Orkney Mythology of Land and Sea

Ragnhild Ljosland, The University of the Highlands and Islands.

Orkney's mythology firmly connects isles and sea. The landscape continues into a seascape. The Orcadian people on land have their counterparts both on the surface and under the water, in sailors and shipwreck survivors, and in 'Fin Folk', seal folk, and mermaids.

We can thank the Sanday man Walter Traill Dennison (1825–1894) for passing on much of this mythology to us and future generations. Born into the landed gentry class, he straddled the worlds of the educated elite and the oral traditions of islanders. He liked to visit crofts and listen to the stories people had to tell. He listened attentively, and sometimes wrote in the dialect of the island community. He was therefore able to capture in writing the oral culture and tales that had been passed down through generations. At times, he made edits and put together details and strands he heard from different people, and his own ideas, into one tale to make it more coherent than it was when he heard it. But then again, living folktales are reborn each time someone tells them, so Dennison is no different to other storytellers in this respect, except in that he committed his materials to the page.

If you want to read Dennison's work, it is most accessible in Tom Muir's 1995 edition *Orkney Folklore & Sea Legends*[1]. I will now tell some of his tales in my own way, which fascinate me and show the magic in Sanday's relationship with the sea.

The isles were first born as a sea monster, the Stoor Worm or great serpent, thousands of miles long and with a tongue that could sweep whole towns, trees, and hills into the sea. His realm was the deep ocean, but he devoured people on land, especially young lasses. The Stoor Worm personifies the danger of the ocean: it can swallow you and take bites out of the land. But at the same time, the serpent is the land, it is the isles. Then an unlikely hero stepped up to the danger: Assipattle, the younger brother who spent his days by the hearth. He let himself be swallowed, and set fire to the serpent's liver with a burning peat from the hearth. Assipattle's victory is the battle of elements, fire against water. It is the home and civilisation's victory over nature's dangers. As the serpent's liver caught fire, the smoke made the Stoor Worm sneeze Assipattle out, and in its death throes the serpent knocked its teeth out—which became the islands. Its great body lies further north, where its liver still smoulders deep down in the volcanoes of Iceland.

The weather and seasons are personified as the Mother of the Sea and Teran. The Mother of the Sea gave vitality to every creature living under the waves. She had her summer residence in the ocean. But her rival Teran, with his furious anger, whipped up storms and gales. Every spring the two would battle: in The Vore Tullye, the clash of the March gales, she would bind Teran and confine him to the bottom of the sea for the blessed summer season. But around the autumn equinox, battle would resume: in The Gore Vellye, Teran would break his bonds, and this time the Mother of the Sea would be overcome and flee the ocean, leaving Teran to reign for the winter.

The fields and cattle pastures of Orkney are mirrored on a grander scale in the realms of the Fin Folk. These sea fairies inhabit their own magical islands, invisible to the human eye except in extreme conditions. To the fogbound or storm-tossed sailor or fisherman, on the brink of certain death, the island of Hildaland would reveal

itself as a peaceful land of plenty, abundant with green grazing, fat cattle, and glittering freshwater streams. Hildaland, at once, is and isn't one of the Orkney Islands. It comes and goes and its position is not fixed. One mysterious character who once turned up at the market in Kirkwall said he came from an island "east of Stronsay, east of Sanday", where there is no island.

In another tale, a farmer and his sons manage to fix a come-and-go island in place after the wife and mother of the family has been captured and taken there by the Fin Folk. The farmer, 'the Guidman o Thorodale', crawls around an ancient standing stone called the Odin Stone and looks through its hole to be able to see the magical island. Once he has spotted it, he keeps it in sight while instructing his sons to join him in rowing out to it with a load of salt. Drawing rings of salt around the island fixes it in place, enabling the family to fetch their wife and mother home. The island has since been permanent, named Eynhallow—the holy island—but since the ninth circle of salt was a little bit short of being completed, it occasionally vanishes even to this day.

Vanishing islands and sea serpents taking bites out of the land are poignant images of the sad reality of coastal erosion that threatens Sanday. Dennison observed and commented on this in the notes accompanying his mythological tales. He describes former fields which have become bays and headlands turning into islets, giving measurements of how much land had been lost in the living memory of the islanders. Further back in time, Otterswick, he wrote, was once a bonnie forest. Such shifting will gain even more pace with climate change and sea level rise.

The rich environment of sea life under the surface is reflected in the dazzling underwater realms described in the mythology. There, under the waves, are the homes of seal folk, mermaids and mermen. And, of course, the Fin Folk have a home there, too. In 'Finfolkaheem' the sand is gold dust. The palaces of the Fin Folk are built of coral and adorned with pearls and precious stones that shine like stars. Richly coloured seaweed grows in the gardens. Flocks of tamed whales and sea cows graze the sea meadows, and are milked by the mermaids. Fin men hunt on sea horses while otters and seals serve as dogs. The tables are laden with a great feast of the riches of the ocean: roasted and boiled whale meat, some of it stewed in whale blubber. Roasted and boiled seal and otter. Fish of all kinds, and whale and seal soup thick with cod roe. Seaweed boiled in oil or stewed in seal fat, but no bread, as that is the food of dry land. The underwater realm is a land of plenty, but also an otherworld, from which few humans return. Arthur Deerness might have spent the rest of his days there, with a mermaid bride, Auga, had old aunt Marion not worked her magic and brought him back to his bride-to-be on Sanday.

Shipwrecks could be both a disaster and a bounty, and anyone able to wield some control over the elements held a great power. Dennison says that once, even the minister prayed from the pulpit that if it were the will of the Lord to wreck a ship, then please may it come ashore on Sanday! Some islanders had the reputation of being 'storm witches', with the ability to predict or even control the weather. When, in 2024, the shifting sands revealed a substantial timber shipwreck, Ben Saunders of Wessex Archaeology, working with Sanday community volunteer researchers, managed to identify the wreck as the whaler, *The Earl of Chatham*. Storyteller Tom Muir, whose family also hails from Sanday, felt the name rang a bell. He realised he had read the name of the ship in Dennison's work. Dennison wrote of a 'storm witch' nicknamed Ship Maggie for her supposed power to bring ships ashore. She carried a staff much

longer than herself and always wore one white and one black shoe. When the *Earl of Chatham* was wrecked on Ayrabae, writes Dennison, the ship's mate in the middle of the drama had spotted Ship Maggie on the foretop just before the vessel struck. Surviving the wrecking, next morning the mate spotted her again, this time walking along the shore, and he recognised her from her white 'rivlin' leather shoe. He then called out for his gun to shoot at her. This was remembered in Sanday since 1788! Dennison claimed to have a small piece of Maggie's long staff.

Sanday's mythology, as captured by Dennison, speaks eloquently to themes that still have a striking resonance and are perhaps even more topical today. Orcadians live in a close relationship with the sea, in which the sea simultaneously sustains and endangers human lives and communities. Folk memory teaches us that storms can bring both disaster and unexpected bounty. Tales of 'storm witches' share the insight that humans have tried to wield some control over the tempestuous ocean but that such control is beyond the ordinary person and islanders are left to the mercy of nature's forces. The duality of the sea is also reflected in the understanding of the sea as home to a parallel world, with its own people, animals and pastures, a splendid world complete with aristocratic halls. It is not quite a mirror of the human world; it is an otherworld, just out of reach, eerily familiar and at the same time strange. Understood as animated, the sea has power and agency. Like a sea serpent, it can devour and reshape land beneath Orcadians' feet. Fields, links, and even whole islands can disappear, so the boundary between land and sea is never quite fixed. The relationship between land and sea, humans and nature, is unstable, shifting, fragile, dual and interdependent. The stories that Dennison has passed on to new generations resonate in the day and age of changing ocean currents and weather patterns, increasing storm surges and sea level rises, acute coastal erosion, and shifts in the ocean's ecosystems.

References

1. Dennison, WT. Orkney Folklore & Sea Legends. (Orkney Press, Kirkwall, 1995).