*. Ed. F.T. Wainwright (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1955), 147; Nicolaisen, *Scottish Place-Names*, 153; also William Kirk, "Prehistoric Scotland: The Regional Dimension." In: *Scotland: A New Study*. Ed. Chalmers M. Clapperton (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1983), 95.

⁵Nicolaisen, *Scottish Place-Names*, 137.

⁶*Ibid.*, 93.

⁷Names in Old Norse *dalr* do, of course, have a wider distribution (Nicolaisen, *Scottish Place-Names*, 95) but most of them primarily applied to natural features and became settlement names only later. This makes them a very different kind of evidence, only tangentially related to the problem in hand.

⁸Jackson, 147.

⁹William J. Watson, *The History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1926), 407–414.

¹⁰W.F.H. Nicolaisen, "Scandinavians and Celts in Caithness: The Place-Name Evidence." In: *Caithness: A Cultural Crossroads*. Ed. John R. Baldwin (Edinburgh: Scottish Society for Northern Studies, 1982), 75–85.

¹¹Nicolaisen, *Scottish Place-Names*, 149–172.

¹²W.F.H. Nicolaisen, "The Distribution of Certain Gaelic Mountain-Names." *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 45 (1969), 113–128.

¹³Nicolaisen, *Scottish Place-Names*, 122–123.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 142.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 143.

¹⁶See, in this respect, the excellent work done by historical geographers, such as G. Whittington and J.A. Soulshy, "A Preliminary Report on an Investigation into *Pit* Place-Names," *Scottish Geographical Magazine*, 84 (1968), 117–125; and G. Whittington, "Place names and the settlement pattern of dark age Scotland," *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 106 (1974–5), 99–110. Archaeologists are also very much aware of the problems and needs. See, for example, Ian Hodder and Clive Orton, *Spatial analysis in archaeology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).