



## Place-name typologies

### Just dots on maps?

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*The northern cliffs of Lochnagar, the subject of Sheila Young's article on climbers' route names. Lochnagar is properly the name of the corrie lochan: Loch na Gàire, 'loch of sound or laughter', perhaps from wind noise generated by the topography. Its Gaelic 'mountain' name is Beinn nan Ciochan, 'mountain of the breasts', referring to the Scots-named Meikle Pap and Little Pap, hidden in the fringe of cloud in this photo by Nick Bramhall (29/4/2012). Creative Commons licence: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/legalcode>*



seen in Bill Nicolaisen's distribution maps, which were, not only very illustrative at the time they were made, but also groundbreaking. In his famed *Scottish Place-Names*, the distribution maps show us where the major place-name types are situated and allow us to e.g. explore where the various linguistic influences on Scottish toponymy were present.

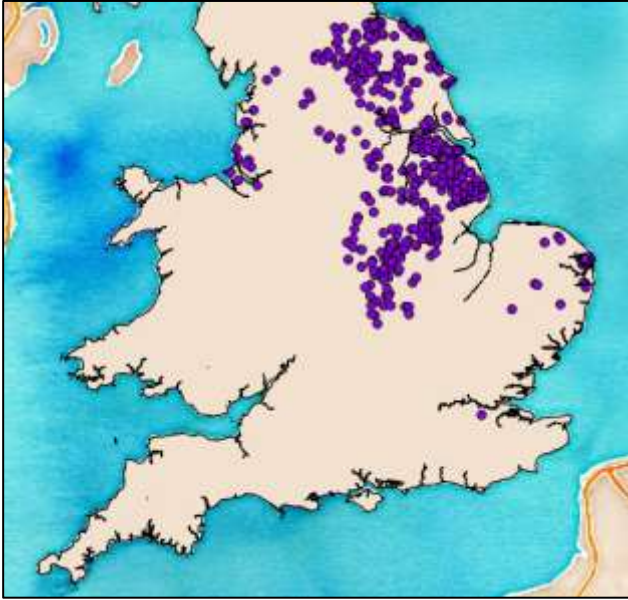


Figure 1: Place-names in -by as found in the Domesday Book

However, there is a different side to distribution maps: Namely, what do they describe and how was the data generated? Bill was very much aware of the “dangers” of distribution maps. Many years ago when I was a student attending his class in Aarhus on the Scandinavian influence on the British Isles, he was very clear that they were as much an interpretation as representing reality. This reservation came as we were looking the distribution of place-names in *-staðir*, *-bólstaðr*, *-setr/-sætr* and *-dalr*, and Bill repeated his own words to us: “If such a sequence of maps is acceptable, place-names have done their job without being pressed for information which they cannot give,” (Nicolaisen 1969, 17) “it would be risky to read any more out of or into these maps.” (Nicolaisen 1976, 96) But instead of refraining from making distribution maps, we should “...therefore keep on drawing and interpreting ever-better place-name maps” (Nicolaisen 1989, 268).

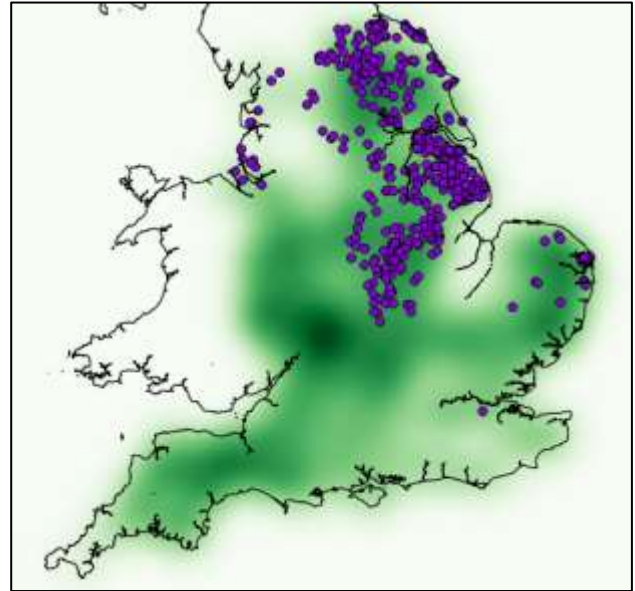


Figure 2. Place-names in -by compared with the settlement density of settlements mentioned in Domesday Book

For years, this was easier said than done, as the production of distribution maps was no easy task and one which often needed to be produced professionally by graphic designers. In recent years, however, the introduction of GIS (Geographic Information System) has moved this mode of illustration into the hands of name researchers – with a piece of GIS software, a file with coordinates and a basic knowledge of styling, and Hey presto!, a new distribution map has been created. Bill Nicolaisen would most probably have been thrilled with the idea of creating distribution maps on the fly, testing the data against different parameters, changing styles, just to get the research questions and research results exactly represented.

Now, as it was earlier, the key question remains – how reliable are they? Bill Nicolaisen himself expressed it in in this way: “Place-Name Maps – How Reliable Are They?” The answer apparently is that they are as reliable as the scholarship that each new generation of researchers brings to them. What may be quite satisfactory for one generation may no longer be sufficient for the next. That is a healthy sign and worth celebrating. We should therefore keep on drawing and interpreting ever-better place-name maps, [...]” (Nicolaisen 1989, 268).

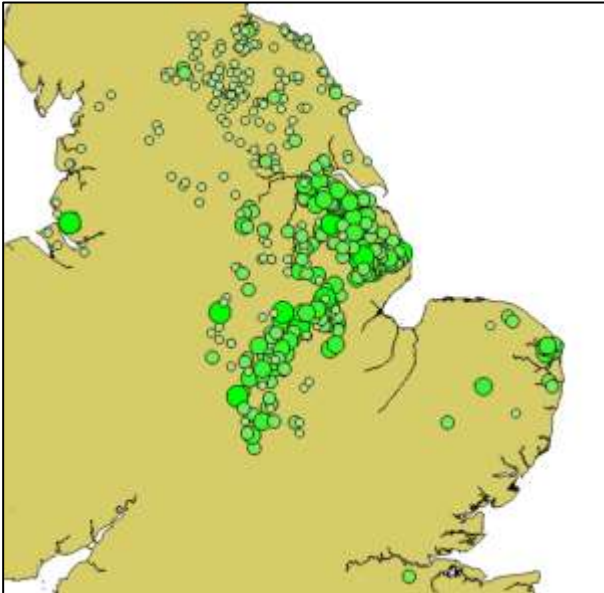


Figure 3. Domesday Book place-names in -by as measured by the number of households in the village.

As with place-name research, it is important to know how substantial and reliable the source data is and how they have been generated. If we look at the data generated by the Open Domesday Project (<http://opendomesday.org/>), we can now quickly make distribution maps of certain place-name types, e.g. place-names derived from Scandinavian *by* ‘village’, see figure 1. But with an additional click or two, we can also use the entire place-name material in the Domesday Book and compare the distribution of place-names in -by with density of settlement in the Domesday Book, figure 2, and see that the name type is generally found in medium to high density areas. At the same time, by making use of the figures for the number of households in each village in for the place-names in -by and see where they are of the largest size within the distribution area. And here it is clear that the largest villages are situated in the southern and eastern parts of the distribution area and that small-size -by-villages are a typical Yorkshire phenomenon. It has truly never been easier to make and interpret “ever better place-name maps”. It is all at hand with GIS.

### Dr Peder Gammeltoft

#### Literature:

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## **BILL NICOLAISEN AND PLACE-NAME EXPLANATORY ELEMENTS IN LEGENDS**

Bill Nicolaisen (1927–2016) was a prominent researcher both as an onomast as well as a folklorist, and throughout his career he published a series of articles combining the two subjects.

Therefore, to pay homage to Bill Nicolaisen, my paper was set in this interdisciplinary field of research, because, as Nicolaisen himself stated in a presidential address given to The Folklore Society in 2001, “the people who give, receive and use names are the same people who tell, listen to and enjoy stories” (*Folklore* 113 (2002), p. 1).

In the folkloristic genre known as *legend* we quite often find place-name explanatory elements, commonly based in the storyteller’s quick associations with living word material. Nicolaisen was much aware of this phenomenon, which, in a Danish framework, is also the main focus of my PhD project. In comparison to Nicolaisen’s theoretical framework and findings on the topic, my paper presented some preliminary results from my PhD project.

Nicolaisen, like others, regarded the phenomenon of place-name explanatory elements in legends a matter of people’s desire to understand the origin of weird sounding names, closely connected to the concept of *etiological* or *explanatory* legends. The assumption is that many legends, including the name-explanatory legends, emerge and are told primarily because people want to explain the origin of animate and inanimate things they do not understand.

Many place-names are, on a lexical level, unintelligible to the name-users, either owing to the names deriving from a different language than that mastered by the name-users, or