

# **In the Beginning was the Name**

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names such as rivers and valleys have in the interpretation of the early stages of these languages to which they can be assigned. When the "lowest" element is reached that can still be interpreted with the linguistic knowledge now at our disposal, there will still be a number of names left that have defied all attempts at an explanation. But it would be dangerous to treat otherwise as a sign of the great age of a name. Each instance of a name is subject to so many influences, especially when some time ago language is involved in its construction, that it would be surprising if every single name could be satisfactorily explained in the course of our investigations.

Generally, place-names ante-dating names of human settlements are those denoting water-courses or mountains and hills, and especially names of burns and rivers. These may throw much light on the problems of linguistic prehistory and so of prehistory in general. The oldest of them are like fossils preserved in later surrounding linguistic media, and it is not too bold to say that the oldest Scottish river-names give us information about the language or languages spoken on the banks of the water-courses they denote, more than 1000 years B.C.

This is not the place for us to explore the course of our investigations in that particular field of research. It will suffice for our immediate purpose to state the results of that inquiry: there are at least five forms of Scottish toponymy, the English, the Norse, the Gaelic, the "p" Celtic and the pre-Celtic Indo-European. A closer examination, however, shows that there are really two English forms, one linked up with northern English stream-nomenclature and one connected with underlying Gaelic patterns when English began to invade the Highlands. Furthermore, the Norse form may be divided into three sub-sections, one applying to the general name Old Norse *is* "great and - possibly - low" the second introducing the first element near the English border, the third providing the Norse element with the same prefix. There are also names from the whole of Scotland: the Norse, the English, and the Gaelic, the pre-Celtic ones. All others are confined to a certain part of the country and usually to a certain period of time previously.

Morphologically, the nomenclature of Scottish toponymy — as those of the other parts of the British Isles and of other European countries — consists of compound names, regardless of the language to which they belong. The underlying form a different class of names is to be found characterized by the formation *is* "great - wide". This group only amounts to 8 per cent of all Scottish stream-names mentioned in the very early Old Norse sources, with the following subdivisions: Gaelic names 1.7 per cent, pre-Celtic names 1.8 per cent, pre-Celtic names 0.5 per cent. With very possible exceptions, Germanic names do not appear in this category, and the formation of stream-names by suffixing names is here entirely