

**THOR AND ULLR IN THE VIKING HEBRIDES? PLACENAMES, LANDSCAPE
AND ARCHAEOLOGY**

**THOR Y ULLR EN LAS HÉBRIDAS VIKINGAS? TOPÓNIMOS, PAISAJE Y
ARQUEOLOGÍA**

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Abstract: In this article, I explore the landscape of two potential Norse theonyms to the gods Thor and Ullr in the Hebrides, particularly on the island of Lewis. Using a methodology that combines the local vicinity of the placename with topographical data (relation to bodies of water and agricultural potential) and archaeological evidence, as well as a comparison to known theonyms to Thor and Ullr in Norway, this article explores the potentiality of these placenames as theonyms. I argue that these placenames are likely theonyms to the gods Thor and Ullr. There are further ramifications for Norse theonyms on Lewis. The first is that they represent a different naming system than in the Norwegian homeland, illustrating the non-uniform nature of Scandinavian cultic practices. The second is that they are indicators of political power that is hierarchical but with multiple elite centres in the region.

Keywords: archaeology, landscape, placenames, mythology

Resumen: En este artículo, exploro el paisaje de posibles teónimos nórdicos derivados de los dioses Thor y Ullr en las Hébridias, particularmente en la isla de Lewis. Utilizando metodología que combina la proximidad de cada topónimo local con datos topográficos (la relación con masas de agua y el potencial agrícola) y evidencia arqueológica, así como la comparación con los teónimos de Thor y Ullr conocidos en Noruega, este artículo explora la potencialidad de estos topónimos como teónimos. Sostengo que estos topónimos son probablemente teónimos de los dioses Thor y Ullr. Además, existen ramificaciones adicionales de los teónimos nórdicos en Lewis. La primera representa un sistema de denominación diferente al de su origen noruego, lo que ilustra la naturaleza heterogénea de las prácticas de culto escandinavas. La segunda es que son indicadores del poder político, que es jerárquico, pero tiene múltiples centros de élite en la región.

Palabras clave: Arqueología, paisaje, topónimos, mitología.

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Introduction

This article seeks to answer the following questions: is there evidence for sacred places of the Norse Gods in the Hebrides? Do the names “Ullr” and “Thor” in the placename record represent the worship of these gods, fossilized in the landscape? Can a combination of placename, archaeology and landscape analyses shed light on these placenames for their original, intended function, and potential consequences for elite power in the region?

During the Viking Period (800-1050) and subsequent Late Norse period (1050-1266), power in the Hebrides was consolidated by a Norse-speaking and cultured elite (Armit, 1996, p. 202). While the Norse in the Hebrides converted to Christianity around the late 10th century AD (Abrams, 2007), and arrived in the landscape of a region that had already been Christianized, did the Norse settlers also bring their Gods? I have decided to explore Old Norse placenames that may designate theonyms, and their surrounding archaeological and topographical features, to this question. Two placenames will be examined: potential theonyms to the gods Thor and Ullr. The island of Lewis has been chosen as a case study area. A landscape analysis to investigate the archaeological and topographical vicinities of each placename was conducted in this article. A database of known theonyms dedicated to these two gods in Norway will serve as a comparison. This article hopes to shed light on the function and meaning of potential theonyms in the Hebrides.

The Viking-period Hebrides

The Hebrides, by what is called the Late Iron Age of Scotland (300-700 AD), were inhabited by a several different socio-linguistic groups. At the onset of the Viking Period (the late 8th century AD), there were three socio-linguistic groups in the region: the Picts, particularly Skye and the Outer Hebrides, the Gaelic-speaking Kingdom of Dalriada, of which several islands were integrated into kingdom, and ecclesiastical communities from Ireland (Jennings and Kruse 2009, pp. 79-80). The region was settled by Norse-speakers from the 9th century AD (Graham-Campbell and Batey, 1998, p. 264). Exact dating during the Viking Age is difficult, with the most conservative estimates being a high-status settlement and hall dated to the late 9th century AD at Bornais, South Uist (Sharples, 2020, p. 461). The settlers brought to the new lands with them aspects of their homeland: Scandinavian-style material culture such as architectural styles, burial rites, and the Old Norse language, Old Norse law (Graham-



Campbell and Batey, 1998). This was part of the so-called Viking Expansion, where Scandinavian-speakers raided, traded, settled, and colonized many parts of Europe.

The landscape of the Hebrides thus composed of rural settlement, focused on the Norse farm (Ryder, 2023, p. 318-319). Permanent settlement was located on agricultural land, indicating independent or semi-independent farmsteads. In the outfield, shieling (transhumance) sites are known, both archaeologically and due to placenames (Foster, 2017). This is suggestive of an infield-outfield system imported to the area similar to Norway. The landscape was likely aristocratic with “the best” land, particularly those located at strategic landing-places for seacraft, reserved for the elite (Ryder, 2023, p. 352). However, a widespread distribution of furnished burials also suggests that there were likely multiple elite centres (Ryder, 2023, p. 345). Old Norse is the language of the earliest strata of placenames with some exceptions (Jennings & Kruse, 2009, p. 87). These placenames include references to the potential worship of Norse gods, with multiple possible theonyms in the area, including to the Old Norse gods Thor and Ullr (Eveholm, 2018, p. 159). In addition to archaeology, these placenames will be the focus of this article.

Placename studies in the Hebrides

In the Hebrides, placename scholars have recently focused on pre-Norse Early Christianity, such as the current project of Saint dedication², and the so-called Pappar placenames, which may designate an ecclesiastical presence (Crawford, 2005). However, the placenames of the Norse-period of the Hebrides have received considerable attention over the last several decades. While the region was inhabited by Celtic-speaking populations Bronze Age, there are hardly any traces of the Celtic languages in placename record, superseded nearly entirely by Old Norse placenames. This shift in placenames, from Celtic to Norse, has been used by some past scholars to suggest ethnic cleansing occurred (Crawford, 1981; Smith, 2001), though other scholars have suggested processes of assimilation of the pre-Norse Celtic speakers (Ritchie, 1993).

Nevertheless, Old Norse placenames have been instrumental in assessing Norse society in the region. For example, Peder Gammeltoft has identified a class of secondary

² <https://uistsaints.co.uk>



settlement sites called *bólstaðr* (Gammeltoft, 2001). Alexandra Sanmark has argued for the presence of multiple thing assembly sites in the region (Sanmark, 2017). Alan Macniven has the presence of a Norse naval levy system on the basis of placenames designating anchorages in the Outer Hebrides (Macniven, 2020). In my doctoral thesis, I included placenames in my archaeological assessment of the settlement and landscape, though my analysis relied on prior databases (Ryder, 2023).

There is however still a discrepancy in data. The island of Lewis is currently the most well-researched area, due to work of Richard Cox (i.e. Cox, 1987), and recently, the doctoral thesis of Sofia Evemalm (Evemalm, 2018). There have been a few placename compilations on specific islands, such as Barra (Stahl, 2000), Tiree (Holliday, 2016), and Islay (Macniven, 2015). For North Uist and Benbecula, blogger and local historical enthusiast Robert Auger has compiled a list of placenames, including his own translations³. However, for Skye, the second largest and historically most populated island of the Hebrides, has last had a database compiled appears to have been in the early 20th century (Forbes, 1923). Many placename compilations come from works such as Ian Taylor (Taylor, 2022) who have compiled them into an overall database of Scotland, but without thorough interpretation and analysis. Older compilations for Scotland in general remain utilized (i.e. MacBain, 1922), but these have not been updated in some time. This article therefore focuses solely on the Hebridean Island of Lewis as a case study for potential Old Norse theonyms.

Theonyms in the Hebrides

There has been little focus however on pre-Christian Norse religion in the placename record of the Hebrides. Gammeltoft argued that, due to a lack of theonyms present in *bólstaðr*, and the present of kirk (church) inclusions in the names, the Norse conversion to Christianity in Scotland must have occurred quickly (Gammeltoft, 2001, p. 157). Evemalm has criticized this, as Gammeltoft argued that Ulbister (Ullr's *bólstaðr*) must not be in reference to a deity, since no *bólstaðr* names include the names of Norse gods (Evemalm, 2018, p. 265). She has overall argued that past scholars have been too hasty to dismiss Old Norse theonyms in the Hebrides. In another article that explores the possibility of the god Frey in a Welsh placename,

³ <https://grimsayer.weebly.com>

Gammeltoft called for a renewed academic interest in theonyms (Gammeltoft, 2008). I share this sentiment, but as an archaeologist, I opt to explore the archaeological and topographical nature of potential theonyms, rather than focus on the language itself.

Sofia Evemalm included potential theonyms in her analysis of Old Norse placenames on Lewis (Evemalm, 2018, p. 159). On Lewis, two sets of names may designate theonyms: Thor and Ullr, both Old Norse Gods attested to in literary sources. Evemalm divided them and analysed each placename separately, concluding that they are potential theonyms that designate cult sites (Evemalm 2018, pp. 263-265).

Evemalm was careful in interpreting these placenames as theonyms. This is because the prefix of Tor- and Ull- placenames can designate more than just names of deities; for example, they can also be personal names of individual Scandinavian settlers (Evemalm, 2018, p. 264). Some placenames that appear to have the word “Thor” included could also have other meanings, such as “thorn”, such as in the case of Cnoc Thòrabroc. I have therefore decided just to include placenames that have been labelled potential theonyms by past scholars. Moreover, though I recognize the issues with these placenames, a method that combines archaeological and landscape features to seek out patterns could perhaps illuminate more about these placenames, and their roles as potential theonyms.

Outside of Lewis, there are a few other Norse theonyms in the Hebrides. One appears to be a Neolithic/Bronze Age megalith on North Uist that contains a theonym to the goddess Freya (Clach Bharnach Bhraodag, “the limpet stone of Freya”, Canmore ID: **9978**). Two islands in the South Hebrides have names that are theonyms, Tiree (Tyr’s island), and Torsa (Thor’s isle) (Haswell-Smith, 1997, p. 72). I have noted that the potential theonym Thorabaig (Thor’s vik?) was recorded on the current edition of the United Kingdom Ordnance Survey map, at Sleat, Skye (Ryder, 2023, p. 92). There are likely more theonyms around the Hebrides, but Lewis has the highest concentration of recorded potential theonyms at the time of writing this article, a total of 4 sites.

Even with the abovementioned problems that Christianization may have occurred early, and cultic sites in general are difficult to identify, I believe the potentiality of theophoric names in the Hebrides should not be dismissed. The act of naming a place after a god is also something that should not be underestimated. Incoming Norse settlers would have taken that



matter with sincerity and reverence, if one is to reference the act of naming a bay after Thor in the Icelandic Saga (Evemalm, 2018, p. 264). A theophoric name carries cosmological weight and can offer insights into the viewpoint of Norse settlers, a possible answer to “why” and shedding light on their naming strategies.

Thor and Ullr

The potential theonyms this article will focus on involve two separate gods. The first, Thor, is the Germanic god of thunder, agriculture, and protector of sea voyages (Davidson, 1969, p. 70). By the late Iron Age, Thor was a popular god, worshipped around South Scandinavia by the distribution of Thor’s hammer pendants and theonyms dedicated to Thor, and sometimes, may have been worn as a response to the Christian cross (Nordeide, 2011, pp. 240-241).

Cult sites to Thor abound in Germanic-speaking Europe. In Scandinavia, theonyms to Thor are plentiful, with some 20 definite Thor sites in Norway for example (Brink, 2007, p. 114). Thor appears to have remained popular among Scandinavian speakers who colonized the North Atlantic, with theonyms appearing in the Faroes (such as the capitol Torshavn), Iceland, and England (Vikstrand, 2016, p. 179). Ireland, and Scotland besides the Hebrides, also possess theonyms to Thor (Gammeltoft, 2008, p. 146).

Ullr is the second god who perhaps appears in the placename record of the Hebrides. Ullr, step-son to Thor, is the god of the of hunting, skiing, and duels (Edwards, 2022). His role in the later sagas is enigmatic, without much mention, but theonyms in his honour appear frequently in Norway and Sweden (Brink, 2007, p. 133-134).

For both gods, the majority of their theonyms in Scandinavia date to the pre-Viking Age (Vikstrand, 2016, p. 179) has argued that this is due to local chieftains who saw themselves as “men of the gods” and associated themselves with a patron deity. By the time of the late Iron Age, power would have shifted into the hands of elites such as jarls or petty kings who claimed descent from the gods (Sundkvist, 2012). The idea of an elite cult, localized at elite-controlled farms, may have had ramifications for theonyms in the North Atlantic colonies such as the Hebrides, and this article will explore this idea fuller.

Area of study: Lewis



Figure 1: The Northern Hebrides and major islands. Generated with ArcGIS by the author, 2021.

The Hebridean island of Lewis (*fig.1*), was chosen due to two factors. The first is that it has a well-researched database of placenames compared to other islands, including 4 potential theonyms already identified, of which this article is interested in (see Evemalm 2018, p. 263-264). Secondly, Lewis has a high ratio of Viking-period sites compared to other islands in the Hebrides, the second-most after South Uist (Ryder, 2021). The archaeological and theophoric record of Lewis is therefore an apt foundation for to build Viking-period research on.

Lewis is the largest Hebridean island and the second largest island in Britain, after the mainland itself. Its landscape mostly consists of bog, wetland and mountains, with fertile arable land located on the machair (fertile but fragile sand-covered grass) fringes of its western and eastern coasts, and fertile lands around its northern coast (Murray, 1973, p. 74).

Archaeologically, Lewis is known for its famous Norse, post-Viking Age chess pieces (Caldwell, 2015). In the Viking Age, Lewis would have been populated by sparse farmsteads,



nucleated along the machair (Ryder, 2021). The archaeology of Viking-period Lewis has received some scholarly attention, with a multi-disciplinary book exploring its archaeology, linguistics, placenames, and presence in the Norse textual sagas (Schorn, 2014). Two Norse-period settlement sites have been excavated, Barvas (MacLeod Rivett 2018; Cowie and Macleod Rivett, 2010) and Bosta (Neighbour and Burgess, 1997) and a third underwent keyhole excavation, Galson (ShoreUPDATE 2014). Multiple burials are known, including a cemetery, with a richly furnished burial of a woman that dates to the late Viking period (Dunwell, Cowie et al. 1995; Welander, Batey et al., 1987). Moreover, there are thirteen other settlement sites known primarily through stray finds (Ryder, 2023, p. 131). A comparison of the archaeological and topographical sites to the potential theonyms would add to the knowledge of Norse settlement and power of the island.

Methodology

I have chosen to utilize a combination of placename data, archaeological evidence, and landscape analysis in order to understand the loci in which certain names exist. Theonyms from Norway will be used as a comparison. This is due to the likelihood that most Norse settlers from Scandinavia arrived from Norway (Goodacre, Helgason et al., 2005).

The placenames from the Hebrides will be given geospatial reference points, as available on the current United Kingdom Ordnance Survey map (current edition). This is available through a variety of electronic sources, notably the Scottish archaeological database *Canmore*⁴.

Similarly, the placenames from Norway will be given geospatial reference points, the simplest being farm numbers. Each theonym listed by Brink (2007) will be further investigated using other visual databases, particularly online Norwegian databases⁵ norgeskart.no and stedsnavenportalen.uib.no.

Archaeological data, particularly sites, will be given a 200 square meter reference point next to the geospatial reference of the placename. Similarly, the landscape analysis will

⁴ <https://canmore.co.uk>

⁵ <https://www.norgeskart.no> & <https://www.stedsnavportalen.uib.no>

encompass the general vicinity, or 500 square meters, of the placename. In Norway, individual farms will be analysed accordingly.

Due to the nature of theonyms, as explained above, all theonyms in the Hebrides are treated as potential. For Norway, I have left out a few that previous authors have expressed doubt over, such as *Totland* (Brink, 2007, p. 115).

All archaeological data will be compiled. Sites that can be definitely contemporary with Old Norse placenames will be prioritized. Land use will be included where possible to give a fuller picture of how the land at the placename was used.

Data

The database for Thor and Ullr theonyms in Norway was compiled by Stefen Brink (2007). Using the farm numbers he provided, I further examined the archaeological and topographical (waterscape and land use) features of each farm.

Thor theonyms in Norway

Name	Location	Farm	Archaeology	Waterscape	Land use
Torshov	Trøgstad	646	n/a	River (1km)	Agricultural
Torsnes	Fredriksstad	n/a	n/a	Fjord/bay (10m)	urban
Tose	Borge	685	Burial cairn	Fjord (500m)	Agricultural
Torsnes	Våler	3	n/a	River (50m)	Agricultural
Torshov	Oslo	-	-	-	Urban
Torshov	Enebakk	38	Medieval stray find	Fjord/coastal (200m)	Agricultural
Torshov	Gjerdum	10	n/a	River (10m)	Agricultural
Torshov	Skedsmo	112	Cooking pits	Fjord (10m)	Agricultural
Torshov	Vang	12	Grave field - multiple Iron Age mounds,	Bay (at Hamar), 200m	Agricultural



			and Iron Age stray finds		
Torshov	Løiten	40	n/a	River (200m)	Agricultural
Torshov/Toso	Jevnaker	145	n/a	Fjord (400m)	Agricultural
Torstvet	Larvik	2009	Iron Age settlement (undated)	Fjord/harbor (1000m)	Agricultural
Torsnes	Vikedal	None (urban)	n/a	Coastal (less than 20m)	Urban
Totland	Alversund	237	n/a	Fjord/sound (200m)	Agricultural
Torsnes	Jondal	336	n/a	Fjord (50m)	Agricultural
Torsnes	Sogn og Fjordane	326	n/a	Fjord (10m)	Agricultural
Torsnes	Hillesø	167	Mounds and cairns (undated)	Fjord (10m)	Agricultural
Torsæter	Sogn og Fjordane	1447	n/a	Fjord/bay (400m)	Agricultural

Table 1: Thor theonyms in Norway, modified database from Brink 2007.

Out of 18 names, 3 have grave finds, including at least one area with multiple mounds. These are largely undated except for broad dates, such as the Iron Age or Bronze Age.

All names with Thor- in Norway can be linked to agricultural activity, besides areas that have been recently urbanized and are unable to be assessed. Linguistically, an exception is Torsæter. However, sæter can also designate agricultural activity, albeit usually secondary or tertiary farms involved in the raising of fodder. Today, it appears that Torsæter is an agricultural area.



All loci besides areas of modern urbanization could be linked to farms, besides one area which designates a headland, and thus consists of several farms (table 1). All non-urbanized Thor names can be linked to agricultural activity.

Ullr theonyms in Norway

Name	Location	Farm	Archaeology	Waterscape	Land use
Ultvet	Eidsberg	105	n/a	Inland	Agricultural
Ullrøy	Østfold	n/a	n/a	Inland	Forested
Ulleren	Aker	n/a	n/a	Inland	Agricultural
Ullevål	Aker	Urban			
Ulreng	Skedsmo	n/a	n/a	Inland/mountainous	No
Ulleren	Ullensaker	Urban			
Ullarøy	Sør odal	n/a	n/a	Island in river Lillestrøm	Outfield
Ulland	Fåberg	0525	n/a	River (500m)	Agricultural
Ulleren	Tyrifjorden	207	n/a	Fjord (200m)	Agricultural
Ullarål	Unable to locate	Opland			
Ulleren	Øvre Eiker	96	n/a	River (200m)	Agricultural
Ulland	Ø. Eiker hd, Buskerud	0631	n/a	Inland	Agricultural
Ulland	Flesberg hd, Buskerud	202	n/a	Bogland/inland	Agricultural
Ulleviken	Tønsberg	141	n/a	Bay (200m)	Agricultural
Ulleberg	Larvik	4053	Bronze Age and Iron Age graveyard (cairns and	Fjord (1000m)	Agricultural



			mounds, undated)		
Ullaren	Tinn	4026	n/a	River (200m)	Agricultural
Ulledalen	Kvitseid	n/a	n/a	River (200m)	Urban
Ultveit	Gjerstad	10	n/a	River (50m)	Agricultural
Ullarøy	Nes	167	n/a	50m (lake)	Agricultural
Ullerøy	Vest-Adger	n/a	n/a (large island)	Ullerøysund	Island in sound
Ulleland	Unable to locate				
Ulland	Vest-Adger	1042	Grave field (cairns, Iron Age)	200m (fjord)	Agricultural
Ulleland	Unable to locate				
Ullenes	Rennesøy	1142	n/a	50m (bay)	Agricultural
Ulland	Samnanger	1242	n/a	10m (fjord/bay)	Agricultural
Ulleland	Volden	1519	n/a	200m (fjord)	Agricultural

Table 2: Ullr theonyms in Norway, modified after Brink 2009.

Brink listed 26 definite Ullr theonyms. Of the 26, 3 I was unable to locate, possibly due to these names being archaic. Of the 26, the majority are located on agricultural land, similar to Thor names, with 3 exceptions (*table 2*). 2 these Ullr names were located in areas of modern urbanization and were unable to be further assessed. The majority of these placenames had access to waterways, with just 6 inland, though less so than the Thor names. There is an overall lack of archaeological features associated with these sites, with 2 representing broadly dated grave fields.

Potential Thor & Ullr theonyms in Lewis

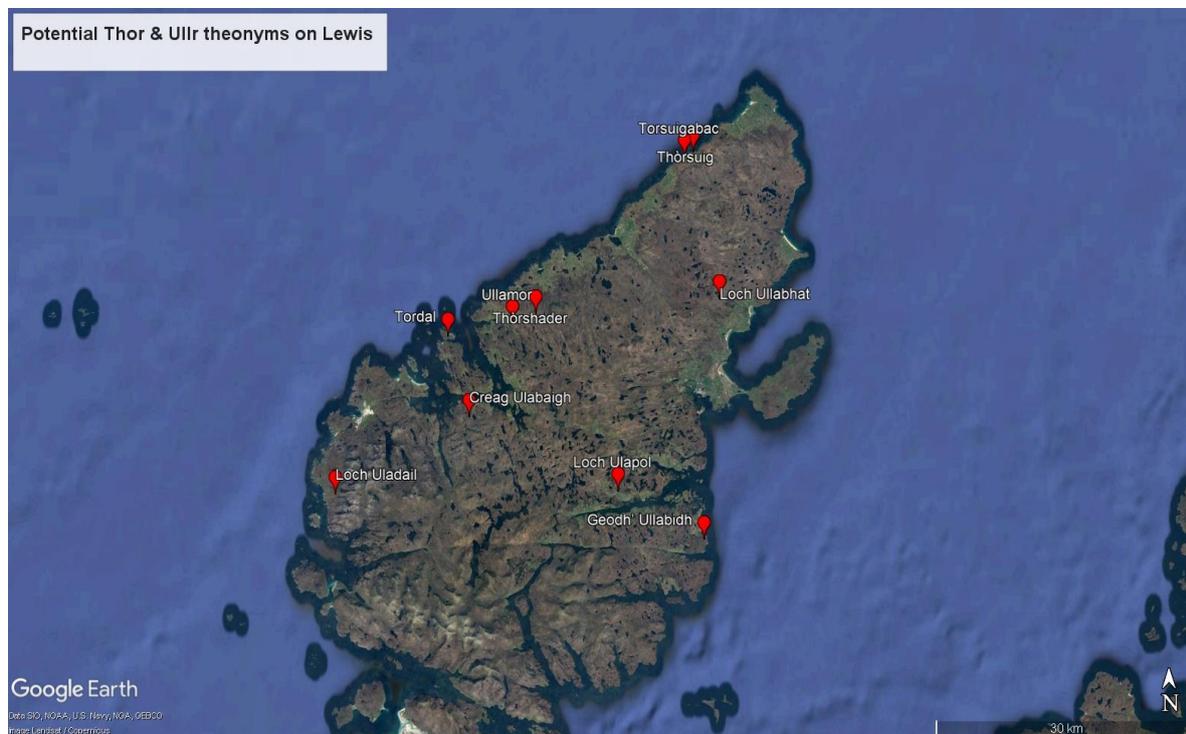


Figure 2: Potential Thor and Ullr theonyms on Lewis. Generated by the author with google earth, 2024.

The database of Lewis was compiled by Evemalm, who provided ordnance survey reference numbers (Evemalm, 2018). I further analysed these placenames for archaeological remains, waterscape, and land use.

Name	Location	Farm	Archaeology	Waterscape	Land use
Thòrsuig	Ness	Galson	Settlement & burials	Coastal, river	Agricultural
Torsuigabac	Ness	Galson	Settlement & burials	Coastal, river	Agricultural
Thòrshader	Carloway (NB246427)	n/a	3 Undated shieling sites	Inland freshwater lochs (200m)	Outfield



				Mountain (Beinn Thorshader)	
Tordal	Uig	n/a (island abandoned in 19 th century)	Field systems (Norse?) Burials (undated)	100m to landing- place	Agricultural (pre-20th); current: cattle pasture
Ullamor	NB 219418	n/a	Undated shieling sites	n/a	Grazelands, moorland
Loch Ullabhat	NB456435	n/a	Undated shieling sites & undated cairn	Freshwater loch	Bogland
Creag Ulabaigh	NB162318	n/a	Undated shieling site	Freshwater loch	Bogland
Geodh' Ullabidh	NB423157	n/a	Undated shieling site	Freshwater loch	Mountainous
Loch Ulapol	NB326223	n/a	Medieval rig and furrow (500m)	Freshwater loch	Grazelands, bogland
Loch Uladail	NB007239	n/a	n/a	Freshwater loch	Mountainous

Table 3: Potential theonyms to Thor & Ullr on Lewis

There are 4 potential theonyms to Thor on Lewis (table 3). 3 of the 4 sites have evidence of settlement and agriculture. 1 site is found in the outfield and is likely a shieling, or outfield activity site (Thòrshader). 3 of the 4 are coastal. 1 site, Tordal, is located on a small island with a landing-place for a beach. 2 sites, Thòrsuig and Torsuigabac are found within meters of the coast. Of the 4, 2 are likely the same site (Thòrsuig and Torsuigabac) and will be treated as such.

There are 6 potential Ullr theonyms on Lewis (*table 3*). Of the 6, 4 possess undated structures interpreted as shielings. 1 has medieval rig and furrow in a 500m radius, and 1 has no archaeological sites recorded in its vicinity. 5 of the 6 sites are found at places of freshwater lochs. 1 site is within 100m of an islet in a freshwater loch that possesses an undated cairn (Canmore ID: 374766). All the sites are in what can be called the outfield, in moors, bogs, or in mountainous terrain.

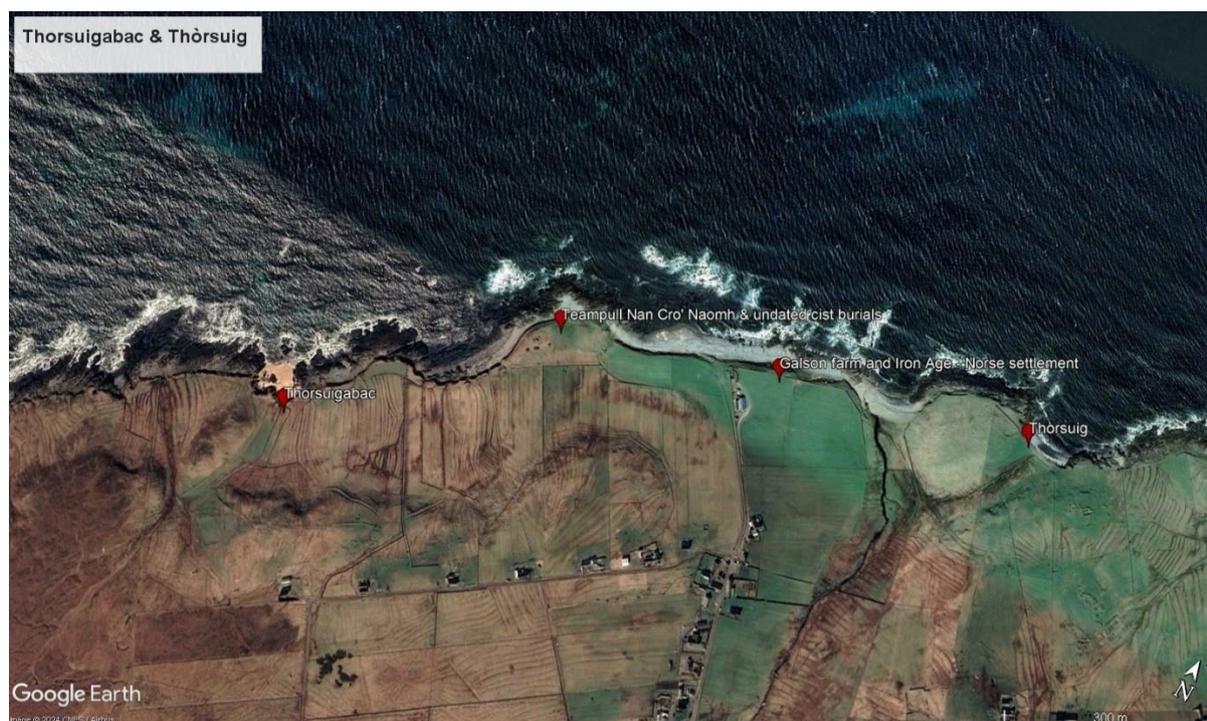


Figure 3: The farm of Galson and its placenames and archaeological sites relevant to this study. Generated by the author with Google Earth, 2024.

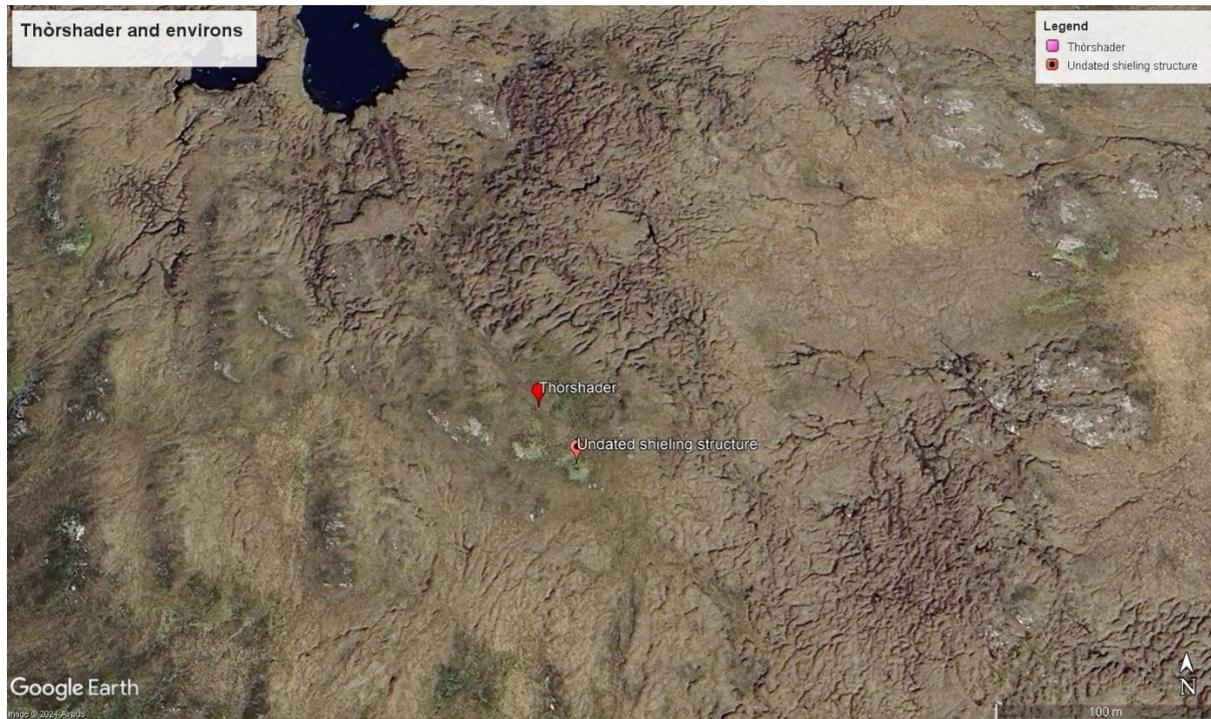


Figure 4: Thørshader and undated shieling structure. Generated by the author with Google Earth, 2024.



Figure 5: Tordal and undated (but possibly Norse) field system. Generated by the author with Google Earth, 2024.

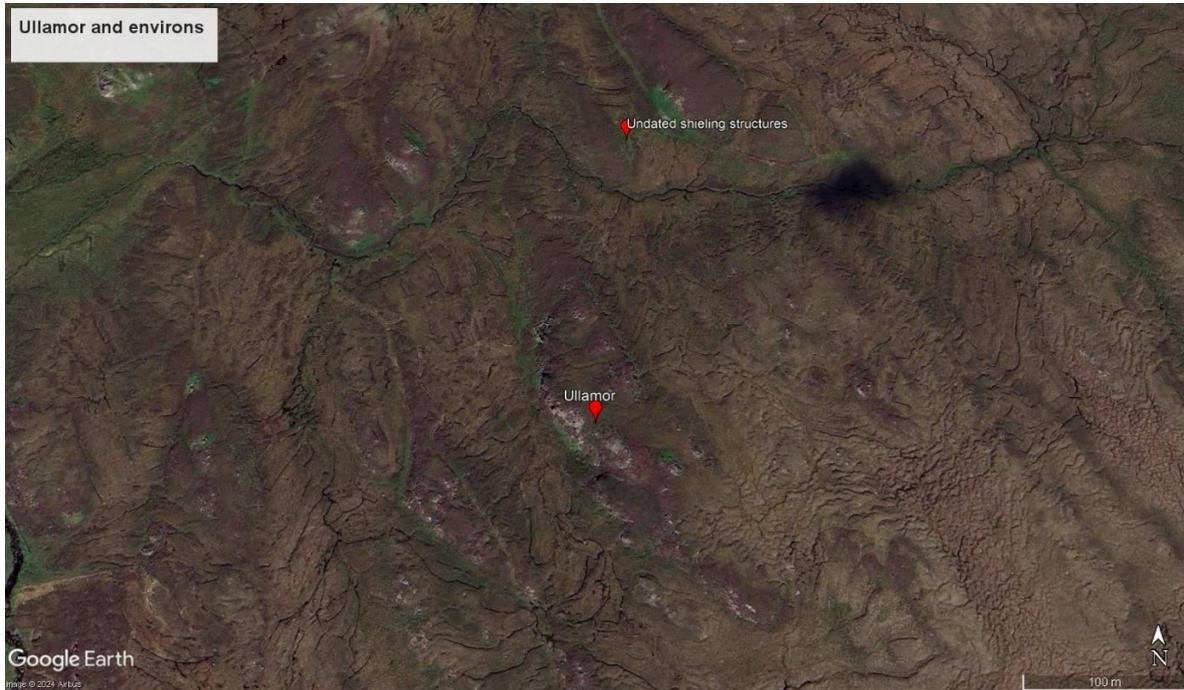


Figure 6: Ullamor and undated shieling structures. Generated by the author with Google Earth, 2024.

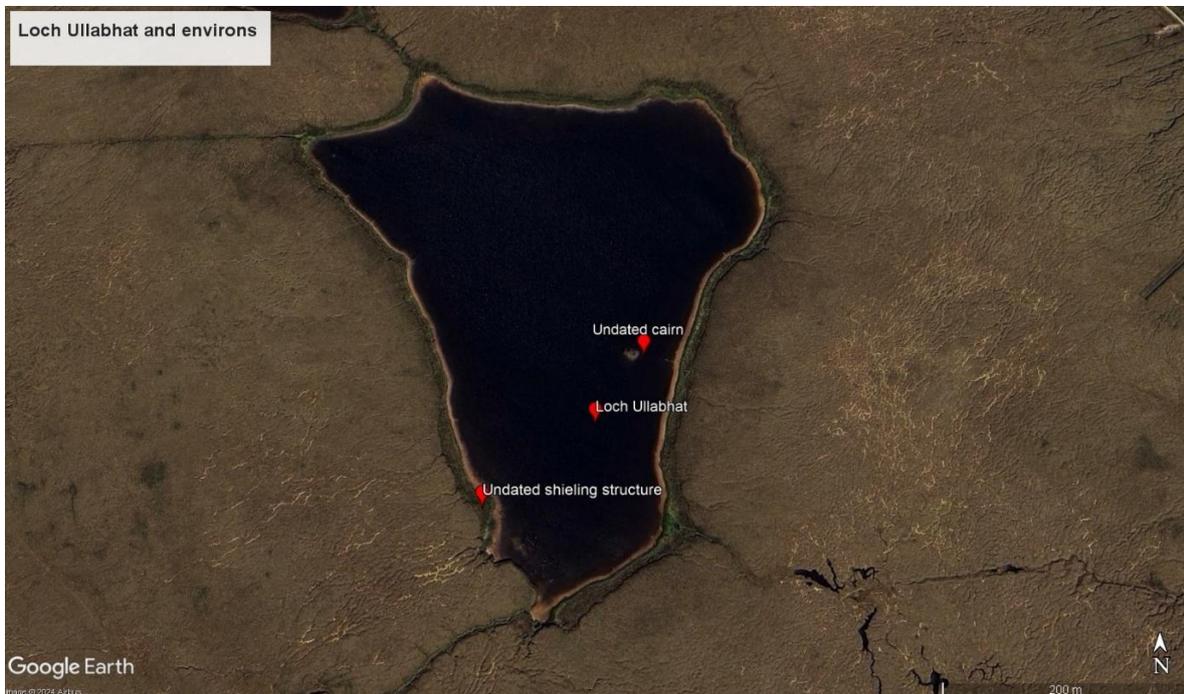


Figure 7: Loch Ullabhat, undated shieling structure, and undated cairn on an islet. Generated by the author with Google Earth, 2024.

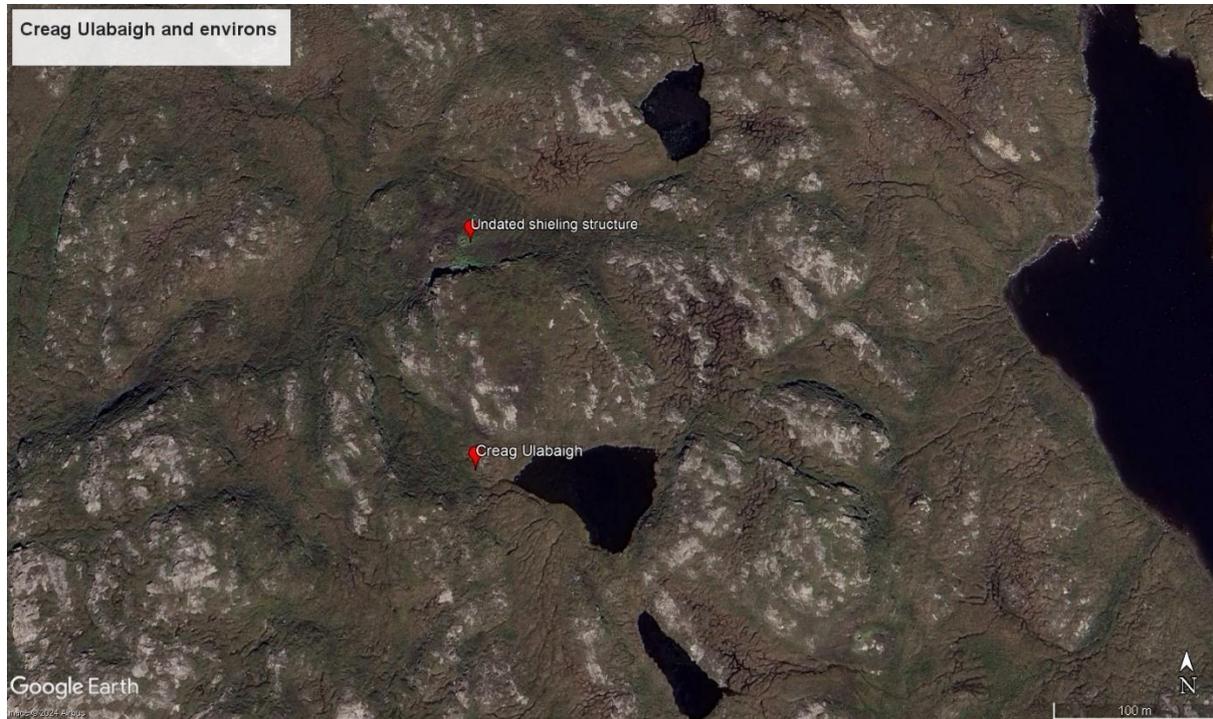


Figure 8: Creag Ulaigh and undated shieling structure. Generated by the author with Google Earth, 2024.

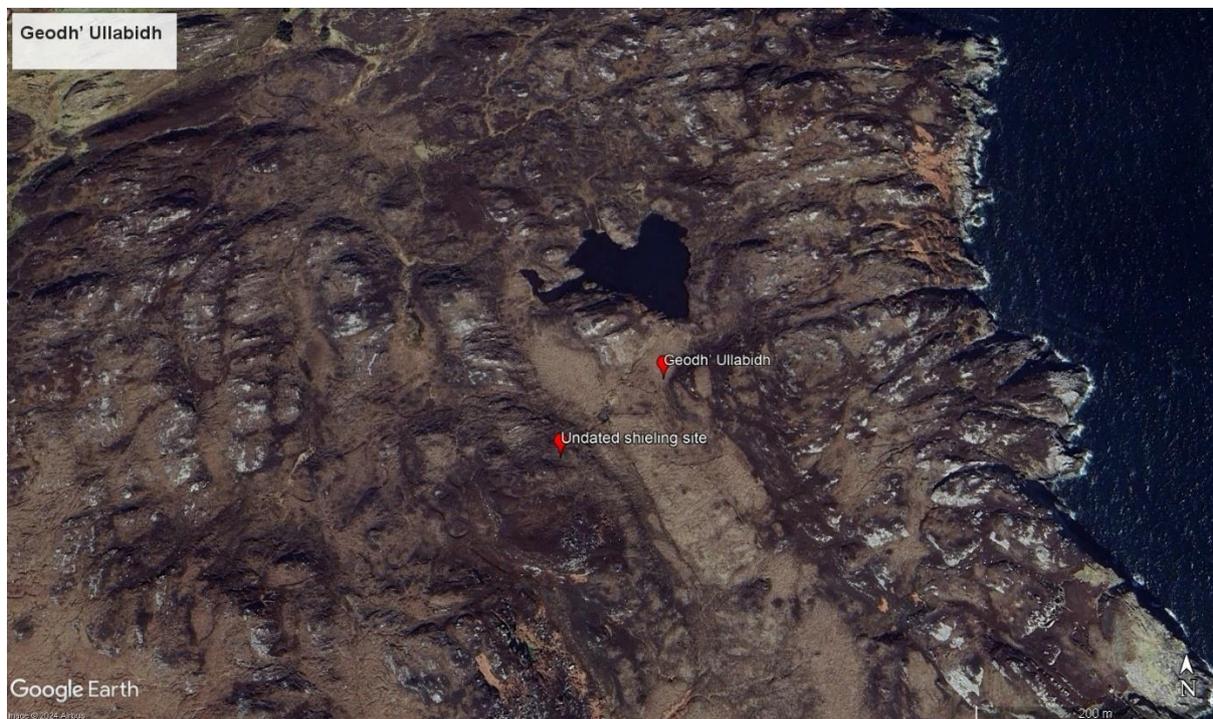


Figure 9: Geodh' Ullabidh and undated shieling structure. Generated by the author with Google Earth, 2024.



Figure 10: Loch Ulapol, including Medieval Rig and Furrow. Generated by the author with Google Earth, 2024.



Figure 11: Loch Uladail. Generated by the author with Google Earth, 2024.



Hebridean Thor-placenames	Agricultural land (high-status farms?)	Bays/places to land seacraft and access to sea-route	Funerary monuments
Hebridean Ullr placenames	Grazelands (shieling/sæter sites?)	Inland with freshwater lochs	Undated shieling structures
Norwegian Thor placenames	All farms - agricultural land	Bays/harbours/rivers/lakes, all waterways traversable	Burial monuments
Norwegian Ullr placenames	Both agricultural land and outfield	Both coastal and inland	Not many recorded archaeological sites

Table 4: A comparison of commonalities of Hebridean and Norwegian Thor and Ullr placenames.

Discussion

The archaeology of Thors- placenames on Lewis

The placenames Thòrsaig and Torsuigabac are located on the northern and southern ends of the farm Galson, at Ness, Lewis (*fig.3*). Evemalm has argued that these two names, which both translate to “Thor’s bay,” in English, were likely the same farm (Evemalm, 2018, p. 264). In agreement with Evemalm, I treat these two placenames as one site, and refer to it as Thòrsaig for the sake of simplicity.

Thòrsaig is the location of a significant series of Norse archaeological activity. Located at Ness, Lewis, Galson is the name of a modern farm where a series of structures has been surveyed by ShoreUPDATE, due to severe coastal erosion (*fig.12*).

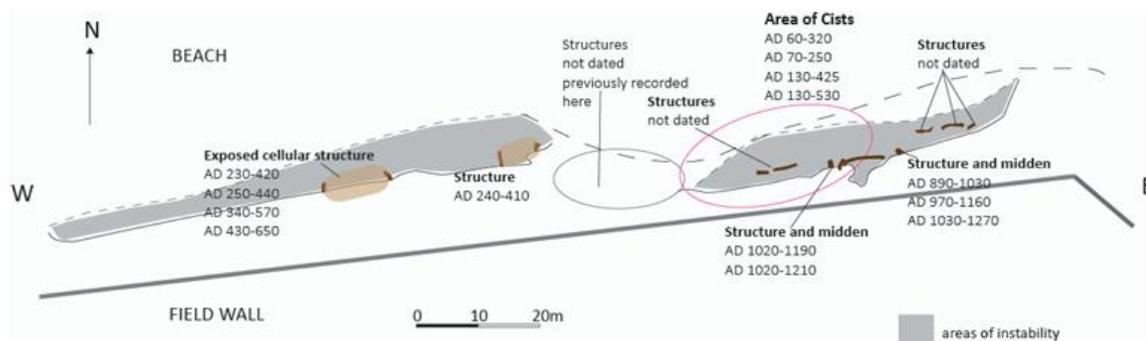


Figure 12: Archaeological features at Galson, after ShoreUPDATE 2014.

The site is located on an eroding sand hill. A stray find of a copper alloy mount for a horse bridle, dating to the 9th century AD, was discovered there. The mount shows a mixture of Celtic-Norse art, and similar mounts have been found in Ireland and Man (Graham-Campbell, 1986). Multiple keyhole excavations and geophysical surveying revealed a complex of stone-built structures, with radiocarbon dates ranging from 200-1200 AD (Canmore ID: 4357 from ShoreUPDATE 2014). In addition, several cist graves were discovered, dating to the pre-Norse Iron Age, around 500-600 AD, among the structures. Due to the nature of erosion and limited excavations, it is unknown what was visible in what period. There are moreover several undated (Iron Age or Norse) long cists in the cemetery of the chapel Teampull Nan Cro' Naomh (Canmore ID: 4346).

Due to its placement in the landscape, I have previously argued that this site was likely a high-status residence during the Viking Age (Ryder, 2023, p. 341). Evemalm has argued that Thòrsaig is similar to Thor's Vik in Iceland, and has drawn comparisons to an event in the Saga of Icelanders when a bay was named in honour of Thor (Evemalm, 2018, p. 204).

I propose that the archaeological remains at Galson likely represent a "Thor's Bay" site, an elite farm located on the northwestern machair of Lewis.

In contrast to the other potential Thor theonyms, Thòrshader is found in a mountainous area, with a hill named Beinn Thòrshader lending its name to the potential theonym. There are 3 undated shieling sites within 200m, located around the hill. It is over 3km to the coastline (fig.4). The name, landscape, and archaeological record all indicate a shieling site. These can be best described as seasonal residences related to outfield activity,



such as summer grazing pastures, present on Lewis from the Viking Age to modern times (Foster, 2017).

Thørshader is the only potential theonym which does not fit within the general topographical features of the other Thor- placenames (*fig.4*). Evemalm expressed the most doubt over this placename as a theonym, opting that the Thor- represents a personal name (2018, p. 43). However, Thørshader is also identical to a Thor theonym from Vestland (previously Sogn og Fjordane), Norway: Torsæter. Both names translate into “Thor’s seter” in modern English. It is worth to note that shieling sites do not necessarily negate the role of agricultural activity, as many shieling sites were used to grow hay, used as fodder for animals. Given the location and landscape of Thørshader, it does appear to have been used for grazing and the land is of little or no agricultural usage.

Tordal is located on a Little Bernera, an island roughly 200x400m located off the mid-northern coast of Lewis, in Loch Roag. The island is fertile, and the area in question, Tordal, has been archaeologically surveyed, and a series of stone-built dykes, interpreted as a Norse field-system has been observed (*fig.5*; Canmore ID: **333106**). There are further undated burials located, including long cists which could be pre-Norse Iron Age, or Viking Age (Canmore ID: **33106**). Loch Roag is known by modern mariners as the only naturally sheltered harbor on the western side of Lewis, and was historically a stop-over on the seaway from Lewis to Iceland (Small, 1969, p.2). Evemalm has expressed that this placename is just as likely a theonym as it is a personal name (such as Thorir) (2018, p. 141). Without further excavation, it is difficult to interpret this site, though based on the name, historic land-use and topography, it was likely a farmstead in the Viking period.

In both Lewis and Norway, Thor- names appear to be in association with infield, or permanent settlements, on arable land, and in relation to Norway. The forms of their names are not similar, however. It is possible that naming strategies were different in the North Atlantic colonies by the Viking Age, and this will be explored fuller in this article.

The Ull- names appear unlike the Ullr theonyms in Norway when both are translated into English. Some of the Ullr names, however, may designate farms (Ulapol, Ullapuill, and Ullabaidh), but just as confusingly, they may designate bodies of water (Evemalm, 2018, p. 65). In regard to the waterscape, most of the Ulla- sites can be found in association with freshwater



lochs, unlike Thors- on Lewis, or Ullr theonyms in Norway. The Ullr names overall possess many similarities in landscape usage, as they are all areas of the outfield and of limited or no agricultural value. While the possibility of theonyms can not be discounted, this could also be in reference to wool production. One common alternative interpretation of ull- is wool. However, it does not appear that placenames in Norway used the prefix ull- or ul- for wool (Inge Særheim pers.commun.). Inge Særheim has said that another alternative interpretation for ul- is the verb “to run”, as in running water. That being said, another interpretation, of “wolf” (*ulfr*), is unlikely, due to wolves (*Canis lupus*) appearing to never have inhabited the Outer Hebrides (Serjeantson, 1990). That leaves, in my opinion, either the God Ullr or personal names for these potential theonyms.

The Ullr names are overall more enigmatic. None of the placenames can be associated with excavated archaeological sites, or sites that are not broadly dated (*table 3*). However, all 5 sites occur in the outfield or areas of non-permanent settlement and with no or very limited agricultural activity (*table 4*), the exception being Loch Ulapol (*fig.10*). This is in contrast to both 3 of 4 potential Thor theonyms, and also to Norway, where the majority of Ullr theonyms can be associated with agricultural land (*table 2*). This means that, if these are theonyms, the wilder outfield was named in honour of Ullr rather than the infield, much different to both (potential) Thor theonyms on Lewis and Ullr names in Norway. Overall, whether these names are theonyms to Thor or Ullr, each subset of placenames have their own commonalities that suggest a particular system for specific name.

Ullr theonyms are lacking but not absent in Western Norway (Brink, 2007, p. 117), Denmark and England (Jesch, 2015, p. 135). It is interesting that Ullr appears potentially 6 times on Lewis. Is it really then placenames based on a person name or *wolf*? I do not find it coincidental that these placenames are all linked to outfield activity. It is likely that these words, associated with pastures, mountains, and freshwater lochs, were designated in the name of the God Ullr.

In my opinion, Gammeltoft was too dismissive of the possibility of Ulbister being in honor of Ullr (Gammeltoft, 2001, 157). The potentiality of other theonyms on Lewis is perhaps an indication that naming practices of places named after Norse Gods did not include *bólstaðr*



placenames; furthermore, there appears to be a lack of theonyms associated with *bólstaðr* in Scandinavia, either (i.e. Brink 2007, pp. 126-135).

What does it all mean?

At a general level, there are two distinctive landscapes for two distinct potential theonyms on Lewis. They however both have much in common with the landscape of theonyms in Norway, albeit sometimes, different forms of the names (no Thor's vik in Norway, for example, Brink, 2007, pp. 131). This is suggestive that incoming Norse settlers to Lewis named certain landscapes with the suffix Thor- and Ull-, whether or not they are theonyms or personal names.

Many theonyms regarding Thor in Norway designate holy places, such as (hof) and (se). These are notoriously absent from the Hebrides – with some possible exceptions such as Howmore on South Uist (Raven, 2005, p. 227). There is some overlap, with some Thor-placenames designating natural features, such as Torsdal (valley) in the Hebrides and many cases of “nes”, and one of “øy”. In both the Hebrides and Norway, these places are all cultivatable, with farms.

Nevertheless, there seems to have been different naming strategies, whether they are theonyms or not. With some exceptions, Thor- names can be tied to cultivatable land, usually main farms, in both the Hebrides and Norway. The difference in naming and the lack of -hov and -ve despite the prevalence of Thor's ve and Thor's hof/hov in Scandinavia is likely explained by the chronological difference in naming places after Thor (and other deities). Thor's role as a protector of sailors (vik) and fertility (fields and farms, and sometimes both in the case of Thor's vik at) may have come into play when naming sites after Thor. Moreover, cultic practices in Scandinavia often took place inside the house itself (i.e. Carlie, 2008. p. 209). By the Viking Age, worship of Thor may have been confined to inside longhouses rather than at hofs/hovs, by the time of the Viking colonization of the North Atlantic.

Many disparities likely have to do with the theonyms in Norway being much older than the Atlantic colonies. If most theonyms were coined in the pre-Viking Age, then (potential and certain) theonyms in the colonies are much younger. While the low number of placenames is difficult to argue for a pattern, this is all likely not coincidental due to a number of



archaeological and topographical commonalities among the placenames (*table 4*). It seems that Norse colonists identified certain features of the pre-Norse Scottish landscape, including potentially the pre-Norse funeralscape, of loaded with meaning (McLeod, 2015; Leonard, 2011). It is possible that certain landscapes were sacred and perhaps invoked two separate gods. In many cases, these places are similar to their counterparts in Norway, in other cases, they are not. The similarities and differences together mean that Norse settlers into the Hebrides were creating their own lived landscapes, similar enough to their homeland, but different enough that a part of their own identity was forged in their new homes. Similarly, I have argued that the Norse brought over important traditions such as their hierarchical culture, burial rites, and law to the Hebrides but altered them in some ways to fit their new landscape (Ryder, 2023, pp. 344-345).

It is interesting to note that in the Hebrides, only 1 Ullr- name can be associated with arable land (*figs .5-11*). This is different than in Norway (*table 2*). The fact that there are no Ullr names in association with farms, and they only appear in the outfield, suggests that these are likely theonyms. This means that the role of the God Ullr may have been much different in the Late Iron Age than in earlier periods when theonyms were coined in his honour in Norway.

For example, in my doctoral thesis, it appears that “high status” Norse farms do not usually include personal names. This is likely because personal names were not “the first” farms named, and Norse settlers targeted farms with the best arable land for settlement first (Ryder, 2023, pp. 51-52). Archaeologically, Galson can be traced to a somewhat earlier period, to the late 9th century AD and thus contemporary with the earliest dated farm in the Hebrides, Bornais (fort-ness). If the Galson settlement site can be linked to the name *Thor’s Vik*, it is likely that this is an early name, increasing the likelihood of it being a theonym. This is however somewhat speculative, and an expansion of the corpus of Thor- names, both theonyms and personal names, in the region, can help answer this question better in the future.

If they are not theonyms

Thor- names on Lewis represent areas of agricultural activity, are coastal, and likely refer to main farms. Thorsæter, which is more likely a personal name, refers to a shieling or transhumance site. Personal names in association with farms, and including components of



topographical features (bay and valley, respectively), are not unusual in the region (Ryder, 2023, p. 221).

The Ull- names are in my opinion more uniform, with 6 names and many common features, archaeological and topographical, among them. They are not very likely to all be personal names (Ulli or Ulf). The association with shieling structures and grazelands further lends to this possibility.

If they are theonyms

These placenames, as mentioned above, are different than their Norwegian counterparts. Thor- names can be associated with agricultural activity. In the case of two Thor's bay names on Lewis, they likely represent a high-status elite site, visible in the archaeological record, and located today at Galson. It is possible that places settled early in the Hebrides could be sacred to specific gods, particularly to Thor, who's cult was widespread and popular throughout the era. One aspect of the worship of Thor was to call upon him for safe sea voyage; or alternatively, to curse the voyage of another (Perkins, 2001, p. 26). Thor being associated with bays on Lewis, the Faroes, and Iceland, could have been an important development in the seaborne journeys of Scandinavian settlers from Norway to the North Atlantic. Western Lewis, where both Galson and Tordal are located, is located on a sea-route to Iceland, as mentioned earlier in this article. Moreover, these sites located on agricultural land further Thor's association with agricultural land shows the likelihood that he continued to be invoked as the farmer's god – present in Tordal for instance.

If the Ullr names are dedications to the god Ullr, this is significant for a few reasons. Firstly, they would represent the recorded cases of theonyms to Ullr outside of Scandinavia, though being present in Iceland. Secondly, it would show that the cult of Ullr continued into the Viking era, significant enough to warrant aspects of the landscape named after the deity. A pattern in land usage and topographical features would suggest that Ullr was still regarded as a god of the wilds by the Viking Age, perhaps associated with freshwater lakes, rugged terrain, and mountains, which would befit a god of hunting.

Taken together, if they are theonyms, it is evidence that paganism perhaps lasted longer in the Hebrides than previously thought. There is no official conversion date of the Hebrides, and Christianization of the Norse is usually assumed to have officially begun in 997 AD along with Orkney (Abrams, 2007). Christian centers appear to have persisted from pre-Norse times and throughout the Norse period in the Hebrides (Clancy, 2023, p. 149). Early Christianization in Viking Scotland has been argued in scholarship before (i.e. Gammeltoft, 2001, p. 162). However, on Lewis, the youngest furnished burial in the region is present, one burial at Cnip, which seems to have been buried after 950 AD on the basis of a ringed-pin (Welander, Batey et al., 1987). While furnished burials indicating paganism is probably too simplistic, there may be a stronger strain of paganism on Lewis than previously thought, although Per Vikstrand, after Jesch, has suggested that perhaps “cultural paganism” lasted after Christianization among Scandinavian settlers in Britain (Vikstrand, 2016, p. 182). One Thor’s hammer pendant (now lost) is known in the archipelago, from the island of Ensay in the Harris Sound, deposited in what was likely a female Viking-period burial (Harrison, 2008, p.485). A soapstone crucible for a Thor’s hammer pendant was uncovered in 1920 at a broch site on Skye (Ryder, 2023, pp. 190-191; see *fig. 12*). This is further evidence that the worship of Thor existed in the region, regardless of if the three/four potential theonyms represent cult sites. Perhaps Norse paganism was stronger in some areas of the Hebrides, in response to Christian centres located not only in the Hebrides, but in Scotland and Ireland. This is in lieu of the argument put forth by scholars such as Sæbjørg Walaker Nordeide that argued that Thor’s hammer pendants were prevalent in the Late Viking Age as a response to Christian crosses being worn (Nordeide, 2006).

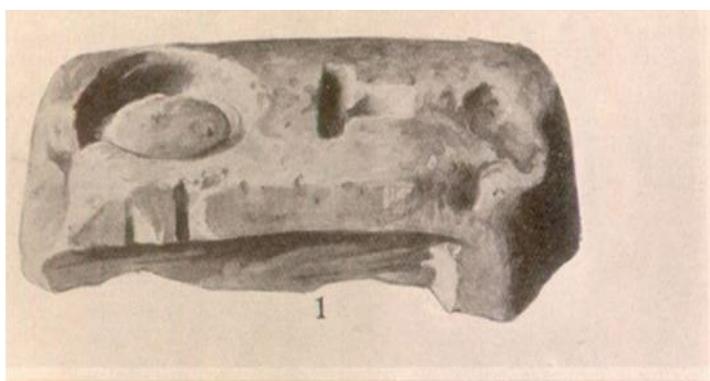


Figure 12: Soapstone crucible with Thor's hammer pendant impression on right side. After (Callander 1921).

This all suggests that naming strategies were much different in the Hebrides than in the homelands. The potential theophoric relationships add another dimension. If Norse settlers in the Hebrides named landscapes after Thor and Ullr, they did to in a much different way, and likely for different reasons, than their counterparts in the Norwegian homeland.

A role for the gods?

Do the theonyms reveal anything about the beliefs of the Norse settlers in the Hebrides? One answer may be in a comparison to Iceland and Norway. In Norway (along with Sweden and Denmark), Olof Sundkvist argued that rulers claimed divine descent from the gods, while in Iceland, local chiefs claimed to be “friends” of the gods (Sundkvist, 2012, p. 248). This would mean that the role of power in Iceland was more decentralized, and had a more horizontal power structure and thus a different role for the gods politically than the Scandinavian homelands. In the Hebrides, I have argued that power was largely hierarchical due to the nature of the topography, with local magnates seizing the “best” farms, located at strategic points in the waterscape (Ryder, 2023, p. 347). At the same time, however, the archipelago lent itself to multiple elite centres, though likely under one local elite (probably located at Bornais, South Uist) (Sharples, 2019, pp. 600-601). Power in the Hebrides in the Viking Age may have been unlike both Norway and Iceland. It then makes sense that the political role of the gods was also something different, with perhaps with specific families worshipping Thor at elite halls, such as (potentially) at Galson, similar to the elite grandeur of Norse god worship in Scandinavia. Ullr on the other hand, a god of the wilds, may have been worshipped more horizontally, similar to Iceland. Unfortunately, due to the nature of the evidence, the majority of this remains somewhat speculative.

Conclusion

Is there evidence of the worship of Old Norse gods in the Hebrides?

Given the above data, this is a difficult question to answer. If these placenames represent theonyms dedicated to Thor and/or Ullr, do they represent the places of cults to these gods? Did they involve rituals to these gods? Both of these questions are speculative, firstly because an Old Norse theonym does not necessarily represent a cultic building or practice at those loci. For example, some names may have been so due to landscape features



instead. Secondly, it must be stressed that there is the possibility that these are not theonyms, or not all are theonyms, but personal names that resemble the names of gods.

I do believe that some of these are likely theonyms. The best case is the theonym of Thorsbaig/Thorsbaigasac, with an elite settlement site and good agriculture land located at what was likely a bay. The Ullr names, while the notion of personal names cannot be discredited, are too similar in topographical form to be coincidental.

If we do have evidence of theonyms to the Norse gods in the Hebrides, this has ramifications for how we view Norse pagan ritual and power in the Hebrides. Brink has stressed that cultic sites in Scandinavia are not uniform, and different gods appear more prevalent in different locations (Brink, 2007). It is possible that both Thor and Ullr are present in the Hebrides, and their cultic places were located in different areas of the landscape.

I ultimately argue that the role of theonyms, the reason behind the theonym, and the implication for society for these theonyms would have been much different than in the Scandinavian homeland. I further argue that these theonyms appear different than in Iceland, though this is a preliminary assessment that deserves further comparisons. Finally, the role of power behind the theonyms was likely important in the Hebrides, and the reflects a hierarchical settlement pattern, albeit with multiple elite centres.

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