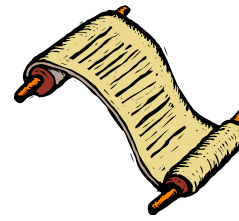
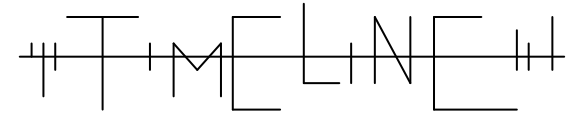


The history of language in Shetland

S1-3



Language in Shetland



Pre-300AD
Before the Picts

We don't know much about the people of Shetland or their language.

Pictish people carve symbols into stone and speak a 'Celtic' language.

300AD-800AD
Picts

800AD-1500AD
Vikings

Vikings occupy the isles and introduce 'Norn'. They carve symbols called 'runes' into stone. The Picts and their language are then wiped out by Vikings.

Scotland rule gradually influences life on the islands. The Scottish language eventually becomes the prominent language.

1500AD onwards
Scots

Today
Us!

The dialect Shetlanders speak with today contains Scottish and Norn words.



THE PICTS



The Picts lived in mainland Scotland from around the 6th to the 9th Century, possibly earlier. Indications of a burial at Sumburgh suggest that Picts had probably settled in Shetland by 300AD.

The Picts spoke a Celtic language. Picts may have travelled from Ireland, Scotland or further afield to settle in Shetland.

Picts in Shetland spoke one of the 'strands' of the Celtic language.

Picts also carved symbols onto stone. These symbols have been found throughout Scotland—common symbols must have been understood by many Picts all over 'Pictland'.



These symbol stones may have been grave markers, or they may have indicated gathering points. Whatever their use, they were communicative.



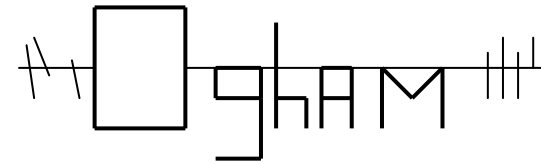
Some stones appear to be memorials; the symbols chosen for a memorial stone may represent the individual or family.

Some symbols were abstract; some depicted animals or human figures. Others represented aspects of paganism or Christianity. Abstract symbols sometimes accompanied each other, or accompanied figures, such as animals or beasts.



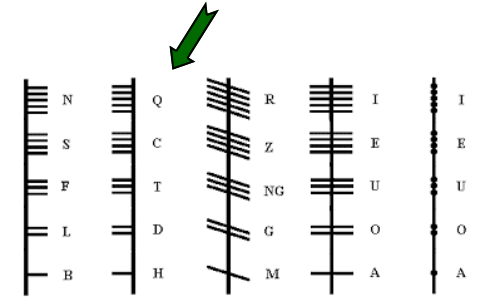
symbolictionary.net

The Papil Stone (left) is an example of a Pictish symbol stone from 7-8th Century. It was found in 1877, and depicts a cross, monks, a lion and two unusual 'bird-men'.



Some carvings are part of an alphabet called 'ogham'. Ogham represents the spoken language of the Picts, by using a 'stem' with shorter lines across it or on either side of it.

Ogham alphabet



ogham.celt.dias.ie

There are seven ogham inscriptions from Shetland (including St Ninian's Isle, Cunningsburgh and Bressay) and one from a peat bog in Lunnasting.

The side, number and angle of the short lines to the stem indicates the intended sound.

This inscribed sandstone was dug up from the area of the ancient church in Mail Churchyard in Cunningsburgh. Photo: c1903, from Shetland Museum

The Bressay Stone (right) shows elaborate decoration on both large sides, and an ogham inscription on each end. The inscription reads:

CRROSCC : NAHHTVVDDADDS : DATTR : ANNBENNISES : MEQQDDROANN

Which translates as:

"The Cross of Nordred's daughter is here placed."

"Benises son of Droan."



side 1 | side 2

shetlopedia.com





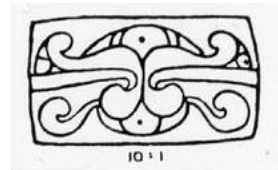
SYMBOLS IN SHETLAND



Carvings on small stone discs are unique to Shetland.

There are many 'common' Pictish symbols, found throughout Scotland; these include eagles, boars and abstract Z-rod and V-rod symbols.

In Shetland, many common symbols have been found, and some symbols appear more often than others.



Particularly popular in Shetland is the rectangle style symbol.

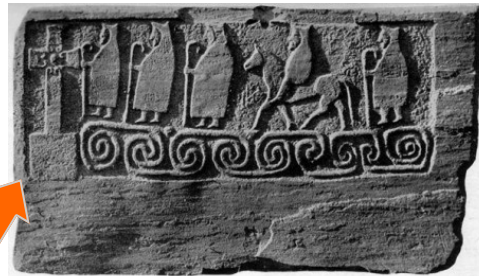


symboldictionary.net

Some Pictish symbols are carved next to Christian crosses and some include cruciform designs but as cruciform designs were popular in Shetland, we cannot ascribe Christianity as being the definite purpose of these carvings.

Many early Christian carvings were used as shrines, and were usually placed within the church (given their size in the church, they may have acted as the altar themselves).

Later symbol stones clearly indicate Christian depictions, particularly missionaries or monks, and the Papil Monk's Stone (below) may indicate the 'arrival' of Christianity. This stone is from the 8th or 9th Century.



Charles Thomas (1973) suggests that the spirals seen on this slab may represent the sea, and, with the monks, may indicate the early missionaries travel to Shetland.



ANNIHILATION



It is thought that the Picts and their language were quickly eradicated when the Vikings invaded Shetland.

The aural language was exterminated without much trace, and any written forms, on wood or other perishable materials may have been lost over the years.

Only a few written artefacts have been found; they are mostly formal memorials, such as the inscription on the Bressay stone, and they do not help us establish what the 'everyday' language was like.

Because of this, we know very little about the Pictish language. We also know only a little about the spoken language the Vikings brought with them to Shetland.

Both the Pictish and the Viking languages that were prominent in Shetland are likely to have been communicated aurally, and seldom written down.

The majority of the population were illiterate at this time.



Pictish period burial cairn at Sandwick, Unst. A skeleton was found below the rectangular cairn of quartz pebbles.

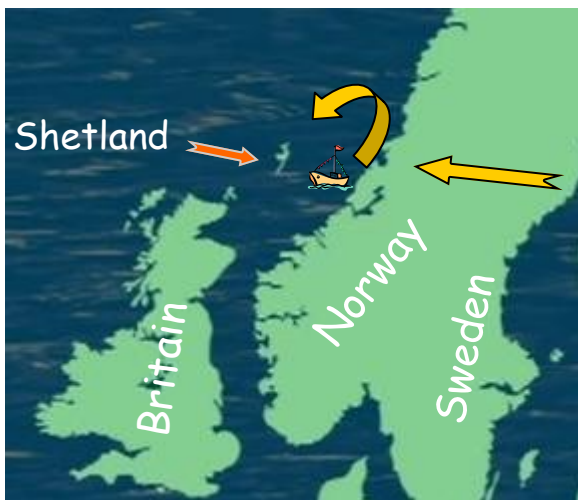
The Picts and their culture were strongly rooted in Shetland for around 500 years before the Vikings invaded the isles from around 800AD onwards.

Viking invasion!

Hjaltland: Old Norse word for Shetland

Vikings travelled to Shetland over a thousand years ago, sometime after 800AD. This was called the 'Viking Age'

The Vikings travelled by sea from areas of Scandinavia—mostly Norway. Once they invaded Shetland, they settled down. They took control of land and made a living as fishermen and crofters.



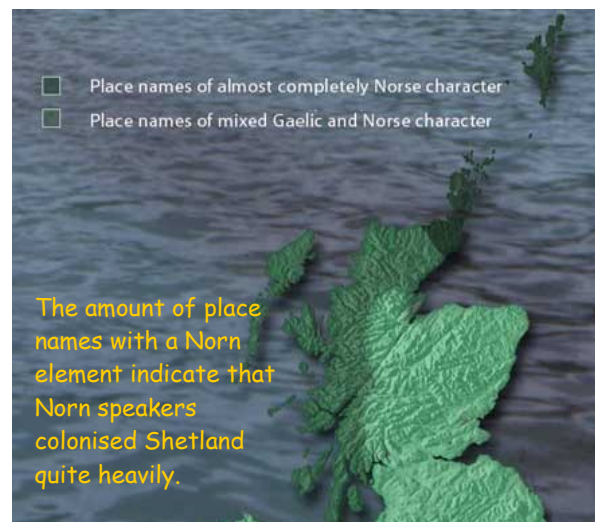
Vikings spoke an Old Norse language originating from their homeland in Scandinavia. This language got broken up into distinct dialects once Vikings settled in different areas. The 'strand' of Old Norse that became prominent in Shetland and Orkney was given the name 'Norn'.

Norn was closely related to the dialect in South-West Norway—the Norn language most likely travelled from this area, and Shetland's geographical connections with this area were greater than with other parts of Norway.

The word Norn derives from the Old Norse adjective Norraenn, meaning 'Norse' or 'Norwegian' and the corresponding noun Norraenna, meaning 'Norwegian/Norse language'.

Norn was spoken in Shetland for centuries until the islands came under Scottish rule.

Norn and our place-names



To identify areas and establish ownership, Vikings named many specific areas of land, including small parts of field and hill—the names assigned by Vikings were often very descriptive.

Place-names in Shetland have retained the influence of the Norn language.

Walls, or 'Waas', comes from a Norn adjective for the way the sea comes into the bay—'Va', or Vaas' (plural).

From Orkney
& Shetland,
1920, (p.134)

Nearly all the place names are of Norse origin.
and rocks are denoted by uý, holm, baa, skerry, drong,
stack ; openings along the coast by vœ, wick, frith,
ham, hoob, min, gio, gloop, helyer ; capes by noss, hevdi,
or neep, bard, mool, ness, taing, hevda, berg, ord ;
rocks or cliffs by clett, hellya, berry, bakka, fell or
inland heights by værl or ward, roni, björg ; valleys
fil, hool, sneug, kame, coll or kool, gil, boiten, koppa, sloag,
by wall or vel, dal, grave or gref, gið, kelda, o, liðag,
quarf, wham ; fresh water by vatn, fors, bister,
crofts and townships by seter, or ster, gairdie,
enclosures by garth, gard, gord, girt, gairdie, Peti
bag, quhey. or burra. Irish

Norn was mostly an aural language. We don't have many written records of Norn— it was perhaps rarely written down, or perhaps written records have perished over time.



The descriptiveness of place names indicate that Norn was perhaps quite a descriptive language. The Shetland dialect today contains many adjectives relating to specific types of weather, nature and actions.

steekit mist—very dense fog
Voar—spring
Knap—Shetlander's attempt
to 'speak proper English'

Runic stone at Eshaness kirkyard



THE RUNIC ALPHABET



tarahill.com



Runic script: a set of related alphabets using letters known as runes to write various Germanic languages.

Germanic languages were used before the Roman alphabet (Latin) came into use (at around 1100AD in Northern Europe).

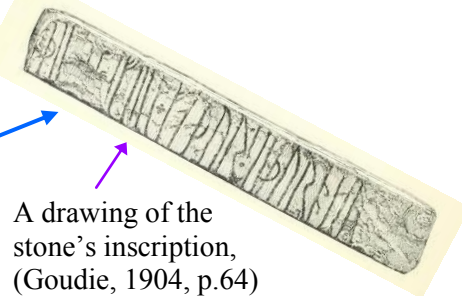
Like Pictish symbols, runes in Shetland were often carved into stone as memorial inscriptions.

The latest known example we've found in Shetland is a graveslab from around 1300AD, from Eshaness.

Latin was probably already present in Shetland by this time (though the majority were illiterate), but it's possible that runes were used for some time after the introduction of Latin.

Altogether we've found only seven surviving runic inscriptions in Shetland—around fifty have been found in Orkney.

The most complete inscription found on a stone in Shetland reads: "In memory of his/her father, Thorbjorn" - a personal memorial.



A drawing of the stone's inscription, (Goudie, 1904, p.64)

Evidence of Viking language

The remnants of language we have found in Orkney and Shetland include:

- ✚ Runic inscriptions
- ✚ Documents written in Latin
- ✚ Fragments of spoken Norn written down before the language died
- ✚ Words preserved in Scaldic verse
- ✚ Place-names
- ✚ Remnants recorded after Norn had already died

Orkney has 52 surviving runic inscriptions — Shetland has only 7. They are difficult to understand, but we do know that they bear some relation to the West Scandinavian language.

Runes

Latin documents found on the isles were likely written by Norwegians, perhaps even written in Norway—they provide no clear insight to the language in Shetland.

Fragments of Norn were written down at a time of linguistic change, by George Low, a man with no prior knowledge of Norn or Scandinavian —they give us restricted insight to a changing language in only one isolated area of Shetland.



Scaldic Verse: A distinct genre of Old Norse poetry. Examples were found in Orkney, but may have originated from Scandinavia.



Jakob Jakobsen gathered Norn words in the 1890's—Norn was not spoken by this time, but Jakobsen managed to retrieve around 10,000 Norn words known or remembered by Shetlanders at the time.



Place-names indicate a real presence of Norn, but give us little information about the structure of the language.

James III and his wife,
Margaret of Denmark



A map of Shetland from 1654, by Willem Janszoon and Joan Blaeu.



Scottish rule

At the end of the 14th Century Norway entered into union with Denmark. Shetland was passed from Norwegian to Danish governance.

Shetland was pawned to Scotland for 8,000 Rhenish guilders (currency in the 'Rhineland' in 14th and 15th centuries).

Less than a century later, in 1469, Shetland was handed over to Scotland, along with Orkney. This was to serve as part of a dowry for the marriage between Princess Margaret of Denmark and King James III.



The Princess and the King on the Marriage Window, Town Hall, Lerwick

Dowry: money or goods a brides family brings to her groom at their marriage

King Christian I of Denmark (and Norway) was not legally permitted to pawn the islands (he was king of the people, but under Udal Law—the Norse legal system—he had no overall ownership of the land). However, he did so anyway, without consenting the 'Norwegian Riksråd' (Council of the Realm).

There was a clause in the pawning document which could allow a Danish ruler to redeem the islands by a monetary deposit. There was also an obligation to retain the language and laws of Norway.

The Danes did attempt to redeem the isles over a number of years, to no avail—Scotland simply ignored their requests.

For 200 years after the pawning, the islands were passed back and forth 14 times between the Scottish Crown and Scottish courtiers as a means of extracting income.

Scottish Influence

Life in Shetland immediately after the annexation of the isles to Scotland changed very little —Scottish laws were introduced in 1611, and from then the transition to the Scottish language, economy and customs was a gradual process.



The main reasons for an increase in Scottish influence were:

- ✓ Scottish rule
- ✓ Governmental/economical connection to Scotland
- ✓ Immigration
- ✓ Emigration
- ✓ Changes in trade

Shetlanders sold their goods through Hanseatic German merchantmen from the 15th century onwards. They exported wool, butter and salted fish, and imported cloth, salt, beer and other goods.

Shetlanders were linguistically adept—they picked up languages they needed for trade, such as German, and could converse with the Dutch fishermen who came ashore.

Trade with the North German towns lasted until 1707, when the Act of Union prohibited German merchants from trading with Shetland.

Lairds took control of exportation and importation. Shetland was restricted to trading with Scotland only, and suffered an economic depression—there was less need to learn other languages, and more need to speak Scots instead of Norn.

Young Shetlanders were leaving the isles to find better economic climates and more opportunities, whilst Scots were moving into the isles.

A decrease in young Shetlanders living on the isles meant the native language had more difficulty surviving.

The Scots who settled influenced the language on the isles, and also brought their customs and religious observances with them.

William Gordon—a missionary who, like many other Scots, settled on the isles.



"...almost all of them speak as much Dutch, Danish, and Norwegian as serves the purpose of buying and selling...some of them speak these languages fluently."



George Low, during his 'voyage to Shetland', in 1774—a time when Shetlanders predominantly spoke Scots.

Lairds grew powerful in Shetland. They took ownership of land—tenants were at risk of being evicted if they did not provide the Laird with fish and meat to trade. The extravagant laird houses are still seen in Shetland today.

Gradual disintegration

For some time Shetlanders were bilingual—they could speak both Norn and Scots, but gradually Norn became less relevant.

Names, particularly forenames, were the first to go—Norse forenames were refused by Scots clergy at baptisms, with but a few exceptions, such as Magnus.



Sem Kløv—used for driving on rovs (the washers clinched onto boat nails)

Other Norn words which were lost quickly referred to utensils or implements no longer part of Shetland life.

Norn wasn't a literary language—when Scots threatened the Norn oral tradition, its complete existence was jeopardised. After its demise, very few relics of the language were found or recovered.

Words remain in a language for longer:

- ✓ where they have a necessary use (in the workplace)
- ✓ where they are used informally (in the home)
- ✓ and where there is no equivalent in another language

The lack of written Norn has also made it difficult for us to map out the development, and disintegration, of the Norn language.

Norn words survived in fishing, farming and the home, as well as specific adjectives which do not have a sufficient Scottish/English equivalent (words for weather, seasons, nature and other descriptive words for people, characters and actions).



Geography, travel and isolation from immigrants, sea-farers and other areas of Shetland determined how the language in a particular area changed.

The demise of Norn: a summary

The Norn language fragmented throughout the 17th century.

By the 18th century the dominant language spoken in Shetland was Scots.

A summary of the main reasons for the gradual demise of the Norn language is below:



Map of Scotland, 1761—both Shetland and Orkney are in an inset at the top right of the map. © scran.ac.uk

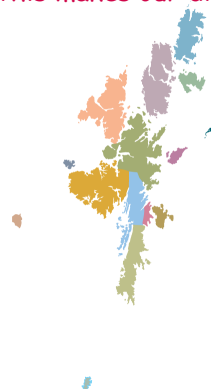


Our language today

Whilst we have now fully adopted the Scottish language, there are still aspects of our dialect which relate to the old Norn language. This makes our dialect unique.

We have retained many words derived from Norn.

Like Norn, the Shetland dialect comes from an aural tradition—how we spell dialect words is debated regularly, and can vary just like pronunciation, depending on the area of Shetland you come from.



Replacing 'th' with 'd' is an example of how the Norn language has some survival in Shetland today.

Am dat blyde noo da Voar is come.



There are differences in dialect throughout different areas of Shetland. The history of the area, travel limitations and isolation of each area can be attributed somewhat to the linguistic differences that exist in Shetland.

The amount of linguistic influences Shetland has experienced makes it difficult to assign origin to some words we use—most we can trace back to Old Scots, Norn, or standard English.

We have retained some influences from lesser known sources, such as the Dutch fishermen who frequented Shetland during the 18th and 19th centuries—our dialect word 'cabbi-labbi' (meaning hubbub, or confused noise) stems from their 'kibbelen' - to wrangle.

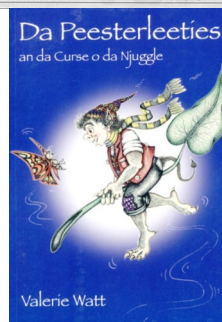
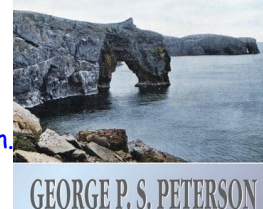


Local cartoonist Smirk often uses dialect in his illustrations.

Norn can be identified in our place names, our pronunciation of Scottish/English words, and in words unique to the Shetland dialect.

Dialect in prose and poetry

Dialect can be found in the local press, local radio and in an increasing number of local non-fiction material, particularly published memoirs.



There are a number of dialect stories written for young children.



Da Sang o Da Papa Men, in 'Da Sings At A'll Sing Ta Dee', 1973, Shetland Folk Society

Oot bewast da Horn o Papa,
Rowin Foulis doon!
Ower a hidden piece o water,
Rowin Foulis doon!
Roond da boat da tide-lumps makkin,
Sunlicht trowe da clouds is brakkin,
We maan geng whaar fish is takkin,
Rowin Foulis doon!
Fishy knots wir boat haes, truly,
Nae misforen knot
We hae towes an bowes an cappelles
Ballast ida shott,
Paets, fir fire ita da kyettie,
Taates fir da pot.
Oot bewast, etc.

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Online resources:

Shetland Forwards: www.shetlanddialect.org.uk

Shetland Museum and Archives: www.shetland-museum.org.uk

Scran: www.scran.ac.uk

All photos from Shetland Museum Photo Library or Scran unless stated otherwise.

Good Reads:

Chandler, Pauline, 2007, *Viking Girl*, (Oxford)

Deary, Terry, 2010, *Viking Tales*, (A&C Black; London)

Fisher, Catherine, 2003, *The Snow-Walker*, (Red Fox, London)

Aald Daa

*Da tap, tap, tap o his staff apu da brig-stanes;
He clears oot o his craig, an gies a kreks;
Sneets his nose atween twa müldy fingers,
Dan comes in trow, an for da pipe he reks.*

*Büts lowsed aff, da sock feet ta da fire;
An wi a bit o pocky faalded in a steek,
He boos him for a light, an draas contentit;
Neebin ower among da bacha reek.*

*Jime's steady haand is scored in monny a wrinkle
Shortened da stride, an draan da sinnan tight.
Bit still da blue een hadd a mirry twinkle,
Laek bright stars idda hidmist day-a-light.*

*Aald Daa, by well-known
Shetland poet Rhoda Bulter,
1929-1994*

brig-stanes = flat stones
before house door

craig = throat

müldy = lightly soiled with
earth or peat

pocky = paper bag

steek = taper

neebin ower = nodding sleepily

sinnan = sinew

hidmist = last