
The Lowlands of Scotland have been exposed to Scandinavian influence over two quite distinct periods. An early Viking contact period in the late 9th and early 10th centuries saw Scandinavians attacking Strathclyde from Dublin as well as setting up alliances with the Scottish seat of power; possibly in an attempt to establish lines of communication between the two Scandinavian strongholds Dublin and York via the Clyde-Forth Valley. The Lowland settlement names with –byr have been associated with this period, as have the earliest so-called hog-back monuments, a distinct, roof-shaped type of gravestone found in Northern England and Scotland. A second period of influence belongs to the 11th and 12th centuries when people from Northumbria and Yorkshire, some fleeing the terror of William of Normandy, found a welcome haven in the Scotland of the MacMalcolm dynasty. This people, who spoke a kind of pidginised Scandinavian English, became very influential in the establishment of the Scottish burghs and thus left a legacy of Scandinavian loan-words in Scots. Or so we were told to believe.

Susanne Kries’ study of the medieval Scandinavian loans into Scots challenges the established view that the Scandinavian words in Scots are the result of an indirect Scandinavian influence from the Anglo-Scandinavians migrating from the north-east of England. Kries argues that if this was the case we would expect to find a common inventory of vocabulary in north-eastern England and in Scotland. However, her study shows that a substantial number of the Scandinavian loans in Middle Scots have no equivalent in Middle English.

One could have wished Kries had investigated more than one explanation for the fact that there are more Scandinavian loan-words in Scots than in northern English. One possibility that could have been scrutinized is that a normalisation process within English might have eliminated many of the northern English loans. Already from William I’s reign there was just such a pressure from the dialect of the south-west - where there was minimal Scandinavian influence - on the more Scandinavianised dialect of the north. However, Kries does not only rely on a difference in the number of words. In many cases where there are equivalent forms, the variations between the English and Scots forms point to a difference of linguistic and cultural influence from Scandinavia. All in all, Kries finds that the differences are too great to support the theory that the move of influential people from the north-west of England helping to set up the burghs of Scotland during the reign of David I gave Scots its Scandinavian component.

Kries convincingly identifies a Scandinavian influence on Scots that is much stronger than previously estimated. She suggests that the reason for this is that Scots had a longer period of exposure to Scandinavian than had English. She estimates that the period of contact or influence could have started as early as the 9th century and that it could have lasted until the beginning of the 13th century. Kries argues for such an early date by claiming that the focal area of the Scandinavian influence was not the south-east but rather the south-west of Scotland. During the 9th and 10th centuries there was a node of direct contact between Scandinavians and Angles in the area around the Solway Firth. Geographically this is an extension of the Scandinavian belt
of strong cultural influence stretching all the way from Cumberland to Lincolnshire, for this is where most and also the oldest Scandinavian loans are found. This reader feels that Kries’ ideas, although interesting, are sometimes based on rather shaky foundations, primarily the very scarce early source material, both for Scots and Northern English. The theory of a south-western path of influence on Scots is the most controversial, and clearly the author should have put more effort into explaining how linguistic borrowings which took place in what would have been a Scottish periphery actually managed to win general acceptance in Scots. Kries does point to the hog-back monuments which might be evidence for a Scandinavian aristocracy in the south-west of Scotland. However, the evidence for such an aristocracy is not very strong, and even if it did exist, it still would not be enough to explain how borrowings that first occurred in the south-west managed to spread to, say, Lothian and Aberdeenshire. The very strength of the hypothesis that Kries is out to debunk is the fact that it made socio-linguistic sense for Scandinavian words to be accepted into Scots because they arrived with merchants and traders that Scots by necessity had to communicate with. This would be similar to the situation in Scandinavia in the late Middle Ages when influential Hanseatic merchants left a very large corpus of Low German loans. It is therefore somewhat surprising that Kries does not touch upon the rather lively recent theoretical and methodological discussion around the Middle Low German loans into Scandinavian.

Since we are considering omissions, a modern work of this sort ought to have made use of the newest Norwegian dictionary Norsk ordbok, for although only half of it is yet in print, the unedited word-base is available on the Web. Kries’ discussions of words sometimes gives the impression that Swedish must have played an important role when it comes to influencing Scots, as several words are listed with Swedish dialect parallels, when a simple check could have established similar Norwegian dialect words. This criticism put aside, it is important to realise that this study is an important piece of work. For the first time the complete inventory of Scandinavian loans in Old and Middle Scots is analysed. About 700 words are thoroughly discussed as they appear in the recently completed Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue. The author points to several interesting features in the corpus of Scandinavian loanwords in Scots, for example the difference to north-east English. She is also able to show that the inventory of Scandinavian loans is larger than that accepted by traditional scholarly consensus, that there is a clear Norwegian or west Scandinavian presence in the Scots material and that the period of influence is likely to have taken place over a much longer period than formerly thought. These are all interesting findings, which greatly advance research in this field, and one can only hope that some of Kries’ suggested explanations are controversial enough to be challenged in future.