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A Gaelic-Scandinavian loan-word in English place-names

Gillian Fellows Jensen (pp. 18–25)

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ABBREVIATIONS OF COUNTIES AND EPNS COUNTY SURVEYS

Co	Cornwall
Ha	Hampshire
He	Herefordshire
K	Kent
La	Lancashire
Nb	Northumberland
Sf	Suffolk
So	Somerset
Wt	Isle of Wight
CPNE	<i>Cornish Place-Name Elements.</i>
EPNE	<i>English Place-Name Elements, Parts 1 and 2.</i>
PN BdHu	<i>The Place-Names of Bedfordshire and Huntingdonshire.</i>
PN Brk	<i>The Place-Names of Berkshire, Parts 1, 2 and 3.</i>
PN Bu	<i>The Place-Names of Buckinghamshire.</i>
PN Ca	<i>The Place-Names of Cambridgeshire and the Isle of Ely.</i>
PN Ch	<i>The Place-Names of Cheshire, Parts 1–5.</i>
PN Cu	<i>The Place-Names of Cumberland, Parts 1, 2 and 3.</i>
PN D	<i>The Place-Names of Devon, Parts 1 and 2.</i>
PN Db	<i>The Place-Names of Derbyshire, Parts 1, 2 and 3.</i>
PN Do	<i>The Place-Names of Dorset, Parts 1–4.</i>
PN Du	<i>The Place-Names of County Durham, Part 1.</i>
PN Ess	<i>The Place-Names of Essex.</i>
PN ERY	<i>The Place-Names of the East Riding of Yorkshire and York.</i>
PN Gl	<i>The Place-Names of Gloucestershire, Parts 1–4.</i>
PN Hrt	<i>The Place-Names of Hertfordshire.</i>
PN Le	<i>The Place-Names of Leicestershire, Parts 1–7.</i>
PN Li	<i>The Place-Names of Lincolnshire, Parts 1–7.</i>
PN Mx	<i>The Place-Names of Middlesex (apart from the City of London).</i>
PN Nf	<i>The Place-Names of Norfolk, Parts 1–3.</i>
PN Nt	<i>The Place-Names of Nottinghamshire.</i>
PN NRY	<i>The Place-Names of the North Riding of Yorkshire.</i>
PN Nth	<i>The Place-Names of Northamptonshire.</i>
PN O	<i>The Place-Names of Oxfordshire, Parts 1 and 2.</i>
PN R	<i>The Place-Names of Rutland.</i>
PN Sa	<i>The Place-Names of Shropshire, Parts 1–9.</i>
PN Sr	<i>The Place-Names of Surrey.</i>
PN St	<i>The Place-Names of Staffordshire, Part 1.</i>
PN Sx	<i>The Place-Names of Sussex, Parts 1 and 2.</i>
PN W	<i>The Place-Names of Wiltshire.</i>
PN Wa	<i>The Place-Names of Warwickshire.</i>
PN We	<i>The Place-Names of Westmorland, Parts 1 and 2.</i>
PN Wo	<i>The Place-Names of Worcestershire.</i>
PN WRY	<i>The Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire, Parts 1–8.</i>

A GAELIC-SCANDINAVIAN LOAN-WORD IN ENGLISH PLACE-NAMES

One of the entries in Hugh Smith's *English Place-Name Elements* begins as follows¹: 'erg ON, 'a shieling, a hill-pasture' (found in ON only in *Orkneyinga Saga*) was current among Norw settlers in the NW and had been introduced by them from OIr or Gael (cf. MÍr *airge*, Ir *airghe*, Gael *airigh*).' In the same year as Smith's *Elements* appeared, the Faroese scholar Christian Matras published an important article on the subject of this entry.² Hugh Smith would certainly have written differently, if the results of Matras's research had come to his attention in time. Since *English Place-Name Elements* continues to be the staple source of information on place-name elements for interested scholars and laymen in the English-speaking world, while Matras's paper has not received the attention it deserves, probably because it is written in Danish, it has seemed advisable to reopen the discussion of the element *erg*. I have published a detailed examination of its origin in the Irish journal *Dinnseanchas* and a summary of the evidence presented by Matras and myself will precede the present discussion of the form taken by the element in English place-names.³

The form *erg*, cited by Smith and by Eilert Ekwall in *The Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names* and elsewhere, does not occur in any West Scandinavian source. The only occurrence of the word in an Icelandic source is in a record of the Caithness place-name *Asgrims ærgin* (probably Assery ND 0562) in a version of *Orkneyinga saga*. The form *erg* is found twice in a sixteenth-century Danish translation of a different version of the same saga, whose Icelandic text has been lost. The word is not found in any other Danish source and would seem to be the result of the translator's effort to render an unfamiliar word in his Icelandic original. Christian Matras has noted that a generic *ærgi* n. is found in numerous place-names in the Faroe Islands and he argues convincingly that this is the correct nominative singular form of the element found in the name *Asgrims ærgin*.

The Scandinavian word would seem to be a loan from Gaelic. There is a Common Gaelic word *dirge*, of disputed etymology. It appears in this form in early Irish sources with the senses (a) 'place

1. EPNS XXV (1956) 157.

2. 'Gammelfærøsk ærgi, n., og dermed beslægtede ord', *Namn och Bygd* (1956) 51-67.

3. Cf. 'Common Gaelic *dirge*, Old Scandinavian *ærgi* or *erg*?, *Dinnseanchas* VII, 1-2 (1976/77) (forthcoming).

for milking cows, byre, cowshed', (b) 'herd of cattle', and (c) 'troop, band'.⁴ From the first of these meanings there would seem to have developed the specialised sense 'summer milking-place in the mountains' but there is no certain evidence for the occurrence of the word in this sense in Irish place-names. There are a few possible instances in Kerry but the Viking settlements in Ireland were largely urbanised and restricted to the areas around Dublin, Wexford, Waterford, Cork and Limerick and it seems hardly likely that the Scandinavians became acquainted with the generic in Ireland.

A survey of the occurrences of the element in place-names in the Isle of Man, the Northern Isles and the Scottish highlands and islands provides no conclusive evidence as to the source from which the Vikings borrowed the word. Most of the place-names containing the element in these areas would seem to be post-Norse Gaelic formations.⁵ That the Vikings did in fact borrow the generic, however, is shown by the presence of the numerous names containing it in the Faroe Islands and northern England and there is some evidence to suggest that the Vikings were also in part at least responsible for the dissemination of the element in Scotland. The English place-names containing *ærgi* all occur in areas where there was considerable Scandinavian settlement and the majority of the specifics with which the generic is compounded are of Scandinavian origin. Some of these are personal names and others appellatives.

Eilert Ekwall has compiled a fairly full list of English place-names containing the element.⁶ I have supplemented this list by reference to the same author's book on the place-names of Lancashire (1922), to the volumes of the English Place-Name Society (EPNS)⁷ and, for Lincolnshire, to the EPNS archives in Nottingham. The total number of occurrences in the northern counties is: 9 place-names and 5 minor names in Cumberland, 8 place-names and 7 minor names in Westmorland, 17 place-names and 14 minor names in Lancashire, 1 place-name and a few field-names in Cheshire, 6

4. Cf. Royal Irish Academy, *Contributions to a Dictionary of the Irish Language*. A. (1964) 208 and other works cited in the article referred to in n.3.

5. Cf. e.g. Margaret Gelling, 'The Place-Names of the Isle of Man', *The Journal of the Manx Museum* VII (1971) no 87, 173, John Stewart, 'Shetland Farm Names', *The Fourth Viking Congress*, ed. A. Small (Edinburgh, 1965) 247-66, Hugh Marwick, *The Place-Names of Birsay*, ed. W.F.H. Nicolaisen (Aberdeen, 1970) 80.

6. In *Scandinavians and Celts in the North-West of England* (Lund, 1918) 74-87.

7. EPNS Volumes V, XIV, XX-XXII, XXX-XXXVII, XLII-XLIII and XLIV-XLVII.

place-names in the North Riding of Yorkshire, 5 place-names and a field-name in the East Riding, 8 place-names and 4 field-names in the West Riding, and one or two field-names in Lincolnshire, just across the Humber from Yorkshire. Most of these names are borne by places of minor importance and only ten of them are recorded as settlement names in Domesday Book of 1086 (DB). These are Mansergh in Westmorland (PNWe 1. 49), Arkholme, Goosnargh and Grimsargh in Lancashire (PNLa 180, 149, 145), Airy Holme and Eryholme in the North Riding of Yorkshire (PNYN 165, 280), Arram and Argam in the East Riding (PNYE 79, 108), and Golcar and the lost Starkerghs in the West Riding (PNYW 2. 291, 6. 178). Many of the English names make only isolated appearances in the recorded sources and for the purposes of the present survey I have confined my attention to the names for which a fair number of early forms survive. When the form taken by the generic in these place-names is examined, it is revealed that in the names in Cumberland, Westmorland and the North and East Ridings of Yorkshire the element is almost always spelt with an initial *e*. The few exceptions can all be explained either as instances of Anglo-Norman substitution of *a* for *e* in Domesday Book or as a result of the Middle English (ME) development of short *e* before *r* + a consonant to *a*.⁸ In Lancashire and the West Riding of Yorkshire the situation is not so clear. In Lancashire eight names normally appear with *a* spellings and two with *e*, while Arkholme shows variation between *a* and *e*. In the West Riding of Yorkshire there are two names with *a* spellings, four with *e* spellings, and one name, Feizor, which shows variation between *a* and *e*. Arrowe in Cheshire only has *a* forms. It would seem that there is a dialectal division into a southern area consisting of Lancashire south of the Ribble, the Wirral, and the Huddersfield area of the West Riding with original *a* spellings, and a northern area consisting of Cumberland, Westmorland, Lancashire north of the Ribble, the North and East Ridings of Yorkshire and the northern part of the West Riding with *e* spellings. The boundary between the two areas corresponds approximately with that between the Old English (OE) dialect regions of Mercia and Northumbria.

The variation of vowel in the stressed syllable is a difficult problem. The original Scandinavian long *æ* would probably have been shortened to *æ* immediately on adoption by the English, since the combination long vowel before two consonants was only found in OE

8. Cf. K. Luick, *Historische Grammatik Der Englischen Sprache* (Leipzig, 1921-40) para. 429.3, 430.

when the two consonants in question formed a lengthening group. The resulting **ærg* form, however, would have conflicted with the normal phonemic pattern in the Anglian north, where breaking of *æ* before *rg* and subsequent smoothing of the diphthong *ea* to *e* would have resulted in a form such as **erg*.⁹ The English would probably have replaced the *ærg*-form of the place-names with the **erg* of their normal dialect and this would explain the dominant *e* spellings of the generic in the Northumbrian area. Alternatively, the long *æ* might have survived for some time in the Scandinavian dialect of northern England and in the late OE period this *æ* would have developed into *e* before being shortened to *e* on adoption into English.¹⁰ The northern *e*-spellings could also reflect this development.

For the Mercian group of names, however, the *a*-spellings are early and persistent and would seem to be the original ones. If it could be assumed that the Mercian names were either not coined or not adopted into English until the late eleventh century, that is after the late change of *æ* to *ǣ*¹¹, then the *a* forms would represent the most probable Anglian substitution for the Scandinavian word. The Viking colonisation of southern Lancashire, however, took place in the early part of the tenth century and culminated before the Viking settlement of the Lake District. The late coining of the names cannot, then, be the explanation of the *a*-spellings in the Mercian area. Nor does there seem to be any reason to believe that the Scandinavian language survived in use longer in southern Lancashire than in the Lake District and Yorkshire so the late borrowing of the names can hardly explain the *a*-spellings either. It is conceivable that the reaction of the Mercian dialect to the deviant form **ærg* might have been different from that of the Northumbrian dialect and that while the Northumbrians chose to adapt **ærg* to *erg*, on analogy with forms resulting from the smoothing of *ea* before *r* + a consonant, the Mercians preferred to retract the *æ* to *a*. I have not been able to find any supporting evidence for this difference of attitude, however. An alternative suggestion is that the Mercian *a*-forms might represent loans direct from Gaelic or perhaps rather that they reflect a pronunciation of the loan-word closer to the original Gaelic *á* before a palatalised consonant than to Scandinavian *æ*. The suggestion that the immediate source of the loan might be

9. Cf. A. Campbell, *Old English Grammar* (Oxford, 1961) para. 144, 222.

10. Cf. Luick, *op. cit.* para. 361

11. Cf. Campbell, *op. cit.* para. 329.3.

the Gaelic word has already been made by John Dodgson for Arrowe in Cheshire.¹² The difficulty here, though, is that there does not seem to be any good reason why the settlers in the southern area should have taken the loan-word from a different source than did those in the northern area.

If we were to join Ekwall and Smith in assuming that the word was borrowed as **erg*, the *e* of the Northumbrian names would need no explanation. The late forms in *arg* could be explained as the result of the ME development of *er* before a consonant to *ar* but the persistent pre-1300 forms in *a* in the Mercian area would again be problematical. It would still be necessary to postulate a different source for the *a*-forms than for the *e*-forms. This might have been Gaelic *áirigh*. Finally it should be noted that the Northumbrian forms cannot be explained as a direct borrowing from Gaelic. They must have passed through a Scandinavian stage.

Besides the variation between *a*-spellings and *e*-spellings there is some variation in the ending of the word in English place-names. In this case, however, variation occurs in spellings of almost all the place-names concerned. Some spellings end in *g*, while others indicate a disyllabic pronunciation (*arge*, *arhe*, *arwe*, *arie*, *erge*, *erhe*, *erwe*). If we assume that the immediate source of the word in English place-names is Scandinavian *ǣrgi* and that the place-names were coined by Scandinavian-speaking people, then the element would probably originally have had forms such as *ǣrgi*, nominative and dative singular, *ǣrgjum*, dative plural. When the Scandinavian language dropped out of use in northern England, the form of the place-names would automatically have been adapted to conform with the phonemic pattern of OE. Since a short *i* in a final unstressed syllable had been lost after a long stressed syllable in Primitive OE, the final *i* of the singular would have tended to be lost, although it might conceivably have been represented by short *e*, on analogy with the form of words such as *ende* and *streng*.¹³ Compare, for example, the DB personal names *Bonde* and *Scule* from Scandinavian *Bóndi* and *Skúli*. The *um* of the dative plural, however, would have survived. The differing fates of the inflexional endings are reflected in DB spellings such as *Gvdlagesarc* on the one hand and *Stratesergum* on the other. A DB form such as *Manzerge*, however, is more likely to show a secondary OE inflexional ending in *-e* than, as assumed by Matras, to represent the disyllabic form of the word.

12. Cf. *The Place-Names of Cheshire* Part 4 (Cambridge, 1972) 262.

13. Cf. Luick, *op.cit.* para. 304, 312, Campbell, *op.cit.* para. 345, 355.

The OE dative singular ending may also be reflected in some of the later spellings with final *-e*.¹⁴ Spellings such as *arwe*, *arhe* and *erwe*, however, indicate velarisation of the *g*.¹⁵ The *g* in the Gaelic and Scandinavian words was palatalised and the palatalised pronunciation is indicated by a few late spellings such as *arie* in the English place-names. The original palatal *g* would have been expected to become velarised after the *a* of the Mercian spellings but it should be noted that there is also some evidence for velarisation after the *e* of the Northumbrian spellings.

It will be seen that the identification of the generic in the English place-names with the Gaelic-Scandinavian loan-word is not without problems and it has perhaps been rash to base even tentative conclusions on a few dozen place-names, particularly since the element is such an ambiguous and phonetically elusive one and one that may have developed variants in the different parts of the Gaelic-speaking world even before the Vikings started tampering with it. The problem has also been complicated by the fact that comparatively little is known of the early Mercian and Northumbrian dialects.

The explanation of why the Vikings should have borrowed the word from Gaelic in the first place is not entirely straightforward either. The Scandinavians did have other words at their disposal for denoting the concept of the shieling. The only one of these to achieve any degree of popularity in English place-names, however, is *skǫli* 'hut'. This word and its English cognate **scēla* both denote 'a temporary hut or shed' and are probably not synonymous with *ærgi*. The other Scandinavian words for 'shieling' which may be found in English place-names are *sǣtr* and *sel* but neither of these is particularly common and it is generally difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish them from other words, related and unrelated, Scandinavian and English, such as Scandinavian *sǣti*, *setr* and English *sǣte*, *geset*, Scandinavian *selja* and English *gesell*. It is possible that the Gaelic loan-word *ærgi* is the only word to have been used with any frequency to denote a shieling by the Viking settlers in England.

I have argued elsewhere¹⁶ that it is unlikely that the practice of a *seter*-economy was unknown in Scandinavia before the beginning of the Viking period and that the most probable reason for the borrowing

14. Cf. A.H. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements* 1. 142 s.v. *-e*².

15. Cf. Luick, *op.cit.* para. 709.5.

16. In the article cited in n.3.

of the Gaelic word was that there was something characteristic about the location or the function of the *ærgi* in the British Isles that caused the Viking settlers to refer to it by the Gaelic term rather than by a Scandinavian word. The seasonal movement of animals was an indigenous custom of great antiquity in England and the other parts of the British Isles. There is literary evidence for it in the seventh century in England in the biographies of St Cuthbert¹⁷ and Glanville Jones has argued that the custom antedated the arrival of the English.¹⁸ It is thus possible that the places with names in *ærgi* in the British Isles were already in existence before the arrival of the Vikings.

Eleanor Megaw has recently pointed out that the places in the Isle of Man with names in *eary* tend to have much more favourable situations than the shieling-mound sites on the moorland that have been excavated by Peter Gelling and dated by him to the Viking Age or later.¹⁹ The places with *eary*-names would certainly seem to have been established at an earlier period than the shieling-mound sites and may thus antedate the Viking settlement.

Mary Higham has shown that the majority of the places with *erg*-names in north-west England lie well below the expected altitude for summer grazing and that many of them are sited on the best soils in their areas.²⁰ She argues that the names were given by the Vikings to pre-existing settlements that had some special characteristic to which the term could be specifically applied.

The exact nature of the *ærgi* cannot be deduced from the linguistic evidence alone and it may well have differed from region to region. The most suggestive evidence about its significance to have appeared up to now has been provided by Donald Macaulay's examination of the place-names of the small island of Bernera, which lies in the bay called Loch Roag on the west coast of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides.²¹ In Bernera the Gaelic term *áirigh* is used of the

17. Cf. *Two Lives of Cuthbert*, ed. Bertram Colgrave (1940) 70 and 170.

18. In 'Early Territorial Organization in Northern England and its Bearing on the Scandinavian Settlement', *The Fourth Viking Congress*, ed. A. Small (1965) 67-84, particularly 72-73.

19. Cf. E. Megaw, 'The Manx "Eary" and its significance', a paper read at Douglas in April 1977, and P.S. Gelling, 'Medieval Shielings in the Isle of Man', *Medieval Archaeology* VI-VII (1962-63) 156-72.

20. Cf. M.C. Higham, 'The "Erg" Place-Names of Northern England', *JEPNS* 10 (1977-78).

21. In 'Studying the Place Names of Bernera', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness* 47 (1971-72) 313-37.

'half-way house' shielings, where the cattle were kept in the month of August on their return from the summer pastures in the Uig hills on Lewis and before transference to the village pastures for the winter. The summer-shielings on the 'mainland' of Lewis, however, frequently have names containing the Scandinavian generic *sætr*, while there are only three such names in Bernera itself and none in the other small islands in Loch Roag. This suggests that the Vikings may have used the Gaelic term *áirigh* for the type of shieling which is now referred to in Norway as a *heimseter* - a shieling close to the home-farm that was 'used for short grazing periods as soon as the pasture allowed it in the spring and on the way home from the mountain or summer *seter* in the autumn'.²² That this specialised use of the *ærgi* was preserved through the centuries in all the areas where the Vikings settled seems unlikely but there may have been a tendency for lower-lying shielings or home-shielings to receive a name in *ærgi* rather than one in *sætr*. Such lower-lying shielings would be the ones most likely to develop into prosperous arable settlements, as has happened with some of the *earys* in Man and the *ærgis* in northern England. It is to be hoped that further research by archaeologists, ethnographers and geographers into the sites of places with names in *ærgi* and *sætr* will be able to substantiate or refute this tentative suggestion.²³

GILLIAN FELLOWS JENSEN

22. Cf. Anne-Berit Ø. Borchgrevink, 'The "Seter"-Areas of Rural Norway, - a Traditional Multipurpose Resource', *Northern Studies* 9 (1977) 3-24.
23. This paper is a revised and abridged version of a lecture given to the Annual Conference of the Council for Name Studies in Great Britain and Ireland on 3rd April 1976. I am very grateful to James Stewart and the late Olof von Feilitzen for advice during its preparation.