

How Scandinavian was the Early Viking Age in the Northern Isles?

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Introduction

The Northern Isles of Scotland (Orkney and Shetland) are celebrated not only as the nearest parts of the British Isles to Scandinavia, but also as the most Scandinavian in culture and heritage. The two neighbouring North Atlantic archipelagos (**Fig. 1**) were the last substantive territorial additions to Scotland when, as the surviving insular parts of the Norse Earldom of Orkney, they were impignorated from the Danish to the Scottish crowns in 1468-1472. Their Medieval and post-Medieval vernacular was Norn, a derivative of the Old Norse group of languages, and their landscapes abound with place-names of Scandinavian origin. Traditions of local assembly, law and landholding in the former earldom are intimately connected to the Scandinavian and North Atlantic worlds. Events such as the annual mid-winter festival of *Up Helly Aa* in Shetland uphold and dramatize Scandinavian cultural links (even if in its current guise it is a Victorian re-working of an older and less consciously historicized tradition of tar-barrelling and mischief). Archaeologically, the importance of the islands' Scandinavian connections is demonstrated most visibly to the public by the large and well-visited guardianship sites at Jarlshof (Shetland) and the Brough of Birsay (Orkney), and in their museums, where a host of displayed objects project the Scandinavian Viking inheritance as the key shaping influence on their early history. *Orkneyinga Saga* is celebrated as the written account which above all gives colour, vibrancy, personality and narrative to the Northern Isles' Viking and Medieval history.

There can be no doubt that Orkney and Shetland were integral (if distinctive) parts of the Scandinavian North Atlantic world for several centuries in the High Middle Ages, and that this period has left a pervasive and lasting cultural influence. But can their enduringly proud and visible Scandinavian inheritance be equated with being some of the earliest and most influential *Viking* settlements in the British Isles? Such a view is embedded in academic literature, almost to a point beyond question. The predominance of Scandinavian cultural forms as they emerge into written history in the Medieval and post-Medieval periods has been near-universally read back to the Viking Age as evidence of an early and dominant Scandinavian settlement. The cultural mix evident in the archaeology of early Viking-Age Orkney and Shetland is, however, a much more muted and complex witness than it might initially appear.

'First base?'

It is often said that Lerwick in Shetland is closer to Bergen than to Edinburgh or London. This is usually done to make something of a political point about distance, allegiance and control, but it mirrors a common stance taken by historical and archaeological writing: that proximity of place

implies primacy of contact. It is true that Orkney bestrides or at least overlooks the seaways connecting the North Sea to the north and west coasts of Scotland, leading south to Ireland and westwards to Iceland and beyond. Its position as a 'cultural crossroads' in the Viking world seems unassailable. The natural assumption is consequently that the Northern Isles were the first Scandinavian territorial possessions across the western seas to be taken from their inhabitants (probably violently), acting thereafter as staging posts for attacks on Scotland and Ireland, and as lynchpins of the 'sea road' which led Norwegians to colonize Ireland and the North Atlantic. There are grounds, however, for some scepticism about the neatness of this scenario. Were the scattered and sparsely-populated islands of the far North really such an important and strategic target for early Viking activity?

The raids on Northumbrian monasteries at Lindisfarne in 793, and 'Donemuthan' (probably Jarrow) in 794, need not necessarily be linked to a northern expansion pattern, as they could just as well have resulted from landfalls on sea-routes heading south from Western Scandinavia. Recent work by Clare Downham (2017) and Alban Gautier (2016) among others has stressed the extent to which historical evidence for the later 8th and early 9th centuries points towards Francia and Southern England as the principal locations of early raiding. In these adjoining territories were to be found riches and opportunities which far exceeded those of the far North. Their towns, markets, greater populations, large monasteries, mints and productive estates looked decidedly vulnerable as the Frankish Empire began to show signs of strain and over-extension. With the death of Charlemagne in 814, the possibilities for enrichment by adventurous raiding groups grew. Southern England was affected by similar disunity as Mercia's power declined at the expense of Wessex following the death of Offa (who had in his final years authorized coastal defences against pagans), leaving in particular Kent, East Anglia and the Thames Valley as contested and semi-open territories in the early 9th century. Other recent researchers (Raffield 2016; McLeod 2014) have stressed the ethnically-mixed but cohesive group mentalities of Viking war-bands, with piracy and thalassocracy (Price 2014) being invoked as a means of understanding their extralegal and supranational worldview. The national or ethnic definition of Vikings as exporters of a colonial Scandinavian culture, as upheld by decades of scholarship following Worsaae, Shetelig, Brøgger et alia, is correspondingly now coming into greater question. I have argued in a forthcoming paper (Griffiths 2019) that a 'southern route' was established, which drew Viking attacks and trading activity from the English Channel around to the Irish Sea. Viking Settlement in Ireland, instead of succeeding settlement in the Northern and Western Isles, may therefore have preceded it.

Raids in the North?

The conquest of inhabited territories in the early Viking Age was near-universally preceded by raiding, subsequent to which first an overwintering presence and later a permanent settlement ensued. The pattern of early seaborne Viking raids which famously asserted itself in the 790s is visible in England, Ireland and Francia. In Scotland, only Iona stands out historically as the victim of an 8th-century raid, but given its close relationship to Ireland (indeed the report is carried in the *Annals of Innisfallen* for 795, the same year that Ireland itself was first raided), Iona may well play more to the Irish context than to the Scottish one. A persuasive case based on excavated evidence has been argued for an undocumented Viking raid on the Pictish monastery at Portmahomack, Easter Ross, on the edge of the Moray Firth (Carver 2008, 80; Carver et al. 2016, 256-260). A destructive fire occurred around the end of the 8th or beginning of the 9th century, from which the economy of the monastic community did not quickly recover; pieces of broken or even possibly defaced crosses were found, and evidence of blade wounds was detected in osteological analysis of a small number of the inhumations, suggesting that some of the monks or lay members had been killed in combat. Carver put these together, not unreasonably, as evidence for a devastating pagan raid, but it is possible to criticize his argument. Places where crafts and manufacturing were happening were subject to endemic fires; stone carving involves much breakage, and the conscious deposition of its debitage is not in itself necessarily an act of sacrilege; and there was enough violence around in the period, even among local populations, to offer an alternative explanation for a modest number of weapon wounds detected among numerous inhumations.

Given the lack of historical sources covering the Northern Isles at the time of the early attacks, it is perhaps to be accepted that we cannot know whether there were raids in the 790s or early 800s in Orkney or Shetland. The general Western European pattern would suggest that they should have occurred as a prelude to invasion and settlement, but despite much speculation over the decades, no convincing evidence has yet been found. It might be expected that churches and monasteries would have been attacked first, but in the Northern Isles no case of destruction has yet emerged. Perhaps the most famous archaeological discovery that has been argued to be reflective of a Viking threat is the hoard of Pictish silverware deposited under the floor of the chapel on St Ninian's Isle, Shetland. Discovered during excavations in 1958, the hoard dates to around 800, and its deposition has most often been held to be evidence of priests hiding their wealth, perhaps in haste and terror, as the longships approached. Such an image induced fascination in the younger mind of this author, but the recent summative publication of the chapel excavations (Barrowman 2011) prompts more mature reflection. The hoard was buried in the centre of the chapel floor, not at all inconspicuously, with its position indicated by a cross-marked slab; this can hardly be seen as an act of concealment designed to confuse or deceive attackers. It is more likely that its deposition belongs in the deeper and less-easily understood realm of religious practice and Early Medieval spirituality.

The nature of early settlement and burial in the Northern Isles

The orthodoxy that Orkney and Shetland were the first (and ‘purest’) Scandinavian territorial possessions in the British Isles has given rise to a longstanding expectation that early conquest-period settlements must be found, and archaeological researchers have long sought to demonstrate the presence of undiluted, incoming Scandinavian material cultures in the Northern Isles. It might also be expected, in a scenario of early conquest and overwhelming Norse settlement, that the pattern of insular loot recognized in western Norway (e.g. Wamers 1995) would be replicated in the Northern Isles, but with the exception of a few insular artefacts such as the ‘Westness Brooch’ from Orkney (Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998, 137), this is not the case. The reality of what most excavations have produced is much less clear-cut, but far more interesting than the Scandinavian ‘colonial’ model might imply.

Further into the North Atlantic, traces of settlement and environmental modification in Iceland and the Faroe Islands have been dated to the later 9th century onwards. Icelandic data, relying on tephrochronology, appears to uphold the traditional *landnam* date of Viking arrival around 871-872 (Edwards et al. 2016), whereas in the Faroe Islands a roughly contemporary settlement phase at the multi-period site of Á Sondum, Sandur, succeeds by some margin earlier hints of a human landscape presence, which has been interpreted to suggest the Faroes had been occupied prior to the Viking Age (Church et al. 2013). In Orkney and Shetland there is no such doubt about the presence of pre-Viking inhabitants, so the mere presence of human activity is no guide to the chronology or cultural imprint of the Viking presence. Excavations on complex sites with preceding Iron Age phases at Pool, Sanday, Orkney and Old Scatness, Shetland, have produced radiocarbon dates which have allowed a case to be made for some Viking occupation before the end of the 9th century. The Pool evidence from Phase 7.1, largely based on pre-AMS dates determined some decades ago now (Hunter 2007, 529-532), may now be subject to revision. Old Scatness has provided a clear, recent example of a multi-period site where modifications to existing architecture and material culture, associated by their excavators with an early Viking presence, were initially imposed within the functioning structure of pre-Viking wheelhouses, Structures 6 and 11. Internal space was reordered, hearths were modified, ironworking activity was detected and flagged floors introduced, leading their excavators to state that ‘The Viking settlement at Old Scatness was well-established by the beginning of the 10th century AD and probably by the late 9th century’ (Bond & Dockrill 2016, 11).

Elsewhere in Shetland, excavations of part of a multi-period settlement site at Norwick, Unst, have produced five radiocarbon determinations which, along with a distinctive assemblage of Norwegian steatite objects, suggest a relatively early phase of Viking occupation, possibly well within the 9th century, although there are some caveats about this possibility expressed in the interim publication (Ballin Smith 2013, 229); the final version (with more in-depth chronological analysis) is as yet awaited. The provisional date range goes back to the 7th century, suggesting that at least part of the

site is pre-Viking. Norwick was identified as a Viking settlement on artefactual grounds, although there was also evidence of flagged floors and drains. The building remains were fragmentary but appear to lack some of the attributes of 'classic' longhouse settlements elsewhere in Unst, such as Underhoull, Hamar and Belmont, which are dated to a considerably later phase of the Viking Age (Bond & Dockrill 2016, 8).

An argument for a tentative and ethnically mixed early Viking Age, with fleeting hints of incoming cultures remaining closely aligned to pre-Viking settlement forms, preceding a more established 'longhouse' phase, may be transposed to Orkney. The site of Buckquoy on Birsay Bay, excavated by Anna Ritchie in 1970-1971 (Ritchie 1977), has long been cited by those arguing for a 'peaceful' assimilation model for Viking settlement. An evidently important and literate Pictish settlement of cellular-style buildings within a mound site saw some modification, notably the introduction of side benches and a long central hearth in the central building House 4. More rectilinear-style buildings succeeded these, but these remained small and ambiguous in cultural attribution. The five settlement phases described by Ritchie were succeeded in Phase VI and, she argued, closed, by the imposition of a furnished grave of pagan Viking type, with a ringed pin, an iron knife, a bone mount and a whetstone, but which cannot be dated earlier than the mid- to late 10th century due to the inclusion of a coin of Edmund of Wessex (940-946). It is in fact unclear as to whether the grave came at, or after, the latest phase of domestic occupation, so the mound could have been ruinous and deserted by the time the burial occurred. There was almost no diagnostically Scandinavian material culture at the site: stone gaming boards suggestive of the Viking game *hnefatafl* could feasibly have been insular as much as Scandinavian in derivation; a spindle whorl bore an inscription in (Irish) ogham, not runes; and no steatite was found (ibid., 187). Settlements of a more convincing Scandinavian/North Atlantic character, comprising substantial longhouses with central hearths and side doorways, are found nearby, most notably 500m away on the Brough of Birsay; in all probability these post-date Buckquoy Phase VI.

The Buckquoy grave seems remarkably late in date considering the traditional expectation that Scandinavians were dominant in the Northern Isles from the earliest point of the Viking Age. Other pagan Norse graves in Orkney conform to this apparent 'late' pattern. A short distance south of Birsay, a furnished grave with a comb and iron weapons was deposited in a mound on the southern side of the Bay of Skaill, near the location of the Neolithic site of Skara Brae; it was discovered in 1888. James Graham-Campbell, in a recent reassessment (Graham-Campbell 2019), favours a 10th-century date. The triple inhumation in a part-disturbed boat burial at Scar, Sanday (Owen & Dalland 1999), which contains numerous Scandinavian items, produced three radiocarbon dates from human bone, the latest of which was Cal AD 980-1260, and their mean 1060±40 BP, so it is difficult on these indicators alone to push the overall date any earlier than the 10th century. Most of the Scandinavian-style objects, which included a Petersen Type H sword, whalebone plaque, weights and an equal-

armed brooch, could have been heirlooms that were quite old when deposited. Scar seems to have been sited in isolation from earlier burials, whereas the eight furnished graves (including two boat burials) at Westness, Rousay, were located amidst a much larger pre-Viking cemetery (32 graves in total were excavated). For Shetland, Graham-Campbell listed in a recent survey a much smaller total of ten pagan Viking graves (Graham Campbell 2016), remarkably few considering the evidence for early settlement in Shetland briefly alluded to above. Their date range is described as ‘from the mid 9th to the mid 10th century’ (ibid., 36), but given the problems of relative dating using artefact types with potentially long periods of use, such as oval brooches, the emphasis should arguably be towards the latter half of this range, thus agreeing with the broad date range of their Orcadian equivalents. Isotope data taken from three inhumations in the Viking phase of the Westness cemetery suggested probable Norwegian origins for two of them (both male), but a third (a female) was found to have originated elsewhere, with North-Eastern Ireland among the analysts’ suggestions (Montgomery et al. 2014). It must be noted, however, that wherever these individuals had grown up, they need not have arrived in Orkney *directly* from these locations, and in an age of fast-moving and self-transforming Viking communities, they could easily have spent a significant part of their adult lives in intermediate places.

Unlike areas in the Irish Sea and the Baltic, which were busy crossroads of commercial exchange, the Northern Isles are not overly well-endowed with Viking-Age silver hoards or finds of coinage, and such as there are, like the graves, are relatively late in date, with only a few finds preceding the late 10th century. The earliest coins that could have been Viking imports to Orkney are single finds of Anglo-Saxon issues of the mid-ninth century, but which may have been in circulation for some time: a silver penny of Burgred of Mercia (866-868), found in excavations of the settlement mound known as Saevar Howe at the southern end of Birsay Bay (Hedges 1977, 93), and a slightly earlier coin of Eanred of Northumbria, found recently in the entrance to a Neolithic passage tomb at Swandro, Rousay (www.swandro.co.uk). No typically ‘Viking’ hoard, characterized by mixed ornamental hacksilver and numismatic contents of European and Islamic coins, occurs in Orkney or Shetland before the deposition of the Skaill Hoard around 970 (Graham-Campbell 1995).

This hoard was found in a rabbit burrow by a boy with a kelping hook in March 1858, on the north side of the Bay of Skaill, Orkney, at a location now known to have developed as an important settlement from the late 10th century (Griffiths 2013). It seems legitimate to speculate on the coincidences in date and location between the Skaill Hoard, the grave to its south on the Bay of Skaill found in 1888, and the Buckquoy grave. All three were deposited in meaningful locations, the graves on prominent but abandoned settlement sites, and the hoard in an area that was shortly to become a centre of settlement and power. Examples of furnished Viking burials forming a final or post-occupation deposit on long-lived sites of pre-Viking occupation are seen elsewhere in Orkney at the Broch of Gurness (Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998, 127-129). The 1888 Bay of Skaill grave was

inserted into a mound that shows evidence of Prehistoric occupation, as well as containing a Pictish cist-burial that was exposed by erosion and excavated in 1996. The Buckquoy grave was situated atop a settlement of mixed and intermediate character, in its later phases probably to be seen as a *Viking* settlement, but not a very *Scandinavian* one. The Skaill Hoard, arguably, is staking a claim on a new location in the landscape, as a founding statement perhaps, in an area that had not hitherto been of settlement importance but would see rapid development as such after that point. It can be postulated that there could have been an earlier Viking presence on an Iron Age broch site at Verron, 500m away along the north side of the bay, abandoned in favour of the area around the hoard location in around 950-970. (Only very minor excavation at the eroding edge of this site has occurred.) This broad point in time coincides with the deposition of a number of the pagan graves in mounds that had been previously occupied but had either already been abandoned or were so at this point. The imposition of an 'ancestral' stamp, in the form of a near-obsolete burial rite, at a point of transition between settlements and religions is fascinating. It suggests that there was a significant new impetus in power and authority emerging at this time.

It seems to this author that the evidence is telling us that the developed and dominant Scandinavian Viking Age in Orkney and Shetland, characterized by longhouses and developed landholdings, only began after the mid-10th century. All attempts to force it into an earlier chronology have yet proved largely fruitless, as the archaeological evidence will not play ball. However, this is not to say that the first Vikings only arrived at this late point. Clearly something was changing during the 9th century, and new traits are discernible in the architecture, material culture and environment of the Northern Isles, as seen in particular at Old Scatness and Buckquoy. This was evidently occurring in a more muted manner than traditional conquest scenarios would imply, perhaps indicating more consensual, or even partly submissive, relationships with existing inhabitants than has previously been appreciated.

Cultural connections at Viking-Age settlements

Recent surveys and excavations at the Bay of Skaill, Marwick and Birsay Bay in Orkney (Griffiths 2016; Griffiths et al. 2019) have brought questions of chronology and cultural affiliation in the early Viking Age into renewed consideration. In all three locations, settlements expressed topographically as mound sites have been investigated, and their relationships to sites of earlier occupation, and to churches and landholdings, explored. On the northern side of the Bay of Skaill, a series of large sandy settlement mounds has been surveyed and part-excavated, indicating that a cluster of longhouses was established from the mid-10th century, with the earliest and largest of these coincident with the probable location of the Skaill Hoard. This example, located within a mound, known as the '[Castle of] Snusgar' (a name attested since the 18th century but which may have Medieval origins) was found to be in a truncated and disturbed condition due to later activity. A rich haul of artefacts was obtained from its remaining occupation layers, including bone pins, combs and

whetstones, along with extensive archaeobotanical and archaeozoological data. 100m east of it lies another large settlement mound, termed 'East Mound' for the purpose of distinguishing it from Snusgar. Under deep windblown sand, a well-preserved stone-walled longhouse, 26.3m by 5m, was exposed in excavation seasons between 2005 and 2010. It had initially been constructed in the later 10th century as a hall, 10m by 5m, with a separate, smaller outbuilding and ferrous metalworking hearths; in later phases these structures became linked by walls, passageways and a stone staircase into a unified complex. In the early 11th century a byre and domestic annexe were added, but the central hall remained in use at the heart of the complex, with its stone sidebenches (which survived intact) easily able to seat 20-30 people. All indications (including the name of the bay) suggest this was a *skáli*, an important farmstead, perhaps the head farm in its district, which was a centre of local tribute and decision-making. No burials were found at the Bay of Skail longhouse sites, presumably because in the post-conversion period they were almost certainly conducted at the neighbouring church site of St Peter, Sandwick, as implied by a stray find of a Borre-decorated bone strap-end from the churchyard.

The material culture of the settlements at the Bay of Skail is broadly comparable to assemblages from other Viking-Age settlements in Atlantic Scotland, such as the Brough of Birsay, Pool and Skail (Deerness) (Orkney); Jarlshof (Shetland); and Bornais and Cille Pheadair (South Uist, Western Isles). The majority of objects are made from materials that can be sourced within the Earldom of Orkney, including bone, iron and Shetland steatite. Many of them are finely-made and decorated. Small bone pins and needles, whalebone objects and antler combs fall into type-groups associated with the North Atlantic settlements in the 10th to 12th centuries. The combs are exclusively of iron-riveted types rather than copper-riveted ones, strengthening their attribution to the earlier phases of the Viking comb tradition (Ashby 2014).

The building forms are similar to those observed elsewhere in the northern world, but the material culture of the Skail settlements is far from defined by Scandinavian traits. Objects such as an amber bead, a blue glass biconical bead, a small number of Norwegian steatite sherds, and some of the whetstones have Scandinavian parallels (e.g. from Borg and Hedeby), yet in this respect the Scandinavian-style objects seem to be in something of a numerical minority. Another classic 'Viking' object, a chipped but otherwise intact glass linen-smoother, is in actuality probably of Frankish provenance. Perhaps most striking is a group of objects that point towards the Irish Sea region as a source of cultural influence and contact. A decorated crutch-headed copper-alloy ringed pin is almost certainly a Dublin product, as the city accounts for by far the largest number of ringed pins found, coupled with the only archaeologically demonstrable evidence for their manufacture. There is a strong Irish and correspondingly weak Scandinavian flavour to the types represented in the comb

assemblage. Pottery was scarce at these sites, but petrological analysis of a group of coarse greyware pottery sherds suggests they also have a possible Irish Sea provenance in Ulster, whereas a small number of glazed whiteware sherds from the latest phase of occupation in the 12th to 13th centuries are of Norman French origin.

From close to these excavations, the most spectacular signifier of Irish Sea, and more particularly Manx, links is the Skaill Hoard itself (**Fig. 2**). Decorative and morphological elements of some of the more elaborate silver brooches resemble most strongly the brooches in the 10th century Ballaquayle Hoard from the Isle of Man (Graham-Campbell 1995). Although the hoard included 19 dirhams, which are relatively rare in the Irish Sea hoards, its ornaments and hacksilver suggest it may well have been assembled in Ireland, Man or North-West England, and then brought to Orkney. By contrast, the dominance of Norwegian object types, especially among the combs and steatite, as observed in a somewhat later settlement in Orkney such as Quoysgrew, Westray (Barrett 2012), or indeed some of the Unst longhouses in Shetland, is less evident. There were some Scandinavian items in the assemblage, but these were few in number. Rather, it seems that the most noticeable external influences on the Snusgar and East Mound settlements were coming more from the South and West, than from the North and East. Irish Sea links also appear evident on other earlier Viking-Age sites in the Northern Isles, such as the Brough of Deerness, Orkney (Barrett & Slater 2009), where some of the building traits may resemble Dublin types. Other site assemblages from Orkney and Shetland might now be reviewed in the light of the above comments. What role did Scandinavian-sourced objects and materials play in the assemblage? How dominant were they at different points in the period in relation to local and insular materials? And what was the proportion of artistic, commemorative and artisanal functions amongst them?

Orkneyinga Saga and other sources

Orkneyinga Saga was composed in Iceland around, or just after, 1200. It tells us that Orkney and Shetland were conquered by King Harald Finehair of Norway in the 870s, prior to which they had been used as a base for ‘pirates’ (whose ethnicity is not specified), who had raided in Norway. Harald, who would no longer tolerate these attacks, raided west, as far as the Irish Sea, attacking the Isle of Man; on his return, he gifted Orkney and Shetland to his follower Earl Rognvald of Møre, from which Norwegian royal ordinance the authority of the earldom stemmed. Thereafter a series of great earls, none greater than Sigurd II (‘The Stout’) and Thorfinn I (‘The Mighty’), covering the period 991-1064, made the earldom a significant power in Northern Britain.

The colourful drama of *Orkneyinga Saga* gives a peerless rendition of the Norse heritage of Orkney. Amid universal acclaim of their literary value, it is well-known that scholars have long criticized the

uncritical use of the Icelandic sagas as historical sources. Many would concede only a heavily qualified acceptance. It must be considered why, and in what political context, the saga was compiled and revised. Iceland in the great age of saga-writing was dominated by political divisions over the rising assertiveness of Norway, which eventually formally subjugated the island's commonwealth in 1262-1264. Snorri Sturluson, author of *Heimskringla*, was famously among the advocates of union with Norway. *Orkneyinga Saga* and related sources such as the *Historia Norwegiae* (the surviving manuscript of which also contains a genealogy of the earls of Orkney) must therefore be seen as politically-loaded narratives, weaving heroic literary fiction with historical fact and incidental detail. They arguably helped to build a retrospective manifesto for Norwegian control of the North Atlantic, aspirations for which were taking shape in their fullest measure around and after 1200.

Claims made for the origins of the earldom in *Orkneyinga Saga* and *Historia Norwegiae* must be treated with due scepticism (Barrett 2008, 418-422). The reigns of Sigurd II and Thorfinn the Mighty provide an upward step-change in detail and historical reportage in the saga, coinciding with the time when Christianization was complete, and consolidated settlement appears in the archaeological record. Prior to this period, the saga's account of the activities of the earls is much sketchier and more anecdotal. It is perhaps notable that none of the early earls were buried in Orkney or Shetland; Sigurd I, the saga relates, was buried on the banks of the River Oykel in Sutherland, having died from an infection caused by an injury from the tooth of his recently-killed Scottish adversary, Maelbrigte. Sigurd's stronghold was on the Moray Firth, implying that the connection between the earl and the islands themselves was less than direct or exclusive at this early point. Throughout the early chapters of *Orkneyinga Saga* there is a recurrent series of references to Ireland and the Irish Sea, beginning with the story of Harald Finehair's expedition to the Isle of Man. Whether the latter is truly historical, or a convenient fabrication, is a moot point, but it appears to serve a purpose in legitimizing Norwegian rule by subsuming existing connections. Sigurd II died carrying the Raven banner at the Battle of Clontarf near Dublin in 1014. The 'Irish' theme in *Orkneyinga Saga* is interesting in the light of the material culture of 10th- and 11th-century settlements in Orkney as described above. Instead of seeing early Viking-Age Orkney and Shetland as a base for activity by Scandinavian Vikings for the west coast of Scotland and into the Irish Sea, it is possible to argue that the Northern Isles were *recipients* of Hiberno-Norse or Irish-Sea Viking influence and migration in the early Viking Age, and that this largely flowed south to north instead of in the traditional north to south direction. The great earls of the later 10th and 11th centuries were prepared to risk and lose their lives in the cause of Irish warfare, because at that time it was deeply embedded in the culture of their earldom. The Irish Sea territories remained a foundation of Norwegian royal claims on Northern Britain through to the reign of Magnus Barelegs in the early 12th century, and beyond.

Conclusion

The 12th and 13th centuries represent a shift in the outward cultural orientation of the Northern Isles as, for economic and political reasons, they faced more fully towards Norway. Settlements which reached their apogee in this period, such as Quoygrew, show more exclusively Scandinavian links in their material culture than some of the earlier settlements. Changes in the fishing and farming economy during the 11th century, and in particular the rise in the production of stockfish, emphasized Norwegian contacts. The local political geography of the islands, including place-names and patterns of law and landholding, once attributed to the earliest Vikings by scholars such as Hugh Marwick, have more recently been argued by William P.L. Thomson to be in large part products of 12th-century innovation and reorganization (Thomson 2008, 5-24). This was also the great age of saga writing, when, as discussed above, political impetus was increasing toward a more direct and assertive form of Norwegian rule over the North Atlantic territories. The historical narrative formed at that time has remained enduringly influential. It is from this point onwards, arguably, that Orkney and Shetland's Scandinavian heritage largely took on the shape in which it is recognizable today.

It would clearly be wrong to say that there were no individual Norwegians in the Northern Isles during the early Viking Age, but I propose that the influence of Norway at this time was less direct and dominant than is usually assumed. Prior to the 12th century we can perceive a society in touch with Scandinavia, making use of Scandinavian material culture (often most visibly in funerary contexts), but very far from being a colonial extension of the 'homeland', as so often assumed by archaeologists. Rather, the settled society of the 10th and 11th centuries seems to have been at least as deeply connected to Ireland, Britain and areas to the south. Hiberno-Norse contacts and material culture are unmistakably present (indeed as they are in Norway itself, suggesting that traffic of people and objects *to* Norway was at least as influential as *from* it). The mix of people and influence coming northwards from the direction of the Irish Sea to the Northern Isles may help to explain the make-up of populations further west, notably in Iceland.

The emergence of longhouses and developed landholdings in the 10th century seems to coincide with a series of furnished burials in prominent places in the landscape, in cemeteries and semi-abandoned settlement mounds of the pre-Viking period. The establishment of new leading settlements at this time often took place in close proximity to churches and chapels, either of new foundation or in some cases possibly surviving from Pictish times. We may speculate as to the reasons for these changes; the 10th century was a time of flux in both religion and politics, but it seems that the influence of Norse paganism in the Northern Isles was probably fleeting and slight. Further back in time from the 10th century, we struggle to identify any dominant or 'colonial' Scandinavian traits in the settlements or landscapes of the Northern Isles, with those excavations that have produced hints of incoming groups and cultures offering only muted signals as to their ethnicity. Pre-Viking places and contacts with the insular world of Ireland and Northern Britain seem rather to have survived and maintained their

centrality. Vikings were evidently not a monocultural wave of colonizers, but a set of multifarious, probably small and disparate groupings, whose identity was formed by the agency of their own travels and life experiences, at least as much as by their biological heritage. For many of them this ‘acculturation’ occurred in the mixed and populated areas of Ireland, Britain and Europe. Such ‘pirates’ appear only tangentially in histories of the period, which were reordered in later times to emphasize a purer and more dominant Norse heritage. This is not to deny that an early Viking Age existed in Orkney and Shetland, but to suggest that their earliest Vikings were perhaps not quite the people we always thought they were.

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FIGURE CAPTIONS:

Figure 1: The Northern Isles, showing places and sites discussed in the text.

Figure 2: Part of the Skaill Hoard, from Sandwick, Orkney. Copyright: National Museums of Scotland.