

Fierce, Barbarous, Unbiddable

Perceptions of Norse-Gael Identity in Orkney-Caithness

c.1000-1400

Dylan Pierre Colin Howarth



Master's Thesis in
Nordic Viking and Medieval Culture

Department of Linguistics and Scandinavian Studies
UNIVERSITETET I OSLO

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Printer: Reprosentralen, Universitetet i Oslo

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Summary

The purpose of this Master's thesis is to analyse the perceptions of Orcadian Norse-Gael identity as they are found in medieval written sources. This thesis attempts to demonstrate that Norsemen – both Icelandic or Norwegian – and Scots (and to a lesser extent the Irish and English), understood Norse-Gael identity in Orkney and Caithness to be distinct, and that both groups attributed various characteristics to the Orcadians.

This thesis also seeks to gain an understanding of Orcadian self-perception. An examination of personal names and familial ties, combined with an analysis of political developments in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries can help shed some light as to how the Orcadians understood and perceived their own identity.

The main source material used in this study consists of Icelandic sagas (*Orkneyinga Saga*, *Njáls Saga*, *Laxdæla Saga*, *Magnúss Saga Skemmri*, *Fóstbræðra Saga*, *Sverris Saga*, *Hákonar Saga Hákonarsonar*) and Scottish chronicles (*Gesta Annalia*, *The Chronicle of Melrose*, *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*).

The first chapter of this thesis focuses on depictions of Orcadians as pirates, criminals and rebels. The second chapter explores themes related to religion, such as the retention of pagan practices after the Orcadians' conversion to Christianity, the sanctification of Magnús Erlendsson, and the thirteenth-century attacks on two Scottish bishops of Caithness. The third chapter examines the origin myth found in *Orkneyinga Saga*, as well as the authorship and purpose of the saga. The final chapter looks at personal names and familial ties, ascribed characteristics, and Orcadian folklore.

The findings of this thesis are that medieval Norsemen and Scots were aware of the Orcadian identity's distinctness, and ascribed a certain number of traits to the Orcadians. The chief attributes that were assigned to the Orcadians were backwardness and unruliness. These perceptions were partly products of the Orcadians' 'otherness', as well as of certain 'real' characteristics possessed by the Orcadian Norse-Gaels and their society, such as their practice of piracy and their rebellious tendencies.

Acknowledgements

I would, first and foremost, like to thank Professor Jan Erik Rekdal of Universitetet i Oslo for having supervised the writing of this thesis. His comments and wise advice were of an invaluable help, and for this I am eternally grateful. Professor Rekdal gave me constant support and encouragement throughout the two semesters spent writing this thesis, and I feel extremely lucky to have had a supervisor who was so interested and supportive. His suggestions and corrections on all kinds of points of detail were deeply helpful. Any mistakes left are entirely my own.

I would also like to thank the members of Universitetet i Oslo's Department of Linguistics and Scandinavian Studies. Thank you to all who have taught and helped me during these two years.

I am most grateful to all the scholars who have, and still do study medieval Orkney, Caithness and Shetland, and whose works I have used to write this thesis. Among these are Barbara Crawford, Ian Beuermann, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, Else Mundal, Gro Steinsland, as well as the late William Thomson and Bo Almqvist. The scholarly works of these individuals have given me indispensable information and insight into the subject of the medieval earldoms of Orkney and Caithness.

I would like to give a special thank you to Paul Edwards and Herman Pálsson for their superb translation of *Orkneyinga Saga*, without which the writing of this thesis would have been impossible. Their translations of other works, as well as the translations of others were of an immense help.

To my family, thank you for always having been there and supported me throughout my studies and my life.

Last, but not least, I would like to thank Doctor Alice Taylor of King's College London. Alice was the person who first ignited my interest in the history of medieval Scotland, and first turned me onto the subject of the murder of Bishop Adam of Caithness during the writing of my Bachelor's dissertation. Finally, to anyone who I have forgotten, thank you.

Introduction

The subject of this Master's thesis is the perceptions of Norse-Gael identity in Orkney-Caithness that are to be found in medieval literary sources, notably Norse sagas and British chronicles. There are two main reasons as to why this particular object of study has been chosen. Firstly, scholars have relatively ignored the question of the characteristics of Orcadian Norse-Gael culture in the High Middle Ages. Although there is much literature on the topic of the medieval earldoms of Orkney and Caithness, this extensive body of works tends to concentrate on the history of the region. This being said, several scholars have touched upon various aspects of Medieval and later Orcadian culture. Bo Almqvist, for instance, examined the nature of Orcadian folklore in a number of written pieces, most notably 'Scandinavian and Celtic Folklore Contacts in the Earldom of Orkney'¹ and 'What's in a World? Folklore Contacts between Norsemen and Gaels as reflected in *Orkneyinga Saga*'.² Barbara Crawford too, has looked at the mixed Norse and Gaelic character of the earldoms of Orkney and Caithness in the High and Late Middle Ages in various books, chapters and articles, such as 'Norse Earls and Scottish Bishops in Caithness: A clash of Cultures'³ and 'Scots and Scandinavians in Medieval Caithness; A Study of the Period 1266-1374'.⁴ However, a comprehensive study of the character of medieval Orcadian society and culture does not appear to have been produced. Secondly, the questions surrounding the contemporary external perceptions, particularly literary, and self-understanding of Orcadian identity have simply not been addressed. It is these perceptions that will be the chief focus of this thesis, though the study of these necessarily requires an examination of certain of the discernable characteristics of Orcadian society.

¹ Bo Almqvist, 'Scandinavian and Celtic Contacts in the Earldom of Orkney', in R.J. Berry and Howie N. Firth (editors) *The People of Orkney: Aspects of Orkney 4*, (Kirkwall, 1986), 187-208.

² Bo Almqvist, 'What's in a Word? Folklore Contacts Between Norsemen and Gaels as Reflected in *Orkneyinga Saga*', in Olwyn Owen (editor), *The World of Orkneyinga Saga. The Broad-Cloth Viking Trip*, (2005), 25-37.

³ Barbara Crawford, 'Norse Earls and Scottish Bishops in Caithness: A Clash of Cultures', in Colleen E. Batey, Judith Jesch, and Christopher D. Morris (editors), *The Viking Age in Caithness, Orkney and the North Atlantic: Select Papers from the Proceedings of the Eleventh Viking Congress, Thurso and Kirkwall, 22 August – 1 September 1989*, (Edinburgh, 1993), 129-147.

⁴ Barbara Crawford, 'Scots and Scandinavians in Mediaeval Caithness: A Study of the Period 1266-1375', in J.R. Baldwin (editor), *Caithness. A Cultural Crossroads*, (Edinburgh, 1982), 75-85.

While Shetland was part of the Earldom of Orkney until 1195 – when it was put under direct Norwegian royal control – and will be touched upon to a certain extent, the main focus of this thesis will be Orkney and Caithness. The main reason for this is that there is enough evidence pointing towards Shetlanders having their own identity and culture, and that it differed in certain ways from those found in Orkney and Caithness. The peoples and cultures of these two, more southern parts of the earldoms were far closer to each other as a result of various factors, the most obvious of which was geography. The dividing line appears not so much to have been the Pentland Firth, but rather the waters between Orkney and Shetland. The various written sources that have survived also seem to suggest that Shetlanders were understood to be a distinct group within the earldom. While the same does also appear regarding those living in Caithness, the differences between them and the people living in Orkney were not as marked as between Orkney and Shetland. Whether this Shetlandic identity was understood to be wholly distinct or simply a regional variety of the Norse-Gael one of the Earldom needs closer examination. While Shetlandic and Orcadian identity and culture were close and similar, the differences between them mean that it is both simpler and a bit more precise to focus on Orkney and Caithness. The reason for referring to the peoples, society and culture of Orkney-Caithness as Orcadian will be addressed shortly. As mentioned before, though, Shetland and its people will inevitably have to be taken into account when looking at identities and their perceptions in the Earldom (at least until 1195) of Orkney, and can offer an interesting item to look at to understand the particularities of Orcadian identity and culture.

The main hypothesis that will be tested in this thesis is that Norsemen and Scots understood Norse-Gaels in Orkney-Caithness to have a distinct identity, neither fully Norse, nor fully Gaelic (and later Scottish). To put it simply, Norsemen and Scots both perceived Orcadian identity to be characterized by certain traits that made it unique, and this understanding was reflected in the literary sources that dealt with and mentioned the joint earldoms of Orkney and Caithness and their people. Some of these traits included a love for piracy, brutality, and deviousness. One of the most important aspects of the perceptions of the Orcadians, was that they were backwards, embracing lifestyles that were outmoded and anachronistic in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and beyond.

There are a couple of sub-hypotheses that will also have to be tested in conjunction with this main one. One of these is that the representations of Norse-Gaels in sagas and chronicles can actually tell us something about the way that the Orcadians understood their society and culture. Indeed, while the sources do not necessarily tell us what the Norse-Gaels

thought of themselves in explicit terms, one may find clues that can lead us to reconstruct this self-perception.

Furthermore, the textual sources present a tension at the heart of Orcadian identity. The story of Magnús Erlendsson and Hákon Pálsson's rivalry, for instance, as found primarily in the *Orkneyinga Saga*, which ends with the murder of St. Magnús, perceives a tension between the Norse and Gaelic aspects of Orcadian identity. The tension resulting from the blending of the Norse and Gaelic cultures is to be found in other events, stories and characters, most notably in the figure of Rögnvaldr Kali Kolsson, the other saint from the earldom dynasty. This tension possibly reflects the very real problems posed by the Earls' divided and potentially conflicting loyalties. While these cultural tensions were not necessarily felt by the Orcadians themselves, they were perceived by those on the outside, and appeared to reflect, as has just been mentioned, the problem of the Earls' dual allegiance.

Another sub-hypothesis that will be dealt with is the idea that the bulk of the *Orkneyinga Saga* was produced as part of an effort to express the legitimacy of the Earls' autonomy. As a result, the saga defines – or at least offers a certain understanding of – something akin to Orcadian national identity and understanding as it was during Haraldr Maddadsson's rule as Earl of Orkney and Caithness. This period saw the earldom increasingly constrained by the Norwegian and Scottish kings. Indeed, the usual dating of the *Orkneyinga Saga* to around 1200 comes only a few years after the rather sore loss of Shetland in 1195, and the series of extremely harsh punishments imposed by King William I of Scotland during Haraldr's reign.

To test out this hypothesis, a number of questions can be posed. First of all, how were Orcadian Norse-Gaels perceived in contemporary literary sources? What were thought to be the characteristics of their cultural identity, and was it understood to be distinct? What are the differences and similarities between the perceptions found in Norse sources and those found in Scottish and other British sources? Did this identity evolve? If so, how? Can we get a sense of how the Orcadians perceived themselves? If so, what was this self-perception like? Other important questions arise from these. What do the perceived tensions between the Norse and Gaelic aspects of Orcadian society and culture tell us? How do Norse and Scottish perceptions of the Orcadians compare to information found in genealogies and place-name evidence? How did the gradual transfer of Orkney and Shetland into the Scottish sphere of influence affect Orcadian identity, and did it affect its perceptions?

In addition to these important questions, a number of smaller questions inevitably arise. These secondary questions can help us focus our search a bit more. For instance, we

should ask ourselves the significance of the episode of Earl Sigurð's death. Similarly, what is the significance of the story of Magnus and Hákon? Who is Swein Asleifarsson? Why is he such an important character in the *Orkneyinga Saga*? What do the literary depictions of Orcadian society tell us about the political situation of the Earldoms in the period being studied? A number of questions also need to be asked with regards to the source material itself. Who wrote *Orkneyinga Saga*, and for what purpose? How does *Orkneyinga Saga* compare to works such as the *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, *Heimskringla*, *Historia Regum Britanniae*, and *Historia Norvegiæ*? This thesis will not attempt to answer each of these questions. Rather, these questions can serve as a framework from which to launch an examination of the problem at hand.

The period covered by this thesis will be between around 1000 and 1400, with a particular emphasis on the period of 1016-1231. One may suggest that given that the sources being examined mostly date from between 1200 and 1447, that the period being studied is actually 1200-1447. However, as this thesis shall chiefly focus on events that occurred, and people that lived mainly between 1000 and 1400 – and that incidents that had occurred prior to the writing of the sources would in some cases have been relatively fresh in the collective memory of various peoples – it is more accurate to label the period being studied as 1000-1400. While it might be tempting to put 1232, the year in which the 'Norse' dynastic line effectively died out, as the later date, there are good reasons for extending it to 1400. First of all, Orkney and Caithness continued to be administered by a single Earl on behalf of two different kings until 1375, when the Scottish crown purchased Caithness. Between 1375 and 1468, the Sinclair earls continued to hold the earldom of Orkney from Norway. Secondly, as quite a few sources being examined in this thesis date from after 1231, and a number of important occurrences happened in the following decades, such as the Battle of Largs in 1263, and the signing of the treaty of Perth in 1266, it makes sense to include the period after 1231. The choice for 1400 should be explained too. 1400 has mainly been chosen due to it being a rather neutral date that stands between 1375 and 1470. The transfer of the Earldom to the Sinclair Earls in 1375 could be considered to mark the end of the shift towards Scottish rule, and the 95 years of Sinclair rule in Orkney were rather different to those of the previous Møre, Angus and Strathearn earls. Extending the period of study to 1400 can also help give a bit of context. A number of dates could be suggested as the end limit of the period of study, including 1266, 1349, and 1470, but it is simpler to place it at 1400. Many of the perceptions that Norsemen and Scots had of the Orcadians in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries continued to exist into the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. While the period between 1266

and 1470 will be focused on far less than that of 1016-1231, it is important to include it within the study due to its historical significance and the fact that numerous important sources date from it.

Given that the sources deal with events, both real and invented, that took place or were set in a time prior to this period, most notably the mythical origin story of the Orcadian earldom dynasty, and the early period of the colonization and rule of Orkney and Caithness, one must also consider this earlier time. However, the production of the written works dealing with earlier epochs tells us much about the period in which they were written, which is why one may narrow down the period being studied to c.1000-1400. Earlier events and periods will of course be examined as part of the context of the birth and evolution of the Orcadian Norse-Gael identity and its perception by others, but narrowing the period of study down to 1000-1400 is more precise as it helps us place and understand these perceptions in their contemporary context.

The period of 1000-1400 has been chosen due to its being broad enough to allow the coverage of a wide range of ideas and themes, whilst also being narrow enough to allow for certain general points to be made. The dates 1000 and 1400 offer a comfortable frame on which to set up this thesis, avoiding the constraints that would come with choosing a very specific period.

Furthermore, an important reason as to why this particular period was chosen is that this was the time during which the Norwegian and Scottish kingdoms were securing themselves as states. This process essentially brought about the making and defining the Norwegian and Scottish nations, much like in other parts of Europe. To study the Orcadian identity in this context is therefore useful.

The main types of sources that will be examined in this thesis are sagas and chronicles. The main works that will be studied include *Orkneyinga Saga* (c.1200), *Njáls Saga*, *Gesta Annalia*, John of Fordun's *Chronica Gentis Scotorum* (The Chronicle of the Scottish People), *Historia Norvegie* (c.1220), the *Melrose Chronicle*, and *Sverris Saga*. These specific sources constitute the bulk of the corpus, though by no means its entirety. Other works that contain information of value include Walter Bower's *Scotichronicon*, *Magnúss Saga Lengri* (The Longer Magnús Saga), *Magnúss Saga Skemmri* (The Shorter Magnús Saga), *Hákonar Saga Hákonarsonar*, *Fóstbræðra saga* (The Saga of the Sworn Brothers), *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* (The Saga of Gunnlaugr Serpent-Tongue), *Eyrbyggja Saga*, *Laxdæla Saga*, and Wace's *Roman de Brut* (c.1155).

Where necessary, other kinds of sources, written and not, will be used, mainly to help the analysis and provide context for certain matters found in the literary sources. These would include charters and letters. Moreover, genealogies, place-names, and material forms of culture (objects, statues, etc.) are invaluable when it comes to comparing the perceptions of an identity with its very real and discernible characteristics, as well as the self-understandings that may be reflected in these characteristics. This is particularly the case with names and language.

The main reason for examining literary sources is that these offer the best, and probably only way of examining perceptions of Norse-Gael identity in Orkney-Caithness. Indeed, written sources are the only medium through which we can know what Norsemen and Scots thought of the Orcadian Norse-Gaels and their culture, particularly that of the Orcadian aristocracy. The written sources are also useful as they can potentially give us hints as to Orcadian self-perception. These glimpses into the self-understandings that Norse-Gaels had of themselves can be supported by some of the other forms of evidence that have just been mentioned.

Moreover, the existence of written material from both Norse and British sources is particularly helpful as it can allow the scholar to see the Orcadians from two different perspectives – a British, mainly Scottish one in the south, and a Norse one, chiefly Icelandic and Norwegian, in the North – and the similarities and differences found in these perspectives can provide as complete an understanding as possible.

There are several key concepts found in this thesis that need to be clarified. The first of these would be ‘perception’. By ‘perception’ I intend to mean the way in which something is understood and interpreted. In this case, this understanding is to be found in literary sources, though it almost certainly reflects an understanding that existed outside of these, and indeed was responsible for the understanding found in the literature.

The next term that needs to be defined is ‘Norse-Gael’. By Norse-Gael, I mean the syncretism of Norse and Gaelic cultural traits. As such, one may talk about Norse-Gael people, Norse-Gael society and Norse-Gael culture.⁵ The use of the term ‘Orcadian’, as found

⁵ The term *Gall-Ghàidheil* (*Gall-Goídil* in Old Irish, meaning ‘foreign gaels’) has been used to describe Norse-Gaels, particularly in an Irish context. There has been some debate as to who exactly the people described as *Gall-Ghàidheil* in the sources were. See: R.L. Bremner, ‘Some Notes on the Norsemen in Argyllshire and on the Clyde’, *Saga-Book of the Viking Club*, 3, (1901), 338-380; Carl J.S. Marstrander, *Bidrag til det Norsk Sprogs Historie i Irland*, (1915); Clare Downham, ‘The Break up of Dál Riata and the Rise of the Gallgoídil’, in H.B. Clarke and R. Johnson (editors), *The Vikings in Ireland and Beyond: Before and After the*

in this thesis, means that which relates to the joint earldoms of Orkney and Caithness. While the society and people of Caithness did differ in certain regards to those of Orkney, their proximity and similarity means that the use of the term ‘Orcadian’ can be considered appropriate when talking about both Orkney and Caithness in this context. Moreover, it is simpler to use the term ‘Orcadian’ to describe things relating to both Orkney and Caithness rather than having to talk about ‘Orcadians’ and ‘Caithnessmen’ separately, and having to make up words to characterise something as ‘Caithnessian’. The use of the term ‘Orcadian’ can also help us distinguish identity, society and culture in Orkney and Caithness from that found in Shetland, as has been touched upon earlier.

Given that the focus of the thesis is Norse-Gael identity in Orkney-Caithness, there will most often be no need to specify that the term Norse-Gael applies to the Orcadian variety, and the terms Norse-Gael and Orcadian may therefore be used rather interchangeably as they will both refer to the same thing most of the time. However, where mention is made of Norse-Gaels and Norse-Gael cultures and societies that are not Orcadian, this will be specified.

In this case, ‘identity’ defines the characteristics determining who or what a person or thing is. A cultural identity could therefore, in this case, be defined as the cultural characteristics and traits that define an individual, group, or society, and thus produce a feeling and self-understanding, and often (though not always), an external perception of being distinct.

Battle of Clontarf, (Dublin, 2015), 189-205; Roderick McDonald, ‘Outsiders, Vikings and Merchants: The Context Dependency of the *Gall-Ghàidheil* in Medieval Ireland and Scotland’, *Journal of the Australian Early Medieval Association*, 11, (2015), 67-84. The term *Gall-Ghàidheil* could be used when talking of Orcadian Norse-Gaels, given their mixed Norse and Gaelic heritage and culture, although it is a broad term that may refer to any Norse-Gaels.

Chapter I

Pirates, Criminals, and Rebels

A recurring theme found in medieval literature that deals with or mentions Orkney and Caithness is that the region was turbulent. Indeed, Orcadians are often portrayed as insatiable Vikings, brutal thugs, and untrustworthy rebels in contemporary texts. The saga sources, on the one hand, provide us with a vivid picture of the Orcadian lifestyle in the Early and High Middle Ages. At the heart of this way of life was plunder, and far from dying out with the close of the Viking Age, piracy as a way of life appears to have survived deep into the High Middle Ages. Oftentimes, the men (and women) of the Orcadian aristocracy could show themselves to be extremely violent and uncontrollable, something that appears to have been held against the earls whose duty, according to the emerging model of Norwegian statehood, was to maintain order and justice. The sagas also offer a depiction of the Orcadians as both deceitful and fiercely independent. The Scottish chronicles of John of Fordun and of the abbey of Melrose, for their part, present the Orcadians as wicked troublemakers on the periphery of the Kingdom of Scotia, much like the Moravians and Galwegians. This chapter will explore these themes of piracy, outlawry and rebellion. Additionally, two specific individuals will be focused on. These are Sveinn Ásleifarson and Earl Rögnvaldr Kali Kolsson. Through these we shall see various ways in which Orcadian aristocrats were depicted at a time when developments in the rest of Europe and Norway came to affect Orcadian society and culture.

1.1 – *An Earldom Born of and Plagued by Piracy?*

The establishment of the earldoms of Orkney and Caithness was a direct product of the activities of Scandinavian Vikings. The most common narrative found in the Norse material asserts that King Haraldr Fairhair (c.850 – c.932) conquered Orkney and Shetland during an expedition to the west around 872 to deal with some troublesome Vikings who had based themselves in the islands. The narrative varies somewhat between the sources, with *Orkneyinga Saga* having Haraldr lead the expedition himself, while *Eyrbyggja Saga* tells us

that he put Ketil ‘Flat-Nose’ in charge of it. Either way, it was as a result of this conquest that the earls of Møre came to control Shetland, Orkney, and eventually Caithness. The truthfulness of this story, however, has been questioned by many; especially given the silence of the Irish and Scottish sources with regards to Haraldr’s voyage.⁶ Moreover, the recording of numerous raids in the Hebrides between 794 and 813 would point to settlement having begun, in one form or another, far earlier than the saga narratives suggest.⁷ While the dating of when exactly the Norsemen started settling in the area has been the subject of much debate, what is clear from the surviving written sources is that the arrival of the Norsemen in the Northern Isles was the product of piracy.

Various sagas tell us, as Barbara Crawford and others have pointed out, that Vikings initially used the Northern Isles as bases. From these they would launch raids on Norway.⁸ Chapter 4 of the *Orkneyinga Saga* states:

‘One summer Harald Fine-Hair sailed west over the North Sea in order to teach a lesson to certain Vikings whose plunderings he could no longer tolerate. These Vikings used to raid in Norway over the summer and had Shetland and Orkney as their winter base’.⁹

As the story goes, Haraldr then proceeded to conquer not only Shetland and Orkney, but also the Hebrides. During this campaign, Earl Rögnvaldr Eysteinnsson of Møre’s son, Ívarr, was killed. In compensation for this loss, Haraldr gave Rögnvaldr Orkney and Shetland. Rögnvaldr, however, handed over the islands to his brother Sigurðr (d. c.892). When Haraldr sailed back east, ‘he gave Sigurd the title of earl and Sigurd stayed on in the islands’.¹⁰ Sigurðr, nicknamed ‘the Mighty’, thus became the first earl of Orkney. It was Sigurðr – we are told – who launched the conquest of the north of the mainland of Scotland with the help of Þorstein ‘the Red’, the son of Ketil ‘Flat-Nose’. Interestingly, *Laxdæla Saga* and

⁶ William Thomson, *The History of Orkney*, (1987), 15-16; Thomson, ‘Harald Fairhair, Torf Einar and *Orkneyinga Saga*’, in Olwyn Owen (editor), *The World of Orkneyinga Saga: The Broad-Cloth Viking Trip*, (2005), 3.

⁷ Thomson, *The History of Orkney*, 17-20.

⁸ Barbara Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms: Orkney and Caithness from AD870 to 1470*, (2013), 85.

⁹ *Orkneyinga Saga*, translated by Paul Edwards and Herman Pálsson, (London, 1981), 26.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 27

Landnámabók do not mention Sigurðr, attributing the conquest of northern Scotland solely to Þorstein, as William Thomson has pointed out.¹¹

Similarly, *Eyrbyggja Saga* tells us that Vikings used the Orkneys as a base from which to attack Norway. It tells us:

‘Just about that time King Harald Fine-Hair was forcing his way to power in Norway. During the campaign many men of high standing abandoned their estates in Norway, some emigrating east, some west over the North Sea. Others used to winter in the Hebrides or in Orkney, then spend the summer raiding in Harald’s kingdom, causing plenty of damage’.¹²

Heimskringla is another source in which the narrative of Orkney as a Viking base can be found.

The information found in the Latin *Historia Norvegie* differs quite significantly from the information that can be gleaned from the sagas. *Historia Norvegie* makes no mention of Haraldr’s expedition, and instead presents a different narrative. Whereas the other sources are silent on the topic of whether or not anyone lived in Orkney (and presumably Shetland too) before the arrival of the Norsemen, *Historia Norvegie* states that the ‘Pents’ (Picts) and the ‘Papes’ (*Papar*, Gaelic, usually Irish, monks) inhabited the islands. Interestingly, it goes on to tell us that it was the Møre kindred who captured the islands by themselves. As the text states:

‘In the days of Harald Fairhair, king of Norway, certain Vikings, descended from the stock of that sturdiest of men, Ragnvald jarl, crossing the Solund Sea with a large fleet, totally destroyed these peoples after stripping them of their long established dwellings and made the islands subject to themselves’.¹³

Whether as the result of an expedition by Haraldr Fairhair or not, the birth of Orkney-Caithness was intrinsically tied to piracy. Piracy did not stop once the Norse presence in the Northern Isles and Caithness had been firmly established; in fact, it was quite the contrary.

¹¹ Thomson, *The History of Orkney*, 21.

¹² *Eyrbyggja Saga*, translated by Paul Edwards and Herman Pálsson, (London, 1989), 25; Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 85.

¹³ Inger Ekrem and Lars Boje Mortensen (editors), *Historia Norvegie*, translated by Peter Fisher, (2003 or 2006), 67.

Throughout the saga material, Orkney-Caithness is presented as a region filled with pirates. In a passage of *Fóstbræðra Saga* (the *Saga of the Sworn Brothers*) found in *Flateyjarbók*, two of the characters, Þorgeir and Veglag, stop in Orkney on their way to Norway, staying with Earl Rögnvaldr Brusason. The saga tells that:

‘There were Viking raiders all over the islands, stealing from farmers and traders, and Rognvald wanted to punish them for their evil deeds’.¹⁴

Þorgeir decides to help Rögnvaldr, and they succeed in defeating the Vikings, bringing peace and stability back to the Orkneys. Veglag, meanwhile, goes to Scotland and become a notorious thief, eventually being killed. Where these Vikings are from, we are not told, though they may possibly have been Orcadians.

An example in *Orkneyinga Saga* highlighting the disruptive nature of Viking activities is found in Chapter 5, during the rule of Earl Hallad, one of the sons of Rögnvaldr Eysteinnsson. We are told:

‘Vikings would raid the islands as well as Caithness, looting and killing, but when the farmers complained of their losses to Earl Hallad, it seemed to him beyond his power to right matters for them’.¹⁵

This passage introduces a theme that runs throughout the Saga, namely that there were numerous thugs and bullies present in the earldoms, and that the earls were not always able to fully control them. This theme will be touched upon later on in this chapter.

However, piracy was not only practiced by the most disruptive and unruly members of the Orcadian elite, it was practiced by all, including the earls themselves. In *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu* (the *Saga of Gunnlaugr Serpent-Tongue*), the eponymous hero also stops in Orkney on his way to Norway. While there, he befriends Earl Sigurðr Hlodvirsson (c.960-1014), better known as Sigurðr ‘the Stout’ (Sigurðr *digri*). Together, they spend a summer

¹⁴ *The Saga of the Sworn Brothers*, translated by Martin S. Regal, in Vidar Hreinsson (editor), *Comic Sagas and Tales from Iceland*, (London, 2013), 49.

¹⁵ *OS*, Edwards and Pálsson, 28.

plundering around the Hebrides and the west coast of Scotland, before parting ways as good friends.¹⁶

Plundering expeditions are many in *Orkneyinga Saga*. Almost all of the earls and high-ranking men of the earldoms are said to have gone on raiding expeditions during the summers. We are told in chapter 11, for example, that the aforementioned Earl Sigurðr ‘the Stout’ ‘used to go on Viking expeditions every summer as well, plundering in the Hebrides, Scotland and Ireland’.¹⁷ Similarly, chapter 23 states that Earl Þórfinn ‘the Mighty’ and his nephew, Earl Rögnvaldr Brusason ‘raided in the Hebrides, in Ireland, and over a wide area in the west of Scotland . . . Every summer they went on raiding expeditions, sometimes together, sometimes separately’¹⁸. Reading through the saga, one starts to lose count of the number of plundering expeditions in the Hebrides, Ireland and Scotland. What becomes apparent is just how important raiding and looting was to the Orcadian aristocracy.

The association of the Orcadians and piracy can be also be found in Wace’s *Roman de Brut* (c.1155). During a feast thrown by King Arthur in Paris, Wace tells us that ‘Gonvais, king of Orkney’ was there, and that he ‘controlled many pirates’.¹⁹ This particular reference is interesting because it only associates the Orcadians, and not the Norwegians or Danes who are also present, with piracy. It is evident that the stereotyping of Orcadians as pirates was widespread during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

In the sagas, the Orcadian pirates are often described as *vikingar* (Vikings). The use of this term indicates that the form of piracy practiced by the Orcadians was understood to be of a ‘Viking’ nature. In other words, this was perceived as a specifically Norse type of raiding.

Many of the leading men of Orkney, Caithness, and Shetland were farmers. Chapter 56 of *Orkneyinga Saga* gives a quick presentation of some of the leading families in Orkney and Caithness at the time of the rule of Earl Páll Hákonarson. Almost all of them are said to have been farmers. These landed aristocrats were known as *gæðingr* (or *göding*, ‘man of property’, ‘good-man’, ‘man of good family’), a term that is usually associated with Orkney-Caithness in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, as Barbara Crawford has pointed out.²⁰ Marriage and kindred often tied these men and families to the earldom dynasty, and they

¹⁶ *The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue*, translated by Katrine Attwood, in Örnólfur Thorsson (editor), *Sagas of Warrior-Poets*, (London, 2002), 143.

¹⁷ *OS*, Edwards and Pálsson, 36.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 60

¹⁹ *Romance of Brut*, translated by Judith Weiss, in Laura Ashe (editor), *Early Fiction in England from Geoffrey of Monmouth to Chaucer*, (2015), 52.

²⁰ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 173.

would undoubtedly have owed obligations to the earls in return for grants of estates.²¹ Whether these landed men held their lands in feu, or whether the earldoms had their own distinct model of land tenure has been the subject of debate.²² Beneath these gödings were the *bondi*, moderately wealthy landowners and tenants.²³ People at most levels of society engaged in farming and fishing. While some of the produce was set aside for military retinues, who would then go plundering, a large part of it was probably also exported to Norway and other parts of the British Isles.²⁴ This, as James Barrett has suggested, was probably responsible for the earldoms' wealth, and allowed it to remain semi-independent for most of the High Medieval period.²⁵

Piracy around Britian and Ireland must therefore have been a profitable way of acquiring more material wealth. Whether the agricultural wealth of the region allowed these men to live a life of piratical leisure, as Crawford has suggested²⁶, or whether they used piracy as a means of acquiring wealth that their farming could not give them, raiding appears, from the Norse material, to have been an activity very much loved by the Orcadian aristocracy. As Barrett points out, the products of plunder, although rarely mentioned in the sagas, almost certainly included money, material possessions, cloth, cattle, ships, and, importantly, slaves.²⁷ The seizure of these goods and resources during raids abroad undoubtedly contributed to the wealth of the earldoms along with farming, trade and other lucrative activities. Farming, fishing and raiding were the foundations of Orkney and Caithness' wealth.

Yet, why were the Orcadians singled out as prodigious pirates? Was piracy genuinely more widespread in Orkney than it was in the Hebrides and other parts of the Norse world? It seems doubtful that the Orcadians were the only ones engaging in piracy around Irish Sea. The rewards of plunder were undoubtedly just as attractive to other Norse-Gaels and Norsemen as they were to the Orcadians. The stereotype of the Orcadian as a voracious pirate probably stemmed from a perception of 'otherness'. This idea of otherness attributed a level

²¹ *Ibid.*, 174.

²² *Ibid.*, 174.

²³ *Ibid.*, 175.

²⁴ James H. Barrett, 'The Pirate Fishermen: The Political Economy of a Medieval Maritime Society', in Beverly Ballin Smith, Simon Taylor, and Gareth Williams (editors), *West Over Sea: Studies in Scandinavian Sea-Borne Expansion and Settlement Before 1300: a Festschrift in Honour of Dr. Barbara E. Crawford*, (2007), 299-340, 329.

²⁵ Barrett, 'The Pirate Fishermen', 299-340.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 175.

²⁷ Barrett, 'The Pirate Fishermen', 310.

of ‘backwardness’ to the Orcadians to distinguish them as inferior to other Norse peoples, perhaps because of their mixed heritage.

The importance of raiding seems pretty normal when looking at those parts of the sources set in the Viking Age. What is perhaps most remarkable is that this mode of life continued until the late twelfth century. The last Viking expedition recorded in *Orkneyinga Saga* is Sveinn Ásleifarson’s final trip to Ireland, which probably took place in 1171. It is the character and story of Sveinn that we shall now examine.

1.2 – Sveinn Ásleifarson: The Archetypal Orcadian Viking?

No individual better represents the Orcadian Viking lifestyle and love of plunder than Sveinn Ásleifarson. Sveinn is one of the most important characters of *Orkneyinga Saga*, of which he dominates some forty chapters.²⁸ So important is Sveinn’s role in the narrative (and apparently in twelfth-century Orcadian society) that the saga author tells us that ‘people say that apart from those of higher rank than himself, he was the greatest man the western world has ever seen in ancient and modern times’.²⁹ Yet, Sveinn’s reputation was far from unanimously good. For the people of Dublin, he was, we are told, the ‘greatest troublemaker known to them in the western lands’.³⁰ Sveinn also had many enemies at home. Among these were the Moddan clan of Sutherland, and his former friend Þórbjörn Clerk. Whether the story of Sveinn presented to us is more fictional than historical or not, it gives an interesting insight into twelfth-century Orcadian society and some of the ways in which it was perceived.

Much like for previous and contemporary Orcadians, piracy was central to Sveinn’s way of life. Chapter 105 of *Orkneyinga Saga*, titled ‘Svein’s life-style’ gives a clear image of the kind of life that the man apparently lived.

‘In the spring he had more than enough to occupy him, with a great deal of seed to sow which he saw to carefully himself. Then when that job was done, he would go off plundering on the Hebrides and in Ireland on what he called his ‘spring-trip’, then back home just after midsummer, where he stayed till the cornfields had been reaped

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 172.

²⁹ *OS*, Edwards and Pálsson, 218.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 217.

and the grain was safely in. After that he would go off raiding again, and never came back till the first month of winter was ended. This he used to call his ‘autumn-trip’.³¹

Chapter 100 also tells us that he used ‘his share of the plunder to supplement his revenues from the islands and defray his expenses’.³² While most often limited to the Irish Sea, Sveinn’s expeditions did extend as far as the Isles of Scilly,³³ apparently. Despite being his livelihood, Sveinn’s piracy would also prove to be his doom. It was during the aforementioned expedition to Dublin in 1171 that Sveinn would meet his end. After having been warned by Earl Haraldr Maddadson that his Viking expeditions would eventually lead to his death, we are told that Sveinn decided to go on a final trip before stopping for good. The people of Dublin, determined to not let their town fall to the Orcadian Vikings, decided to dig pits that they would cover and use to trap Sveinn and his men in. Once in the pits, the Vikings were attacked and killed by the Dubliners.³⁴ While *Orkneyinga Saga* is the main source with regards to Sveinn’s life, it is possible that several other sources recorded his death, as James Barrett and others have pointed out³⁵. Both the *Annals of Ulster* and Gerald of Wales mention a failed Orcadian attack on Dublin in 1171, with a John or Eoan ‘the Mad’ assisting the ousted King of Dublin, Ascall Mac Ragnaill, against the Normans. It is possible that John was none other than Sveinn. Sveinn’s connections to the broader Norse-Gaelic world and mercenary activities mean that the identification of John as Sveinn is certainly plausible.³⁶ It is possible that Sveinn’s name was converted to Seán, the Gaelic rendition of John. This could explain why Sveinn is called John in both of these sources. Whether or not Sveinn and John were the same person, his death in Dublin was a fitting end to a life that was characterized by violence.

What is particularly interesting about Sveinn’s story is that he embodies a lifestyle more commonly associated with the ninth, tenth and early eleventh centuries. In a way, Sveinn’s death serves as a warning. His violent death highlights the grisly end that inevitably befalls those who are unwilling to adapt to the new ways of changing times. Sveinn’s old-school lifestyle inevitably leads him to die a brutal death. While some have seen in Sveinn’s

³¹ *Ibid.*, 215.

³² *Ibid.*, 207.

³³ *Ibid.*, 207.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 217-218.

³⁵ James H. Barrett, ‘Svein Asleifarson and 12th-century Orcadian Society’, in Owen, Olwyn (editor), *The World of Orkneyinga Saga: ‘The Broad-Cloth Viking Trip’*, (2005), 218.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 218-219.

story an anachronism and a reinvention of Viking-Age chieftain culture, it seems more probable that his story also reflects certain realities of twelfth-century Orcadian life. First of all, Sveinn is not the only Orcadian of his time to engage in piracy. While he may in a way be seen as one of the last real Orcadian Vikings, many of his contemporaries, such as Earl Rögnvaldr Kali Kolsson, engage in raiding in *Orkneyinga Saga*. Secondly, other sources, such as *Sverris Saga* indicate that this kind of lifestyle persisted until the end of the twelfth century, and possibly even into the thirteenth century. In *Sverris Saga*, Haraldr Maddadsson excuses himself towards Sverre following the Eyiarskeggjar' ('Island-Beardies') rebellion of 1194 by stating that 'The men of Orkney do not always act as I wish; many leave the Orkneys to plunder in Ireland and Scotland, to pillage merchants, and all the contrary to my wish'.³⁷

While Sveinn's plundering expeditions are numerous, his violent and disruptive activities were not limited to lands outside of Orkney-Caithness. Sveinn perfectly exemplifies the picture of Orcadians as being violent, dangerous, cunning, defiant and treacherous. First introducing him to us in chapter 66, the saga wastes no time in presenting just how unmanageable and dangerous Sveinn was. In that same chapter he kills Sveinn Breast-Rope, and flees to the Hebrides with the help of Bishop William of Orkney. These actions result in him being made an outlaw by Earl Páll Hákonarson in the next chapter. This is the first of many times that Sveinn ends up in conflict with various earls.

After staying in Atholl with Earl Maddad and his wife, Margaret Hákonardóttir, sister of Earl Páll Hákonarson, Sveinn kidnaps Páll, and takes him back to Margaret and Maddad. An arrangement is made between Margaret and Sveinn to get Earl Rögnvaldr to accept her three-year-old son, Haraldr Maddadsson, as a co-earl. Páll offers to renounce his claim to the earldom and to become a monk, asking Sveinn to tell his friends that he has been blinded and maimed so that they will not come and find him. The saga tells us that while Sveinn told Páll's friends and kinsmen that he had stayed in Scotland, others claimed that Margaret got Sveinn to blind Páll, and later hired someone else to kill him.³⁸

In chapter 92, Sveinn goes as far as seizing a cargo-boat carrying Earl Haraldr Maddadsson's tributes to Shetland following a falling out with Haraldr over Sveinn's brother, Gunni Olafsson, getting Haraldr's mother pregnant.³⁹

It was not simply with the earls that Sveinn found himself in confrontation. Indeed, he also had a long-standing feud with the Moddan clan of Sutherland over the death of his father.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 220.

³⁸ *OS*, Edwards and Pálsson, 138-139.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 185.

While Sveinn was not responsible for starting the feud, he would be the one to end it. The feud started when Olvir Brawl, a grandson of Frakkok Moddandsdóttir (Frakkok and her kin will be dealt with more extensively later on in this thesis), and some of his men – as they were returning from a Viking expedition – burned Sveinn’s father, Óláfr Hrólfsson, to death and looted his property. There was a short break in the feud following the agreement with Maddad and Margaret to capture Earl Páll, with Earl Óttarr of Thurso, Frakkok’s brother, paying compensation to Sveinn, and Sveinn promising to support Erlendr Haraldsson to become Earl. Sveinn eventually decided to take revenge on Olvir and Frakkok, and the feud came to an abrupt end some time later with Sveinn brutally slaughtering a number of Olvir Brawl’s men and setting fire to Frakkok’s house, burning her and everyone inside to death.⁴⁰

Throughout *Orkneyinga Saga* Sveinn comes across as both clever and incredibly violent. After a trip to the Hebrides aimed at getting revenge from the chieftain Holdbodi Hundason (who had previously looked after Sveinn), during which ‘Svein and his men killed a lot of people there, plundering and burning in a number of places’⁴¹, Sveinn decides to claim a higher share of the loot. This leads Þórbjörn Clerk, and some of the other captains, to go to Earl Rögnvaldr Kolsson to complain. In the words of the saga, ‘The Earl said this would be neither the first nor the last time that Svein showed himself to be unjust and a bully’.⁴² The situation eventually escalates and Sveinn and his companions go to Lambaborg, a small castle in Caithness, and ‘They committed many a robbery in Caithness, taking the loot into their stronghold, and so became thoroughly unpopular’.⁴³ Following this, Earl Rögnvaldr, accompanied by a number of chieftains, besieges Lambaborg. Sveinn and his friend Margad escape and flee to Scotland, where they stay with King David I (c.1084 – 1153, r. 1124 – 1153). On the way to Edinburgh Sveinn and his men are said to have looted the monastery on the Isle of May.⁴⁴

So troublesome was Sveinn that numerous members of the community advised that he be exiled during a peace meeting between himself and the earls Rögnvaldr Kolsson and Haraldr Maddadson, stating that banishment would be the only way to finally stop him from causing trouble.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 144-145.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 150.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 200.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Sveinn's story in *Orkneyinga Saga* is how he consistently manages to come out unscathed from his numerous confrontations with the earls. Despite being exiled several times, having half of his property seized by the Earls Rögnvaldr Kali Kolsson and Haraldr Maddadsson, and being more often than not outmatched by the earls in military might, settlements were always reached. Every time he committed an outrage, Sveinn managed to be reconciled with the various earls. However, Sveinn could not evade the inevitable violent death that awaited him. While Sveinn was clever and capable of turning many a situation in his favour, his continued survival may be put down to more than his own ingenuity. If Sveinn got away with such outrages it was because of the earls. The earls' inability, or – it is more likely – unwillingness to control Sveinn and others like him may come across as a display of failure in their functions as rulers. For Norwegian observers, the reliance of the earls on unruly chieftains and a 'Viking' style of rule, at a time when the Norwegian state was becoming increasingly defined and administrated must indeed have seemed like a failure.⁴⁶ Ian Beuermann has pointed out, though, that *Orkneyinga Saga* may in fact present a defence of this type of rule in the face of a new and feudalized form of monarchy.⁴⁷ The theme of unruliness and thuggishness, and the position of the earls in relation to their apparently violent and unruly aristocrats, will, however, be touched upon more thoroughly later on in this chapter.

Also of note are Sveinn's close connections with Scotland. Indeed, Sveinn is said to have visited the Kings of Scots David I and Malcolm IV (1141 – 1165, r.1153 – 1165) on several occasions. The first visit, mentioned previously, came after he had fled the besieged Lambaborg castle. In chapter 92, Sveinn goes to Aberdeen to meet the 'nine-year-old' Malcolm (Malcolm cannot have been nine years old, given that he was born in 1141 and started ruling in 1153, when he was twelve or thirteen).⁴⁸ In the narrative of *Orkneyinga Saga*, these contacts make Sveinn appear to be closer to the Kings of Scots than to the Earls themselves. Sveinn supposedly became good friends with both David and Malcolm. The saga tells us that David helped reconcile Sveinn and Rögnvaldr, and that Sveinn and Malcolm 'parted the best of friends'.⁴⁹ While David compensated those robbed by Sveinn on his

⁴⁶ Ian Beuermann, 'Jarla Sögur Orkneyja. Status and Power of the Earls of Orkney According to their Sagas', in Gro Steinsland, Jon Vidar Sigurdsson, Jan Erik Rekdal, Ian B. Beuermann (editors), *Ideology and Power in the Viking and Middle Ages: Scandinavia, Iceland, Ireland, Orkney and the Faeroes*, (2011), 152.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 152.

⁴⁸ *OS*, Edwards and Herman Pálsson, 186.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 186.

voyage to Edinburgh⁵⁰, Malcolm gave him various valuable gifts and was even prepared to pay a ransom to free him when a false rumour spread that he had been captured while raiding the east coast of Scotland with Earl Erlend Haraldsson (c.1124 – 1154).⁵¹ Most notably, David at one point tells Sveinn that Earl Rögnvaldr ‘must be a fine man’,⁵² the phrasing implying that David had never even met Rögnvaldr.

The final words uttered by Sveinn in *Orkneyinga Saga* are interesting. As Sveinn falls, last amongst his men, the saga places these words in his mouth:

‘Whether or not I’m to fall today’, he said, ‘I want everyone to know that I’m the retainer of the holy Earl Rognvald, and now he’s with God, it’s in him I’ll put my trust.’⁵³

These words highlight Sveinn’s close connection with another important character of *Orkneyinga Saga*, Earl Rögnvaldr Kali Kolsson. It is to the character of Rögnvaldr that we shall now turn.

1.3 – Rögnvaldr Kali Kolsson: Viking Warrior and High-Medieval Nobleman

Throughout most of *Orkneyinga Saga*, Sveinn’s story is intertwined with that of Earl Rögnvaldr Kali Kolsson.⁵⁴ Rögnvaldr is one of the most important characters of the saga, and while not described as one of the most powerful earls, he nonetheless stands as one of the most prominent ones, his story covering about half of the saga. Rögnvaldr, both in his historical life and in his literary depiction, is a character that can shed much light upon twelfth-century Orcadian society and its perceptions. Whereas Sveinn presents a vivid and colourful image of the more traditional Orcadian pirate-farmer, Rögnvaldr shows a different kind of Orcadian aristocrat. Indeed, not only was Rögnvaldr a Viking earl and skald, he was also a lover of courtly pleasures and a fervent Christian. Perhaps this had something to do with the fact that he was born and raised in Norway, and was initially perceived as an outsider. As Ole Bruhn states, ‘On the one hand he acts like a veritable Viking whilst on the

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 153.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁵⁴ Beuermann, ‘Jarla Sögur Orkneyja’, 148.

other he is a studious modern prince finding the time to take part on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land'.⁵⁵ The impression one gets from *Orkneyinga Saga* is of a complex character that exhibits certain tensions within twelfth-century Orcadian society.

Rögvaldr, whose original name was Kali, was the son of Kol Kalisson, a Norwegian nobleman, and Gunnhild Erlendsdóttir, daughter of Earl Erlend Þorfinnsson of Orkney and sister of Saint Magnus Erlendsson. Kali was granted his share of the earldom of Orkney by King Sigurðr Magnusson of Norway (c.1090 – 1130, r.1103 – 1130), who also gave him the name of Rögvaldr after Earl Rögvaldr Brusason. Following Sigurðr's death, and a war between his son Magnús and Haraldr Gilli (or Gillikristr, supposedly an illegitimate son of King Magnús 'Barefoot' Ólafsson from Ireland) – which saw Magnús defeated and maimed – Haraldr, who had earlier befriended Rögvaldr in Grimsby, confirmed the grant of Rögvaldr's share of the earldom.⁵⁶ Earl Páll Hákonarson, however, refused to recognise Rögvaldr's claim. Rögvaldr, with the help of his father, allied himself with Frakkok, and promised her and her kin half of Orkney if they helped them defeat Páll. Rögvaldr was defeated, and was forced to flee back to Norway after spending the summer in Shetland. His second expedition would turn out to be more successful as a result of him cleverly putting Páll's beacons out of action. A settlement was reached with the help of Bishop William, and the islands were divided between the two earls, though not without tension. Shortly thereafter, Sveinn Ásleifarson kidnapped Páll, as was mentioned earlier, leaving Rögvaldr as the sole earl until the arrival of Haraldr Maddadsson.⁵⁷

From his introduction in chapter 58 of *Orkneyinga Saga*, it is clear that Rögvaldr is somewhat different to other earls because of his love for skaldic poetry. As Ole Bruhn puts it, 'the impression one gets in the saga of this earl, and descendent of a saint, is of a man liberally reciting skaldic poetry on every possible occasion'.⁵⁸ Indeed, it is easier to count the times when Rögvaldr is not reciting verses than those when he is, with there being thirty-two verses in the saga that can be directly attributed to him.⁵⁹

So keen was Rögvaldr's interest in poetry that he and the Icelander Hallr Þórarinnsson composed the almost academic *Háttalykill* (*The Old Key of Metres*), a work designed to

⁵⁵ Ole Bruhn, 'Earl Rognvald and the Rise of Saga Literature', in Batey, Colleen E., Jesch, Judith, and Morris, Christopher D. (editors), *The Viking Age in Caithness, Orkney and the North Atlantic*, (Edinburgh, 1989), 240.

⁵⁶ *OS*, Edwards and Herman Pálsson, 108-118.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 118-142.

⁵⁸ Bruhn, 'Earl Rognvald and the Rise of Saga Literature', 240.

⁵⁹ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 215.

illustrate each skaldic metre using two verses. The saga tells us that there were originally five verses for each metre but that the work was deemed too long.⁶⁰ As Ian Beuermann points out, the wish to write down these skaldic metres would seem to imply that there was a need to preserve them, as would the preservation of Rögnvaldr's poetry in *Orkneyinga Saga*. His devotion to skaldic poetry and Viking life would thus appear to have been part of a fashionable preservation and revival of more traditional aspects of Norse culture.⁶¹ Ole Bruhn suggests that there was something modern and chic about his skaldic poetry, and that it may have been a Norse reaction to the emerging courtly culture of other parts of Europe.⁶² After being exposed to the modern cultural developments of Western Europe, Rögnvaldr and his peers possibly felt the need to develop their own type of courtly culture, made distinct by the preservation of their cultural heritage, with particular focus on the art of skaldic poetry and Viking-age ideals.

Significantly, Rögnvaldr's poetry differed from tradition in a number of ways. It was characterised by a frequent use of individual stanzas to comment on events as they occurred, often light-hearted and witty in tone and content, distancing them from the more traditional poems of praise.⁶³ Moreover, many of the metres illustrated in *Háttalykill* are not known from earlier or contemporary Norse sources, and are sometimes based on foreign models, indicating that Rögnvaldr and Hallr were experimenting, producing a poem intended to expand skaldic poetry by combining tradition with the modern and the exotic.⁶⁴ Whilst anchored in skaldic tradition, Rögnvaldr's poetry was innovative in its subject matter and register, and probably influenced the compositions of Bishop Bjarni Kolbeinsson of Orkney, author of *Jómsvikíngadrápa* and *Málsháttakvæði*. These developments can be seen as part of Orkney's twelfth-century renaissance. This period saw a flourishing of culture, with the St Magnús Cathedral in Kirkwall – constructed under the auspices of Rögnvaldr – standing as its main symbol. At this time Orkney 'was a northern reflection of a southern brilliance', with much of the impetus centred on the earls and their surrounding of like-minded aristocrats.⁶⁵

Poetry was not, in fact, Rögnvaldr's only talent. In his own words, found in chapter 58 of *Orkneyinga Saga*:

⁶⁰ OS, Edwards and Herman Pálsson, 149.

⁶¹ Beuermann, 'Jarla Sögur Orkneyja', 150.

⁶² Bruhn, 'Earl Rognvald and the Rise of Saga Literature', 240-242.

⁶³ Judith Jesch, 'The Nine Skills of Earl Rögnvaldr of Orkney', *Occasional papers of the Centre for the Study of the Viking Age*, 3, (Nottingham, 2006), 10-11.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶⁵ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 237.

‘At nine skills I challenge –
A champion at chess:
Runes I rarely spoil,
I read books and write:
I’m skilled at skiing
And shooting and sculling
And more! – I’ve mastered
Music and verse.’⁶⁶

As Barbara Crawford has stated, the activities listed by Rögnvaldr ‘are particularly appropriate to the contemporary twelfth-century age, when the upbringing of a young man included activities appropriate to a more leisured lifestyle’.⁶⁷ Rögnvaldr’s nine skills were those of a twelfth-century gentleman rather than of a Viking warlord.⁶⁸ Rögnvaldr’s embrace of courtly pleasures also showed in his poetry. For all its celebration of Viking culture, his skaldic verse was at times influenced by courtly love poetry. Rögnvaldr recorded his relationship with the Viscountess Ermingerd of Narbonne during his voyage to the Holy Land in the form of a couple of verses. The verses combine courtly love motifs of admiration, and the sorrow and grief of absence, with imagery taken from pagan Norse mythology.⁶⁹ One example would be the comparison of Ermingerd’s silky golden locks with the magic gold-grinding mill of the legendary Danish king Fróði. The result is a type of skaldic verse that leaves behind the heroic love of battle for the love of a beautiful woman.⁷⁰

Even more importantly for a twelfth-century nobleman, Rögnvaldr was a devout Christian, and, like a good Christian of this time, he went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, as we have just mentioned. Rögnvaldr’s voyage to Jerusalem undoubtedly counts as one of the most famous and memorable episodes of the saga. Assembling a band of Orcadians and Norwegians – who often failed to get along – Rögnvaldr set out for the Holy Land on a trip that would see them stop in Provence and Galicia; they would stop by Constantinople on the way back. Amongst those who joined Rögnvaldr on his pilgrimage, or crusade, was Bishop

⁶⁶ *OS*, Edwards and Herman Pálsson, 108

⁶⁷ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 215.

⁶⁸ Jesch, ‘The Nine Skills of Earl’, 10.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

William the Old, giving an extra religious dimension to the venture.⁷¹ Rögnvaldr is one of only two earls in *Orkneyinga Saga* to go to the Holy Land, the other being Hákon Pálsson (r. 1105 – 1123). Þórfinn Sigurðarson, known as ‘the Mighty’ (c1009 – c.1065), also went on a pilgrimage, though only to Rome. The pilgrimage is, surprisingly, the only truly saintly act of Rögnvaldr’s. The subject of Rögnvaldr ‘the saint’ will, however, be touched upon later in this thesis.

Rögnvaldr’s lifestyle at times showed tension with his more saintly and noble qualities. Much in the vain of his fellow Orcadians, Rögnvaldr was partial to a bit of piracy. His raiding, according to *Orkneyinga Saga*, appears to have been mostly limited to Muslim lands encountered during the voyage to Jerusalem, making it come across as a form of crusading. While sailing around Spain, Rögnvaldr and his men spent their time ‘looting all over the Pagan areas and winning a great deal of plunder there’.⁷² Yet Rögnvaldr was prepared to attack Christians too. The most revealing episode is perhaps the encounter with a dromond ship in the Mediterranean. While he and his companions felt their attack justified once they discovered that the ship was manned by ‘saracens’, they had already determined to attack it, regardless of who was on the ship. In Rögnvaldr’s words:

‘After that we’ll attack them. If they’re Christian merchants, we’ll give them the chance to make peace with us, but if, as I suspect, they’re heathen, then in his mercy God Almighty will grant us victory over them. Whatever loot we get, we’ll give a fiftieth of it to the poor.’⁷³

One gets a mixed feeling from this event. On the one hand, their behaviour appears in line with that of fellow crusaders. On the other, there is something decidedly ‘Viking’ about the ease with which they raid and loot. While there is nothing particularly unique or strange about Rögnvaldr being both a refined nobleman and a Viking raider – knights throughout the rest of Europe were also incredibly violent people who would kill, loot and rape while campaigning – one cannot help but feel that there is a certain tension between the saintly, cultured, and humorous Rögnvaldr that is presented to us, and the violent Viking that is only glimpsed. His aspiration to be a modern nobleman and a holy man at times seems at odds with his embrace of piracy. *Orkneyinga Saga* almost certainly offers us a sanitised version of Rögnvaldr and

⁷¹ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 216.

⁷² OS, Edwards and Herman Pálsson, 171.

⁷³ OS, Edwards and Herman Pálsson, 174.

glosses over most of his violent activities. This was certainly due to the fact that Rögnvaldr's image had to be cleaned up by those wanting to make a saint out of him just like his uncle Magnús. Rögnvaldr was not reluctant to use violence when he felt the need to, as is apparent from his siege of Lambaborg to get Sveinn Ásleifarson and Margad. As Else Mundal has pointed out, Rögnvaldr's poems include references to violent activities that are excluded from the prose narrative.⁷⁴ It seems unlikely that he was entirely blameless with regards to Earl Páll's kidnapping and disappearance, given his proximity with Sveinn and Frakkok.⁷⁵ It is probable that Rögnvaldr was involved in various other violent deeds that have failed to be recorded.

Perhaps Rögnvaldr's more noble qualities were meant to reflect his Norwegian heritage. Rögnvaldr's virtuous features may highlight the 'good' Norse attributes inherited by the Orcadians. In Rögnvaldr's case, these were enhanced by the fact that he was half-Norwegian. Rögnvaldr's Norwegian side therefore made him more inclined to embrace newer things and ways of life than were his fellow Orcadians. Of course, the presentation of Rögnvaldr as virtuous is also linked, as we said, to his connection to Saint Magnús.

Much like his companion Sveinn Ásleifarson, Rögnvaldr's end would be a violent one. While out looking around Thurso Dale in Caithness for Þórbjörn Clerk, whom he had recently outlawed and exiled, Rögnvaldr and his party were ambushed by Þórbjörn and his men. Þórbjörn landed a nasty blow to the earl's chin, while Stefan 'the Counsellor' thrust a spear into the earl, killing him. This violent death at the hands of men he had outlawed seems somewhat pitiful for a man of his status and apparent refinement. This violent end, however, helped him attain the status of martyr, but also exposes a topic that we have already touched upon briefly: unruliness and the earls' inability to control the thugs and bullies who lived in their earldoms.

1.4 – *A Haven for Thugs and Outlaws*

Many of the textual sources that we have looked at and mentioned represent Orkney-Caithness as somewhat of an oasis for incredibly violent individuals and families.

⁷⁴ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 216.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 216.

Furthermore, it appears that the earldoms attracted outlaws from Scotland and other parts of the Norse world.

The most obvious of these thugs and outlaws would be Sveinn Ásleifarson and Þórbjörn Clerk, whom we have already mentioned. While we have presented Sveinn's story in detail, Þórbjörn's was equally marked by violence. Þórbjörn was made an outlaw following his falling-out with Earl Rögnvaldr Kolsson over a dispute between their followers, Þórkel and Þórarin 'Bag-Nose'. After the murder of Þórkel by Þórarin, Þórbjörn was 'driven away' and 'went across to Caithness and stayed there for some time committing various crimes, raping and killing'.⁷⁶ Þórbjörn then proceeded to kill Þórarin and was therefore made an outlaw. Þórbjörn fled to the court of Malcolm IV, King of Scots. Much like Sveinn, *Orkneyinga Saga* describes Þórbjörn as 'a very brave man, but in general a great bully'.⁷⁷ Like Sveinn, Þórbjörn's death was a violent one. Following the deadly attack on Earl Rögnvaldr, Magnús Havarðsson, a member of Earl Haraldr Maddadsson's retinue, and his men killed the gravely wounded Þórbjörn and his companions. Despite having initially been good friends, and tied by kindred – Þórbjörn was married to Sveinn's sister Ingigerd – Þórbjörn and Sveinn fell out after Frakkok's death. While they were for a time reconciled, they eventually fell out again following their plundering expedition to the Hebrides, which saw, as we have mentioned, Sveinn claiming a greater part of the loot than the others.

As we have seen, the Moddan clan of Sutherland and the powerful Frakkok Moddansdóttir were often associated with violent events, some of them particularly malign. Frakkok's husband was himself known as Ljot *níthing* (the 'renegade', or 'villain'). Violent people appear to have been numerous within that kin group. Among them was the aforementioned Olvir Brawl, one of the sons of Frakkok's daughter Steinvor 'the Stout' and Þórljot of Rack Wick. While we know almost nothing about Olvir's brothers Magnús, Orm, Moddan and Eindridi, and his sister *Auðhildr*, it does not seem unreasonable to imagine that the brothers were violent just like Olvir. It may also come as no surprise that Þórbjörn Clerk was another grandson of Frakkok's. Indeed, he was the son of Frakkok's other daughter, Gudrun, and Þórstein 'the Yeoman'. As such Þórbjörn was and may be regarded as a member of the Moddan kindred.

The most conspicuous and powerful member of Clan Moddan was undoubtedly Frakkok, whose presence can be felt directly and indirectly in a good number of the stories and events presented in *Orkneyinga Saga*. While there is no way of knowing to what extent

⁷⁶ *OS*, Edwards and Herman Pálsson, 208.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 143.

Frakkok's prominence within Sutherland society, and role within these events, have been coloured by the saga author, we can assume that she did exist. As Barbara Crawford points out, despite *Orkneyinga Saga* being the only source to mention her, the events and people dealt with were recent enough and might even have been within living memory of some older people.⁷⁸ Her role in the accidental death of her nephew, Earl Haraldr Hákonarson, however, appears to have taken on something of a supernatural dimension.⁷⁹ Haraldr's mother, Helga, and Frakkok are said to have embroidered a poisoned shirt for her other son, Earl Páll Hákonarson. Haraldr accidentally put it on, despite being warned by both women not to do so, resulting in an agonizingly painful death.⁸⁰ As was earlier explained, Páll's sister Margaret, with the help of Sveinn Ásleifarson, was apparently behind his eventual kidnapping, mutilation and probable murder.

The role of women in these events is particularly interesting. As Crawford notes, while it may have made for good and dramatic storytelling, it is also possible that it reflected reality.⁸¹ It should be noted that the magical aspects of the poisonous shirt story are in line with Norse superstitious beliefs. Indeed, magic was most commonly attributed to women and was portrayed as something of a feminine activity.

The saga also associates the Moddan clan with the mysterious Sigurðr 'the Fake-Deacon'. The author does not tell us much about Sigurðr except that he claimed to be the son of Adalbrikt the Priest, that he had spent time at the court of King David I of Scotland, and that his mistress was *Auðhildr*, daughter of Þórleif Moddansdóttir. The two of them apparently had a child called Ingigerd.⁸² Earl Haraldr met Sigurðr in Sutherland, and the two of them journeyed with Frakkok back to Orkney. Earl Haraldr and Sigurðr then attacked and killed Þórkel Sumarliðason, known as Þórkel Fosterer, a friend of Earl Páll's and a relative of Saint Magnús Erlendsson. The tension this caused between the earls was so great that Sigurðr was banished from the islands, and returned to Scotland before going to the Holy Land.⁸³ The story of Sigurðr and his Scottish connections draws attention to another issue: that of Orcadian outlaws – at least outlaws of an aristocratic status – being welcomed by the Kings of Scots.

⁷⁸ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 179.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁸⁰ OS, Edwards and Herman Pálsson, 99-100.

⁸¹ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 179.

⁸² OS, Edwards and Herman Pálsson, 98.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 98-99.

Almost every outlaw encountered in *Orkneyinga Saga* seeks refuge in Scotland at one point or another. Both Sveinn and Þórbjörn, for example, went to Scotland when they were outlawed. Þórbjörn, we are told, ‘was spending his time alternately with the King of Scots and secretly with his friends to the north in Caithness’.⁸⁴ In each case, whether it was Sveinn, Þórbjörn, or Sigurðr, they all appear to have been well received by the Kings of Scots. One may hazard a guess as to why it was that Orcadian outlaws were apparently so welcome. First of all, it may be that the saga authors were intending to portray the Scottish crown negatively, particularly at a time when relations between the kingdoms of Scotland and Norway were starting to deteriorate. Alternatively, this may have been part of a strategy to advance Scottish interests in the region, a strategy that also involved the Scottish Church; the role of the Church and of Scottish bishops in Caithness will be focused on in the next chapter. These individuals, who were now at odds with the earls, could potentially be turned into allies. As we shall see in a bit, kindred to important Scottish families also connected a fair few of these individuals. These people were thus potentially helpful in promoting the interests of the Kings of Scots. For example, it appears that David I was intent on having the half-Scottish Haraldr Maddadsson accepted as co-earl of Orkney and Caithness.⁸⁵ As Barbara Crawford points out, it is possible that Sveinn Ásleifarson acted on David I’s behalf in the negotiations surrounding the young Haraldr’s appointment as Earl.⁸⁶

Clan Moddan were particularly closely connected to Scotland. Frakkok’s father, Moddan, had a Gaelic name, and the family were based in Sutherland, in the far south of the earldom of Caithness. His granddaughter Margaret, meanwhile, was married to Maddad, Mormaer of Atholl. In chapter 63, when accepting to help Earl Rögnvaldr against Earl Pál, Frakkok states that ‘Over winter I’ll gather an army in Scotland from my kinsmen, friends and in-laws’.⁸⁷ We are also told that Þórbjörn Clerk used to live in both Orkney and Scotland.⁸⁸ Earl Haraldr Hákonarson, for his part, is said to have spent much time in Caithness, as well as in Scotland where he had a ‘good many kinsmen and friends’.⁸⁹ Clan Moddan provides us with a relatively good insight into the mixed Norse and Gaelic society of Caithness. The members of the kindred were no doubt bilingual, and Frakkok’s court at Helmsdale is likely

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁸⁵ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 184.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁸⁷ *OS*, Edwards and Herman Pálsson, 119.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

to have been a fertile ground for the mixing of cultures and ideas.⁹⁰ Clan Moddan were almost certainly not the only family to be so closely linked to Scotland, and it is reasonable to assume that most of the Orcadian elite had friends and family in Scotland. These were communities that were in fact not only connected to Scotia, but also to the Hebrides, Ireland and Man. The earldom as a whole was a melting pot of culture and beliefs. We shall, however, take a closer look at kinship ties and personal names in the final chapter of this thesis.

While Orcadian outlaws usually fled to Scotland, Orkney and Caithness also appear to have attracted outlaws from Scotland. *Orkneyinga Saga* tells a story about a certain Gilla Odran who was outlawed at the same time as Þórbjörn Clerk. Gilla was apparently ‘well-connected but a terrible bully, and he was the cause of so much trouble and killing in the kingdom that Malcom grew very angry’. Gilla, we are told, went to Orkney where he was made steward of Caithness by the earls Rögnvaldr and Haraldr. After falling out with a friend of Rögnvaldr’s called Helgi over the stewardship, Gilla killed him and fled to Argyll where he stayed with Sumarliði ‘the Yeoman’. Rögnvaldr then asked Sveinn Ásleifarson to kill Gilla if ever he had the chance. Sveinn eventually found Gilla during his expedition to the west of Scotland, and killed him along with fifty of his men, much to the delight of Rögnvaldr.⁹¹ Gilla’s case was not an isolated one. Indeed, later treaties between Norway and Scotland included clauses to prevent Orkney from being used as a haven by Scottish outlaws.⁹²

The presence of bullies such as Sveinn, Þórbjörn and Gilla Odran suggests that such people may have been needed by the earls to keep control of earldom rights and incomes.⁹³ The society of Orkney and Caithness was certainly a violent one, as can be seen from the sources, as well as the numerous castles and forts (such as Lambaborg) found in Caithness. Incidentally, these stone castles attest to the familiarity of the earldom elite with the aristocratic culture of the Anglo-Norman world.⁹⁴ As Barbara Crawford points out, there is no way of knowing whether the earldoms were more violent than Norway and Scotland.⁹⁵ However, the sagas do make it seem as though Iceland was comparatively more peaceful than Orkney and Caithness, as both Jón Viðar Sigurðsson and Crawford have pointed out.⁹⁶ Orkney-Caithness was probably no more violent than either Norway or Scotland. A look at

⁹⁰ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 183.

⁹¹ *OS*, Edwards and Herman Pálsson, 208-209.

⁹² Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 187.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 196, and Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Det Norrøne Samfunnet. Vikingen, erkebiskopen og Bonden*, (Oslo, 2008), 97.

other written sources, such as John of Fordun's *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, Roger of Howden's *Gesta Regis Henrici Secundi et Gesta Regis Ricardi Benedicti Abbatis*, the *Chronicle of Melrose*, and Matthew Paris' *Chronica Majora*, presents us with many examples of violence within the kingdom of Scotia. Among the more well known of these are the mutilation and murder of Uhtred Mac Fergusa of Galloway by his half-brother Gille Brigte and nephew Mael Coluim in 1174, and the murder of Pdraig of Atholl in 1242. Aristocratic violence was commonplace in most European countries at this time. Feuds and other forms of violence were widespread, and often formed an integral part of inter-magnate relations. In most High-Medieval societies, royal justice and aristocratic justice coexisted within the same legal norms.⁹⁷ Alice Taylor has argued that such feuds and intra-magnate violence can be seen 'as a type of social order in and of itself; satisfaction performed the same function as justice; violence the same formal court process'.⁹⁸

Violence in Orkney-Caithness may have stood out not so much because of its nature and scale, but because of its setting. The major issue that Norwegian contemporaries appear to have had with Orcadian society and politics in this period seems to have been the perceived absence of modern governmental systems. The lack of authority that the earls seemingly displayed, and their unwillingness to adopt the administrative and feudal features of the emerging Norwegian state appear to be the real issue. Given the peripheral and frontier nature of Orkney and Caithness, royal control of both earldoms was incomplete in the mid twelfth century. This means that social structures and political culture were potentially quite different to those found in Norway. The more tribal, warlike, and 'anachronistic' elements of Orcadian society were therefore probably noticeable to a greater extent for observers in Norway and Scotland. As we have mentioned, the earls' inability to control and punish these wilder elements of society may come across as a spectacular failure on their part. As Ian Beuermann points out, *Orkneyinga Saga* may thus partly read as 'an essay in failure'.⁹⁹ Another reading, however, would make the saga critical of contemporary developments in

⁹⁷ For more on Medieval violence: Warren c. Brown, *Violence in Medieval Europe* (2011); Paul Hyams, *Rancor and Reconciliation in Medieval England* (2003); Tom Lambert, 'Theft, Homicide and Crime in Late Anglo-Saxon law', *Past and Present*, 214, (2012), 3-43; Justine Firnhaber-Baker, *Violence and the State in Languedoc, 1250-1400* (2014); Alice Taylor, 'Crime without Punishment: Medieval Scottish Law in Comparative Perspective', in David Bates (editor), *Anglo-Norman Studies: Proceedings of the Battle Conference 35*, (2013), 287-304.

⁹⁸ Alice Taylor, *The Shape of the State in Medieval Scotland, 1124-1290*, (Oxford, 2016), 433.

⁹⁹ Beuermann, 'Jarla Sögur Orkneyja', 149.

Norway, as Beuermann suggests. Indeed, those parts of the saga dealing with Rögnvaldr and Sveinn may in fact present a defence of more traditional rulership, whereby earls depended on their chieftains and ruled in conjunction with them.¹⁰⁰ It appears that *Orkneyinga Saga* both attacks and celebrates ‘Viking’ rulership and society. In any case, it certainly seems that Orcadian society exhibited noticeably distinct traits. One trait that stands out is that of rebelliousness.

1.5 – *Insubordination and Rebellion*

In the eyes of both Scots and Norwegians, Orcadians were troublesome rebels who could not be trusted. Our first encounter with Orcadian troublemakers in the *Chronicle of Melrose* comes in 1197. The 1197 entry in the chronicle states that ‘A battle was fought in Moray, near the castle of Inverness, between the followers of the king, and Roderick and Thorphin the son of king [sic] Harold [Maddadsson]’.¹⁰¹ After defeating Roderick, King William ‘took prisoner earl Harold, and then caused him to be guarded in the castle of Roxburgh, until his son Thorfin surrendered himself as a hostage for his father’. *Gesta Annalia* gives a more in-depth account of these events under the year 1197. It states:

‘The following year [1197], again, a battle was fought in Moray, hard by the castle of Inverness, between the king’s men and Rodoric and Torphin, Earl Harald’s son; but the king’s enemies were put to flight. Rodoric, also, with many others, fell slain. When the king heard of this, he was highly indignant against Harald, and led an army into Moray; and, scouring all those highland districts – namely Sutherland, Caithness, and Ross – he at last was so lucky as to get hold of Harald, whom he brought across the Scottish sea as far as Roxburgh Castle, and threw him into a dungeon there until peace should be made. At length, however, Harald made his peace with his lord the king, and, leaving there his son as hostage, went back to his own land’.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 151-152.

¹⁰¹ Joseph Stevenson (editor, translator), *The Church Historians of England: Chronicles of John and Richard of Hexham; Chronicle of Holyrood: Chronicle of Melrose*, (2010), 147.

¹⁰² William F. Skene (editor, translator), *John of Fordun’s Chronicle of the Scottish Nation*, (Edinburgh, 1872), *Annals*, XXII.

Yet, Þórfinn, ‘on account of his father’s bad faith, and because the peace established between him and the king was afterwards wickedly broken’, was blinded and castrated, dying shortly afterwards. *Orkneyinga Saga* indicates that Þórfinn was maimed in retaliation for Haraldr’s attack on Bishop John of Caithness in 1201.¹⁰³

This was not the first time that Haraldr had caused William trouble. While he had initially been advanced as a pro-Scots earl, Haraldr proved to be a most troublesome man indeed; he was a pain not only for the Kings of Scotland, but also for his Norwegian overlords. *Gesta Annalia* mentions a disturbance that occurred in Caithness just the year before. It tells us that:

‘That same year [1196] King William led an army into Caithness. Crossing the river Oikel, he killed some of the disturbers of the peace, and bowed to his will both provinces of the Caithness men, routing Harald, the earl thereof, until then a good and trusty man – but at that time, goaded on by his wife, the daughter of Mached, he had basely deceived his lord the king, and risen against him’.¹⁰⁴

Roger of Howden’s account has part of the royal army reaching Thurso and destroying the castle there.¹⁰⁵ Haraldr divorced his first wife, Afreka, daughter of Duncan, Mormaer of Fife (d.1154), and sister of Duncan II (d.1204) for reasons that are not exactly clear.¹⁰⁶ *Orkneyinga Saga* informs us that they had four children, Heinrek (Henry), Hakon, Helena and Margaret.¹⁰⁷ Haraldr then married Gormflaith (Hvarflöð), daughter of Malcolm MacHeth, earl of Ross. They had six children, Þórfinn, David, Jón, Gunnhild, Herborga and Langlif.¹⁰⁸ It is likely that this union with the daughter of Malcom MacHeth¹⁰⁹ lay behind Haraldr’s involvement in the troubles that took place in Moray in the 1190s.¹¹⁰

¹⁰³ OS, Edwards and Herman Pálsson, 224.

¹⁰⁴ *Chronicle of the Scottish Nation, Annals*, XXII.

¹⁰⁵ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 247.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 246.

¹⁰⁷ OS, Edwards and Herman Pálsson, 214.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 218.

¹⁰⁹ There has been some debate as to whether Malcolm MacHeth was a single person, or whether there were two individuals: one of them an illegitimate son of Alexander I, and the other the son of Áed (or Eth or Beth), mormaer of Ross. For more on this: G.W.S. Barrow, *Kingship and Unity: Scotland 1000-1306*, (1981); A.A.M. Duncan, *The Kingship of the Scots 842-1292: Succession and Independence*, (2002); Russell Andrew McDonald, *Outlaws of Medieval Scotland: Challenges to the Canmore Kings, 1058-1266*, (2016).

¹¹⁰ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 246.

Malcolm was one of the rebels at Stracathro, and he persisted in his rebellion until 1134, when David I captured him with the help of some English barons.¹¹¹ Malcolm was imprisoned for 23 years, eventually being released in 1157, and given the title of Earl of Ross.¹¹² While Malcolm IV attempted to give Ross to his sister in 1162, it appears that Malcolm MacHeth successfully held Ross until his death in 1168.¹¹³ Malcolm's descendants were, however, denied their inheritance.

Haraldr was most probably drawn into these events due to the need to defend his wife's interests in Ross. Interestingly, *Orkneyinga Saga* informs us that Haraldr's son Henry (a child from his first marriage, curiously) 'ruled over Ross'¹¹⁴, indicating that Haraldr's operations in Ross were partly successful.¹¹⁵ As *Gesta Annalia* states, it was believed that it was his wife who incited him to rebel. The fact that *Gesta Annalia* tells us that a battle was fought 'again' in Moray implies that Haraldr had risen against William in 1196. The main threat to Gomflaith's family came from the increasingly powerful de Moravia family of Moray. However, Haraldr's actions in Moray were probably as much an attempt at stopping the threat that the de Moravia family posed to his own power in Sutherland and Caithness as they were of protecting his wife's family's interests in Ross.¹¹⁶ The de Moravias were loyal vassals of the Scottish kings and quickly cemented themselves as the most powerful family in the area. As such, they were important agents in the advancement of the authority, interests and policies of the Kings of Scotia in the north of Scotland. Following a display of insubordination by Earl Jón Haraldsson in 1214, Sutherland was granted to the de Moravias.¹¹⁷

Haraldr further angered King William by killing Haraldr *ungi* ('the Young') in 1198. Haraldr *ungi* was a son of Eiríkr Stagbrellir ('Stray-Brails') – Eiríkr himself was the son of *Auðhildr*, mistress of Sigurðr 'the Fake-Deacon', and Eiríkr Strife – and Ingiriðr, daughter of Earl Rögnvaldr Kali Kolsson. The younger Harald was therefore deeply imbedded in the society of Sutherland and Caithness, and posed a legitimate threat to the older Haraldr. *Orkneyinga Saga* informs us that Haraldr *ungi* was granted half of Caithness by King William. Haraldr Maddadsson refused to hand the younger Haraldr half of Orkney. Both

¹¹¹ Thomson, *The History of Orkney*, 72.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ OS, Edwards and Herman Pálsson, 224.

¹¹⁵ Thomson, *The History of Orkney*, 72.

¹¹⁶ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 247.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 266.

Haraldrs assembled their forces and met during the Battle of Wick. The younger Haraldr's army was outmatched, and both he and his brother-in-law, Lifolf Pate (*skalli*), were killed.¹¹⁸ After learning of Haraldr *ungi*'s death, King William sent messengers to Rögnvaldr Guðröðarson, King of the Hebrides (and grandson of Earl Hákon Pálsson), asking him to take over Caithness. With his army drawn from the Hebrides, Kintyre and Ireland, Rögnvaldr successfully took over Caithness and appointed three stewards, Mani Olafsson, Rafn 'the Lawman' (lögmaðr), and Hlifolf 'the Old', to take charge while he returned to the Hebrides.¹¹⁹ Roger of Howden states that Rögnvaldr bought the earldom 'saving the king's yearly revenue'.¹²⁰ Haraldr Maddadsson, who was in Orkney, then sent someone – apparently a kinsman of Rafn's – over to Caithness to kill Hlifolf.¹²¹ It was following this that Haraldr went to Caithness and had Bishop John mutilated. For the Scots, this was a most unbearable act, and the punishment imposed on Haraldr was severe. A similar situation was to occur twenty years later with the murder of Bishop Adam of Caithness in 1222. In the latter case it was Haraldr's son and successor, Jón Haraldsson, who would incur the wrath of the Scottish king. Both incidents resulted in a massive expedition to Caithness by King William and Alexander II respectively. We shall take a closer look at these two events in the next chapter.

There is also evidence that Haraldr was in contact with King John of England in 1201, something that could have been regarded as treasonable. Pipe rolls record Adam 'chaplain of Orkney' and several of his men going to Orkney on the king's affairs. The next year, Haraldr and Adam were granted a safe-conduct to meet John in England, though they most probably did not go given the trouble Haraldr was in.¹²²

Despite *Gesta Annalia*'s assertion that Haraldr had been a 'good and trusty' man before his marriage to Gormflaith, it is likely that he had already been engaging in acts of rebellion. Indeed, it is most probable that he gave direct help to those most hated enemies of the Scottish Crown: the MacWilliams (or mac Uilleim). The MacWilliam kindred were descended from Malcolm III Canmore's (c.1031 – 1093, r.1058 – 1093) first wedding to Ingibjörg of Orkney. As descendants of Malcolm, the MacWilliams were a very real threat to the Canmore kings. The Canmores repeatedly had to suppress MacWilliam insurrections, stopping only once the last MacWilliam, an infant girl, was executed in 1229 or 1230. Whether Ingibjörg was Þórfinn Sigurðsson 'the Mighty's' widow or a daughter of his has

¹¹⁸ *OS*, Edwards and Herman Pálsson, 220.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 221.

¹²⁰ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 250.

¹²¹ *OS*, Edwards and Herman Pálsson, 221.

¹²² Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 253.

been a matter of debate. While *Orkneyinga Saga* states that Ingibjörg was Þórfinn's widow¹²³, her sons were already fully-grown by the time she married Malcolm. For this reason, William Thomson and others have suggested that she may in fact have been a daughter of Þórfinn's rather than his widow.¹²⁴

Either way, the MacWilliams were related by blood to the earldom dynasty. It is probable that a number of MacWilliams used Orkney or Shetland as a base from which to launch attacks on Scotland in the second half of the twelfth century. For the MacWilliams, the Earls of Orkney could have been relied on for support and protection.¹²⁵ For the earls, the MacWilliams would have provided valuable allies against interference by the Kings of Scots.¹²⁶ Furthermore, as Alasdair Ross points out, earning the goodwill of potential kings of Scotia would have been to the earls' advantage.¹²⁷ Interestingly, and, rather unsurprisingly, *Orkneyinga Saga* is the only known contemporary source that is pro-MacWilliam.¹²⁸ The saga states:

‘Ingibjorg the Earls’-Mother married Malcolm, King of Scots, known as Long-Neck. Their son was Duncan, King of Scots, father of William, who was a great man and whose son William the Noble every Scotsman wanted for his king’.¹²⁹

Haraldr Maddadsson possibly even gave direct military support to the MacWilliams. *Gesta Annalia* reports that in 1179, the first of the MacWilliams, Domnall, ‘relying upon the treachery of some disloyal men, had first, indeed, wrested from his king the whole of Ross, by his tyrannous insolence’.¹³⁰ While there is no way of knowing who exactly these ‘disloyal men’ were, the fact that Ross was the first region to be targeted makes Caithness a plausible launching point for the operation. If this was the case, it is quite probable that a number of these men were Orcadians. Increasing pressure on Earl Haraldr in the wake of Bishop John's

¹²³ OS, Edwards and Herman Pálsson, 76.

¹²⁴ Thomson, *The History of Orkney*, 52.

¹²⁵ Alasdair Ross, ‘Moray, Ulster, and the MacWilliams’, in Sean Duffy (editor), *The World of the Galloglass: Kings, warlords and warriors in Ireland and Scotland, 1200-1600*, (Dublin, 2007), 38.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ OS, Edwards and Herman Pálsson, 76.

¹³⁰ *Chronicle of the Scottish Nation*, Annals, XVI.

maiming probably resulted in the MacWilliams being evicted from Orkney and setting up a new base in Ulster after 1202.¹³¹

Haraldr's son, Jón, the last of earl of the 'Norse' line, was also a troublemaker and found himself involved in Moray. *Gesta Annalia* reports that 'in the year 1214, King William set out for Moray, where he made some stay; and having made a treaty of peace with the Earl of Caithness, and taken his daughter as a hostage, he came back from Moray into Scotland'.¹³²

The rebellious tendencies of the Orcadians, coupled with their links to the MacWilliams, meant that they were regarded in much the same light as the Moravians and Galwegians. As Alasdair Ross has explained, Moravians came to be regarded as rebellious murderers and traitors, and were frequently vilified by royal propaganda.¹³³ Similarly, the Galwegians who revolted on a number of occasions, the most notable of which was in 1235, were also portrayed as rebels and murderers.

It was not only the Scots who had a dim view of Orcadians. For the Norwegians, the Orcadian aristocracy was equally unreliable and suspicious. Following Rögnvaldr Brusason's death, Earl Þórfinn Sigurðarson refused to pay compensation to one of King Magnús Olafsson's (c. 1024 – 1047, r.1035 – 1047) men whose brother had also perished in the attack. *Orkneyinga Saga* has Magnús tell Þórfinn that 'this isn't the first time you think you killed too few of my retainers: nor the first time you failed to pay compensation'.¹³⁴ Earl Magnús Erlendsson's refusal to fight at the Battle of the Menai Straits, and his subsequent flight to Scotland, is another example of Orcadian insubordination that can be found in *Orkneyinga Saga*.

Animosity between the earls and their Norwegian kings would reach a new level during Earl Harald Maddadsson's rule. Once again, Haraldr found himself in trouble. Haraldr fell foul of King Sverrir as a result of the *Eyjarskeggjar* rebellion in 1193. *Orkneyinga Saga*'s account of these events is synoptic, covering a couple of paragraphs. Haraldr's brother-in-law, Óláfr, and Jón Hallhelssin raised an army in Orkney to fight King Sverrir and replace him with King Magnús Erlingsson's son Sigurðr. Sverrir defeated the rebels, known as the 'Island Beards' or 'Island-Beardies' due to their being from Orkney and Shetland, at the Battle of Florvag. Jón, Óláfr and Sigurðr were all killed. The saga then informs us that:

¹³¹ Ross, 'Moray, Ulster, and the MacWilliams', 38.

¹³² *Chronicle of the Scottish Nation*, Annals, XXVIII.

¹³³ Ross, 'Moray, Ulster, and the MacWilliams', 24-44.

¹³⁴ *OS*, Edwards and Herman Pálsson, 73.

‘King Sverrir grew to hate Earl Harald very bitterly, blaming him for the mustering of the army; and in the end, taking Bishop Bjarni along with him, Earl Harald had to go east to Norway, where he surrendered himself to King Sverrir and asked him to give judgement and settle everything between them. King Sverrir took back from Harald the whole of Shetland, with all its taxes and revenues, and since that time the Earls of Orkney have not ruled in Shetland’.¹³⁵

Sverris Saga, on the other hand, provides much more detail. It tells us that Sverrir planned to sail to Orkney with a fleet to punish the Orcadians for their treachery. Earl Haraldr, learning of this, travelled to Norway with Bishop Bjarni, and ‘all the best men of Orkney’, to meet with Sverrir at Christchurch Cathedral in Bergen and plead his case.¹³⁶ Haraldr claimed that he had not encouraged the *Eyjarskeggjar* to rebel; though he also admitted that he had not fought them. Haraldr’s excuse was that he was old and, as we have mentioned, that he was unable to control his men. Haraldr then proceeded to fall at Sverrir’s feet, laying his case in his and God’s power. The king’s terms of agreement were harsh. While Haraldr was put in charge of Orkney once more, Shetland came under direct royal control, and half of the legal fines of Orkney had to go to Sverrir.¹³⁷ The sysselman that Sverrir put in charge of Shetland was Arni Lorja

Despite the humiliating loss of Shetland, and the precarious situation that Orkney and Haraldr found themselves in, Haraldr was still ready to go against the Norwegian crown. *Böglunga Sögur* indicates that after Sverrir’s death in 1202, Haraldr had Arni Lorja murdered and ‘laid Orkney and Shetland under himself again, with all its taxes and dues, as he had had it before’. The parallels between this murder and that of Hlifolf are clear.¹³⁸

The Norwegian kings also disliked Haraldr’s son Jón. Notwithstanding he and his brother, David, attempting to repair relations with Sverrir’s successor, King Ingi, Jón Haraldsson found himself in trouble. The brothers had to pay a large fine to Ingi, and were forced to swear fealty to him as well as hand over hostages, according to *Böglunda Sögur*.¹³⁹ King Hákon Hákonarson appears to have been deeply distrustful of Jón. *Hákonar Saga Hákonarsonar* (Hakon’s Saga) indicates that Jón had to leave his son Haraldr as a hostage in Bergen in 1224. That same year, Haraldr was drowned, as is recorded in the *Icelandic Annals*.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 224.

¹³⁶ *Sverres Saga*, translated into Norwegian by Dag Gundersen, (Oslo, 1967), 160-161.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 161-162.

¹³⁸ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 259.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 263.

For the earls, the increasing restrictions of power brought by the growing ambitions of both kings must have been unbearable. The chapters in *Orkneyinga Saga* relating to Earl Þórfinn's relationship with King Óláfr Haraldsson (Saint Óláfr, 950 – 1030, r. 1015 – 1028) may give us a glimpse into how the earls of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries saw their Norwegian overlords. After being forced by Óláfr to submit, the saga says that Þórfinn 'was reluctant to give up all hope of keeping his ancestral lands, nor did he care to be forced without a fight to swear oaths granting those lands to men with no birthright to them'¹⁴⁰. Earl Þórfinn later tells his nephew, Earl Rögnvaldr Brusason, that 'The reason we [Þórfinn and his brother Brusi] agreed to King Olaf's claim of ownership was because we were entirely in his hands, not because we thought he had any right to it'.¹⁴¹ When placing these acts of defiance in the context of the period – the Kings of Norway and Scotland's push to establish direct overlordship over the peripheral parts of their respective kingdoms – one better understands what motivated the last 'Norse' earls to rebel. For them, this was a question of remaining independent and avoiding being turned into simple royal functionaries. As Ian Beuermann points out, if *Orkneyinga Saga* was a celebration of 'Viking-age' rulership, then this was a battle that was not simply fought in real life, but also one that was fought in the literary sphere.¹⁴² For both the Norwegians and the Scots, Haraldr's insubordination and treachery must have come across as extreme arrogance.

The perception of the Orcadians as traitors and rebels must have stemmed partly from these genuine acts of rebellion. However, the simple fact that the earls and their men served two kings at once undoubtedly made them suspicious in the eyes of both sides. Allegiance to two kings, and the peripheral nature of the earldom when seen from both kingdoms, underscored the 'otherness' of the Orcadians. The earls' potential to fall back on either one of their overlords in times of trouble would have displeased both kings, and is best exemplified by a conversation between Earl Þórfinn and King Óláfr. Much like the other passages dealing with the relationship between the two men, this conversation appears coloured by a late-twelfth-century lens. In it Þórfinn tells Óláfr that 'it's not possible for me to pay homage to you. I'm already the Earl of the King of Scots and subject to him'.¹⁴³ This did not apparently stop Óláfr from forcing Þórfinn to submit by threatening to replace him with a sysselman.

¹⁴⁰ *OS*, Edwards and Herman Pálsson, 46-47.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁴² Beuermann, 'Jarla Sögur Orkneyja', 152.

¹⁴³ *OS*, Edwards and Herman Pálsson, 46.

Serving two kings was dangerous for the earls. As the kings of Norway and Scotland began to consolidate and expand their power, they began to resent the earls' subjection to another sovereign.¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, whom would the earls prioritise if war were to break out between both kingdoms? While it was not unknown for vassals to hold lands from two different overlords, they usually had a liege lord whom they would prioritise their fealty to. The Earls of Orkney-Caithness were unusual in that they held not only titles, but also official positions in two kingdoms; only the Beaumont family of Normandy were in a similar situation, being vassals of both the Kings of England and the Kings of France.¹⁴⁵ It was the unfortunate Earl Magnús Gilbertsson who found himself in the impossible situation of choosing when war finally did break out in 1263.

As a result of King Alexander III of Scotland's campaign in Skye in 1262 – the campaign was part of an effort to acquire the Hebrides – King Hákon Hákonarson decided to undertake a great naval expedition to reassert his authority in the Hebrides. Magnús is said to have sailed with the fleet from Bergen, being given a long-ship by Hákon. Surprisingly, Magnús disappears from the story as it is recounted in *Hákonar Saga Hákonarsonar*, with there being no mention of him at the disastrous Battle of Largs of 1263 and the sudden death of Hákon in Kirkwall during the journey back to Norway. No mention is made of Magnús' whereabouts or actions during these events.¹⁴⁶

From the Scottish side, meanwhile, there is evidence that a large number of hostages were taken in Caithness. The Exchequer Rolls show that their expenses were charged to the account of the sheriff of Inverness at a penny a day.¹⁴⁷ These hostages were no doubt taken to ensure Magnús' loyalty. Magnús most probably just waited it out through these events, hoping to keep himself and his earldoms in one piece. Trouble was only just starting for the people of Caithness, however. *Magnúss Saga Lagabætis* (The Saga of Magnús 'the Lawmender') states that in 1264, the Scottish army 'took much goods from the men of Caithness because King Hakon had laid a fine on the men of Caithness'.¹⁴⁸ Caithness most probably bore the brunt of the fallout of the failed campaign.¹⁴⁹ A 1265 entry in the Exchequer Rolls indicates that the men of Caithness were fined 200 cows.¹⁵⁰ As Barbara

¹⁴⁴ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 239.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 299-300.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 300.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 301.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Crawford puts it, ‘the ‘unfortunate men of Caithness’ whom we hear about so often in the records, were non-combatants who had the misfortune to live in this strategic war zone’.¹⁵¹ Following the Treaty of Perth in 1266, Earl Magnús had to be reconciled with Hákon’s son, King Magnús Hákonarson ‘the Law-Mender’ (1238 – 1280, r.1263 – 1280). We know little of the reconciliation of 1267. There is only a statement in *Hirðskrá* that refers to ‘special’ agreements between the two. Whether these agreements were as punitive as those of 1195, closer to those of 1210, or different to both of these, the ‘position of the earl was now more as that of a royal officer than an independent chieftain, and his authority was delegated to him by the king’.¹⁵²

As this chapter has made apparent, an examination of contemporary written sources gives a rather evocative image of Orcadians as being violent and troublesome. The perception of Orkney and Caithness being wild and lawless was fuelled not simply by real occurrences, but also by the ‘otherness’ that accompanied having a mixed identity. For both Scots and Norsemen there was something different about Norse-Gaels. This ‘otherness’, coupled with a distrust of that which is different and distinct, undoubtedly contributed to this particular understanding of Orcadian identity. Yet it would be a mistake to assume that Norsemen and Scots only saw Orcadians in these terms. While they certainly did see them as dubious pirates, troublemakers and rebels, their understanding of Norse-Gael identity was not limited to this representation and was far more complex. This was but a facet (albeit an important one) of the external perceptions of Orcadian Norse-Gael identity. As we have seen, Orcadians were equally regarded as brave and commendable in their shrewdness, warlike nature, and love of culture. We shall now move on from the subject of violence and insubordination to turn our attention to a different (though not necessarily always separate) matter: religion.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 305.

Chapter 2

Heathens, Saints, and Sinners

This chapter will look at the place of religion in the perceptions of Orcadian Norse-Gael identity. The religious developments that occurred from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries, and the relationship between these and understandings of Orcadian distinctness will also be dealt with. While the first few generations of Norse settlers in Shetland, Orkney and Caithness were pagans, they soon converted to Christianity. The survival of pagan practices, however, was noted by contemporaries and reflected, for them, rather poorly upon the Orcadians. The persistence of pagan practices and beliefs could, additionally, be seen as defiance towards the kings of Norway. Pagan symbolism was also a means of establishing the legitimacy of the Orcadian dynasty and rejecting the superiority of the Norwegian crown during the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. The survival and eventual ‘defeat’ of heathenism found a vivid illustration in the story of the martyrdom of Earl Magnús Erlendsson at the hands of his cousin Earl Hákon Pálsson. With Magnús, the earldom dynasty thus had its first saint. It soon had a second in the person of Magnús’ nephew, Rögnvaldr Kali Kolsson. These dynastic saints brought status and fame to the northern earldoms in a way that could never have before been imagined, nor possible without them. These saints offered the future Orcadian earls new tools and symbols to show their independence and equality with regards to the Norwegian crown. The earldoms of Orkney and Caithness were also connected to the wider British world. Celtic saints’ cults from northern Britain and Ireland survived the Norse settlement, and were sometimes brought back to Norway. In Caithness, Scottish bishops began to be appointed by the Kings of Scots in the second half of the twelfth century. Tensions between the earls and the Scottish bishops of Caithness would come to a head in the first half of the thirteenth century. Bishop John was maimed in 1202, while Bishop Adam was murdered in 1222. These crimes would incur the wrath of the Scottish kings, and were so grave and sinful that the papacy became involved.

2.1 – *The Pagan Past*

One character particularly associated with Norse paganism is Earl Einarr Rögnvaldason, better known as Torf-Einarr. *Orkneyinga Saga* identifies Einarr with the god

Óðinn. Firstly, Einarr's very name may be a hint towards Óðinn's warriors, the *einherjar*.¹⁵³ Einarr is described as 'tall and ugly, and though he was one-eyed he was still the most keen-sighted of men'.¹⁵⁴ Einarr's single eye mirrors Óðinn's offering of one of his eyes in return for wisdom. Einarr's keen sight enables him to spot Hálfðan Long-Leg following his battle with him. Hálfðan was one of the sons of Haraldr Hárfagri (Fair-Hair) who apparently killed Einarr's father, Rögnvaldr of Møre. In revenge for this, Einarr supposedly killed Hálfðan by using the 'blood eagle', whereby he cut his ribs from the spine and pulled the lungs out through the back to imitate wings. Einarr dedicated the killing to Óðinn, making a couple of skaldic verses to celebrate the 'sacrifice'. In a sense this was a sacrifice to himself. This mirrors the *Hávamál* poem, in which Óðinn hangs himself on the world tree to gain knowledge of poetry, and states 'dedicated to Odin, given myself to myself'.¹⁵⁵ Einarr is also similar to Óðinn in that he spontaneously recites poetry.¹⁵⁶ Much in the same way that Óðinn is the father of the gods and the ancestor of the Norwegian kings, Einarr is the ancestor of the earls of Orkney and Caithness.¹⁵⁷ His uncle Sigurðr, the first earl of Orkney, and his cousin Guthorm both died, while Sigurðr's other son, Hallad, gave up the earldom. All future earls of Orkney and Caithness were thus descended from Einarr.

The killing of Hálfðan made Einarr the first earl to clash with a Norwegian king, and his association with Óðinn is significant. Indeed, it links the earldom dynasty to the gods. This link with Óðinn and the gods, which confers status upon the kings of Norway, is absent in the origin myth of the earls' ancestry. The earls' mythical ancestor, Fornjótr is giant, rather than a god. The mythical origins attributed to the Orcadian dynasty are complex and will be explored more closely in the next chapter. It is enough to note for now that this connection to Óðinn was intended to add prestige to the earldom dynasty, and conferred a sense of equality and independence vis-à-vis of the Norwegian kings.¹⁵⁸

Einarr's background, as the child of a slave, was also based on a mythical pattern. While marriage between individuals of equal social status was the general rule in Old Norse

¹⁵³ Beuermann, 'Jarla Sögur Orkneyja', 135.

¹⁵⁴ *OS*, Edwards and Pálsson, 29.

¹⁵⁵ William P. L. Thomson, 'Harald Fairhair, Torf Einar and *Orkneyinga Saga*', in Olwyn Owen (editor), *The World of Orkneyinga Saga. The Broad-Cloth Viking Trip*, (2005), 8.

¹⁵⁶ Else Mundal has rigorously examined Einarr's poetry in her article 'The Orkney Earl and Scald Torf-Einarr and his Poetry', in Colleen E. Batey, Judith Jesch, and Christopher D. Morris (editors), *The Viking Age in Caithness, Orkney and the North Atlantic: Select Papers from the Proceedings of the Eleventh Viking Congress, Thurso and Kirkwall, 22 August – 1 September 1989*, (Edinburgh, 1993), 248-259.

¹⁵⁷ Thomson, 'Harald Fairhair, Torf Einar and *Orkneyinga Saga*', 8.

¹⁵⁸ Beuermann, 'Jarla Sögur Orkneyja', 136.

society, it appears, as Gro Steinsland has argued, that Norse ideas of kingship made an exception of this.¹⁵⁹ In Norse mythology, the prototype of a king is descended from the union of opposites – the *hieros gamos* – between a god and a giantess.¹⁶⁰ Having a princely father and a slave-born mother was not simply acceptable; it was desirable. Einarr is not simply the son of a slave. He is a born ruler, son of an earl and the product of a mythical alliance. Einarr appears, as Ian Beuermann puts it, as ‘the worthy progenitor of the new ruling house of Orkney who refutes Norwegian claims’.¹⁶¹

While the first few generations of Norse settlers in the area were pagan, they eventually converted to Christianity. Conversion to Christianity is said to have taken place during Earl Sigurðr the Stout’s reign. According to the saga tradition, Sigurðr and Orkney were forced to convert by King Óláfr Tryggvason (c.960 – 1000, r. 995 – 1000) around 995. Óláfr’s demand was the following:

‘ ‘I want you and all your subjects to be baptized,’ he said when they met. ‘If you refuse, I’ll have you killed on the spot, and I swear that I’ll ravage every island with fire and steel’ ’.¹⁶²

Sigurðr reluctantly accepted, and was baptized. The king also took his son, Hvelp (or Hundi), as a hostage, and baptized him under the name of Hlodvir¹⁶³. Orkney then converted. Hlodvir, however, died in Norway soon after this as Sigurðr refused to pay homage to Óláfr.¹⁶⁴

The narrative presented by the author is obviously simplistic, and doubtless does not accurately reflect the genuine process of the conversion of Orkney. It is, however, entirely plausible that a meeting did take place between the king and the earl. As Crawford notes, such a meeting would have been ‘part of the process of the Norwegian king’s assertion of his

¹⁵⁹ Gro Steinsland, *Det Hellige Bryllup og Norrøne Kongeideologi: En Analyse av Hierogami-Myten i Skírnismál, Ynglingatal, Háleygjatal og Hyndluljóð*, (Oslo, 1991); Mundal, ‘The Orkney Earl and Scald Torf-Einarr and his Poetry’, 251.

¹⁶⁰ Beuermann, ‘Jarla Sögur Orkneyja’, 133, and Mundal, ‘Torf-Einarr and his Poetry’, 251.

¹⁶¹ Beuermann, ‘Jarla Sögur Orkneyja’, 136.

¹⁶² OS, Edwards and Pálsson, 37.

¹⁶³ The name of ‘Hound’ was frequently attributed to warriors in Irish traditions, and had a certain pagan connotation. Whether there was such a tradition in Norway needs further investigation. Perhaps there was a deeper symbolism attached to the forcible changing of Hundi’s name. Such a change of name might have explicitly reflected his baptism, and virtually ‘cleansed’ him of his pagan and Norse-Gael attributes.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 37-38.

authority over the earl'.¹⁶⁵ Indeed, Óláfr's visit to Orkney was almost certainly political in nature. His campaigns between 991-994 also involved the Isle of Man and the Hebrides, areas that Sigurðr had control over at this time. Religion may have played a part in the securing of Sigurðr's obedience.¹⁶⁶ Crawford has also pointed out that a version of *Olaf's Saga* states that Óláfr left priests behind 'to instruct the people'.¹⁶⁷ This may have been Óláfr's most important contribution to the conversion of Orkney. Leaving priests on the islands ensured that the potentially lengthy process of converting Orkney and bringing it under the episcopal control of Norway was in safe hands.

The conversion of the Orcadians, was certainly a lengthy affair, and undoubtedly started in one form or another quite a while prior to Óláfr's arrival in the islands. Contact with the Celtic populations of Northern Scotland and the rest of the British Isles meant that Orcadians had been exposed to Christianity for a long time. Earl Sigurðr's mother (Eithne, the daughter of King Kjarval of Ireland), for example, was Irish, and therefore Christian. Strangely enough, though, *Orkneyinga Saga* also describes her as a sorceress.¹⁶⁸ His wife was the youngest daughter of Malcolm II of Scotland (c. 954 – 1034, r. 1005 – 1034). These Celtic Christians may have brought their own priests with them, though whether these had any impact upon wider society is impossible to know.¹⁶⁹ Moreover, Christian influences had already made their way from Norway. King Eiríkr 'Bloodaxe' Haraldsson and his sons had been baptised in England. They held much influence over the earldoms between 932 and 970, and it would be strange if their Christian beliefs did not influence Orkney and Caithness to some extent too. Ian Beuermann points out that *Orkneyinga Saga* does not link the 'positive' of Christian conversion with the British Isles. Disowning any British elements does seem to show a desire to place Orkney firmly within the Scandinavian sphere.¹⁷⁰ On the other hand, Óláfr is also criticised for the brutality that he used to impose the new faith, and one may read into this a warning to Norwegian kings to not be too blunt in their methods of coercion.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁵ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 126.

¹⁶⁶ Thomson, *The History of Orkney*, 38.

¹⁶⁷ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 127.

¹⁶⁸ OS, Edwards and Pálsson, 36. Are we to read into this that Eithne was actually Pagan? Or is this simply another case of a woman being associated with magic for folkloric and literary reasons? The disowning of any British element to Orkney's conversion might explain why the saga author brushed Eithne's Christianity aside.

¹⁶⁹ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 127.

¹⁷⁰ Beuermann, 'Jarla Sögur Orkneyja', 144.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Archaeological discoveries also appear to contradict the dramatic story of Óláfr's sudden and forcible conversion. The grave evidence that has been found indicates that pagan burial practices had stopped prior to Óláfr's arrival.¹⁷² This process may have occurred as rapidly as in a generation or two.¹⁷³ Continuing Christian sculpture after 800 is a further indication that Christianity survived in Orkney following Norse colonisation.¹⁷⁴

Despite nominally accepting the new faith, it appears that Sigurðr did not fully renounce his old pagan practices and beliefs. Sigurðr's mother had made a magical banner for him when he was younger. The banner was embroidered with a raven 'and when the banner fluttered in the breeze, the raven seemed to be flying ahead'.¹⁷⁵ More impressively, the banner would bring victory to the man whom it was carried before, but death to the one who carried it. Almost prophetically, it was this banner that was said to have resulted in Sigurðr's death at the Battle of Clontarf in 1014. According to the saga, no one would carry the banner, so Sigurðr had to do it himself, dying shortly after. *Njáls Saga* offers a more detailed account of the battle. Chapter 157 states:

'Earl Sigurd asked Thorstein Hallsson to carry the banner. Thorstein was ready to take it. Then Amundi the White said, 'Don't carry the banner – everybody who does gets killed'. 'Hrafn the Red', said the earl, 'you carry the banner'. 'Carry that devil of yours yourself', answered Hrafn. The earl said, 'Then it's best that the beggar and his bag go together', and took the banner off the pole and stuck it between his clothes. A little later, Amundi the White was killed. Then the earl was pierced through by a spear.'¹⁷⁶

Njáls Saga also tells us of various supernatural events that supposedly took place in both Orkney and Caithness following the battle. On the morning of Good Friday, a man in Caithness called Dorrud apparently saw twelve Valkyries weaving 'the web of fate for those

¹⁷² Thomson, *The History of Orkney*, 39.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁷⁴ Beuermann, 'Jarla Sögur Orkneyja', 143. Conversion of the Orcadians may have followed a pattern that found in other parts of the British Isles. See Lesley Abrams, 'Conversion and the Church in the Hebrides in the Viking Age: "A Very Difficult Thing Indeed"', in Beverly Ballin Smith, Simon Taylor, and Gareth Williams (editors), *West Over Sea: Studies in Scandinavian Sea-Borne Expansion and Settlement Before 1300: a Festschrift in Honour of Dr. Barbara E. Crawford*, (2007), 169-194.

¹⁷⁵ OS, Edwards and Pálsson, 37.

¹⁷⁶ *Njal's Saga*, translated by Robert Cook, (London, 2001), 302.

warriors at the battle¹⁷⁷ out of human entrails whilst singing the *Darraðarlióð* (*Song of Dorrud*); human heads serving as loom-weights, a sword serving as the sword beater, and an arrow being used as the pin beater.¹⁷⁸ Such stories show the dramatic, and almost apocalyptic dimension that the battle's significance took on in the minds of High-Medieval Norsemen.¹⁷⁹ The choice of Caithness as the setting for this story is interesting, and it is not all that surprising that such Nordic imagery should be set there. Various people have noted that *Darraðarlióð* contains elements of Celtic imagery, and that the idea of weaving having magical properties is probably Celtic in its inspiration.¹⁸⁰ In Orkney, meanwhile, a man named Harek saw what he thought were Earl Sigurðr and some of his men riding. As he rode out to meet them, they got together and rode into a hill and disappeared. Of Harek we are told that no trace was ever found.¹⁸¹ Sigurðr's death marked the end of an era. As William Thomson puts it, 'when the hillside closed on Sigurd's ghostly army, it also closed on the whole world of heathen magic'.¹⁸² Or did it? The written material attributes a certain conservation of pagan practices and beliefs to the Orcadians long after Clontarf.

While Sigurðr's 'heathenism' may partly be the product of a simplification of the Battle of Clontarf's narrative into a struggle between Irish Christianity and Norse paganism¹⁸³, it also appears to offer a moral lesson as to the value of Christianity. One may read in this story a warning as to the dangers of paganism. It was the banner itself – symbol of the old ways – which was responsible for Sigurðr's death. Had he fully embraced his Christian faith, and given up the magic banner, he might have survived. Not only did the banner bring death to the Earl, it failed to assure his side victory. As William Thomson states, 'The raven was the symbol of Odin, but Odin was a fickle god who offered no sure rewards for his followers; it was unsafe to trust him and his magic failed Sigurd at Clontarf'.¹⁸⁴ Was Sigurðr's defeat seen as divine punishment for his refusal to accept the new faith?

Although Clontarf may have come to embody the death of the pagan past and the true start of Christian life, the textual sources also appear to indicate that some of the old ways survived in Orkney and Caithness. The story of the raven banner is not the only instance found in the *Orkneying Saga* of pagan practices surviving following the conversion. There are

¹⁷⁷ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 128.

¹⁷⁸ *Njal's Saga*, Cook, 303.

¹⁷⁹ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 128.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ *Njal's Saga*, Cook, 307.

¹⁸² Thomson, *The History of Orkney*, 42.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

two more that can be discerned, one of them also being intrinsically tied to death. The first of these is to be found in chapters 35 and 36. These two chapters deal with Hákon Pálsson's (Saint Magnús Erlendsson's cousin, r. 1105 – 1123) trip to Sweden. Chapter 35 tells us that:

‘In Sweden, Christianity was in its infancy, so there were still a good many people practising paganism in the belief that by it they would gain wisdom and knowledge of many things yet to happen. King Ingi was a devout Christian and every heathen was abhorred by him. He made great efforts to put down the evil practices which had been for long a part of heathen worship, but other leading men and landowners grew so resentful when their barbarism was criticized that they installed another King who still adhered to the pagan rites, the Queen's brother Svein, nicknamed the Sacrificer’.¹⁸⁵

Ingi was exiled to West Götaland, though he apparently managed to burn Svein down in a house and bring the country back under his control. During his stay in Sweden, Hákon, we are told, went to visit a soothsayer to discover his future. The soothsayer told Hákon that he would become the sole ruler of Orkney, but that he would also commit a terrible crime that he would possibly never be able to atone for. This crime was the betrayal and murder of his cousin, Magnús Erlendsson. Hákon's wickedness is made all the clearer given that he decides to place his trust in a pagan sorcerer rather than in God and in his ancestor King Óláfr Haraldsson. The soothsayer tells Hákon that it might be wiser for him learn his destiny from ‘Olaf the Stout’.¹⁸⁶ Saint Óláfr was known to have appeared to other kings to advise them. As Barbara Crawford puts it, the message of this encounter is that Hákon, as a future earl, is not worthy enough to receive advice from the holy king, even though he was directly descended from him.¹⁸⁷ However, it seems probable that the intention of the fictional meeting was simply to make obvious his wickedness and to announce to the audience the martyrdom of Magnús. In many ways, Hákon was not worthy of being advised by Óláfr simply because he was not Magnús. *Magnúss Saga Skemmri* (the shorter *Magnus Saga*, as opposed to *Magnúss Saga Lengri*, the longer *Magnus Saga*) makes no mention of the soothsayer, and instead tells us that Hákon wished to learn about the lifestyle of other chieftains. If Hákon's visit had been real, who would have known of it? Would he have told his friends? Surely it would have been most unwise for someone of his standing to let it be known that he had visited a soothsayer, or

¹⁸⁵ OS, Edwards and Pálsson, 79-80.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 80.

¹⁸⁷ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 166.

to even risk knowledge of it spreading. A closer look will be taken at the story of Hákon and Magnús and its meanings in the next parts of this chapter.

The next mention of a surviving pagan practice comes in chapter 65, titled ‘Earl Paul’s victory’, during which Earl Páll calls his retainer Sveinn Breast-Rope. The author tells us that ‘He [Sveinn] was keen on the old practices and had spent many a night in the open with the spirits’.¹⁸⁸

Folklore records from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries show that numerous elements of Norse paganism survived in the folklore of rural communities for centuries. Among these were the carrying of fire around the boundaries of farms and fields to frighten trows (a kind of fairy). The rhyme used by Óðinn to heal Baldr’s horse was known in both Orkney and Shetland, being refashioned in an ostensibly Christian form. Petty charms and horse cults associated with weddings were also recorded as late as the eighteenth century.¹⁸⁹ The final chapter of this thesis will explore Orcadian folklore in more detail.

The retention of pagan practices reflects rather negatively upon the Orcadians. Perhaps this was to make for good story telling in the cases of Sigurðr and Hákon. One senses, however, that there is a possible attempt at depicting Orcadian society as relatively backwards in comparison to Norway and Iceland. First of all, there is the issue of the conversion being brought by a Norwegian king. Secondly, it is interesting that Hákon should be associated with Swedish pagans. His visit of the soothsayer serves as a literary device, announcing the eventual death of his cousin Magnús, and shows us that this saint killer was a dark man.¹⁹⁰ While Hákon’s wickedness is set up against Magnús’ sanctity, it also likens a section of Orcadian society to the ‘backwards’ and recently Christianized Swedes. This obviously reflects poorly upon the Páll line of the earldom dynasty. Similarly, Earl Páll is one of Hákon Pálsson’s sons, and it might not be accidental that one of his men is said to maintain pagan superstitions and practices. However, the retention of pagan practices also reflects negatively on Orcadian society more generally. The narrative of the saga has the Norwegians bring Christianity to Orkney, only for many Orcadians to revert to their old ways. One might read into this a rejection of Norwegian overlordship by the Orcadians. Yet this rejection comes at the price of defeat and death. It is notable that in two of the instances mentioned above, pagan practices result in or are related to someone’s death. The message is clear: paganism is wicked

¹⁸⁸ OS, Edwards and Pálsson, 120-121.

¹⁸⁹ Thomson, *The History of Orkney*, 41.

¹⁹⁰ William P.L. Thomson, ‘St Magnus: An Exploration of his Sainthood’, in Doreen J. Waugh (editor), *The Faces of Orkney: Saints, Skalds and Stones*, (2003), 47.

and dangerous, and will bring death and damnation to those who refuse to abandon it. The association of Orcadians with pagan retentions effectively shows that certain Orcadians were morally dubious. This is a trait that we have already seen with their supposed love of piracy and violent tendencies. Similarly, the idea of backwardness is one that has already been encountered in the association of Orcadians with piracy at a time when it was perceived as anachronistic and almost barbarous. It is most improbable that the earldoms, which had been in such close contact with Christianity for a few centuries, should have been slower at embracing it than other parts of the Norse world. The story of Hákon visiting the soothsayer is almost certainly invented. While pagan practices did survive as part of local superstitions, they were given a Christian makeover. Individuals such as Sveinn Breast-Rope were certainly no more pagan than those who continued to use petty charms in the eighteenth century.

Once again, *Orkneyinga Saga* shows itself to be a complicated and mixed text. On the one hand, the association of Einarr with Óðinn appears to serve the purpose of legitimising the earldom dynasty and its rule. The saga endorses the Orkney earls' desires to be independent and considered equal to the Norwegian kings. On the other hand, the persistence of paganism is associated with death, and the endurance of pagan beliefs and practices does not reflect too well on Orcadian society. Could it be that, while being a text supportive of Orcadian political aspirations, the saga also relies on accepted notions of Orcadian identity found in other parts of the Norse world, and frames the presentation of the Orcadian aristocracy in these terms of otherness?

The conflict between paganism and Christianity was not simply one that represented tensions between Orkney and Norway. It also served to illustrate tensions within Orcadian society. If there was one event that best illustrated the conflict between past and present, paganism and Christianity, Norse and Gael, it was undoubtedly the martyrdom of the Saint-Earl Magnús Erlendsson.

2.2 – *Magnús Erlendsson and Hákon Pálsson*

While it may appear up until now that Orcadians were almost always viewed as dangerous and villainous, this was most certainly not the case. As we have seen, they were also seen as brave and cunning, as with Sveinn Ásleifarson. Orcadians could also be virtuous and holy, and none were more so than the earl and saint Magnús Erlendsson.

Magnús's story stands in contrast to that of his cousin Hákon. While Hákon was focused on the Scandinavian past, as was illustrated, Magnús, the chaste European saint, was more closely connected to Scotland and the world of Latin Christendom.

Hákon's focus was on Scandinavia. Prior to his voyage to Sweden, Hákon had stayed in Norway at the court of King Óláfr 'the Peaceful' (c.1050 – 1093, r. 1067 – 1093). *Orkneyinga Saga* informs us that the young and violent Hákon was sent to Norway to avoid his quarrel with Earl Erlendr and his sons from escalating any further. Hákon was well received in Sweden and he had a number of friends and kinsfolk there.¹⁹¹ As we have just mentioned, it was while in Sweden that Hákon visited the soothsayer. The saga links Hákon's visit to the soothsayer and Magnús' eventual death to an earlier part of the story: specifically that of Einarr 'Buttered-Bread' and the deadly 'black-widow' Ragnhild.¹⁹² Ragnhild had, we are told, planned the murder of her first husband, Earl Arnfinn, marrying his brother Earl Havard 'the Fecund' straight after. Ragnhild then goaded Einarr into killing Earl Havard, his uncle. A seer in his company warned Einarr that he should not kill Havard on that day, but rather leave it until the next day. The seer warned him that 'If you won't, there are going to be killings in your family for years to come'.¹⁹³ Ignoring the seer's warning, Einarr killed Havard. What followed was a series of killings, all orchestrated by Ragnhild, including Einarr's. Hákon's meeting with the soothsayer can be interpreted as a repetition and fulfilment of this warning. His killing of Magnus would initiate a bitter rivalry and hatred between the Erlendr and Páll branches of the earldom dynasty.¹⁹⁴ Violence would also plague Hákon's own descendants, as is evidenced by the troubled and violent relationship between his children, Páll, Haraldr and Margaret.

While a number of the details of both of these stories are almost certainly fictitious, they reflect upon the very real phenomena of family feuds. Both earldoms were divisible amongst co-earls, and inheritance was far from automatic. Aspiring earls did not so much inherit a share of the earldom, but rather the recognition that they had a right to claim a share. Secondary branches of the earldom dynasty rarely held on to the comital title for long.¹⁹⁵ As a result of this intense competition, relations between heirs were often tense and downright

¹⁹¹ OS, Edwards and Pálsson, 79.

¹⁹² Thomson, 'St Magnus', 47.

¹⁹³ OS, Edwards and Pálsson, 34.

¹⁹⁴ Thomson, 'St Magnus', 47-48.

¹⁹⁵ Thomson, *The History of Orkney*, 36.

violent. In the words of William Thomson, ‘at worst, power went to those with the greatest capacity for murder and for survival.’¹⁹⁶

Feeling homesick, Hákon decided to go home. Knowing that people were not all that keen on his return, he advised King Magnús Barefoot (1073-1103, r. 1093 – 1103) to launch an expedition to the Hebrides and to subdue Orkney along the way, much like Haraldr Fairhair had done.¹⁹⁷

Following the arrival of King Magnús Barefoot in Orkney, Hákon’s and Magnús’ fathers were deposed as Earls of Orkney and Caithness, and were sent to Norway as prisoners, where they died shortly afterwards. King Magnús put his eight-year-old son Sigurðr in charge of Orkney and Shetland. The king also took Hákon and Magnús on his expedition to the Hebrides and Wales. It was at the Battle of the Menai Strait that the young Magnús Erlendsson’s saintly qualities first began to show. In a famous incident Magnús refused to take part in the fighting, declaring that he had no quarrel with anyone there. King Magnús, considering this cowardice, ordered Magnús to take cover. Instead, he stayed on deck and sang from his psalter, unprotected from the arrows and spears that rained down upon the ship. In contrast to the depiction of Torf-Einarr as an Óðinn-like figure, the story of Magnús is loaded with imagery that reminds us of Baldr. Magnús is presented as the fairest of men, is apparently immune to projectile weapons, and is in the end killed by treachery.¹⁹⁸

The Battle of the Menai Strait (also known as the Battle of Anglesey Sound) was certainly a real event, and there is no reason to doubt that Magnús was present and refused to fight. The story was surely based on a real act of insubordination, though it was likely dramatized by the saga author.¹⁹⁹ While George Mackay Brown and John Mooney saw Magnús as making a moral stand against violence, it is wrong to think that Magnús was a pacifist. Chapter 46 of *Orkneyinga Saga* and chapter 7 of *Magnúss Saga Skemmri* tell us that that Magnús and Hákon, when they ruled Orkney together, fought and killed ‘a chieftain called Dufniall, their second cousin’, and that they also put to death a certain Þórbjörn in Shetland.²⁰⁰ There were other, more worldly reasons for Magnús’ refusal to fight. His father and uncle had been taken prisoner, and the earldom had in effect been abolished. Effectively

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁷ OS, Edwards and Pálsson, 82-83.

¹⁹⁸ Thomson, ‘St Magnus’, 48.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁰⁰ OS, Edwards and Pálsson, 90, and *Magnus’ Saga: The Life of St Magnus Earl of Orkney, 1075-1116*, translated by Paul Edwards and Herman Pálsson, (Oxford, 1987), 27.

being a hostage of King Magnús, his chances of inheriting his share of Orkney had been ended.²⁰¹

William Thomson has suggested that his refusal to fight may also have been linked to his numerous Welsh connections. Following his escape to Scotland, *Orkneyinga Saga* and *Magnúss Saga Skemmri* tell us that he would go to Wales where he spent time with a certain bishop'.²⁰² Magnús presumably had Welsh contacts prior to this. Thomson notes that King Gruffudd ap Cynan of Gwynedd had a Hiberno-Norse mother and rumour had it that he had travelled to Orkney to raise a fleet to attack Glamorgan.²⁰³ Furthermore, in 1114, King Alexander I of Scotland joined King Henry I of England on a campaign against King Gruffudd. His army was said to have been drawn from 'the farthest corner of Pictland', which would indicate that a Caithness contingent, possibly led by Magnús, was involved. Magnús' Welsh connections may have given his refusal to fight a further political context.²⁰⁴ On the other hand, reasons of conscience might have been behind his objection to take part in the raiding, plundering and scorching of the Hebrides by King Magnús' army.²⁰⁵

Following his escape from King Magnús' army, Magnús became a retainer of King Edgar of Scotland (c. 1074 – 1107, r. 1097 – 1107), and spent time in Wales and England with friends of his. Magnús returned to Orkney following the death of Magnús Barefoot in 1103.²⁰⁶

Orkneyinga Saga then provides us with a portrait of Magnús. It describes him as:

'a man of extraordinary distinction, tall, with a fine, intelligent look about him. He was a man of strict virtue, successful in war, wise, eloquent, generous and magnanimous, open-handed with money, sound with advice, and altogether the most popular of men. He was gentle and agreeable when talking to men of wisdom and goodwill, but severe and uncompromising towards thieves and Vikings, putting to death most of the men who plundered the farms and other parts of the earldom'.²⁰⁷

²⁰¹ Thomson, 'St Magnus', 49.

²⁰² *OS*, Edwards and Pálsson, 86, and *Magnus' Saga*, Edwards and Pálsson, 25.

²⁰³ Thomson, 'St Magnus', 50.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁶ *OS*, Edwards and Pálsson, 86, and *Magnus' Saga*, Edwards and Pálsson, 25.

²⁰⁷ *OS*, Edwards and Pálsson, 89-90.

The description of Magnús found in *Magnúss Saga Skemmri* is virtually identical. This is the portrait of the ideal High-Medieval ruler. It presents a man who lived a life of piety and who was as beautiful in appearance as he was in character. Magnús took a wife from one of the leading Scottish noble families²⁰⁸, though he remained chaste during their ten-year marriage.

The discovery of Magnús' remains in Kirkwall Cathedral has shed some light as to the real Magnús. The examination of his skeleton has revealed that he was about 5ft 7½ inches tall and rather 'poorly developed physically'.²⁰⁹ Other estimates have given him a height of 5ft 9 in, which was slightly above the medieval average. Examination of the shin and forearms bones, however, shows that these were relatively long and may have enhanced the impression of height.²¹⁰ The hagiographical nature of the texts dealing with Magnús obviously lies behind his portrayal as a tall, strong and handsome warrior-saint.

This is not simply a story about the martyrdom of Magnús and the political control of Orkney and Caithness. It sets up a conflict not only between the two cousins, but also between Norseman and Gael, sinner and saint, past and present. The tension is not limited to two individuals and their followers. Rather, it is a tension that exists at the heart of Orcadian society itself. This was a society of mixed Norse and Gaelic heritage, and which was geographically placed at the meeting point of those two worlds. For Norse observers, the mixture of Norse and Gaelic cultural traits might have appeared curious and even conflicting. As we have seen, this tension can also be found in the character of Earl Rögnvaldr Kali Kolsson. Furthermore, the story of Magnús and Hákon illustrates the political division that existed between the Earldom of Orkney and the Earldom of Caithness. The division of the earldoms between two or more earls also meant that one might have looked north to Norway for help, while the other may have turned to their Scottish overlord in the south. Magnús' refusal to fight once again highlights the theme of the earls' frequent insubordination and desire for independence. Magnús, in many ways, became a symbol for the changing nature of Orcadian society, marking a departure from 'Viking-age' society, and the start of the high Middle Ages.

The end to Magnús and Hákon's story was a bloody one. As relations between the two cousins deteriorated, a meeting was fixed for them to reconcile. Both earls were to meet on Egilsay. Each was to bring two ships and an equal number of men. Unbeknownst to Magnús,

²⁰⁸ We are not told who this was, or which family she came from.

²⁰⁹ Thomson, 'St Magnus', 52.

²¹⁰ Judith Jesch, Theya Molleson, 'The Death of Magnus Erlendsson and the Relics of St Magnus', in Olwyn Owen (editor), *The World of Orkneyinga Saga. The Broad-Cloth Viking Trip*, (2005), 137.

Hákon had planned to betray him. On the way to Egilsay, Magnús' ship hit a large breaking wave, which he interpreted as a foreboding of his death and a confirmation of the soothsayer's prophecy concerning Hákon. Hákon showed up with eight ships and a small army. Magnús made three offers to Hákon in an attempt to bargain for his life. He first offered to leave Orkney and go on a pilgrimage to Rome and the Holy Land to do penance for both of them. He then offered to either be imprisoned in Scotland or to be maimed. All three offers were rejected. The saga portrays Hákon as not being fully to blame for the death. Indeed, it tells us that he accepted the final offer, but that the chieftains insisted that one of them was to die that day. Earlier on in the encounter Magnús tells Hákon that the cause of Hákon's treachery probably 'lies in other people's sinfulness rather than your own'.²¹¹ The theme of the earls' inability to fully control their chieftains is once again present. Hákon then asked his standard bearer Ofeig to kill Magnús, but the latter refused. Hákon therefore had to order his cook Lifolf to do the deed. After praying, Magnús told Lifolf not to worry, and to strike him hard on the head. Lifolf administered the blow with an axe, and thus ended the life of Earl Magnús Erlendsson. Magnús' remains have confirmed that he was killed by an axe-blow to the head.

Magnús' body was initially buried at Christ Church cathedral at Birsay on Mainland in Orkney. To absolve for his sin, Hákon went on a pilgrimage to both Rome and Jerusalem.²¹²

Magnús story, however, was not over. While he had been virtuous in life, he was to become exceptionally celebrated in death. We shall now look at how Magnús and his nephew, Rögnvaldr Kolsson, were made into saints.

2.3 – *Saints Magnús and Rögnvaldr*

While the killing of one earl by another was not unusual, the consequences of this particular one were. A saintly cult rapidly developed, and Orkney soon had its first native saint. Several actors were involved in the promotion of Magnús' cult and sanctification. Among these were the Erlendr line of the dynasty, Bishop William of Orkney, and the people of Shetland.

The first step in the making of a saint was the testimony of miracles. A number of miracles are to be found in *Orkneyinga Saga* and the two *Magnus Sagas*, most of them affecting people from Shetland. About fifteen of the miracles occurred in Shetland, while eight took place in Orkney, and one in Caithness. A large proportion of the Shetland miracles

²¹¹ OS, Edwards and Pálsson, 93.

²¹² OS, Edwards and Pálsson, 97, and *Magnus' Saga*, Edwards and Pálsson, 34.

benefitted a man called Bergfinn Skatason and his kin. Bergfinn was blind and apparently had his sight restored after keeping a vigil at Magnús' grave with two cripples, who too were restored to health. During a second trip, Bergfinn took his leprous son, Halfdan, with him. Halfdan was cured and Bergfinn's sight was further bettered. One of Bergfinn's tenants, a man called Þórd 'Dragon-Jaw', who refused to stop working on the day of Magnús' mass, went insane for six days. He was cured following a three-night vigil at Magnús' tomb. Bergfinn also made an offering of money to Magnús' shrine on behalf of his nephew Ogmund who had badly fractured his skull. Ogmund was at once healed. Other miracles that supposedly took place in Shetland included the curing of leprosy and of blindness, the healing of a broken leg, and a further case of insanity that was cured.²¹³

Given the strong association of Shetland with Magnús miracles, and the high proportion of Magnús place names and dedication there, it seems likely that Shetland was a part of the Orkney earldom that was loyal to the Erlendr line. This is further attested by the good welcome that Rögnvaldr received in Shetland during his first expedition and the fact that Earl Páll Hákonarson 'didn't trust the Shetlanders'.²¹⁴ Additionally, the Orcadian Gunni, who pressed for the translation of Magnús' relics, was from Westray in Orkney, which was in the Erlendr half of the earldom.²¹⁵

Bishop William was closely connected to Hákon and his son Páll. William initially refused to endorse Magnús' cult, doubting his saintliness. William's reluctance to endorse Magnús' sanctity may have been the result of ecclesiastical rivalries at this time. Evidence shows that the archbishopric of York were appointing bishops to Orkney in opposition to those appointed in Scandinavia by the archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen. In the 1130s, the papacy was brought into this struggle to ensure that the Norwegian king supported the York-appointed bishop.²¹⁶ Magnús was likely the patron of a York-appointed alternative bishop called Radulf (or Ralph) Novell between 1109-1114. Following Magnús' death, Novell was probably forced out of his see. An 1125 letter by Pope Honorius II addressed to King Sigurðr the 'Crusader' (c.1090 – 1130, r. 1103 - 1130) urged the Norwegian king to allow Radulf to

²¹³ OS, Edwards and Pálsson, 103-107, and *Magnus' Saga*, Edwards and Pálsson, 34-40.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 122.

²¹⁵ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 202.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 203.

enjoy his episcopal rights in peace.²¹⁷ It was essential for William to rely on the protection of the Páll line at this time when his position was threatened by potential rival bishops.²¹⁸

This all apparently changed following a couple of miracles that occurred after a voyage to Norway. Poor weather prevented William from sailing from Shetland back to Orkney. The ship's captain suggested that William should vow to translate Magnús' remains if the weather cleared up. William agreed that if he was able to make it back to Orkney to sing Mass on the Sunday of the following week that he would support the translation of Magnús' remains. The weather cleared up and the bishop was able to sing mass at home the very next Sunday. However, this first miracle did not entirely convince him and he continued to refuse to believe in Magnús' saintliness. While praying, William was suddenly blinded. Seized with terror, he went to Magnús' grave to pray, and vowed to translate his relics. His sight was instantly restored. One suspects that there were probably more worldly reasons behind William's acceptance of the translation of Magnús' relics. The purpose of the journey is unknown, though it is possible that the bishop met Rögnvaldr Kali Kolsson while in Norway. Magnús' sainthood was for Rögnvaldr a means of winning his position in Orkney. As an outsider who had spent most of his life in Norway, it was vital for Rögnvaldr to have a base from which to legitimise his claim to the Erlendr share of the earldom. Such a meeting might explain why William had such a sudden change of heart. Promises for the building of the St Magnus Cathedral and the endowment of the bishopric may have been made on this occasion.²¹⁹ Given that his position as bishop was no longer threatened by the 1130s, and that the Páll line was now imperilled by Rögnvaldr and his father Kol, it makes sense that William should seek to get in on the potential rewards of a powerful cult of Magnús.²²⁰ Indeed, having a native saint as a patron was crucial in enhancing the identity of a bishopric.

The bishop was needed for Magnús' canonization, and he 'was the key to unlocking the full potential of the Magnus cult as a means of securing popular support for Rognvald as heir to his saintly uncle'.²²¹ Pressure may also have been placed upon William while he was delayed in Shetland to recognize Magnús' sanctity and elevate his relics.²²²

²¹⁷ Haki Antonsson, 'St Magnús of Orkney: Aspects of his Cult From a European Perspective', in Olwyn Owen (editor), *The World of Orkneyinga Saga. The Broad-Cloth Viking Trip*, (2005), 145.

²¹⁸ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 203.

²¹⁹ Thomson, 'St Magnus', 53.

²²⁰ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 204.

²²¹ Thomson, 'St Magnus', 54.

²²² Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 202.

The result of William's change of heart was the translation of Magnús' relics to Birsay and eventually Kirkwall. William had the relics washed, and tested a knucklebone three times through the ordeal by fire. The relics were initially placed above the altar in Christ Church in Birsay. Magnús' relics were translated to Kirkwall around 1136/7. Chapter 68 of *Orkneyinga Saga* informs us that while in Norway – where he was making plans for a second military expedition to Orkney – Kol made a speech in which he advised Rögnvaldr to 'look for support where men will say the true owner of the realm granted it you, and that's the holy Earl Magnus', and to vow that he would construct a stone cathedral in Kirkwall for his holy uncle.²²³ Shortly after Earl Páll's kidnapping and disappearance, Rögnvaldr ordered the beginning of the building of the new cathedral in Kirkwall.

St Magnus Cathedral's fine Romanesque style shows that Rögnvaldr and Kol were familiar with such buildings in Scotland and England.²²⁴ Inspiration for the cathedral came from the one in Durham, and it is possible that the Durham masons, who had begun building Dunfermline abbey in 1128, started work on St Magnus Cathedral shortly after Rögnvaldr became sole earl in 1137.²²⁵ While initial progress was rapid, lack of funds began causing problems. A land tax or a levy of one mark for every ploughland was therefore imposed as redemption for odal possessions. This helped maintain the building of the cathedral, allowing Rögnvaldr and Bishop William to go on their pilgrimage.²²⁶

Magnús' cult became highly popular and soon established itself as one of the most important saints' cults in northern Europe. A number of dedications to Magnús are to be found in Iceland, and the Cathedral of the Faroe Islands was dedicated to him.²²⁷ At some point in the twelfth century, a certain Magister Robert (probably Robert of Cricklade, prior of St Fridewide's in Oxford²²⁸, 1141 – c. 1180), wrote a Latin *Vita* of Magnús. This now-lost *Vita* served as the basis for an extant Latin *Legenda*. As we have already mentioned, two Icelandic hagiographical sagas were produced, and *Magnúss Saga Lengri* was probably based upon the lost *Vita Sancti Magni*.²²⁹ Portions of *Orkneyinga Saga* dealing with Magnús and his various miracles were in turn based upon these other texts. These texts were important in helping spread Magnús' cult and legitimizing it by recording various miracles. Several statues

²²³ OS, Edwards and Pálsson, 131.

²²⁴ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 210.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 211.

²²⁶ OS, Edwards and Pálsson, 142, and Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 212.

²²⁷ Haki Antonsson, 'St Magnús of Orkney', 149.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

of Magnús have survived to this day, as has a thirteenth-century manuscript containing a Magnús hymn, ‘*Nobilis Humilis*’.²³⁰ A fifteenth-century ‘sequence of St Magnus’ (‘*Comitis generosi militis gloriosi*’) – part of a Mass of St Magnús – is also known from Icelandic manuscript fragments.²³¹ Magnús also made later visionary appearances. Spread of Magnús’ cult to Scotland is indicated by his appearance, along with St Columba and St Óláfr, to Alexander II in 1249, warning him not to invade the Hebrides.²³² Magnús is also said to have appeared following the Battle of Bannockburn (1314), bringing news of the victory to Aberdeen and Orkney.²³³ Later on, when Orkney faced invasion from Caithness in 1529, Magnús supposedly appeared at Summerdale and ‘faucht for the libertie of this cuntrie, quha was its patroune’.²³⁴

The second Orcadian to acquire the status of saint was, unsurprisingly, Magnús’ nephew Rögnvaldr. Following his death in 1158 at the hands of Þórbjörn Clerk and his men, Rögnvaldr was buried in the cathedral at Kirkwall. It was only thirty-four years after his death that the elevation of his relics took place as part of Bishop Bjarni Kolbeinsson’s move to have Rögnvaldr canonized. While *Orkneyinga Saga* does mention miracles occurring and the Pope giving permission for the translation of the relics,²³⁵ there are no official records for either.²³⁶ An entry in the Icelandic Annals under the year 1192 does, however, state ‘Earl Rognvald sanctified’.²³⁷ The translation of Rögnvaldr’s relics was therefore obviously known outside of Orkney, and it is likely that his saintly status was recognized. Bishop Bjarni’s promotion of Rögnvaldr was undoubtedly motivated by gratitude towards the late earl’s benefaction and enhancement of the diocese through Magnús’ cult. Kirkwall was now the resting place of not one, but two earldom saints. Unlike Magnús’ cult, however, that of Rögnvaldr very much remained a local one within the ecclesiastical milieu of Orkney.²³⁸

It appears that an attempt was also made to get a cult started around the figure of Harald *ungi* following his death at the Battle of Wick. *Orkneyinga Saga* informs us that:

²³⁰ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 65.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

²³² Thomson, ‘St Magnus’, 58.

²³³ *Ibid.*

²³⁴ *Ibid.*

²³⁵ OS, Edwards and Pálsson, 214.

²³⁶ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 220.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 221.

‘People in Caithness think him a true saint and a church stands where he was killed. He was buried there on the headland, and as a result of his virtues, great miracles have been performed by God as a reminder that Harald wished to go to Orkney and join his kinsmen, Earl Magnus and Earl Rognvald’.²³⁹

It would have been rather extraordinary if a third family martyr had been recognized. Bishop Bjarni, however, was firmly committed to Earl Haraldr Maddadsson’s cause. Bishop Adam of Caithness, meanwhile, was preoccupied with his own issues related to Earl Haraldr.²⁴⁰

Having one dynastic saint was impressive; having two was even more so and undoubtedly brought great prestige to the earldom dynasty.²⁴¹ The presence of two native dynastic saints showed the earldom’s special place in the world of northern sainthood.²⁴² Not only did these cults make Orkney a centre of pilgrimage – bringing in all the wealth that such sites did – it gave the Orkney bishopric a boosted status within the newly established archdiocese of Nidaros (1152/3). Of the five North Atlantic dioceses brought within its control, Orkney was the only one with its native saint’s cult.²⁴³ This put it on par with the dioceses of Nidaros, Bergen and Oslo, which had their own local saints’ cults (Óláfr, Sunniva, and Hallvard respectively).

Magnús’ cult followed the pattern of Scandinavian royal patron saints that had died violent deaths. Norway had St Óláfr, who was killed at the Battle of Stiklestad in 1030; Denmark had St Knútr, murdered at the church in Odense in 1086; Sweden had St Eiríkr, killed at the Battle of Uppsala in 1160. In the same way that Óláfr was the ‘perpetual king of Norway’, Magnús was the ‘true owner of the realm’.²⁴⁴ Magnús may effectively be called the fourth Scandinavian saint-king (or in his case, saint-earl).²⁴⁵ Magnús (and to a lesser extent Rögnvaldr) brought fame to the earldom dynasty. Having a dynastic saint was also a means of signalling equality and independence, particularly in relation to the Norwegian crown. Furthermore, Orkney and Caithness were no longer lands of reluctant Christians; they were the earldoms of powerful, noble, and glorious saints on par with those Scandinavian ones.

²³⁹ OS, Edwards and Pálsson, 220.

²⁴⁰ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 250.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 221.

²⁴² *Ibid.*

²⁴³ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁴ Thomson, ‘St Magnus’, 57.

²⁴⁵ Beuermann, ‘Jarla Sögur Orkneyja’, 147.

Magnús could also be of use for other parts of the Norse world. While one can find ten dedications to Magnús in Iceland, there are none in Norway.²⁴⁶ *Magnúss Saga Skemmri* recounts a miracle that took place in Iceland. The saga describes how a farmer named Eldjar Vadarson became sick and weak during a famine. He asked to be carried to church, and prayed. He vowed to God that he would fast for six days if his health improved, and he promised to observe the fast before St Óláfr's mass and that of St Magnús. Magnús appeared to him in his sleep and told him that Óláfr had sent him to cure him.²⁴⁷ In *Magnúss Saga Lengri*, a woman's relatives punish two Norwegian brothers after they have seduced her. One of them is killed and eaten by wolves, and the other is injured, maimed, blinded and muted. The surviving brother prays to God, and St Magnús intervenes to mend his bones and restore his sight and speech. Even more amazingly, Magnús summons the wolves to disgorge the flesh and bones of the deceased brother and brings him back to life.²⁴⁸

These two miracles appear to carry an ideological message, as Ian Beurmann, argues. While the first shows that Magnús could intervene where Óláfr could not – although he is sent by Óláfr, which seems to reflect a saintly hierarchy that mirrors the earthly one – while in the second, Magnús directly intervenes in Norway.²⁴⁹ There was, however, as we have just mentioned, no sustained cult of Magnús in Norway, and these are the writings of Icelandic authors.²⁵⁰ As Beurmann asks, 'Is it possible that some Icelandic apprehension over the gradual encroachment of the Norwegian Church and crown could have found literary expression in a rivalry between St Óláfr and St Magnús, adopting the Orcadian to a certain degree as an anti-Norwegian saint?'²⁵¹ This certainly seems plausible. While Norway had Saint Óláfr, the northwest Atlantic had Saint Magnús. This was essentially an expression of equality and independence vis-à-vis of Norway.²⁵²

While Orkney now had two native saints, these were not the only saints to have been venerated in the earldoms. A number of Celtic Saints were also venerated in Orkney, Caithness and Sutherland. It is to these saints' cults that we now turn to.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 145.

²⁴⁷ *Magnus' Saga*, Edwards and Pálsson, 41-43.

²⁴⁸ Beurmann, 'Jarla Sögur Orkneyja', 146.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 146.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 147.

²⁵² *Ibid.*

2.4 – Celtic Saints' Cults and their Origins

Christianity in Orkney and Caithness was heavily influenced by developments in Scandinavia. Orkney and Shetland were first under the control of the Archbishopric of Hamburg-Bremen, and then, from 1153 onwards, under that of the Norwegian archbishopric of Nidaros. The cult of the Orcadian Saint Magnús was modelled on that of other Scandinavian Saint-Kings. However, insular Celtic traditions were also deeply influential for the church in both Orkney and Caithness. Amongst other things, a number of 'Celtic' saints were venerated in the earldoms, as they were in other Norse colonies in the British Isles. Much as in Ireland, Norse settlers in Orkney and Caithness picked up the cults of saints that were particularly popular in Ireland and Scotland – as well as those of saints who were themselves Celts, such as Columba, Bríde and Donnán – as can be seen from the place-name evidence found throughout the former earldoms. The most obvious and important of these were Saint Columba, Saint Triduana, Saint Bride, Saint Donnán, and Saint Ninian.

Saint Columba's cult was widespread across the Gaelic and Norse-Gaelic worlds, and there is evidence that his cult was taken up in Orkney. There is a St Colme in Birsay, which, as Jan Erik Rekdal has pointed out, could be a Norse rendering of Colum if it was taken up as a noun with a weak inflection.²⁵³ This would have given *Colmi* and later *Colme*. It is more likely that St Colme refers to the adoption of Columba's cult amongst the Norse settlers rather than to an unknown Pictish saint.²⁵⁴

Evidence of a potential Columban cult in Orkney also appears in the legend of Saint Findan, the '*Vita Findani*', which is dated to the latter part of the ninth century.²⁵⁵ According to the legend, Findan was captured in Ireland by Vikings and taken to Orkney. He managed to escape his captors, and swam to another island. After spending two days wandering, he came upon a house and the inhabitants took him to a bishop whose seat was nearby. The bishop 'had been instructed in the study of letters in Ireland and was quite skilled in the knowledge

²⁵³ Jan Erik Rekdal, 'Vikings and Saints – Encounters Vestan um Haf', *Peritia: Journal of the Medieval Academy of Ireland*, 17-18, (2003-2004), pp. 256-275, 262.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 263.

²⁵⁵ William P. Thomson, 'Appendix B: St Findan and the Pictish-Norse Transition', in Doreen J. Waugh (editor), *The Faces of Orkney: Saints, Skalds and Stones*, (2003), pp. 279-283, 279.

of this language'.²⁵⁶ Findan stayed with the bishop for two years before travelling across Europe and becoming a monk in 851.

Findan's legend is interesting for a number of reasons. First of all, it implies that Pictish, pre-Norse church institutions survived the Norse colonisation.²⁵⁷ If this is the case, then it does not seem inappropriate to suggest that some Norsemen converted early on. This would, once more, point against the saga narrative for the conversion of Orkney. Secondly, it indicates that the ninth-century Orcadian Church, if there was one, was heavily influenced by Ireland.²⁵⁸ Although the bishop's ethnicity is not mentioned, he was likely a Pict. Findan clearly could not speak the bishop's native language, whatever it was, hence the reason for them speaking Irish together.²⁵⁹ The bishop's connection to Ireland shows that an Irish, and probably Columban tradition was present in Orkney at this time.²⁶⁰ The adoption of this local cult of Columba by the Norse settlers is one of the possible explanations for the presence of the aforementioned St Colme. Although Irish influences were almost certainly brought back by Irish Norse-Gaels too, it is not improbable that the Norsemen encountered and adopted an already existing cult of Columba in Orkney.

Saint Triduana, also known as Saint Tredwell, was another saint who was worshipped in Orkney and Caithness. Triduana was known in Norse by the superstitious name Trollhønna (literally 'magic hen')²⁶¹. Triduana's legend says that she lived as a hermit with other virgins in Rescoby in Forfarshire after having travelled from her homeland of Greece to Scotland. According to one legend, she accompanied Saint Regulus (saint Rule) to bring Saint Andrew's skeleton to Scotland. According to another, she came as a virgin follower of Saint Boniface (this is a different Boniface to the Anglo-Saxon saint who led a mission to Germany)²⁶². Nectanevus, the Pictish ruler, became attracted to her, and particularly so to her eyes. Triduana fled to Dunfallad in Atholl, but Nectanevus pursued her. She therefore decided to gouge her eyes out and give them to him fixed on a stake.²⁶³ Another legend asserts that she lived in Restalrig in Midlothian for the remainder of her life. As both Aidan MacDonald and Jan Erik Rekdal point out, Triduana and Boniface are both commemorated in a church on

²⁵⁶ *The life of Saint Findan*, translated by Christine J. Omand, in Doreen J. Waugh (editor), *The Faces of Orkney: Saints, Skalds and Stones*, (2003), pp.284-287, 287.

²⁵⁷ Thomson, 'St Findan and the Pictish-Norse Transition', 280.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁶¹ Rekdal, 'Vikings and Saints', 263.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 264.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

the island of Papa Westray in Orkney, indicating that the association of the two is older than and independent of the sixteenth-century Aberdeen Breviary.²⁶⁴ This dedication is also the northernmost known dedication to Triduana.

Of Bishop John's maiming at the hands of Haraldr Maddadsson's men, *Orkneyinga Saga* tells us:

'Bishop Jon kept praying to the holy virgin St Tredwell, and when they set him free he went over to a hillside where he asked a woman to help him. She could see the blood streaming from his face.

'Quiet, my lord', she said, 'I'll help you gladly.'

The bishop was taken to where St Tredwell rests, and there he was restored to health both in speech and sight'.²⁶⁵

While the saga simply refers to the Norse Trollhøna, the story itself indicates that this is Triduana.²⁶⁶ It makes sense that the blinded Bishop John would pray to Triduana for the restoration of his sight given the role played by blindness in her legend. This miraculous account is also compatible with *Gesta Annalia's* assertion of what happened to Bishop John, that 'the use of his tongue and of one eye was, in some measure, left him'.²⁶⁷ The papal document that prescribed the punishment for the perpetrator, meanwhile, only refers to John's tongue being cut out.²⁶⁸ While John may certainly have prayed to Triduana, the retention of one or both eyes offers a sound basis for the story of the miraculous recovery of his sight.

The resting place of the saint mentioned in *Orkneyinga Saga* was almost certainly a church that kept a relic of hers, and not her grave, as Jan Erik Rekdal points out.²⁶⁹ The centre of her cult was located at Ristalrig near Edinburgh, and it is possible that this was the place of her burial.²⁷⁰ Where exactly in Caithness John was brought is unknown. There is a croft in Ballachly named Croit Trolla, presumably after Trollhøna, with a chapel and a burial ground beside it. South of Helsmdale in Sutherland, there is a chapel called Kintradwell in English

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁵ OS, Edwards and Pálsson, 222.

²⁶⁶ Rekdal, 'Vikings and Saints', 264.

²⁶⁷ *Chronicle of the Scottish Nation*, Annals, XXIV.

²⁶⁸ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 254.

²⁶⁹ Rekdal, 'Vikings and Saints', 264.

²⁷⁰ Rekdal, 'Vikings and Saints', 264, and Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 254.

and Clin Trolla in Gaelic.²⁷¹ These two locations are potential and likely candidates for the site of John's miraculous recovery.

Triduana's cult was popular in eastern Scotland and commemorations are found at the church of Rescobie in Angus, and in Cairntradlin in Aberdeenshire, amongst other places.²⁷² It is interesting that the saga associates Triduana with a Scottish bishop. Could it be that the saga author was trying to portray Triduana's cult as a phenomenon that was predominantly Gaelic? Possibly. A potential implication, in this case, would be that this was a Scottish import that was brought with the newly established bishops of Caithness. Scottish bishops had been present in Caithness since around 1147, when Bishop Andrew, as attested by marginal notes of the *Book of Deer*. This is possible but it does not seem all that convincing. Hostility and suspicion towards the new Scottish bishops would have made it harder for the local population to accept these new cults. It would be rather strange for there to be a shrine with a relic of Triduana's in Caithness at a site that was obviously quite well known precisely because it housed this relic if Triduana's cult was not popular. If Scottish bishops did introduce Triduana's cult to Caithness, it must have caught on and spread rather quickly given that John's maiming took place in 1202. The rapid spread of Magnús cult is explained by the political context in which it took place. For the people of Caithness to adopt a Scottish import would have required them to be open to the activities of the Scottish bishops. In any case, there was obviously a well-known Triduana cult-site established in Caithness by 1202.

While there are few female saint dedications to be found in Shetland, a number of chapels and place-names referring to the Irish Saint Bride are to be found in Orkney. These are: Bridesness in North Ronaldsay, Breedakirk in Eday, Bride's Noust in Graemsay, Breetaness in Wasbister in Rousay, the Saint Bride's chapel near the Noust of Biggin in Yesnaby in Sandwick, and a Saint Bride chapel on Papa Stronsay.²⁷³ The cult of Saint Bride, also known as Saint Bridget of Kildare, probably developed out of a Christianisation of the cult of the Celtic fire-goddess Brigid. Numerous place-names throughout the rest of Scotland bear her name, such as the Kirkbrides in Galloway, the Kilbrides on the west coast and in the Hebrides, and Brydekirk in Dumfries.²⁷⁴ Evidence for the popularity of Saint Bride's cult in Orkney is also found in a special custom from Papa Westray. Orcadian folklorists have recorded that in early February, around the time of Bride's feast day – known as Imbolc and

²⁷¹ Rekdal, 'Vikings and Saints', 265, and Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 254.

²⁷² Rekdal, 'Vikings and Saints', 265.

²⁷³ Howie Firth, 'Traditions and customs', in R.J. Berry and Howie N. Firth (editors) *The People of Orkney: Aspects of Orkney 4*, (Kirkwall, 1986), 149.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 148.

held on the 1st of February – and Candlemass (2nd of February), boys would go out around the island with torches and look for the *gyros*, older boys dressed as old women wearing masks. These *gyros* would hit out at the younger boys with a rope.²⁷⁵ Howie Firth points out that the word *gyro* is likely a derivation of the Old Norse *gýgr*, meaning ‘ogress’.²⁷⁶

In Sutherland, the Norse settlers picked up the cult of Saint Donnán. According to Donnán’s legend, he was one of the ‘martyrs of Eigg’ – a monastic community living on the Hebridean island of Eigg who were either beheaded or burned down in their monastery in the early seventh century.²⁷⁷ In Helmsdale, north of Bora, there is the *srath* of Cill Donnáin (or Kildonain, Kildonan), also known as *Srath Ilihd*.²⁷⁸ Helmsdale (from the Old Norse *Hjálmundalr*) replaced the old name *Ilihd* at some point, and *Srath Ilihd* was renamed *Srath Kildonain*. This change of name is probably the result of the introduction, or adoption of Donnán’s cult in the area by the Norse settlers given that Donnán’s fair was held at Cathair Dhonnáin.²⁷⁹ Like the Triduana-place-names, Donnán dedications that we know of are found in areas that have a high percentage of Norse place-names.

Dedications to Saint Ninian are also prevalent in Orkney, Caithness and Shetland. Saint Ninian was supposedly a missionary who worked to convert the southern Picts. The most obvious of these is St Ninian’s Isle in Shetland. Shetland also has a Ninian-dedication at Papil on Yell and a St Ninian’s chapel in Norby.²⁸⁰ In Orkney there is a St Ninian’s chapel in South Ronaldsay, and one at Toab.²⁸¹ In Caithness there is a Ninian-dedication at Papigoe near Wick.²⁸² In Sutherland a Ninian-dedication is found at Navidale.²⁸³ These probably, however, only started appearing in the region in the twelfth century. William Thomson has suggested that these Ninian-dedications were retrospective and antiquarian by nature due to their frequent association with *papar* sites and place-names. He has pointed out that there are no known Ninian-dedications in Scotland that are earlier than twelfth-century. Thomson has linked the arrival of Ninian’s cult in the north to the writing of Aelred of Rievaulx’s *Vita*

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 150.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁷ Rekdal, ‘Vikings and Saints’, 266.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁰ William P. Thomson, ‘The Orkney *Papar*-Names’, in Beverly Ballin Smith, Simon Taylor, and Gareth Williams (editors), *West Over Sea: Studies in Scandinavian Sea-Borne Expansion and Settlement Before 1300: a Festschrift in Honour of Dr. Barbara E. Crawford*, (2007), pp .515-538, 523.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*

²⁸² *Ibid.*

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 524.

Niniani c.1160.²⁸⁴ He has argued that the primary function of these dedications, as well as the Laurence-dedications, was probably to underplay the Norwegian connection of the Orcadian church and to emphasise the earliness of links with other British churches.²⁸⁵ As he puts it, ‘they also had the advantage of casting the Orkney Church in favourable light by the claim that it had such venerable antecedents’.²⁸⁶ Meanwhile, ‘the reputation of the saints was similarly enhanced by the assertion that their influence had extended to the extremities of the British Isles’.²⁸⁷

Although a number of saints’ cults were possibly imported from the Hebrides and Ireland, there are a few points that are worth considering. Firstly, why were these cults adopted in Ireland and the Hebrides and not in Orkney and Caithness? The traditional view holds that all traces of Christianity were initially erased in Orkney. However, the fact that Norse settlers had relations – both violent and peaceful – with Gaelic locals in Caithness,²⁸⁸ suggests that this narrative is far too simplistic. It is certainly possible that the original Orcadian church suffered greatly from the Norse settlement. However, as the *Life of Saint Findan* suggests, its activity was not completely halted. Contacts with local populations in Caithness meant that Norsemen would have been exposed to local Christian traditions even if all church activity ceased in Orkney. Secondly, how early did Irish and Hebridean influences make their way back to Orkney? While they may very well have done so in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, it would be strange if they did not do so earlier too. Strong contacts and links with Norse-Gaels from Ireland and the Hebrides meant that Orcadians were undoubtedly exposed to local traditions from those areas. Furthermore, Jan Erik Rekdal has argued that saints’ legends from the British Isles may have been important in the formation of those in Norway and Iceland.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 523.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 525.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 525.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 525.

²⁸⁸ The Norsemen seem to have been in contact with Gaels in Caithness from quite early on, as is exemplified by the battle between Earl Sigurð ‘the Mighty’ and Maelbrigte ‘Tusk’. There is, though, a strong debate as to what happened to the Pictish population of Orkney. While some believe that they became assimilated into the Norse settler population, others favour the possibility that they were exterminated. Others even argue that Orkney and Shetland were empty when the Norse arrived. See: James H. Barrett, ‘Beyond War or Peace: The Study of Culture Contact in Viking-Age Scotland’, in John Hines, Alan Lane and Mark Redknap (editors), *Land, Sea and Home: Settlement in the Viking Period*, (2004), 207-218; Iain Crawford, ‘War of Peace: Viking Colonisation in the Northern and Western Isles of Scotland Reviewed’, in H. Bekker-Nielsen (editor), *Proceedings of the Eight Viking Congress* (1981), 259-269; Anna Ritchie, ‘Birsay around AD 800’, *Orkney Heritage*, 2, (1983), 54-64.

²⁸⁹ Rekdal, ‘Vikings and Saints’, 256.

Saint Sunniva's legend appears to have borrowed elements from the legends of Triduana, Donnán, Mo Nenna and Bega.²⁹⁰ It is hard to imagine that the bringing back of Celtic saints' legends to Norway from Britain could have occurred without Orkney and Caithness having any British saints' cults. While the cult of Celtic saints may have seen a revival in twelfth century Orkney, it is likely that a number of those cults were already present there. The twelfth-century Columba dedications found in Norway may also reflect a similar saintly renaissance in Norway. Additionally, these could reflect fashionable imports from the Norse colonies in the West. Whether the Orcadians inherited saints' cults from the pre-existing church, or whether they inherited them from other parts of the British Isles, it seems likely that they inherited a number of them at an early date. The archaeological evidence for the early Christianisation of Norse settlers is also important. While it does not tell us anything about the saints that these people would have venerated, we can assume that they were probably saints whose cults were popular in other parts of northern Britain. A relatively early adoption of certain Celtic saints' cults by the Norse settlers of Orkney and Caithness would be a further indication that the narrative of Óláfr Tryggvason's forcible conversion of Orkney is incorrect.

In any case, Norwegian kings and clergymen in the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries must have been aware of the prevalence of Celtic saints' cults in Orkney and Caithness, as in the Hebrides and Ireland. This awareness would have highlighted the distinctness of the local Orcadian church and of Orcadian culture more generally. What Norwegians thought of this is not known and is probably unknowable. Perhaps they were indifferent to this; perhaps they were irritated by it. What the upper echelons of Norwegian must certainly have resented, however, was the removal of Caithness from the Orkney bishopric, and the establishment of a new Scottish one.

2.5 – The Maiming of Bishop John and the Murder of Bishop Adam of Caithness

While local cults and dedications presented strong Gaelic characteristics, Gaelic clergymen from Scotland could be subject to suspicion. Relations between the earls and the Scottish bishops of Caithness were tense. This tension was to escalate into physical attacks on the bishops in the first three decades of the thirteenth century.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 275.

The first bishop to be attacked was Bishop John. *Orkneyinga Saga* says that after the murder of the steward Hlifolf, Haraldr Maddadsson went to Scrabster to find Bishop John. Then, ‘As the Earl’s troops stormed up the stronghold from the ships, the bishop set out to give the Earl some kind of word of welcome, but what actually happened was that Earl Harald took the bishop captive and had his tongue cut out and a knife driven into his eyes, blinding him’.²⁹¹ As we have seen, John then prayed to Saint Triduna and apparently had his sight and speech restored. The men of Caithness then had to swear oaths of allegiance to Earl Harald. While *Orkneyinga Saga* gives no reason for John being so specifically targeted, *Gesta Annalia* does. The author tells us that ‘on the plea that John, bishop of that province, was an informer, and the instigator of the misunderstanding between him and the lord king, he had, as he thought, the bishop’s eyes put out and his tongue lopped off’.²⁹² What John was supposedly informing King William about is not known. Barbara Crawford has suggested that this accusation may have been the result of John informing King William of the contacts between Earl Haraldr and King John of England that we have already mentioned.²⁹³ John possibly knew of these contacts through information circling around ecclesiastical circles.

Papal letters also reveal that the attack on John may have been related to John’s obstruction of the payment of ‘Peter’s Pence’ in Caithness. While little is known from the activities of John’s predecessor, Bishop Andrew, a papal letter informs us that ‘he confirmed a grant by the earl of a payment of an annual due of one penny from every inhabited house in Caithness which because of Haraldr’s regard for the blessed Peter and Paul was collected specifically as alms for the needs of the Roman Church’.²⁹⁴ This payment was essentially a form of ‘Peter’s Pence’, which had been introduced in Norway by the papal legate Nicholas Breakspear during the elevation of Nidaros to the status of archbishopric.²⁹⁵ John, however, obstructed the payment. The papal letter of 1198 instructed both Bishop Bjarni of Orkney and Bishop Reginald of Rosemarkie to stop John from preventing the payment. Why would John prevent the payment of the due at the risk of papal censure on himself? As ‘Peter’s Pence’ was not paid in Scotland, John may have been determined to bring Caithness in line with the rest of the kingdom and block any potential powers that the bishop of Orkney still had or was felt to have had in Caithness.²⁹⁶

²⁹¹ OS, Edwards and Pálsson, 222.

²⁹² *Chronicle of the Scottish Nation*, Annals, XXIV.

²⁹³ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 254.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 251.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 251-252.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 252.

Tension between the two, however, did not ease. John's potential informing and the seizure of Caithness probably drove Haraldr to physically remove the threat posed by the bishop, whom he saw as a traitor. King William's response was swift and forceful. As *Orkneyinga Saga* tells us, William raised a massive army and marched to Caithness. So large was this army, apparently, that as it was camped in Ausdale near the boundary between Sutherland and Caithness, the 'camp extended from one end of the valley to the other'.²⁹⁷ Hearing of this, Haraldr raised his own army, numbering some six thousand men. He sent messengers to William to try to agree upon a settlement. William demanded that he be granted a quarter of all the revenues from Caithness. Haraldr and the leading men of Caithness, seeing no alternative, agreed. William then headed back south. *Gesta Annalia* gives a slightly different account. It states:

'this army [William's], however, met with little or no success and returned; for Harald had retreated to the furthest coast, returning as soon as the army had gone back. The following spring, therefore – that is, in 1202 – as the lord king was getting ready to sail towards the Orkneys against the said Harald, the latter, under the safe-conduct of Roger, bishop of Saint Andrews, met him at Perth; and there, by the intercession of that bishop and other good men, came to a good understanding with the king, and swore that he would in all things abide by the judgement of the Church, and thus he was restored to his earldom, on payment of two thousand pounds of silver to the lord king'.²⁹⁸

Both sources also say that Haraldr's son Þórfinn, who was kept as a hostage, was blinded and castrated during the campaign, dying as a result of his injuries. King William was not the only one to be enraged and disturbed by the maiming of Bishop John. The papacy took this incident extremely seriously. While Haraldr escaped papal censure, a certain Lumberd was bamed by a papal order, and was to be administered penance.²⁹⁹ As Crawford points out, it is possible that Innocent III decided to spare Haraldr, *dilectus filius nobilis vir* ('the noble man our beloved son'), because of the situation around 'Peter's Pence' and John's thwarting of it.³⁰⁰ The instructions for Lumberd's punishment were severe. He had to 'walk around naked

²⁹⁷ OS, Edwards and Pálsson, 223.

²⁹⁸ *Chronicle of the Scottish Nation*, Annals, XXIV.

²⁹⁹ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 255.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

– except for breeches and a short and sleeveless woollen vest – throughout the countryside where the bishop had been mutilated and in the surrounding region (in the locality of Thurso and Scrabster), for fifteen days ‘with his tongue tied with a thin cord and pulled out beyond his lips and the cord tied round his neck’.³⁰¹ Lumberd also had to carry rods with him that would be used to discipline him when he came to a church. He would then have to lie on the ground in silence, and fast until evening. Only then would he be able to eat some bread and drink some water. Within a month of this ordeal, Lumberd had to leave for Jerusalem where he would spend three years, and he would have to fast every sixth day on bread and water for the next eleven years.³⁰²

The implications of this event are interesting. On the one hand, this made Haraldr (and Lumberd) out to be a terrible sinner. While not quite as shocking, one may see certain parallels with the killing of the archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Becket in 1170 following his conflict with King Henry II. Such similarities must have been noticed at the time. On the other hand, the role of ‘Peter’s Pence’ in the build-up to the bishop’s maiming highlights Haraldr’s apparent piety. Furthermore, evidence survives for Haraldr’s generosity to the Scottish Church. A twelfth century document in Latin reveals that Haraldr made an annual grant of one mark of silver to the abbey of Scone in Pethshire.³⁰³

If Haraldr’s attack on Bishop John was shocking, the murder of his successor, Bishop Adam, in 1222 was even more so. The Chronicle of Melrose says that Adam, along with a monk called Serlo were attacked and burned to death by people from Caithness who were angered by the tithes (teinds) that Adam claimed.³⁰⁴ *Gesta Annalia* says:

‘Forasmuch as Adam, Bishop of Caithness, and sometime abbot of Melrose, claimed tithes and other church rights from his subjects, these were kindled with fury; and, on Sunday, within eight days after the Blessed Mary’s Nativity, being gathered together in a body of over three hundred men, they took him, beat, bound, wounded, and stripped him; and, throwing him down into his own kitchen, which had been set on fire, burnt him, after they had killed a monk of his, and one of his servants’.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 255-256.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 256.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 57.

³⁰⁴ *The Church Historians of England: Chronicles of John and Richard of Hexham; Chronicle of Holyrood: Chronicle of Melrose*, 174-175.

Neither *Melrose* nor *Gesta Annalia* tell us what these tithes were. The *Annals of Dunstable* say that Adam ‘sought from his subjects the tithes of hay concerning which both he and the earl of Caithness had made promise to the king of Scotland’.³⁰⁵ An appenda to *Orkneyinga Saga* found in *Flateyrbók*, however, states:

‘it was an old custom that the bishop should have a span of butter for every thirty kine; this each householder was to pay who was in Caithness; he more who had kine, but he less according to his means; and each was to pay according to the tale of his kin. But Bishop Adam wished to raise the tax and have a span for every fifteen kine; and when he got that he claiemd to have it for every twelve kine; and when that was given he wished to have it for every ten kine’.³⁰⁶

It therefore seems that two tithes were involved, and that a general resentment arose out of the Church’s demands for these tithes. Although the 1222 entry of the *Chronicle of Melrose* does not mention Earl Jón Haraldsson, the entry for 1231 states that ‘John, earl of Caithness, was killed and burnt in his house; a punishment which he had merited at God’s hands, for he had inflicted the like injury upon the venerable bishop Adam’.³⁰⁷ The *Annals of Dunstable* also report that it was Jón who had Serlo slain in front of Adam, before ordering that Adam be bound and burned in his own kitchen.³⁰⁸ *Gesta Annalia*, for its part, tells us:

‘John, earl of Caithness, although he was dwelling close by, and had seen the people, armed, pouring in from all sides, upon being moreover, asked by some of that bishop’s servants to bring help, dissembled and said: “If the bishop is afraid, let him come to me.” Whence, also, it was believed by many that he was privy to that crime’.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁵ *Annals of Dunstable*, in Alan Anderson (editor), *Scottish Annals from English Chroniclers: A.D. 500 to 1286*, (1908), 337.

³⁰⁶ ‘The Burning of Bishop Adam from the Flatey Book’, in George W. Dasent (editor), *Icelandic Sagas and Other Historical Documents Relating to the Settlements and Descents of the Northmen of the British Isles*, III, *The Orkneyingers Saga*, (1894), 232.

³⁰⁷ *The Church Historians of England: Chronicles of John and Richard of Hexham; Chronicle of Holyrood: Chronicle of Melrose*, 176.

³⁰⁸ *Annals of Dunstable*, 337.

³⁰⁹ *Chronicle of the Scottish Nation*, Annals, XLI.

Walter Bower's *Scotichronicon* and the *Flateyrbók* account both give narratives that are similar or identical to that found in *Gesta Annalia*.³¹⁰ The belief in Jón's active participation in the attack may be down to, as Crawford has explained, 'an inflamed rendering of the events by monastic chroniclers who liked to find a single scapegoat for such deeds, rather than a general culpability among the wider farming community'.³¹¹ As Adam had previously been Abbot of Melrose, it is understandable that the chroniclers of Melrose should have been so shocked and angered by his violent death. Whether Jón was actively involved in Adam's killing, or simply refused to intervene, he was held culpable.

King Alexander's response was extremely brutal and vigorous. Learning of these events while in Jedburgh, Alexander raised an army, 'as became a Catholic man'³¹², and marched to Caithness, just as had happened when Adam was maimed. *Gesta Annalia*'s comment is interesting as it sets King Alexander as a model Christian ruler in opposition to the sinful and shameful Earl Jón. The *Annals of Dunstable* say that Jón 'fled from the king's realm; and in the manner of Cain wandering and in exile roamed about among the isles of the sea'.³¹³ Jón fled from Caithness and hid in Orkney or Shetland, probably as his father had done. The biblical imagery used by the author once again presents Jón as a dreadful sinner, on par with Cain. Alexander put down some terms and Jón thought it best to agree to them. *Gesta Annalia* tells us that Jón, 'though he proved guiltless, and had given no countenance or advice to those ruffians, yet, because he had not straightaway sought to take meet vengeance upon them, had to give up great part of his lands, and a large sum of money, to the king, in order to win his favour'.³¹⁴ It is probable that Jón had to pay £2,000 as his father had.³¹⁵ Moreover, the full tithes of hay had to be rendered by Jón and his heirs; the earl had to resign half of his earldom into the king's hands; he had to bestow lands on the church; and he had to, within six months, hand over to the king those responsible for Adam's murder.³¹⁶ Alexander then had these 'mangled in limb, and racked with many a torture'.³¹⁷ The following year, Jón had to pay a large fine, allowing him to recover the half of Caithness that he had resigned to Alexander, as is recorded in Andrew of Wyntoun's *Original Chronicle*.³¹⁸ Knowledge of the

³¹⁰ Walter Bower, *Scotichronicon*, in D.E.R. Watt (editor), *Scotichronicon*, V, 115.

³¹¹ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 271.

³¹² *Chronicle of the Scottish Nation*, Annals, XLI.

³¹³ *Annals of Dunstable*, 337.

³¹⁴ *Chronicle of the Scottish Nation*, Annals, XLI.

³¹⁵ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 272.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 271.

³¹⁷ *Chronicle of the Scottish Nation*, Annals, XLII.

³¹⁸ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 272.

appalling nature of these retributions travelled, and the Icelandic Annals inform us that eighty men had their hands and feet chopped off, many of them dying as a result.³¹⁹ As Crawford puts it, few are the incidents in the history of Scotland that are as revealing of the brutality that a king's vengeance could take.³²⁰

Once again, the papacy became involved. *Gesta Annalia* tells us that to avoid the papacy sending a legate or an envoy upon hearing of this 'atrocious', the Scots sent messengers to Rome to tell of what had happened and how firmly the king had avenged the crime. The pope commended 'both their diligence and the king's task'.³²¹ A papal letter of encouragement praised Alexander for his actions and approved the excommunication that was publicly pronounced by the four Scottish bishops on the perpetrators.³²² While his father had managed to escape the blame for Bishop John's maiming, Jón was not so fortunate. As we have seen, the *Chronicle of Melrose* relishes in the 'just' punishment that Jón received. Similarly, *Gesta Annalia* takes delight in telling of Jón's death in 1230, stating that it was 'punishment for that crime', and that he 'had richly earned such a death'.³²³ One gets a sense of just how hated Jón became in Scotland. Here was a wicked man who not only went against his King, but also allowed his wicked people to kill members of the clergy. If Magnús was the Saint-Earl, Jón was the 'Earl-Sinner'.

An attack on a bishop was extremely serious. Two was extraordinary. These attacks were not religious in their motivation, but rather political. The physical attacks of the Scottish bishops highlight the tensions that existed between the earls and their Scottish overlords. The bishops of Caithness were effectively acting as agents of the Scottish kings. The appointment of the first Scottish bishop, Andrew, sometime between 1145 and 1147, likely formed 'part of the policy for withdrawing Caithness from the Norse sphere and extending royal control over north Scotland'.³²⁴ For the earls, the Scottish bishops were attempting to undermine their power. For the local population, they were suspicious foreigners who imposed oppressive tithes. These two attacks highlight Caithness' status as a frontier zone at this time. Crawford has pointed out that attacks on Irish bishops in this period can be compared to those on John and Adam.³²⁵ The conflicting interests of secular powers and religious authorities could be

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 271.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 272.

³²¹ *Chronicle of the Scottish Nation*, Annals, XLII.

³²² Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 272.

³²³ *Chronicle of the Scottish Nation*, Annals, XLII.

³²⁴ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 251.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 274.

compounded by ethnicity, language and custom.³²⁶ Though the attacks were political in nature, the kings of Scots undoubtedly turned the religious context to their advantage. By portraying the people of Caithness as wild sinners, they could justify bringing the area further within the Scottish sphere. It allowed them to forcefully establish their authority and continue the process of integrating Caithness within the Scottish kingdom.³²⁷ It was also an opportunity to make quite a lot of money. The people of Caithness had to pay a heavy price for these attacks. Not only were a number of them killed, mutilated and dispossessed of their lands, the heavy fines laid by the Scottish Kings were particularly harsh. As Crawford puts it, ‘one wonders what the total impact of these economic reprisals was on the nature of society in the earldom of Caithness’.³²⁸

This was not the last time that a bishop was killed in the earldoms, in fact. In 1382 or 1383, Bishop William IV of Orkney was killed, as is reported in the Icelandic Annals.³²⁹ Who was behind the bishop’s death, however, is not known, and it is not exactly clear why he was killed.

Perceptions of Orcadian identity framed around religion are complicated. The survival of pagan practices became a means of portraying Orcadian society as ‘backwards’ and barbarous. The persistence of pagan practices and beliefs also came to symbolise defiance towards the kings of Norway. For the Orcadians, though, the association of Earl Einarr with Óðinn was a means of establishing the legitimacy of the Orcadian dynasty and rejecting the superiority of the Norwegian crown. With the canonisation of Magnús Erlendsson and Rögnvaldr Kolsson, the earldom now had not one, but two dynastic saints to bring the dynasty legitimacy and prestige. It also showed that Orcadians weren’t pseudo-Christians; they were pious and holy too. However, attacks on Scottish bishops in the early thirteenth century damaged the reputation of the people of Caithness, as well as those of the earls. For the Scots, these terrible crimes were demonstrations of the evilness of those people. Jón Haraldsson came to be seen as an incredibly wicked earl. Though Scottish bishops were not safe in Caithness, the Church of the earldoms and the local traditions found there also exhibited tremendous Scottish influence, as well as influence from Ireland and the Hebrides. Numerous Celtic saints were venerated across Orkney, Caithness and Shetland. Orcadian religious

³²⁶ *Ibid.*

³²⁷ *Ibid.*

³²⁸ *Ibid.*

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 340.

identity was varied, and different interpretations could be made depending on who was making them, when they were making them, and why they were making them. We now leave the topic of religion to examine that of the origin myths of the earldom dynasty.

Chapter 3

The Origin Myths of the Earldom Dynasty

The opening chapters of *Orkneyinga Saga*, unlike the rest of the text, do not record the actions of the historical earls of Orkney and Caithness. Rather, they set out a mythical genealogy for the Orcadian earls, stretching back into the mythical Nordic past. Later on, in Chapter 5 of the saga, we are told the story of Sigurðr ‘the Mighty’, and of his bizarre and ridiculous death. This story, however, also presents the reader with a potential explanation for the fact that Orcadian society and culture presented traits that were both Norse and Gaelic. These early chapters are part of the reason why *Orkneyinga Saga* is such an interesting work of literature for people interested in medieval Orkney specifically, and medieval history more generally. The question of who wrote the saga, as well as that of why, has been the focus of much theorizing and debate.

3.1 – *The Mythical Origins of the Earls of Orkney and Caithness*

The first three chapters of *Orkneyinga Saga* deal with the subject of the mythical ancestry of the Orcadian earldom dynasty. According to the saga, the earls were descended from King Fornjótr, ‘who ruled over Finland and Kvenland’.³³⁰ His three sons were Hlér, Logi and Kári. Kári was the father of Frosti, who himself fathered Snær ‘the Old’. Snær’s son was Þorri. Þorri had two sons, Nórr and Górr, and a daughter called Góí.³³¹ One winter, Góí went missing. Three years later, Nórr and Górr set out to find her, with Nórr scouring the mainland, and Górr the islands in the Gulf of Bothnia and the Baltic. During his search, Nórr laid claim to a large part of Norway, including the Trondheim fjord and Møre. Górr, meanwhile, ‘laid claim to all the islands on his way from the south’.³³² The brothers divided the country between themselves. While Nórr was to have the mainland, Górr was to have all the islands wherever ‘a ship with a fixed rudder could be sailed between them and the mainland’.³³³ Górr thus became known as a sea-king. Nor eventually found Góí, who had been abducted by Hrolf of Bjarg, the son of the giant Svadi. After a battle, the two came to an

³³⁰ OS, Edwards and Pálsson, 23.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

³³² *Ibid.*, 25.

³³³ *Ibid.*, 25.

agreement, and Nórr married Hrolf's sister while Hrolf kept Góí. Nor laid claim to more land in the north, and called it 'Norway'.³³⁴ His sons eventually inherited the kingdom and divided it between themselves. Górr's sons, Heiti and Beiti meanwhile, constantly attacked the territories of Nórr's sons. Beiti, we are told, had one of his ships hauled over 'from Beistad north across Namdalseid to Namsen on the far side, with Górr sitting aft', and 'laid claim to all the land lying to port'.³³⁵ It was from Heiti that Earl Rögnvald of Møre was descended. The saga lists four generations between the two.³³⁶

Preben Meulengracht Sørensen has divided this agnatic line into three sections. Fornjótr, Kári, Frosti, Snær, Þorri, Górr, Heiti and Sveiði can be classified as mythological rulers. These can be assigned to the realm of legend rather than history, with the first four of these representing winter-phenomena. Then come the legendary rulers. These are Halfdan 'the Old', Ivarr Upplendingajarl and Eysteinn Glumra. These three generations represent the transition from the legendary, mythical past into history. The historical earls start with Rögnvaldr of Møre.³³⁷

The decision to trace the ancestry of the earls back to Fornjótr is far from a random one, and the significance of this choice is crucial to our understanding of Orcadian self-perception and of *Orkneyinga Saga's* meaning as a literary work. As Meulengracht Sørensen and others have pointed out, the name-lists incorporated into some manuscripts of Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* list Fornjótr as the name of one of the giants.³³⁸ In Snorri's conception of the origin of the world, the frost-giants were the original giant-race.³³⁹ The meaning of Fornjótr's name is rather unclear. Several explanations have been given, including 'the old owner', 'the old destroyer', 'the receiver of sacrifices', 'the old howler' ('the storm'), and 'the old Jute'.³⁴⁰ Whatever the meaning of his name, it is clear that Fornjótr effectively embodied and personified 'the Nordic winter and northern nature'.³⁴¹ The names of Fornjótr's sons are associated with three elements. Hlér a sea-giant, represents water, while Logi means 'flame'

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

³³⁷ Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, 'The Sea, The Flame, and the Wind: The Legendary Ancestors of the Earls of Orkney', in Colleen E. Batey, Judith Jesch, and Christopher D. Morris (editors), *The Viking Age in Caithness, Orkney and the North Atlantic: Select Papers from the Proceedings of the Eleventh Viking Congress, Thurso and Kirkwall, 22 August – 1 September 1989*, (Edinburgh, 1993), 215-216.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, 213.

³³⁹ Beuermann, 'Jarla Sögur Orkneyja', 115.

³⁴⁰ Meulengracht Sørensen, 'The Sea, The Flame, and the Wind', 214.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 213.

and Kári ‘the north wind’.³⁴² Kári’s sons are also associated with various elements. Frosti represents frost, Snær the snow, and Þorri the wind.

The narrative of Fornjótr and his sons is also found in a chapter of *Flateyjarbók* titled *Hversu Nóregr Byggðisk* (‘How Norway was settled’).³⁴³ This text, however, focuses on Nórr’s descendants. *Flateyjarbók* traces Hálfðan ‘the Old’ ‘s ancestry back to Nórr. A similar account is also found in Snorri’s *Edda*.³⁴⁴ In *Orkneyinga Saga*, however, Hálfðan’s lineage leads back to Górr.³⁴⁵ Several scholars have suggested that Snorri Sturluson may have been responsible for writing this section of *Orkneyinga Saga*. If he did, though, one would expect the narrative of Hálfðan’s ancestry to remain consistent in his writings. Hálfðan’s inclusion in the genealogy is interesting, as Meulengracht Sørensen points out. The purpose of Hálfðan’s inclusion was undoubtedly ‘to pinpoint the noble ancestry and status of the jarl kin’.³⁴⁶ Meulengracht Sørensen has argued that the Fornjótr narrative probably has its roots in old myths, and cannot solely be attributed to High-Medieval learned construction, as Claus Krag has posited.³⁴⁷ As he puts it, ‘the medieval contribution to this narrative is limited to its euhemerization of the mythical forces which are simply understood to be pre-historical kings’.³⁴⁸

Tracing the earldom ancestry exclusively back to the giants was, as Meulengracht Sørensen and Ian Beuermann have explained, unusual; Norse origin myths usually comprised of the Norse gods combined with a southern element, usually from Troy.³⁴⁹ Ari Þorgilsson traced the Yngling dynasty to the Turkish king Yngvi.³⁵⁰ In *Heimskringla*, Snorri Sturluson combined the Asian theory with the mythology of the *Ynglingatal* poem, and placed Óðinn and his sons at the top of the Norwegian and Swedish royal genealogies.³⁵¹ The Orcadian genealogy, however, was never linked directly to Óðinn. Instead, it chose the archenemies of the gods, the giants, to portray the dynasty’s origins as exclusively Nordic.

³⁴² Beuermann, ‘Jarla Sögur Orkneyja’, 115.

³⁴³ Meulengracht Sørensen, ‘The Sea, The Flame, and the Wind’, 216.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 217.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 214-215.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 215.

³⁴⁹ Beuermann, ‘Jarla Sögur Orkneyja’, 115-116.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 116.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*

The rooting of the earls' ancestry in the distant Scandinavian past, and their association with the elements of the far North, 'showed that they were, 'in a way, more Norwegian than the kings of Norway'.³⁵²

As Beuermann has pointed out, the decision to trace the earls' origins solely back to Fornjótr was, however, 'a double-edged sword'. While the earls may have been more Nordic than the kings of Norway, it also meant that they were of lower noble status than the latter.³⁵³ Yet, the origin myth manages to countervail this complication. While the earls' dynastic origins are exclusively Scandinavian, their mythical ancestors are by no means stationary. Nórr and Górr travelled far and wide to find their sister. The earls were the products of immigration and conquest and descended from warrior-rulers who were 'free to decide where to turn to, whom to attack, which lands to take, and how to divide them'.³⁵⁴ Although it is King Haraldr Fairhair who conquers Shetland and Orkney in the saga, the narrative is not quite that simple. Rögnvaldr gives his Orkney earldom to his brother, Sigurðr 'the Mighty', who himself conquers Caithness with Þorsteinn 'the Red'. Beuermann has highlighted the fact that while the saga clearly shows the Norwegian kings' overlordship over Shetland and Orkney, the presentation of the themes of conquest and immigration underlines Orcadian equality with and independence of Norway.³⁵⁵ Furthermore, a connection to Óðinn was constructed through Earl Torf-Einarr, as we mentioned earlier. While Einarr may not have been descended from Óðinn, he was more Óðinn-like than the Norwegian kings. All of these elements served to present the earls as independent from the Norwegian kings through their ancestry. The deliberate decision to trace the ancestry of the Orcadian earls back to Fornjótr was 'an expression of their independence in relation to those kings, to whom they owe their title of jarls, but by no means their aristocratic status'.³⁵⁶

These first three chapters, though, do not simply present the idea that the earls' aristocratic status is intrinsic. From the very start, the saga narrative makes clear the future earls' right to rule both the Orkney and Caithness halves of their earldoms. Górr's claim of the islands in the sea clearly mirrors that of Orkney and Shetland. Meanwhile, Beiti's seizing of part of the mainland in Trøndelag reflects Earl Sigurðr 'the Mighty' 's conquest of Caithness. Barbara Crawford has also noted that this episode is extremely similar to that of

³⁵² Meulengracht Sørensen, 'The Sea, The Flame, and the Wind', 221.

³⁵³ Beuermann, 'Jarla Sögur Orkneyja', 117.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 119.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 119-121.

³⁵⁶ Meulengracht Sørensen, 'The Sea, The Flame, and the Wind', 221.

King Magnús ‘Barelegs’ ‘s seizure of Kintyre shortly after the ‘Battle of the Menai Straits.’³⁵⁷ According to *Orkneyinga Saga*, Magnús and King Malcolm of Scotland’ (*recte* King Edgar. Malcolm III died in 1093, and his son Edgar was ruling at the time) reached a settlement that Magnús should have all the islands lying off the west coast ‘which were separated by water navigable by a ship with the rudder set’.³⁵⁸ Magnús then had his ship hauled across the isthmus at Tarbert, ‘with himself sitting at the helm’, thus claiming the peninsula.³⁵⁹ This parallel is most probably not accidental. Its significance is not entirely clear, though. Perhaps it was intended to demonstrate that the earls, through their ancestry, were equal in status to and as powerful as the kings of Norway. Norwegian kings were not the only ones, nor even the first to assert their authority and claim in this particular way. One could even say that the inclusion of this episode suggests that Magnús in fact copied Beiti!

A further parallel can be drawn between Beiti and Sigurðr in that the earldom dynasty does not descend from their branch of the family. Instead, the earls are descended from Heiti and Torf-Einarr. Górr and Nórr’s travels also clearly reflect those of the earls of Møre. Both were to conquer lands far from their familial homes, which in both of these cases were to the south of this point of origin. Essentially, this is underlining the fact that the earls of Orkney and Caithness have every right to rule over their earldoms, which have essentially always been theirs. The antagonism between Górr and Nórr’s sons is also representative of that which at times existed between the earls of Orkney and their Norwegian overlords. All of these themes, relevant to the late twelfth and the early thirteenth centuries, are woven into the saga’s narrative from the very beginning.

The production of a genealogy of the earldom dynasty was important because it gave it legitimacy and prestige. In this sense, *Orkneyinga Saga* resembles various other literary works from this time. As Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards have pointed out in the introduction to their translation of *Orkneyinga Saga*, *Landnámabók* offers a similar narrative for Iceland:

‘People often say that writing about the Settlements is merely irrelevant learning, but we think we can better meet the criticism of foreigners when they accuse us of being descended from slaves or scoundrels, if we know for certain the truth about our ancestry. And for those who want to know the ancient customs, and how to trace

³⁵⁷ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 81.

³⁵⁸ OS, Edwards and Pálsson, 86.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

genealogies, it's better to start at the beginning rather than in the middle. Anyway, all civilized peoples want to know about the origins of their own society and the beginnings of their own race.'³⁶⁰

Yet, as this passage from *Landnámabók* so clearly illustrates, such works were about more than just the dynasty; they reflected the sense of self of those whose stories they told and that they described; they were exercises in nation building. Similarities can also be drawn with Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, and John of Fordun's *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*. Although *Orkneyinga Saga* only tells us about a small and select section of Orcadian society, it does present a view of some of the most basic elements of Orcadian society at the time of its writing. Interestingly, these first three chapters make no attempt at linking these mythical ancestors to Orkney in any way. This may have been down to the desire, or need to highlight the fact that Orkney and Shetland were firmly part of the Scandinavian world at the time of writing, as Ian Beuermann puts forward.³⁶¹

Although no links are made to Orkney in the mythical section of the saga, it can be argued that the connection of the earls to Orkney and Britain was constructed in a different and far subtler way in the following chapters.

3.2 - Earl Sigurðr 'the Mighty', Maelbrigte 'Tusk', and the Celticisation of the Norsemen

Though the origin myth has no 'Orcadian' or Gaelic elements, a close look at the chapters dealing with the first earl of Orkney, Sigurðr 'the Mighty', reveal that *Orkneyinga Saga* does present a story explaining how and when the Orcadian mixture of the Norse and Gaelic peoples and cultures happened.

Sigurðr's fame derives not so much from his status as the first earl of Orkney, but rather from his striking, and somewhat derisive death. Sigurðr and Þorstein 'the Red', we are told, 'conquered the whole of Caithness and a large part of Argyll, Moray and Ross'.³⁶² So powerful was Sigurðr that he built a fort in Moray. The conquest of Northern Scotland, however, was no easy task. Sigurðr encountered resistance from a local Gaelic mormaer. *Orkneyinga Saga* informs us that 'a meeting was arranged at a certain place between him and

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁶¹ Beuermann, 'Jarla Sögur Orkneyja', 124.

³⁶² *OS*, Edwards and Pálsson, 27.

Maelbrigte, Earl of the Scots, to settle their differences'.³⁶³ Both earls were to bring forty men, but Sigurðr, deeming the Scots untrustworthy, brought eighty men, mounting two on each horse. Sigurðr and his men defeated the scots, and he had them strap the heads of the slain to their saddles 'to make a show of his triumph'.³⁶⁴ On the way home, however, as Sigurðr went to spur his horse, he struck his calf against Maelbrigte's protruding tooth, and cut himself. The wound became infected and he died shortly after. He was then buried in a mound on the bank of the River Oykel.³⁶⁵

Bo Almqvist has argued that the motif of the head avenging its former owner is probably Gaelic in origin, given that it is also found in the Irish story about the death of Concobhar Mac Nessa. Almqvist sums up the story as follows:

'The brain of a Leinster king, Mesgegra, who had been killed by the Ulster champion Conall Cernach, had been mixed with chalk, formed into a hard ball and preserved, so that it could conveniently be boasted about on appropriate occasions. The brain was stolen, however, by a Connaught man who hated Ulster people, and as soon as he got an opportunity, he threw it at the Ulster king, Conchobhar Mac Nessa. Though it entered his brain, Conchobhar managed to survive for several years, but finally, when he heard the news that Christ had been crucified, he became so enraged that the ball fell out of his head; then a stream of blood gushed forth and Conchobhar died.'³⁶⁶

Although the story of Mesgegra's brain may not have been the direct inspiration for the story of Maelbrigte's avenging 'tusk', it is possible that another Gaelic story with the same kind of motif was.³⁶⁷ This is certainly a plausible theory. Given the nature of Orcadian society, it makes sense that their stories would have had Gaelic elements

Nevertheless, not everyone has accepted the conclusions of this analysis. Gro Steinsland has contended that the motif of the ruler dying an unusual death is also found in Nordic mythology.³⁶⁸ Bergsveinn Birgisson, however, has argued that *Ynlingatal* derides the deaths of numerous kings. This would mean that a special death was not, in fact, a sign of a

³⁶³ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

³⁶⁶ Bo Almqvist, 'Scandinavian and Celtic Contacts in the Earldom of Orkney', in R.J. Berry and Howie N. Firth (editors) *The People of Orkney: Aspects of Orkney 4*, (Kirkwall, 1986), 202-203.

³⁶⁷ Almqvist, 'Scandinavian and Celtic Contacts', 203.

³⁶⁸ Beuermann, 'Jarla Sögur Orkneyja', 128.

ruler's special status.³⁶⁹ Beuermann has also contended that this interpretation is not well supported. Given the derisory nature of the deaths in *Ynlingatal*, it would be Snorri Sturluson who would be responsible for making dramatic and honourless deaths a symbol of noble kingship. We are confronted with two possibilities. Either Snorri did not perceive the derisory nature of the poem, or he was, in fact, aware of it and incorporated it into *Ynglingasaga*.³⁷⁰ The first option seems rather unlikely. The second is possible, and would mean that, as Beuermann puts it, 'historians and philologists would also face the interesting possibility that the very first saga of Heimskringla, the praise-work on the Norwegian kings, pokes fun at them'.³⁷¹

Even if one decides to accept the idea that Sigurðr's death follows a literary pattern of Norse rulers dying unusual deaths, then one should also ask oneself: is it not possible that the story has elements of both Norse and Gaelic storytelling? The motif of the unusual fate could easily be combined with that of the avenging head. In light of the mixed storytelling heritage inherited by the Orcadians, it would also make sense for these two motifs to be combined. It seems more likely, though, that the saga in fact mocks Sigurðr's death. As we shall see shortly, this needed not to have been inconsistent with the message of the origin myth.

That *Orkneyinga Saga* should have Gaelic elements is revealing of Orcadian culture in the High Middle-Ages. Yet, the fact that this particular episode potentially has Celtic influences is not its only point of interest. The story presents a celticisation of Sigurðr. Indeed, Sigurðr appears to adopt a number of traits that are perceived to be Celtic. From the text, we gather that the Norsemen consider the Scots to be untrustworthy. This is a theme that reoccurs several times within the saga, and we shall look at this perceived Gaelic characteristic in more detail in the next chapter. It is therefore remarkable that to defeat them, Sigurðr himself resorts to employing deceitful tactics. Moreover, this was not the last time that this particular tactic would apparently be used in Caithness. Almquist has noted that during one of the battles between the Gunn and Keith families fought in August 1478, that the Keiths mounted two men on each of their 12 horses, thus securing them victory.³⁷² Not only did Sigurðr behave like a Gael in battle, he also behaved like one in victory. As mentioned, Sigurðr then has the defeated Scots' heads severed and strapped to the saddles of his men. The custom of

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 128-129.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 129.

³⁷² Bo Almquist, 'What's in a Word? Folklore Contacts Between Norsemen and Gaels as Reflected in *Orkneyinga Saga*', in Olwyn Owen (editor), *The World of Orkneyinga Saga. The Broad-Cloth Viking Trip*, (2005), 31.

severing the heads of slain enemies and displaying them was common amongst the Celts. There are many recorded instances of head cutting in Old Irish sources, and the displaying of the heads of the slain by hanging them around the necks of the victors' horses is also referenced in various texts.³⁷³ In the Irish Death Tale, *The Death of Cet Mac Mágach*, for example, Conall Cernach, and Ulster hero, beheads the Connacht man Cet and three of his followers. Cet had, however, previously taken the heads of 27 ('thrice nine') Ulstermen in one episode.³⁷⁴ In the epic poem *Táin Bó Cuailgne*, Conchobar Mac Nessa and Celtchar cut off the heads of 160 (eight score) men in a single attack.³⁷⁵ In the *Story of Mac Datho's Pig*, the same Conall Cernach boasts, as Almqvist puts it, 'that he has not often slept without the head of a Connacht man under his head', promptly producing the head of one of Connacht's great champions.³⁷⁶

Although Norse literature also features the cutting of heads – such as the decapitation of Sigmund in *Njáls Saga*³⁷⁷ – the story of Sigurðr and Maelbrigte is the only known one to feature such a large number of decapitations.³⁷⁸ Interestingly, it is also the very act of beheading Maelbrigte as a form of boasting and showing off that directly results in Sigurðr's death. In a way, it can be said that Sigurðr was punished duly because he became the very 'thing' that he had set out to defeat.

Yet, this episode is more than just a story about how Sigurðr acted like a Gael, and subsequently died. It also serves as an explanation for the origin of the mixed nature of Orcadian society. Astonishingly, the implication of this episode is that the celticisation of the Norsemen occurred from the very moment of their arrival in Caithness. More specifically, it resulted not only from the simple fact of encountering the Gaels, but from the act of ruling over territories where Gaels lived. Though no Gaelic or Celtic elements are given in the origin myth, the saga narrative manages to present us with an explanation for the fact that the Norse-Gaels had a mixed cultural and ethnic heritage.

If we examine these points while taking into account prophetic nature of Beiti's conquest on the mainland, a potentially very interesting meaning emerges. Beiti's conquest on land mirrors that of Sigurðr in Caithness, and functionally serves as a precursor to this latter conquest whilst underlining the earls' right to rule over Caithness. Sigurðr was thus destined

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 32.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁷ *Njal's Saga*, Cook, 77.

³⁷⁸ Almqvist, 'What's in a Word?', 32.

to conquer Caithness. This in turn means that he was destined to fight Maelbrigte. Perhaps he could have defeated him without resorting to trickery, but the use of deceitful tactics ensured that he would come out victorious. Sigurðr could also very well have celebrated without taking Maelbrigte's head with him as a trophy, and would therefore have lived. Yet his use of deception had already celticised him. Could it therefore be that Sigurðr effectively had to behead Maelbrigte now that he had already acted like a Scot? Was Sigurðr destined to become a Gaelicised Norseman? This would certainly be an interesting detail. Furthermore, it would not matter that a Celtic link was missing from the origin story as the latter, essentially, establishes it by predestining Sigurðr to act as he does. Despite the apparent inappropriateness of Sigurðr's behaviour— and the suitably embarrassing nature of his death—none of this would really have been all that problematic for later earls. Indeed, Sigurðr was not the progenitor of the dynasty; Torf-Einarr was. Sigurðr, as the first earl of Orkney and Caithness, could therefore effectively account for the mixed nature of Orcadian society without tarnishing the earldom dynasty.

Such a narrative might also partly explain why *Orkneyinga Saga* stresses Sigurðr's role in the conquest of Caithness while other sources, as we have mentioned, make no mention of him, attributing it to Þorstein 'the Red' instead. Þorstein was possibly the more dominant member of the partnership. *Landnámabók* claims that he made himself king over the territories he conquered. *Heimskringla* says that his daughter Groa married a Gaelic chieftain called Dungadr. However, *Laxdæla Saga* says that she married Aud 'the Deep-Minded' in Orkney.³⁷⁹ There is, of course, the fact that it was important to stress that the earls of Orkney had acquired Caithness themselves. As the conquest of Orkney and Shetland was attributed to Haraldr 'Fine-Hair', who gave them to Rögnvaldr, it would have been somewhat demeaning to suppose that the Orcadian dynasty had not played a role in the conquest of Caithness either. Removing Þorstein from the picture also meant removing Groa and her potential marriage to Dungadr out of it. As such, the gaelicisation of the Norsemen was the doing of a member of the dynasty rather than of a different kindred. Sigurðr could both highlight the importance of the dynasty's role in the acquisition of its earldoms, and offer the cultural link with the Gaelic world.

Now it seems like a good time to turn to a slightly divergent issue that nonetheless should be addressed. This is the decision to include Hrólfr – better known as Rollo – the first duke of Normandy amongst the sons of Rögnvaldr. The saga states that:

³⁷⁹ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 96.

‘Earl Rognvald married Ragnhild, the daughter of Hrolf Nose, and it was their son Hrolf who conquered Normandy. This Hrolf was so big that no horse could carry him, which is why he was given the name Göngu-Hrolf. The earls of Rouen and the kings of England are descended from him’.³⁸⁰

An obvious question to ask would be: why was he included amongst the Møre kindred? Hrólfr was identified as Norwegian in a number of medieval texts. Hrolf is clearly portrayed as having the characteristics of a giant, being so large that he could not ride a horse. Descent from Fornjótr would thus be rather plausible. Hrólfr and Sigurðr are similar in a number of ways. For a start, both of them are closely related. Both of them also embarked on a mission of conquest abroad, providing their familial dynasties with a dukedom and an earldom respectively. Fornjótr’s descendants were, it seemed, inherently disposed to travel and conquer, creating prosperous dynasties abroad that were able to adapt culturally to those regions they conquered and settled in. The members of both of these dynasties would go on to mark Britain in various ways, particularly Hrólfr’s descendent, William ‘the Conqueror’. Hrólfr’s half-brother, Torf-Einarr, also exhibits certain similarities to William. Both were bastard sons of important aristocrats and women of lower status, and ended up inheriting their fathers’ realms. Both also had opponents in the form of a king named Haraldr and Harold. These similarities may be entirely coincidental, but they should nonetheless be noted, if simply for the fact that they are noticeable. Tying the earldom dynasty to the Norman and Angevin kings of England was a bold move. A point that might have been made was that the Orcadian earls were of the same character as the kings of England. It also showed that the Orcadians had a long connection to the rest of Britain that was more complicated than their simply living in the British Isles.

3.3 – *Orkneyinga Saga: Authorship and Purpose*

The purpose of the origin legend found in the saga was, as we have just seen, to give legitimacy and prestige to the earldom dynasty. Possible readings of the saga, however, suggest that it was not entirely favourable to the Orcadians. The Orcadians’ piratical ways of life, as well as their supposed retention of pagan superstitions and practices, are two

³⁸⁰ OS, Edwards and Pálsson, 26.

characteristics found in the saga that do not reflect too well upon them. Why does *Orkneyinga Saga* present these rather negative traits when it could minimise them? Some might say, of course, that it is unreasonable to expect such a text to be one-dimensional. It is surprising, though, that a written work of this time should both support the cause of the Orcadian earls whilst also showing the flaws that others thought they had. Could it be that while whoever wrote the saga had Orcadian interests at heart, they also perceived Orcadian society as foreign? One vital question should therefore be asked: who wrote *Orkneyinga Saga*, and why did they write it?

To answer this, or rather, these questions, though, we must first examine what exactly *Orkneyinga Saga* is. *Orkneyinga Saga* is a composite work. The core of the saga is derived from the earlier, and now lost *Jarla Sögur* ('Jarls' Sagas').³⁸¹ *Jarla Sögur* is usually dated to about 1200, and the original version appears to have ended with the death of Sveinn Ásleifarson, as indicated by a Danish translation from 1570.³⁸² *Jarla Sögur* contains various sagas, such as those of Magnús Erlendsson, as well as numerous skaldic stanzas. It has been suggested that the final chapters of *Orkneyinga Saga* were probably written around 1234-5.³⁸³ *Heimskringla* likely used *Jarla Sögur* as a source, and it is possible that passages from *Heimskringla* were in turn inserted into a composite *Orkneyinga Saga*.³⁸⁴ This composite saga then made its way into *Flateyjarbók*. *Orkneyinga Saga* in its current form has been pieced from *Flateyjarbók*, with the early Danish translation serving as the template.³⁸⁵

Many people have made suggestions as to who might have written *Orkneyinga Saga*, or, more accurately, *Jarla Sögur*. Dr Jón Stefánsson argued that Bishop Bjarni Kolbeinsson was the author.³⁸⁶ More recently, in 2008, Else Mundal suggested that *Orkneyinga Saga* was written in Orkney following the establishment of a vernacular literary milieu by the cult of Saint Magnús.³⁸⁷

³⁸¹ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 39.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, 9-10.

³⁸³ *OS*, Edwards and Pálsson, 10.

³⁸⁴ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 41.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁶ *Finnbogi Guðmundsson, 'On the Writing of Orkneyinga Saga', in Colleen E. Batey, Judith Jesch, and Christopher D. Morris (editors), The Viking Age in Caithness, Orkney and the North Atlantic: Select Papers from the Proceedings of the Eleventh Viking Congress, Thurso and Kirkwall, 22 August – 1 September 1989, (Edinburgh, 1993), 206.*

³⁸⁷ Gro Steinsland, 'Origins Myths and Rulership. From the Viking Age Ruler to the Ruler of Medieval Historiography: Continuity, Transformations and Innovations', in Gro Steinsland, Jon Vidar Sigurdsson, Jan Erik Rekdal, Ian B. Beuermann (editors), *Ideology and Power in*

The theory that the author was Orcadian, though appealing, is not all that well supported. It is more likely that whoever wrote it was an Icelander with strong Orcadian connections. In Chapter 6, Earl Rögnvaldr of Møre tells his son Hrollaugr that ‘your fate will take you to Iceland. You’ll have plenty of descendants there, and they’ll be thought of as the noblest of men’.³⁸⁸ Such favourable words are interesting. This may, of course, simply be the result of style. It may also have been intended to make for a good story, setting up the slave-born Einarr’s inheritance of the earldoms up against the nobility of his kindred. There could, however, be something more to it.

Einar Ól. Sveinsson advanced in 1937 that a member of the Oddi family of southern Iceland wrote the saga. More recently, Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards have also favoured the Oddi family in the introduction to their translation of *Orkneyinga Saga*. This interpretation is based on the ties that existed between the Oddi kindred and the Orcadian earldom dynasty, both of them being descended from Earl Rögnvaldr ‘the Mighty’ through his son Hrollaugr.³⁸⁹ Sæmundr Sigfusson’s grandson was Snorri Sturluson’s foster-father. Snorri’s foster-brother Páll Jónsson – a future bishop of Skalholt – stayed with Earl Haraldr Maddadsson on his way to England to study.³⁹⁰ Páll’s brother, Sæmundr Jónsson, furthermore, had planned to marry Earl Haraldr Maddadsson’s daughter Langlif, though this marriage never came to be.³⁹¹

Finnbogi Guðmundsson has also argued that the saga’s author was Icelandic. Rather than follow the Oddi kindred trail, though, he has concentrated on the Hvassafell family. He has pointed out that that the marriage between Eiríkr Hákonarson and Guðný Þorvarðsdóttir may offer a good point from which to start a search for the author.³⁹² Eiríkr was the son of Hákon Kló. Hákon is a character that features in *Orkneyinga Saga*. Hákon was himself the son of Hávaðr Gunnason, who was one of the men Earl Hákon Pálsson took with him when he went to kill Magnús Erlendsson, and is best remembered for jumping overboard and swimming to an uninhabited island when he learned of Hákon’s intentions.³⁹³ As Finnbogi Guðmundsson notes, it is interesting that the saga actively seeks to detach Hávaðr from the

the Viking and Middle Ages: Scandinavia, Iceland, Ireland, Orkney and the Faeroes, (2011), 48.

³⁸⁸ OS, Edwards and Pálsson, 28.

³⁸⁹ Finnbogi Guðmundsson, ‘On the Writing of *Orkneyinga Saga*’, 206.

³⁹⁰ OS, Edwards and Pálsson, 10.

³⁹¹ Finnbogi Guðmundsson, ‘On the Writing of *Orkneyinga Saga*’, 206; OS, Edwards and Pálsson, 10.

³⁹² Finnbogi Guðmundsson, ‘On the Writing of *Orkneyinga Saga*’, 206.

³⁹³ OS, Edwards and Pálsson, 92.

incident and clear him of any guilt.³⁹⁴ Hávaðr's wife, Hákon's mother, was Bergljót, one of Earl Páll Þorfinnsson's granddaughters.³⁹⁵ Hákon's wife, meanwhile, was Ingigerðr, one of Auðhildr Moddansdóttir's daughters.³⁹⁶ This is the very same Auðhildr – niece of Frakkok, wife of Eiríkr Strife and mistress of Sigurðr 'the Fake-Deacon' – that was mentioned during the examination of Clan Moddan in Chapter 1. She was a first cousin of Haraldr Maddadsson's mother Margaret. Auðhildr's son with Eiríkr Strife, Eiríkr Stagbrellir (Stray-Brails), was, as we mentioned, married to Ingiriðr, daughter of Earl Rögnvaldr Kali Kolsson. Eiríkr Hákonarson was therefore extremely closely connected to both branches of the earldom dynasty, as well as to Clan Moddan of Sutherland.

Guðný Þorvarðsdóttir was a member of the Reyknesingar family from western Iceland. One of her cousins was Bishop Guðmundr of Hólar, and one of her uncles was Ingimundr the priest. It is this Ingimundr that Finnbogi Guðmundsson has isolated as a potential author of *Orkneyinga Saga*. Ingimundr, as he points out, was also descended from Hrollaugr, and thus Rögnvaldr of Møre.³⁹⁷ He has argued that there are two possible scenarios that could explain the link between the marriage and *Orkneyinga Saga*. Either Guðný met Eiríkr while visiting Ingimundr in Norway – following the death of her first husband – where he was writing a history of Orkney, or the marriage of the two itself led to Ingimundr undertaking this project.³⁹⁸ Ingimundr may have visited Orkney and Caithness during his voyages to Norway and England, and it is possible that Eiríkr served as his guide and informant. This would explain why *Orkneyinga Saga* is so well informed with regards to the Moddan kindred, and relates their story in quite considerable and colorful detail.³⁹⁹

Ingimundr was a well-travelled man, travelling to Norway several times, as well as to England. Furthermore, he was a learned man who loved books. There is, however, no evidence that Ingimundr wrote *Orkneyinga Saga*, and Finnbogi Guðmundsson admits that this theory is speculative. Ingimundr died at some point in 1189 during a voyage from Bergen back to Iceland. The ship he was travelling on accidentally reached an uninhabited part of Greenland, only to be found 14 or 11 winters later, depending on the sources. Ingimundr's body was found in a cave along with six others. There is no mention of any books having

³⁹⁴ Finnbogi Guðmundsson, 'On the Writing of *Orkneyinga Saga*', 206.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 206-207.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 210.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 208.

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 209.

been found in the wreck or the cave.⁴⁰⁰ If Ingimundr did write *Orkneyinga Saga*, he must have done so at some point before 1189. Given that the original version of *Jarla Sögur* probably ended with Sveinn Ásleifarson's death in 1171, it is possible that Ingimundr compiled it at some point between 1171 and 1189. To narrow it even further, the compilation of *Jarla Sögur* would have taken place between 1186 and 1189. There are, however, a couple of issues with this. The question of who wrote the later additions to *Orkneyinga Saga* is still left open. There is also the issue of Sveinn Ásleifarson calling Earl Rögnvaldr Kolsson 'the holy Earl Rögnvaldr' in his dying moments. Given that the Icelandic annals record Rögnvaldr's sanctification as taking place in 1192, this would suggest that *Jarla Sögur* – or at least its last chapter – was written after 1192.⁴⁰¹ If it was written after 1192, then Ingimundr cannot be the author. There is always the feasibility that Ingimundr compiled the bulk of the text and someone else finished it after his death. Another possibility is that this reference to Rögnvaldr as 'holy' served to promote his local cult and push for his sanctification, much like the miracle stories in chapter 104 could have done.

If any books were found with Ingimundr's body, Bishop Jón of Greenland may have brought them back to Iceland when he travelled there in 1202.⁴⁰² They would have arrived at a port in the west of Iceland, such as Hvítáróss, near Borg, where Snorri Sturluson was living from 1202 to 1206.⁴⁰³ It is known that Snorri Sturluson had a copy of the original *Jarla Sögur*. Could Snorri have written the later additions about Haraldr Maddadsson's reign? Alternatively, Ingimundr may have handed his manuscripts to his nephew, Ögmundr Þorvarðsson while in Norway. Ögmundr returned to Iceland in 1192, and may have handed the saga to Snorri Sturluson, whose family he was on good terms with.⁴⁰⁴ Although there is no concrete evidence that Ingimundr was the author of the saga, the identification of Eiríkr and Guðný, and of their extended family as the origin for the information found in the saga, as well as its compilation, is both interesting and rather convincing. A point brought up by various scholars that support the theory of the saga's northern-Icelandic origin is found in its ninetieth chapter. The chapter informs us that Earl Rögnvaldr Kolsson 'took passage on a merchant ship belonging to Thorhall Asgrimsson, an Icelander by birth who ran a farm south in Bishops Tongues [Byskupstungur]'.⁴⁰⁵ Anne Holtmark picked up on the reference to the

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁴⁰¹ Beuermann, 'Jarla Sögur Orkneyja', 110.

⁴⁰² *Finnbogi Guðmundsson*, 'On the Writing of *Orkneyinga Saga*', 210

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁵ *OS*, Edwards and Pálsson, 183.

south, though took it to be a later addition by a northern scribe.⁴⁰⁶ Finnbogi Guðmundsson, however, has noted that both ms 325 and ms 332 have this reading. This would suggest that the original author was from the north of Iceland.⁴⁰⁷ The author need not necessarily have been Ingimundr. Another member of Eiríkr and Guðný's kindred, or of Ingimundr's community could have been responsible for writing the saga. In any case, it seems most probable that the author of *Jarla Sögur*, as well as that (or those) of later additions was Icelandic.

If we accept that the author of the saga was Icelandic, then the portrayal of Orcadian society as being based on piracy, and characterized by a certain 'backwardness' – most notably in the reliance of the earls on chieftains and bullies, and the retention of pagan superstitions and practices – makes sense. An Icelandic author would have perceived Orkney, Caithness, and their people through his own Icelandic lens. Various characteristics would have made Orcadian society and culture appear distinct, and would have made differences between these and their Icelandic and Norwegian counterparts obvious.

But why would someone write such a work if they were not Orcadian? Simple scholarly interest in the subject is a potential answer, though it is not by itself a fully satisfactory one. As the deliberate choice of a Nordic mythical ancestry for the earls, and various other elements discussed here indicate, *Orkneyinga Saga* has a clear political dimension to it. If we assume that *Orkneyinga Saga* was written after 1192 – probably around 1200 – one may be tempted to link its writing to the problems facing the earldoms in the 1190s that we examined in Chapter 1. The most obvious of these was the loss of Shetland in 1195, and the accompanying transformation of the earls' status into royal officials. The loss of Haraldr Maddadsson and later earls' semi-independence, and their forcible inclusion into the Norwegian king's *Hirð* was a terrible blow to his and their status. There was also the issue of Haraldr's troubles with King William 'the Lion' in Caithness. In such a scenario, the saga may have been compiled at the desire of one of several members of the Orcadian elite, or even Haraldr himself. However, Ian Beuermann points out that to assume that *Orkneyinga Saga* was compiled in light of these considerable events is to rest on the benefit of hindsight.⁴⁰⁸ As he puts it, 'would Haraldr have known that he had lost the earldom's semi-independence forever? The fact that he killed the Norwegian royal representative in Shetland

⁴⁰⁶ Finnbogi Guðmundsson, 'On the Writing of *Orkneyinga Saga*', 211.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰⁸ Beuermann, 'Jarla Sögur Orkneyja', 111.

as soon as King Sverrir had died, and that he at the last minute managed to evade King William by playing the trump card King John might speak against this'.⁴⁰⁹

Yet the timing of its compilation is probably not accidental. Rather than being produced as a reaction to these precise events, could it not be that *Orkneyinga Saga* was compiled in reaction to the gradual strengthening of royal power by both the kings of Norway and Scotland? This is a plausible scenario. It also makes sense if we believe that the Icelandic author had very close ties to Orkney and Caithness. The author may have written the saga for personal reasons, using information acquired from Orcadian contacts. Alternatively, members of the Orcadian aristocracy could have been in contact with their Icelandic connections, and asked them to produce a work meant to both provide an account of the history of Orkney and its leaders, and legitimize the earldom dynasty and its standing in the face of mounting pressure from both the North and the South. The later additions, usually dated to around 1230, may have been added in following further humiliations under Earl Jón's reign, such as the loss of Sutherland. Or could these have been a response to the disruptive events of 1230 and 1232? In 1230, members of Snaekollr Gunnison's faction as we saw, murdered Earl Jón. Snaekollr was a son of Harald Ungi's sister. In 1232, as *Hákonar Saga Hákonarsonar* records, a ship carrying all of the best men of Orkney sank when returning from Norway, where they had taken part in the judgment of Jón's murderers.⁴¹⁰ The extinction of the original earldom line – replaced by the Angus line – must have been an extremely disruptive, and even traumatic event, for Orcadian society. It does not seem unreasonable to suggest that it may have played a part in later decisions to remember the history of this initial line.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴¹⁰ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 274-277.

Chapter 4

A Meeting of Two Worlds

At the crossroads between the Norse and British worlds, Orkney and Caithness were prone and ready for the blending of the Norse and Gaelic cultures. The various cultural attributes inherited by the Orcadian Norse-Gaels made them a hybrid group, neither fully Norse nor fully Gaelic. Rather, they formed a distinct people whose features formed a Norse-Gael range rather than a single, defined identity. Within this spectrum were certain attributes common to all Orcadians, and other Norse-Gaels. However, both Norwegians and Scots ascribed their own, perceived characteristics to the Orcadians. These perceived qualities, though, were often products of ethnic and cultural prejudices rather than of truthful understandings of Orcadian identity. That being said, these perceptions fundamentally recognised that there was a perceptible, and very real distinctness to Orcadian Norse-Gael identity.

4.1 – *Personal Names and Familial Ties*

Orkneyinga Saga contains much information with regards to people's personal names and their familial ties. Through these, one can get a sense of the manner in which Orcadians saw their own identity. *Orkneyinga Saga* is replete with personal names. Although most of these tend to be Norse, there are a substantial number of Gaelic ones. The most common Norse names found in the saga include Brusi, Hákon, Haraldr, Magnús, Páll, Rögnvaldr, Þórfinn, Þórkel, Þórbjörn, Sumarliði, and Sigurðr. Among the Gaelic names found in the saga, those associated with Orcadians include Angus, Dufniall (a norsification of Dòmhnall), Frakkok, Margad, Maelbrigte (as can be seen from Eyvind Melbrigdason's name), and Moddan. The name of the Caithnessman Gilli, encountered in Chapter 57 of the saga, could be of Gaelic origin. It is likely to be a shortened form of Gilla Críst, or of another Gaelic name combining Gilla with a saint's name. Gaelic names encountered in the saga and belonging to Norse-Gaels from other parts of the British Isles include Anakol, Gillikristr (a norsification of Gilla Críst), and Dufgal, as well as several of the aforementioned ones.

Furthermore, one of Earl Haraldr Maddadsson's sons was called David, or Davið, a name that was more commonly associated with Scotland than Scandinavia.

Looking at the distribution of these names, the Gaelic ones tend to appear in connection with Caithness. This is not all that surprising given that the region, and particularly Sutherland, was in close contact with the Gaels of Highland Scotland. Unsurprisingly, the further north one travels, the less common Gaelic names are in the saga. Chapter 56 tells us of two individuals named Dufniall and Margad living in Orkney. We are also told of someone called Richard who lived on Stronsay. As for Shetland, the names associated with this northernmost archipelago of the Orkney earldom are all of Norse origin. It would be extremely surprising if there were no medieval Shetlanders with Gaelic names, or at least Norsified names of Gaelic origin. However, it makes sense that they should proportionally be fewer than in Orkney, and especially Caithness, given that the islands had a stronger Norse character than the other parts of the earldoms.

Gillian Fellows-Jensen has examined a number of medieval Orcadian personal names. Her research has brought up various interesting points. The name Sumarliði, for example, appears to be a colonial phenomenon. The name is not to be found in Scandinavia, and is instead found in the colonies of the British Isles and North Atlantic. It likely originated as a – by name for a ‘summer traveller’ – a Viking who took part in summer raiding expeditions.⁴¹¹ Similarly, Earl Rögnvaldr Kolsson's original name, Kali, does not occur frequently in Norway and Iceland. Rather, it is often found in association with the British Isles.⁴¹² Although Rögnvaldr was born and raised in Norway, his name highlighted his Orcadian heritage and connections. The use of names that are infrequently found in Scandinavia by the Orcadians undoubtedly helped mark the distinctness of their identity. The development of new names as a result of overseas expansion reflects the process of the separation of the Orcadian identity from the Norwegian one. The norsification of Gaelic names also shows the colonial history of Orkney and Caithness, and highlights the strong Norse character of Orkney and the northern parts of Caithness. Furthermore, this norsification would have given these names a distinctive ‘flavour’.

A certain amount of caution should be exercised when using personal-name evidence. The bearing of a name is not necessarily indicative of one belonging to the ethnic group that

⁴¹¹ Gillian Fellows-Jensen, ‘Some Orkney Personal Names’, in Colleen E. Batey, Judith Jesch, and Christopher D. Morris (editors), *The Viking Age in Caithness, Orkney and the North Atlantic: Select Papers from the Proceedings of the Eleventh Viking Congress, Thurso and Kirkwall, 22 August – 1 September 1989*, (Edinburgh, 1993), 398-400.

⁴¹² *Ibid.*, 401-403.

that name comes from. Raymond Page has rightly pointed out, for example, that not all those who had Norse names in tenth- and eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon England were Norse. For example, Earl Godwine and his Danish Wife's children bore both Scandinavian names (Swein, Tostig) and Anglo-Saxon ones (Leofwine, Wolfnoth). Harold and his English wife had sons named Godwine, Edmund, Magnus, Ulf and Harold. Despite their names, Magnus and Ulf can hardly be considered to be Norse.⁴¹³ Personal names can be the product of trends and fashions, often set by members of the upper classes of society. Despite this issue, personal names can help scholars make sense of a person or a group's cultural and ethnic self-perception. King Haraldr Gillikristr of Norway, for example, probably identified as Norse-Gael rather than simply Norse. In fact, when he is first encountered in *Orkneyinga Saga*, he simply presents himself as Gillikristr. Given the cultural dimension of personal names, and their frequent attachment to specific ethnic and cultural groups, an individual may erroneously be taken to be of the same ethnic origin as their name, when they may not in fact, or partly, be so. Instinctively, a reader might at first assume that the character of Gillikristr is a Gael, before the revelation that he is in fact half-Norwegian half-Irish. Yet it is not incorrect to instinctively assume that Gillikristr was a Gael, because he was a half-Gael. Therefore, the mixed nature of Orcadian names indicates that certain individuals and families certainly did recognise that they had a Gaelic heritage and that their culture was different from that of the Norwegians. Furthermore, norsified Gaelic names would have marked those individuals bearing them as Norse-Gaels rather than simply Gaels. Names formed, and often still do form, an important part of an individual's identity. It is significant that Sigurðr 'the Stout' 's son Hundi was forced to adopt a new name when he was forcibly converted, as was noted in Chapter 2. In addition to these personal names, familial ties are helpful in understanding why certain Orcadians may have felt more Norse or more Gaelic than others, especially with regards to members of the earldom dynasty.

In terms of familial ties, Orcadian aristocrats were tied to important families both in Norway and in Scotland, as well as Ireland, the Hebrides and Man. Mention should, first of all of course, be made of the supposed ties created by Rögnvaldr of Møre's sons Hrólfir and Hrollaugr with Normandy and Iceland, respectively. The connection between the Møre earls and the dukes of Normandy, though captivating, is not backed by evidence.

⁴¹³ Raymond I. Page, 'How Long did the Scandinavian Language Survive in England? – The Epigraphical Evidence', in Clemoes, P., and Hughes, K., (editors), *England Before the Conquest: Studies in Primary Sources Presented to Dorothy Whitelock*, (1971), 177-178.

There are a fair number of familial links to Norway that are mentioned in *Orkneyinga Saga*. There is, obviously, the fact that Rögnvaldr of Møre was Norwegian. The earls Arnfinn, Havard, and Ljot, as well as their nephew Einarr ‘Buttered-Bread’ all married Ragnhild, the daughter of King Eiríkr ‘Bloodaxe’ of Norway, as we saw in Chapter 2. Earl Þórfinn ‘the Mighty’ ‘s wife was, Ingibjörg, daughter of the Norwegian earl Finn Árnason. Finn Árnason was the brother of Kálfr Árnason, one of the men who fought against King Óláfr Haraldsson at the Battle of Stiklestad, and later helped put Óláfr’s son Magnús ‘the Good’ on the throne. During a battle between Þórfinn and his nephew, Earl Rögnvaldr Brusason, Þórfinn asked Kálfr for help, telling him that ‘the family bonds holding us together demand that each of us give the other all the aid he can, particularly now that we’re up against outsiders too’.⁴¹⁴ Ingibjörg was a cousin of Thora Torgergsdóttir, mother of the kings Magnús II and Óláfr III.⁴¹⁵ In Chapter 29 of *Orkneyinga Saga*, Rögnvaldr Brusason refers to King Óláfr Haraldsson as his ‘foster-father’.⁴¹⁶ Although the saga does mention that he stayed for a while with Óláfr as his hostage, this is the only mention of them having such a close relationship. Þórfinn’s son, Earl Páll, married a daughter of the Norwegian earl Hákon Ivarsson and his wife, Ragnhild, daughter of King Magnús ‘the Good’.⁴¹⁷ Páll’s daughter Thora married the Norwegian Halldor, the son of Brynjolf Camel. His two other daughters, Ingirid and Herbjorg, married the Orcadians Einarr Vorse-Raven and Sigurðr of Westness respectively. Earl Erlendr’s daughter Gunnhild was given in marriage to Kol, son of Kali Sæbjarnason⁴¹⁸, their son being the famous Rögnvaldr Kali Kolsson.

In terms of Scottish connections, the first one that is mentioned in *Orkneyinga Saga* is Earl Sigurðr ‘the Stout’ ‘s marriage to King Malcolm II’s daughter. King Malcolm brought up their son, Þórfinn, at his court. Following the death of his father when he was five, his grandfather, who appointed counsellors to govern with him through his minority, granted him the title of Earl of Caithness.⁴¹⁹ A further link to the Scottish crown, and to the Canmore dynasty in particular, came in the character of Haraldr Maddadsson’s father. Maddad was the son of Máel Muire (Melmar), brother of King Malcolm III Canmore. Ingibjörg’s marriage to King Malcolm III Canmore meant that the Earls of Orkney were related to King Duncan II (c. 1060 – 1094, r. 1094) and the MacWilliams, as was discussed in Chapter 1. Magnús

⁴¹⁴ *OS*, Edwards and Pálsson, 66.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 76-78.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

Erlendsson, as mentioned, married a woman from an important Scottish family, though we are not told exactly which one. One of Magnús and Hákon's cousins was a chieftain called Dufniall, though the saga mentions nothing more than his name. It is possible that he was a Scot, though he may have been a Norse-Gael. Haraldr Maddadsson's two wives (Afreka, daughter of Duncan, mormaer of Fife, and Gormflaith, daughter of Malcolm MacHeth) were from very important Scottish families. His ten children were thus closely connected to the most important aristocratic families of the Kingdom of Scots. The Angus earls of Orkney and Caithness, who took over once the original Norse line went extinct in 1232, were related to the Scottish earls of Angus. How exactly the two dynasties were connected is unclear, though it is likely that the title was passed to them through a marriage between a male member of the Angus family and a female descendent of the Norse earls.⁴²⁰ This was possibly Earl Jón Haraldsson's daughter who was taken as a hostage by King William in 1214, or a sister of Harald *ungi*. The fact that the Angus earls continued to use the name Magnús would suggest that they were somehow related to the Erlendr branch of the earldom dynasty.⁴²¹

In addition to these connections, the earls of Orkney had familial links to Ireland and the Hebrides. As has already been mentioned, Earl Sigurðr 'the Stout' 's mother was Eithne, the daughter of the Irish king Cerball mac Dúnlainge (Kjarval). *Njáls Saga* informs us that his brother-in-law was 'Earl Gilli of the Hebrides', who was 'married to Sigurd's sister Hvarflod'.⁴²² Part of Sigurðr's motivation for joining king Sigtrygg Silkbeard of Dublin's side at the Battle of Clontarf appears to have been the possibility of marrying Sigtrygg's mother Kormlod, who is said to have been a very beautiful woman.⁴²³ Sigurðr's desire to marry Kormlod suggests that his wife had died. Sigurðr's descent from King Cerball, and projected marriage to Kormlod would have given him the legitimacy and potency required to become 'King of Ireland', as he desired to in the event of victory at Clontarf.

The earldom dynasty was also connected to a number of other Orcadian families. Chief amongst these was that most intriguing and deadly of families: the Moddan family. Earl Hákon Pálsson married Frakkok's sister, Helga. Their daughter Ingibjörg, herself, married Óláfr Titbit, king of the Hebrides⁴²⁴, while their other daughter, Margaret, married Maddad, mormaer of Atholl. The Moddan family may have held a title of mormaer from past Gaelic rulers of Caithness and Sutherland. It is unsure why Frakkok's brother, the rather mysterious

⁴²⁰ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 278-279.

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*, 279-282.

⁴²² *Njal's Saga*, Cook, 296.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*, 296-298.

⁴²⁴ *OS*, Edwards and Pálsson, 97

Earl Óttarr of Thurso, ‘a man of great character’⁴²⁵, held such a title. As Gareth Williams has reviewed in his work on the Moddan kindred, there may be a link between Moddan and the earlier Muddan, or Mutadan, installed as a chieftain in Caithness by his uncle ‘King’ Karl Hundason during his conflict with Earl Þórfinn ‘the Mighty’.⁴²⁶ The similarity of the names – which are possibly just alternate spellings of the same name – may hint at a repetition, after two or three generations, of a name that was common to that family.⁴²⁷ Simon Taylor, however, has suggested that Moddan’s name is derived from the Gaelic name *Mo Aedán*, whilst Muddan could be a diminutive form of the Old Irish word *míad* (‘noble’).⁴²⁸ If these two names are actually entirely distinct, then there may not, in fact, be a family connection between the two.⁴²⁹ Just like Óttarr, Muddan was based in Thurso; this is indicated by the passage in Chapter 20 of *Orkneyinga Saga* that deals with his death.⁴³⁰ This may simply be a coincidence. Muddan did not rule for very long before being killed, and it seems doubtful that any children of his would have held any power in Caithness in light of his having been appointed by Þórfinn’s hated enemy Karl Hundason. Óttarr’s title of ‘Jarl’ was probably representative of his personal status rather than a claim to authority that he might have had, given that he is the only member of the Moddan kindred – the only person, in fact – to be described as an Earl of Thurso by the saga. As Williams puts it, ‘it seems likely that the main source of the family’s self-esteem was the noble ancestry which permitted Óttarr’s title, although wealth may of course have been an additional factor’.⁴³¹

Ingibjörg’s marriage to, or relationship with Óláfr Titbit⁴³² also created a connection with the Suðreyjar, the Hebrides. Their daughter, Ragnhild, married Sumarliði (Somerled) of Argyll, and together they had three sons called Dugald, Rögnvaldr and Angus.⁴³³ As mentioned in Chapter 1, *Orkneyinga Saga* asserts that Sumarliði ‘the Yeoman’, who was ruling in Argyll at the time, welcomed Gilla Odran when he fled Caithness. Both of them

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁴²⁶ Gareth Williams, ‘These People Were High-Born and Thought a Lot of Themselves’: The Family of Moddan of Dale’, in Beverly Ballin Smith, Simon Taylor, and Gareth Williams (editors), *West Over Sea: Studies in Scandinavian Sea-Borne Expansion and Settlement Before 1300: a Festschrift in Honour of Dr. Barbara E. Crawford*, (2007), 133.

⁴²⁷ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*, 134; OS, Edwards and Pálsson, 53.

⁴³¹ Williams, ‘The Family of Moddan of Dale’, 137.

⁴³² As Williams points out, there has been some debate as to whether this was an actual marriage, or whether Ingibjörg was a concubine of Óláfr’s. Williams, ‘The Family of Moddan of Dale’, 139.

⁴³³ OS, Edwards and Pálsson, 208.

were reportedly killed by Sveinn Ásleifarson during one of his Viking trips.⁴³⁴ *Orkneyinga Saga* also claims that Ingibjörg and Óláfr Titbit parented Guðröðr, father of Rögnvaldr Guðröðarson⁴³⁵, the future king of the Hebrides who was asked by King William I of Scotland to take Caithness from Haraldr Maddadsson (see Chapter 1). *The Chronicle of Mann*, however, states that Rögnvaldr was the son of Guðröðr, son of Óláfr and his wife Affrica.⁴³⁶ It is unclear who exactly the Rögnvaldr who briefly took over Caithness was. Roger of Howden, for his part, claimed that it was Rögnvaldr son of Sumarliði rather than Rögnvaldr Guðröðarson.⁴³⁷ As long as Rögnvaldr was related to Ingibjörg, then he was connected to both clan Moddan and the Orcadian earldom dynasty.

A further connection to the Hebrides came in the character of the Hebridean Anakol, the foster-father of Ingibjörg's nephew, Erlendr (later Earl Erlendr). Anakol comes across as a stereotypical Hebridean – as they were often typecast in Icelandic literature – being violent, ruthless, and rather distrustful (the idea of Hebrideans being unsavoury is something that we shall return to in the next part of this chapter). Although Anakol was very close to Earl Erlendr, having ‘more influence on him than anyone’, his deepest loyalty lay with his friend, Sveinn Ásleifarson. During a meeting between Earl Erlendr and Sveinn, Anakol ‘threatened to leave Orkney and join Svein unless the earl came to terms with him’.⁴³⁸ The son of Sveinn's good friend Ljotolf from Lewis, Fogl, was, we are told, related to Anakol. Svein Ásleifarson, meanwhile, took the widow of the Manx nobleman Andres, Ingrid, as his second wife.⁴³⁹ What is apparent is just how interconnected the Orcadian aristocracy were to not only Norway and Scotland, but also to the wider Norse-Gael world of the British Isles.

Though names can help elucidate the question of the Orcadians' self-understanding and self-perception, both Norwegians and Scots attributed a number of specific characteristics to the Orcadians.

⁴³⁴ If this is the famous Sumarliði of Argyll, then the account of his death found in *Orkneyinga Saga* is absolutely fictitious. Sumarliði of Argyll died at the Battle of Renfrew in 1164, fighting a Scottish royal army led by Walter FitzAlan, as is recorded in the *Chronicle of Melrose*, *The Chronicle of Mann*, the *Annals of Tigernach*, and the *Carmen de Morte Sumerledi* (*The Song of the Death of Somerled*).

⁴³⁵ OS, Edwards and Pálsson, 221.

⁴³⁶ Williams, ‘The Family of Moddan of Dale’, 147.

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁸ OS, Edwards and Pálsson, 186.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, 145-146.

4.2 – Norse and Gaelic Characteristics

As was covered in Chapter 1, Orcadians were heavily associated with piracy. Viking raiding was an activity that was heavily associated with Norse societies, and had come to be seen as something of an anachronism as the Viking Age gave way to the High Middle Ages. To the Scots and Irish, the Orcadians, much like other Norse peoples, were barbaric. Irish sources describe the ‘foreigners of Orkney and the Shetland Islands’ as ‘a levy of fierce, barbarous men – senseless, uncontrollable and unbiddable’.⁴⁴⁰ Towards the end of John of Fordun’s *Chronica Gentis Scotorum*, Fordun describes King David as the king ‘who had subdued unto himself so many barbarous nations, and had, without great trouble, triumphed over the men of Moray and of the Islands’.⁴⁴¹ Although the islands in question are probably the Hebrides, the characterization of the Hebridean Norse-Gaels could equally be applied to the Orcadian Norse-Gaels.

For other Norsemen, the Orcadians shared a common Norse characteristic of bravery. *Orkneyinga Saga* tells us that, in a poem made about King Óláfr Haraldsson, the Icelandic poet Óttarr svarti (‘the Black’) wrote of Earl Rögnvaldr Brusason:

*‘Great Rulers have good reason
to regard you; trust
you show in their strength:
Shetlanders will serve you.
Before coming
no commander so courageous
In all the eastlands, you
overlord of Orkney.’⁴⁴²*

Later on, during the battle between the earls Páll Hákonarson and Rögnvaldr Kolsson, we are told that Sveinn Breast-Rope ‘was fighting bravely’.⁴⁴³ One Orcadian who is frequently described as brave in *Orkneyinga Saga* is Sveinn Ásleifarson. Following Sveinn and Margad’s escape from Lambaborg (an event touched upon in Chapter 1), Earl Rögnvaldr

⁴⁴⁰ Thomson, *The History of Orkney*, 42.

⁴⁴¹ *Chronicle of the Scottish Nation*, Chapter XLI.

⁴⁴² OS, Edwards and Pálsson, 49.

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*, 121.

says that ‘a trick like that shows a strong, brave heart’.⁴⁴⁴ Quite a compliment, especially coming from a future saint. Later on, during one of Sveinn’s plundering expeditions, one of the men aboard his ship, Einarr Bandy-Legs, apparently doubted the tales of Sveinn’s courage, claiming that they were exaggerated. Sveinn, later tells Einarr ‘if you’re so scared that you can’t tell whether or not the fastest ship under sail is moving, I trust that you’ll never question my courage again either’.⁴⁴⁵ Themes of Norse bravery were often contrasted to ideas about Gaelic cowardice. We shall examine these in a moment.

Another good characteristic attributed to the Orcadians was shrewdness. Although Sveinn Ásleifarson is described as ‘shrewd’ a number of times, there are far fewer instances in *Orkneyinga Saga* of the earls being described as such than there are for the Norwegian kings and Icelandic chieftains in various sagas.⁴⁴⁶ However, the recognition of the fact that the earls were accomplished military leaders shows that the sagas acknowledge their intelligence and shrewdness indirectly.⁴⁴⁷

Although bravery is dependent upon perception, there was an activity that the Orcadians appear to have excelled at which was genuinely very Norse. As has been mentioned, Earl Rögnvaldr Kolsson claimed to excel at nine skills. One of these was, as his verse celebrates, the mastery of runic writing. Various runic inscriptions have been found in Orkney and Caithness. Those found in the Neolithic grave mound of Maeshowe (Orkney) are particularly interesting, not simply because of their content, but also due to the fact that their writing may potentially be recorded in *Orkneyinga Saga*. According to Chapter 93, Earl Haraldr Maddadsson and a hundred of his men found themselves caught in a snowstorm one winter. ‘They took shelter in Maeshowe and there two of them went insane, which slowed them down badly’.⁴⁴⁸ It is not unreasonable to assume that members of Haraldr’s retinue could have carved some of the graffiti found in the mound chamber. Furthermore, a couple of the graffiti document the fact that crusaders stopped by the mound on their way to the Holy

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 191

⁴⁴⁶ Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, ‘The Appearance and Personal Abilities of Godar, Jarlar, and Konungar: Iceland, Orkney and Norway’, in Beverly Ballin Smith, Simon Taylor, and Gareth Williams (editors), *West Over Sea: Studies in Scandinavian Sea-Borne Expansion and Settlement Before 1300: a Festschrift in Honour of Dr. Barbara E. Crawford*, (2007), 95-109, 98.

⁴⁴⁷ Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, ‘Kings, Earls and Chieftains: Rulers in Norway, Orkney and Iceland c. 900-1300’, in Gro Steinsland, Jon Vidar Sigurdsson, Jan Erik Rekdal, Ian B. Beuermann (editors), *Ideology and Power in the Viking and Middle Ages: Scandinavia, Iceland, Ireland, Orkney and the Faeroes*, (2011), 69-108, 77.

⁴⁴⁸ *OS*, Edwards and Pálsson, 188.

Land. One of the inscriptions reads *Jórsalamenn brutu haug þenna* ('Jorsalamenn broke into this mound')⁴⁴⁹, while another states that *Jórsalrtu Orkhaug. Hlíf, matselja jarls, reist* ('Jerusalem-farers broke into Orkahaugr. Hlíf, the earl's housekeeper, carved').⁴⁵⁰ Though these could have been passing crusaders from Norway, it is also possible that these people accompanying Earl Rögnvaldr Kolsson on his crusade. The second of these inscriptions also shows that Rögnvaldr's contingent (if we assume that it is) took women with them. The word *matselja* described a 'woman who divided the food amongst the household'.⁴⁵¹

Other inscriptions of note include the one carved by a certain Eyjólfur Kolbeinsson. Above the entrance of the mound is an inscription that reads *Eyjólfur Kolbeinssonr reist rúnar þessar hátt* ('Eyjólfur Kolbeinsson carved these runes up high').⁴⁵² Not only could Eyjólfur brag about being able to reach such a high point to carve his runes, he could brag of his runic skills by showing them off. The inscription contains a number of bind-runes, as well as a special rune to represent the diphthong /ey/.⁴⁵³ A second inscription contains the words *rist sá maðr er rýnstr er fyrir vestan haf* ('the man most skilled in runes west of the ocean').⁴⁵⁴ What is interesting about this inscription is the first line, which consists of figures that at first glance do not appear to have anything to do with runic writing. These, however, are twig, or tree runes (also known as ciphered runes). Through a complicated system of division of the sixteen-rune fuþark, with each rune being assigned a two-digit number, a carver could write a message using these twig runes – the number of twigs serving to indicate the rune's number.⁴⁵⁵ Using this system, the words *Þessar rúnar*⁴⁵⁶ ('These runes') can be transcribed and transliterated. Not only did this person use twig runes, they also changed the placement of the twigs within the runes at the word division between *Þessar* and *rúnar*. Additionally, the carver added extra twigs to the **m**-rune in the word *maðr*, thus transforming it into the twig rune for **m**.⁴⁵⁷ As Terje Spurkland puts it, this person 'had reason to boast about his runic skills'. Was this someone trying to prove that they were better than Eyjólfur? Or could this inscription also be of Eyjólfur's doing? It does not seem past him to show off his skills so confidently. In any case, such boasting is not unlike that done by Rögnvaldr Kolsson in his

⁴⁴⁹ Terje Spurkland, *Norwegian Runes and Runic Inscriptions*, (Woodbridge, 2005), 144.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁴⁵² *Ibid.*

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*, 145-146.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 179.

poetry. On the whole, as Spurkland points out, the inscriptions at Maeshowe are the work of people who were very skilled in the use of runes.⁴⁵⁸ Although several of the thirty inscriptions found within the burial chamber appear to have been written by Norwegians and Icelanders⁴⁵⁹, it is almost certain that a number of Orcadians were proficient with regards to runic writing. Though Rögnvaldr was in fact Norwegian, his depiction in *Orkneyinga Saga* is closer to that of an Orcadian. As an earl of Orkney and Caithness who lived most of his life in Britain, it is understandable that he may have been seen as ‘Orcadianised’. Given the evidence found at Maeshowe, it seems that Rögnvaldr’s words may be true.

From a Norse point of view, various Gaelic characteristics could be discerned within Orcadian society and culture, and even within Orcadians themselves. The first, and most obvious of these would be appearance. Norse writers seem to have had particular views with regards to Scottish appearance, and certain stereotypes can be discerned. In Chapter 77 of *Orkneyinga Saga*, we are introduced to Bishop John of Atholl. The saga describes him thus:

‘Leading the group was a man wearing a blue cloak, his hair tucked into his cap. The centre of his chin was shaved but his moustache grew long over the lip and on the cheeks. People thought this a very odd looking man’.⁴⁶⁰

Although the author finds John’s appearance odd, he suggests that this was also an unusual way of dressing and fashioning one’s beard amongst Orcadians. Even though John is not described as ugly, his appearance was deemed significant enough to warrant a mention. Orcadians with obvious links to Scotland, however, are frequently described as ‘ugly’ in *Orkneyinga Saga*. Earl Þórfinn ‘the Mighty’ is described in Chapter 20 of *Orkneyinga Saga* as ‘unusually tall and strong, and ugly-looking man with a black head of hair, sharp features, a big nose and bushy eyebrows, greedy for fame and fortune’.⁴⁶¹ The characterisation of Þórfinn as ugly in appearance is one that is accorded to other characters in *Orkneyinga Saga*. Earl Haraldr Maddadson is presented as being ‘a tall, strong man, with an ugly face but a shrewd character’.⁴⁶² These two descriptions stand in contrast to that of Þórfinn’s sons, the

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁴⁵⁹ Michael Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe, Orkney*, (1994), 44-60. Although Maeshowe is the only body evidence that would support a thriving, twelfth-century culture of runic writing in Orkney, there is no reason why this could not have been the case.

⁴⁶⁰ *OS*, Edwards and Pálsson, 143.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*, 164.

earls Páll and Erlendr. According to the saga, Páll and Erlendr were ‘tall, handsome men, shrewd and gentle, taking rather more after their mother’s side of the family’.⁴⁶³ As we saw, their mother Ingibjörg was Norwegian, and related to Norwegian royalty. The frequent descriptions of the earls as being ‘tall’ may be a reference to their descent from the giant Fornjótr. This is, however, wholly speculative; it may simply be that they were naturally tall. Additionally, it was meant to highlight the fact that they were superior to other men in the earldoms. There was probably also a desire to depict the earls of Orkney and Caithness as good and strong leaders, as was the case with Saint Magnús, whose remains indicate that he was not much taller than the average height of the period. In any case, physical ugliness appears to have been associated with Gaels by the author of the saga. The first mention of an ugly Gael is found in the character of Maelbrigte ‘Tusk’, whose protruding tooth undoubtedly would have made him appear ugly.

Jón Viðar Sigurðsson has pointed out that there is a difference in the way that earls and kings are portrayed in Icelandic Family sagas, where appearance and physical attributes are underscored. The sagas ‘stress that kings were more beautiful, taller and stronger than other men’.⁴⁶⁴ Although the earls were taller, stronger, and more aggressive than other men, they were not superior to kings.

Norse-Gaels could also be ugly in terms of their character and behaviour. Although they are often described as shrewd and brave, other, less gratifying characteristics are attributed to them; characteristics that they also appear to share with Gaels. The first and foremost of these would be deviousness and untrustworthiness. Sigurðr decided to put two men on each horse during his battle against Maelbrigte because he ‘decided that the Scots weren’t to be trusted’.⁴⁶⁵ During Earl Þórfinn ‘the Mighty’ ‘s campaign in Scotland in Chapter 55 of *Orkneyinga Saga*, we are told that some of the Scots who had sided with him decided to rebel against him. Angered, Þórfinn set out on a campaign of harrying and devastation to ‘pay back the Scots for their treachery and their enmity’.⁴⁶⁶

For the Norsemen, it is possible that this Gaelic tendency towards deviousness and treachery was a product of their cowardice. *Orkneyinga Saga* frequently presents the Scots as cowards who are almost always routed during battles. During the battle between Earl Ljot, his brother Earl Skuli, and ‘Earl MacBeth’ in Chapter 10, we are told that ‘the Scottish ranks

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁴⁶⁴ Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, ‘Kings, Earls and Chieftains’, 79.

⁴⁶⁵ *OS*, Edwards and Pálsson, 27.

⁴⁶⁶ *OS*, Edwards and Pálsson, 55.

began to crumble and soon they were on the run'.⁴⁶⁷ The next battle, between Ljot and MacBeth at Skitten in Caithness, ends when 'all the Scots who survived took flight, most of them wounded'.⁴⁶⁸ Similarly, during the battle between Þórfinn 'the Mighty' and the enigmatic Karl Hundason, we are told that Þórfinn urged on his men, 'telling them to keep their courage up and fight hard because the Scots would never stand up to pressure'.⁴⁶⁹ After Þórfinn boards Karl's ship, the latter and his men all jump overboard, swimming to another ship and sailing away. In battle following this one, Karl's Scottish and Irish troops were once again routed and fled into Scotland. It was during this rout that Þórfinn learned of the treacherous rebellion of his Scottish troops. The saga states that:

'The Scots were slow to attack once they realized that the Earl was ready for them, so he set about them quickly and, lacking the courage to defend themselves, the Scots ran, scattering in all directions into the brakes and forests'.⁴⁷⁰

Similarly, the account of the Battle of Duncansby Head in *Njáls Saga* has the Scots attacking the Orcadian army from the rear, something that could certainly be considered devious and cowardly, before finally being driven back.⁴⁷¹

Although the sources do not associate the Orcadians with this apparently Scottish disposition towards cowardice, they do indicate that the Orcadians, and Norse-Gaels more generally, seem to have inherited the Gaels' slyness and treachery. There is of course, Sigurðr's recourse to deceitful tactics to beat Maelbrigte. Hákon's treachery and murder of Magnús is another obvious instance of an Orcadian being untrustworthy. Orcadian women appear to have had a reputation for being particularly devious. Ranghild's seduction of men to kill off her husbands, and Frakkok and Helga's failed attempt at killing Earl Páll with the gift of a poisoned shirt are both particularly devious and dishonourable. Similarly, *Njáls Saga* describes King Sigtrygg's mother, Kormlod, as having a character that was 'evil insofar as she had control over it'⁴⁷², and it is made to seem as if it was she who, through her beauty and manipulations, brought about the Battle of Clontarf.

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴⁷¹ *Njal's Saga*, Cook, 139.

⁴⁷² *Ibid.*, 296.

Furthermore, *Orkneyinga Saga* suggests that Orcadians (if not simply the sagas author) may have viewed Hebrideans in much the same way. In Chapter 78, Earl Rögnvaldr Kolsson tells Sveinn Ásleifarson that ‘Not many Hebrideans are to be trusted’.⁴⁷³ Following his betrayal by the Hebridean Holdbodi in Chapter 79, we are told that Sveinn Ásleifarson ‘put little trust in Hebrideans’.⁴⁷⁴ There appears to have been an Icelandic tradition of portraying Hebrideans as untrustworthy, unsavoury, and downright dangerous, often associating them with supernatural events.⁴⁷⁵ In *Laxdæla Saga*, for example, the family of the Hebridean Kotkell are associated with a number of killings. Kotkell, his wife Gríma, and their sons, Hallbjörn slíkisteinsauga and Stígandi, had moved to Iceland. They were all considered to be ‘very skilled in magic’ and ‘great sorcerers’.⁴⁷⁶ There they caused trouble ‘with their thievery and witchcraft’.⁴⁷⁷ After being challenged by Þórðr Ingunarsson, Guðrún Ósvífursdóttir’s second husband, and threatened with outlawry, Kotkell and his sons decide to kill him. Through magic, they create a storm at sea, causing Þórðr’s ship to capsize, drowning him and the men accompanying him.⁴⁷⁸ The family caused further disruptions before finally being killed, although Hallbjörn continued to cause trouble as a ghost for a while.⁴⁷⁹

Another negative trait that might have been attributed to Norse-Gaels was greed. It could be argued that Sigurðr ‘the Stout’ ‘s death at the Battle of Clontarf was a result of his greed. Sigurðr, as we mentioned, accepted to help King Sigtrygg on the promise that he would be able to marry Kormlod and become High King of Ireland. *Njáls Saga* tells us that ‘everyone tried to prevent Sigurd from joining them, but without avail’⁴⁸⁰, almost as if they knew that this expedition would be doomed from the start. Similarly, the Manx Viking Brodir was promised both of these ‘prizes’ by Sigtrygg. This line of inquiry, however, requires further investigation.

Aside from these perceived characteristics, there were certainly very real Gaelic aspects to Orcadian society. Not least of all in the realms of language. In chapter 92 of *Orkneyinga Saga*, the word *kunniðum* is used in the context of Earl Haraldr Maddadsson’s men staying with various people across Caithness during Easter.⁴⁸¹ *Kunniðum* is a

⁴⁷³ OS, Edwards and Pálsson, 145.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁴⁷⁵ Williams, ‘The Family of Moddan of Dale’, 139.

⁴⁷⁶ *The Laxdoela Saga*, translated by A. Margaret Arent, (New York, 1964), 85.

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 89-97.

⁴⁸⁰ *Njal’s Saga*, Cook, 298.

⁴⁸¹ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 182.

norsification of the Gaelic word *commaid* (or Old Irish *coinnmed*; *conveth* in Scots), a term for hospitality rent (billeting, quartering) in Scotland. As Barbara Crawford points out, it is interesting that this term is attributed to the people of Caithness. Whether the term was only used in Caithness due to its position on the mainland of Scotland, or whether its use was widespread throughout the earldoms is unknown. It seems likely, however, that people from Orkney would have known its meaning. Crawford has suggested that the term might have been introduced in the twelfth century by earls who were closely connected to Scotland, such as Haraldr Maddadsson.⁴⁸² Given that many people in Orkney and Caithness had family and friends in Scotland, and that Orcadian aristocrats had been in contact with Scots for just about as long as they had lived there, there is no reason why the use of *commaid* cannot predate the twelfth century. Moreover, it appears that this local term was unfamiliar to the saga's author.⁴⁸³ The fact that the writer was unfamiliar with the use of the term would suggest that he was not from Orkney, and could be taken as further evidence that he was Icelandic.

Another Gaelic word that appears in *Orkneyinga Saga* is *ærgi* (from the Gaelic *àraigh*, meaning shieling). It appears in Chapter 103 in the place-name *Ásgrímsærgin*, which has been identified as Assery in Caithness.⁴⁸⁴ This name is a compound of the Norse personal name *Ásgrímr*, and a Gaelic word for 'hill pasture' or 'shieling'. The word *ærgi* is also found in a number of place-names in Orkney, Shetland, the Faroes, the Hebrides, Scotland and England. The word must have been imported to these areas by Norse-Gaels from Gaelic speaking areas, such as parts of the Hebrides. The word is almost always found in a Norse context.⁴⁸⁵ Bo Almqvist has explained that the use of this word by the Norsemen may have something to do with the way the Gaels practiced transhumance.⁴⁸⁶ It also makes sense that a Gaelic word would have been used in areas populated by Norse-Gaels, a number of whom were bilingual. In any case, certain traditions around shielings developed and can be found in later Orcadian folklore, as well as stories from Scotland and Ireland.⁴⁸⁷

Although written sources record rather few instances of Gaelic words being used in Orkney, and are silent as to whether Orcadians could speak Gaelic, there are a few points that can be made. First of all, a large amount of the cultural exchange that occurred in Orkney and

⁴⁸² *Ibid.*

⁴⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁴ Almqvist, 'What's in a Word?', 28.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

Caithness simply has not been recorded, or any such records have been lost.⁴⁸⁸ Being an Icelandic work, *Orkneyinga Saga* may downplay the Gaelic elements of Orcadian society and culture, instead highlighting Norse characteristics. It may also be that the Orcadian aristocracy exhibited stronger Norse characteristics, and that these are reflected by the saga's focus on the earldom elite.⁴⁸⁹ If Orcadian society and culture were more Norse than Gaelic, this might explain why the Scottish sources that we do have do not really appear to associate any Gaelic characteristics with the Orcadians. It may also offer some insight as to why Hebrideans were deemed particularly untrustworthy and unsavoury by Norsemen; they were even more Gaelic than the Orcadians. On the other hand, the description of Norse-Gaels in Irish sources as *Gall-Goidill* ('Foreign Gaels') shows an awareness that these peoples' cultures were mixed. Perhaps Orkney and Caithness were simply viewed as too peripheral to attract the interest of Scottish chroniclers. It does seem likely that a fair number of Orcadians, especially those associated with the Moddan kindred and similar families were bilingual. Although not from Orkney, the Hunterston Brooch is a good, Scottish example of the sort of cultural melange that might have existed in parts of Orkney and Caithness. The brooch, found in Ayrshire in Scotland, bears the runic inscription 'Melbrigda owns this brooch'. Other runic inscriptions containing Gaelic names have been found throughout the British Isles. A couple of Manx cross slabs, for example, bear inscriptions that containing the names 'Druían, son of Dubgail', and 'Ófeigr, son of Crínán'.⁴⁹⁰ Although not from Orkney, an examination of such pieces of evidence from other areas populated by Norse-Gaels can help scholars get a sense of what Norse-Gael identity in Orkney and Caithness may have been like.

Orcadian folklore, however, may offer a deeper insight as to how the Norse and Gaelic cultures mixed in the British Isles, and how these cultural exchanges affected both the Britain and the wider Norse World.

4.3 – Folklore

The topic of folklore is one that has attracted rather little attention with regards to the study of the medieval earldoms of Orkney and Caithness. Yet, this is a field that can shed light as to several of the cultural exchanges that occurred in Orkney and Caithness, as well as the wider Norse-Gael world of Northern Britain. As discussed in the previous chapter, the

⁴⁸⁸ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 182.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹⁰ Katherine Holman, *The Northern Conquest: Vikings in Britain and Ireland*, (2007), 86.

story of Sigurðr and Maelbrigte found in *Orkneyinga Saga* contains an avenging-head motif that is likely Gaelic in origin. However, this is not the only Gaelic motif to be found in Orcadian folklore. Bo Almqvist has, amongst several others, examined the mixed nature of folklore in Orkney and Caithness. His findings have brought up a number of interesting points and considerations.

Rögvaldr Kolsson and Hallr's poem, *Háttalykill*, contains allusion to an everlasting-fight motif found in the story of Hildir. This story is found in Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* and Snorri Sturluson's *Edda*, as well as in *Flateyjarbók (Högna þátttr)*.⁴⁹¹ According to Snorri's version of the story, Hildir, the daughter of King Högni, ran off with Heðinn Hjarrandason. Högni chased after them, and a battle between Högni's and Heðinn's men followed when both forces met. The battle lasted a whole day, and at night, Hildir resuscitated the dead on both sides, the battle effectively carrying on forever until Ragnarök.⁴⁹² The battle, it is worth mentioning, was supposed to have taken place on the island of Hoy in Orkney.⁴⁹³ There appear to be a certain number of similarities between Hildir's story and the Irish tale *Cath Maige Turedh*, as Michael Chesnutt and Bo Almqvist have pointed out. These tales share a common motif in the form of a 'Resuscitating Hag', who revives the fallen for a certain number of days, usually before being herself killed by the hero of the story. This motif appears in a number of Icelandic *fornaldasögur*, as well as Irish and Scottish-Gaelic folktales.⁴⁹⁴ In Irish oral tales, there is frequently the motif of a mortal man putting an end to an everlasting fight, as is the case in *Högna þátttr*, where one of Óláfr Tryggvason's men, Ívarr ljómi, kills the warriors on both sides, putting an end to the battle.⁴⁹⁵ Such a motif was, as some have argued, probably transmitted by the Gaels to the Norsemen, and such a transmission could have occurred in Orkney and Caithness. Cultural contacts between Scandinavians and Gaels in the Scottish Isles and Ireland offer a plausible explanation as to how the Resuscitating Hag motif became common not only in Orcadian folk stories, but also in Icelandic folklore.

Another folkloric motif found in Orcadian beliefs is that of the Sami people having magical powers. At the beginning of *Orkneyinga Saga*, when Nórr and Górr are looking for Goi, Nórr and his men engage in a battle with some Sami. We are told that:

⁴⁹¹ Almqvist, 'Scandinavian and Celtic Contacts', 197.

⁴⁹² *Ibid.*

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁴⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 197-198.

‘the Lapps tried to bar the way and this led to a clash between them. But so great was the uncanny power and magic of Nor and his men that as soon as the Lapps heard their war-cry and saw them drawing their swords, they were scared out of their wits and ran away’.⁴⁹⁶

The idea of the Sami being sorcerers is one that is found in numerous Norse stories⁴⁹⁷, and obviously made its way to Orkney from Norway. That the Sami are terrified by Nórr’s magical powers clearly shows that the saga author and his audience were familiar with this motif, which in this case was used to demonstrate just how powerful Nórr was.⁴⁹⁸

The wording of the passage too, is interesting. In the original Old Norse, it is said that the Sami *urðu að gjalti* (‘went out of their minds’). The word *gjalti* is thought to be a loan word from Gaelic. The word is very similar to the Middle Irish word *geilt*, which today survives in Irish as *gealt* and in Scottish Gaelic as *geilt*.⁴⁹⁹ This Gaelic word can be used to define someone who goes mad from terror or flees from battle due to fright. In its Gaelic context, *geilt* is also caused by supernatural means, much like Nórr frightens the Sami with his magic. Furthermore, the word *gjalti*, as it is found in Old Norse and Old Norwegian sources ‘is sometimes used to point towards Scotland or Ireland’.⁵⁰⁰

The motif of Sami having powerful magical powers is also found in *Málsháttakvæði* (also known as *Fornyrðadrápa*), the poem that has been attributed by some scholars to Bishop Bjarni Kolbeinsson of Orkney. The poem alludes to a love story involving King Haraldr Fairhair and a Sami girl, who is called Snjófriðr, or Snæfriðr in other sources. The poem says that she made Haraldr lose his mind with love. In Agrip, Heimskringla and Flateyjarbók, Snæfriðr uses a magic love potion to make Haraldr fall in love with her. Upon her death, Haraldr sat by her corpse for three years, it not decomposing due to magic.⁵⁰¹ Although the motif of the Sami having magical powers is of Norse origin, that of the love potion is thought to be of Celtic origin. Moltke Moe found similarities between this story and that of Hengist, an Anglo-Saxon chieftain, and Rowena, the daughter of British king

⁴⁹⁶ OS, Edwards and Pálsson, 23-24.

⁴⁹⁷ Else Mundal, ‘The Perception of the Saamis and their religion in Old Norse sources’, in Juha Pentikäinen (editor), *Shamanism and Northern Ecology*, (Berlin, New York, 1996), 97-116.

⁴⁹⁸ Almqvist, ‘What’s in a Word?’, 34.

⁴⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰¹ Almqvist, ‘Scandinavian and Celtic Contacts’, 199-200.

Vortigern.⁵⁰² This story is found in Nennius' *Historia Brittonum* and Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*. This motif may be therefore be of Welsh origin, or could be one that was common to the Celtic peoples of the British Isles. The motif of a man's enduring love for a deceased woman is found in Irish traditions, as well as legends about Charlemagne.⁵⁰³

This is not the only time that a motif found in *Málsháttakvæði* is also found in works from the Britain. Indeed, stanza 13 of the poem reads:

‘Aflir of deilir sízt við sjá,
Sörli sprakk af gildri þrá,’

(‘Least of all one can try one's strength against the sea;
Sörli burst from his great longing’)⁵⁰⁴

Reidar Christiansen has pointed out that a Scottish ballad, recently recorded in four different versions in Atholl, offers an almost identical story to this one. In this ballad, Seurlus, the son of the King of Bergen, dreams about a beautiful woman, filling his heart with joy. Upon awakening, he catches a glimpse of this woman, who is a mermaid, swimming into the ocean. Seurlus swims after her, but tires, and gets carried to shore by the waves. Although Seurlus survives this near drowning, his heart bursts, killing him.⁵⁰⁵ The similarities between *Málsháttakvæði* and this ballad are striking. Sörli and Seurlus are clearly two versions of the same name. The ballad of Seurlus, however, is thought to not be older than the late Middle Ages. Whether the ballad of Seurlus was influenced by the story of Sörli, or whether they are both derived from an older variant of this story, is hard to tell. Perhaps, as Almqvist suggests, this story was neither of Scandinavian, nor of Celtic origin, but was instead the product of a hybrid Norse-Gael culture, such as that found in Orkney and Caithness.⁵⁰⁶ As Howie Firth has noted, while the theme of mermaids is one that appears in a number of Orcadian stories, mermaid legends are rare in Shetland, and uncommon in Norway.⁵⁰⁷ That there is a folkloric fault-line between Orkney and Shetland is interesting, and suggests that the cultures of the

⁵⁰² *Ibid.*, 200.

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰⁷ Firth, ‘Traditions and customs’, 142-144.

people of Orkney and Caithness were closer to each other than they were to that of the Shetlanders. Though these stories possibly date from later times, and may have been brought by Scots migrants during the strengthening of Scotland's hold on the region, it is likely that this cultural fault-line already existed.

Another supernatural being that populates Orcadian folklore is the trow. Trows are, essentially, the same as Scottish fairies, living in small mounds and hills. They were believed to kidnap humans, especially children, and take them into their dwellings. Although trows share certain superficial similarities with the Norse trolls, and though the word *trow* is likely derived from the word *troll*, they are clearly very much distinct. While Ernest Marwick suggested that trows were Norwegian trolls in a diminished size, Firth has argued that it is more likely that Norse settlers used the word *troll*, which can mean any kind of supernatural creature, to refer to Gaelic fairies.⁵⁰⁸ Rather, Firth believes that the Orcadians instead referred to giant trolls as *jötnar*. A number of legends from Orkney and Shetland use the word *jötun* to refer to giants, and in some of these stories, the giants are turned into stone by the rays of the sun, much like Norse trolls.⁵⁰⁹

Finally, there is another motif to be found in the story of Hallr and Earl Rögnvaldr. In Chapter 81 of Orkneyinga Saga, Hallr arrives in Orkney from Iceland. Here he lodges with a man called Þórstein, and his mother, Ragna. Ragna appears several times in the Saga, and depicted as an authoritative woman capable of talking to the earls almost as if they were her equals (though this angers Earl Páll Hákonarson)⁵¹⁰. After being refused a place at Rögnvaldr's court, Hallr is helped by Ragna. She goes to see Rögnvaldr, wearing a red headdress made of horsehair. Ragna's headgear is called a *gaddan* in the original Norse, a word that is likely of Gaelic origin.⁵¹¹ Seeing this, Rögnvaldr mockingly makes the following verse:

‘So, no sweet-talk:
time surely was when
the queenly ones covered
heads with a kerchief?
Now this merry Matron

⁵⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 144-147.

⁵⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁵¹⁰ *OS*, Edwards and Pálsson, 128-129.

⁵¹¹ Almqvist, ‘What’s in a Word?’, 36.

ties a mare's
tail – she's teasing me –
to her top-knot.'

Ragna responds by telling Rögnvaldr that 'This bears out again the old saying "No man knows all": this comes from a stallion, not a mare'.⁵¹² Following this, she then puts a silk kerchief on her head. Rögnvaldr gradually warms to Ragna, and then accepts Hallr to his retinue. As Almqvist has pointed out, jokes about someone's inability to differentiate an item originating from a stallion from one that comes from a mare are popular in Irish and Scottish tales.⁵¹³ A notable example would be a Scottish Gaelic tale in which two church ministers meet a 'simpleton', called Duncan. When Duncan asks them how they are doing, one of them tells him: 'Ha, ha! Am I not lucky, I got a horseshoe!'. To this Duncan replies: 'Doesn't learning teach you a thing or two? I wouldn't have know it wasn't a mare's shoe'. Almqvist notes that these stories often feature someone of inferior status, or a simpleton, who is confronted by a figure of authority, only to come back and triumph with a clever repartee.⁵¹⁴ Ragna's story is interesting because it chooses a woman as the 'underdog', and effectively helps to reinforce Ragna's status as a strong-minded and powerful woman. There is also something to be said about the fact that the object in question comes from a stallion rather than a mare.⁵¹⁵ By trying to demean her, Rögnvaldr inadvertently opens himself to ridicule. This effectively justifies Ragna's resolve to put herself on par with the most powerful men in Orkney, before she accepts to demean herself by removing her headgear.

The study of Orcadian folklore and the analysis of its Norse and Gaelic characteristics help show to what extent these two cultures mingled in the earldoms of Orkney and Caithness.

⁵¹² *OS*, Edwards and Pálsson, 149.

⁵¹³ Almqvist, 'What's in a Word?', 35.

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

Conclusion

Through this thesis, we have examined some of the ways in which Orcadians, their society, and their culture were viewed. What becomes evident when examining the source material is that Orcadians were understood to be a distinct ethnic and cultural group. Norse and British writers attributed a number of characteristics to the Orcadians that marked them out as a markedly separate group. The Orcadians were recognized as distinct from Scots and Norsemen, and this particular Norse-Gael identity existed on a continuum with that of the other Norse-Gael peoples, namely the Hebrideans, Irish Norse-Gaels, and the Manx. It is hard to pinpoint a precise set of criteria that can define the Orcadian identity as it existed, and who was an Orcadian Norse-Gael. It is uncertain to what extent bilingualism was prevalent amongst Orcadians, though it certainly must have existed.

Rather, this was an identity that existed along a continuum, with certain people exhibiting a more Norse character, and others being more Gaelic. In any case, it was a mixed identity, and those who bore it understood that it was decidedly different to that of the Norwegians. Orcadian folklore, as well the religious culture of the earldoms, offer some of the most compelling bodies of evidence where it is possible to see the mixing of the Norse and Gaelic cultural realms. The Orcadians were aware that their culture was distinct from that of both the Norwegians and the Scots. This can partly be seen in the use of both Norse and Gaelic personal names. Instead, their culture exhibited closer affinity with that of other Norse-Gaels. The fact that Orcadian society and culture were hybrid in nature fuelled ideas of otherness.

For Norsemen and Gaels alike, the Orcadians' otherness marked them out as troublemakers. In Icelandic sagas, Orcadians are most often depicted as pirates. Although there is nothing surprising about Viking-Age Orcadians being portrayed as Vikings, there are a number of abnormalities when it comes to people from Orkney and Caithness. First, and most obvious of all, is the fact that piracy is presented as an integral part of Orcadian life long after the end of the Viking Age. No Orcadian better represented this piratical way of life than Sveinn Ásleifarson. Sveinn, a most extraordinary character, illustrated both the worst and the best attributes of Orcadian society. A pirate, outlaw, bully, and intensely unreliable, Sveinn also showed himself to be brave, cunning and able to interact with people from all over the Norse and Gaelic worlds. Ultimately, though, Sveinn's lifestyle and inability to adapt to a changing world proved to be his undoing. Although the depiction of piracy as essential to

Orcadian society probably does reflect the preservation of piracy as a major aspect of Orcadian life in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, it likely displays a Norse understanding of Orkney and Caithness being somewhat backwards. For Gaels, the Orcadians were, due to their Norse heritage, barbaric.

This perception of backwardness can also be seen in the field of religion. In various sagas, a number of Orcadians are presented as holding onto pagan practices and beliefs centuries after the Christianisation of the earldoms. Moreover, any British role in the conversion of the Orcadians is omitted from the sagas. Rather, it is the Norwegians who are depicted as having converted Orkney during the reign of Óláfr Tryggvason. Although it could be said that their ‘partial’ failure at removing all traces of paganism from Orkney and Caithness reflects poorly on the Norwegians, it is worse for the Orcadians. The fact that they needed to be converted by Óláfr in the first place indicates backwardness; that they refused to immediately give up their paganism shows that they are firmly entrenched in the past and cannot be trusted to do what they are told. Much like Sveinn Ásleifarson, Earl Sigurðr ‘the Stout’ ‘s inability to adjust to change proved to be deadly.

Deceit and treachery are two characteristics that were also attributed to the Orcadians. Orcadians were frequently presented as troublemakers, criminals and bullies, and none more so than the members of Clan Moddan of Caithness. This family, which occupies an important place in *Orkneyinga Saga*, exemplified not only the cultural mixing that took place in the northern earldoms, but also the violent and distasteful tendencies of their people. *Orkneyinga Saga* presents the Moddan kindred as a collective of duplicitous and vicious individuals, few of them more so than Frakkok. Part of this image undoubtedly came from their strong Norse-Gaelic character. In Norse literature, deceitfulness and cowardice are characteristics that are frequently attributed to Scots and Norse-Gaels. It is no surprise, therefore, to find similar things being said of Hebrideans, even by Orcadians. From a Scottish perspective, the Orcadians’ barbarity went hand in hand with treachery. The Orcadians rapidly found themselves grouped with the Moravians and Galwegians as a troublesome and rebellious people on the fringes of the Kingdom of Scotia.

The Orcadians’ reputation for disloyalty was undoubtedly fuelled and reinforced by the events of the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Throughout the course of twelfth century, Norwegian and Scottish kings strived to consolidate their authority over their kingdoms. This growth of royal power affected the near-independence enjoyed by the earls up to this point in both of their earldoms. In Caithness, Scottish royal power sought to establish itself through the appointment of Scottish bishops. Faced with this growing firmness, the

Orcadian earls felt increasingly constrained. The reaction of the earls, and of Earl Haraldr Maddadsson in particular, was to fight back. Haraldr divorced his first wife, Afreka, and married Gormflaith, the daughter of Malcolm MacHeth, one of King David I's main enemies. Haraldr also gave support to those most troublesome of Scottish rebels, and relatives of the Orcadian dynasty: the MacWilliams. In 1194, a number of Orcadians and Shetlanders took part in a rebellion against King Sverrir. By taking part in the MacWilliam and *Eyjarskeggjar* rebellions, the Orcadian aristocracy was physically showing its refusal to accept its loss of independence. In Caithness, attacks on two Scottish bishops, John and Adam, occurred within twenty years. Haraldr's near-fearlessness and lack of respect for royal authority were to prove to be a misjudgement, however. It was he who was to feel the full wrath of both overlords. Being forced to submit to King Sverrir in the aftermath of the defeat of the *Eyjarskeggjar* rebellion, Haraldr had Shetland removed from his control. Instead, the islands came under direct royal control with the appointment of a sysselman. Little could Haraldr imagine that Shetland would never again come back under the earls of Orkney's control. On the Scottish front, meanwhile, Haraldr was at first removed from Caithness, before coming back. In the aftermath of Bishop John's maiming, Haraldr was forced to submit to King William, and had to pay a huge fine. Haraldr's son Jón, meanwhile, lost Sutherland to the de Moravia family of Moray. With Jón's murder in 1230, the Møre line of the earldom dynasty came to an end.

This is also the period that saw the production of the most significant textual source that has survived for the study of medieval Orkney: *Orkneyinga Saga*. Written by an Icelander with close connections to Orkney around the year 1200, and supplemented with additional chapters over the next thirty years, *Jarla Sögur* tells the story of the earls of Orkney and Caithness from mythical prehistory until the end of the twelfth century. The opening chapters of *Orkneyinga Saga*, as the modern text is known, present a mythological, prehistoric genealogy of the Møre earldom line. Though this origin myth of the Møre dynasty is firmly anchored in Scandinavia, it differs significantly from the origin myths of other Norse ruling dynasties. By choosing the giants, rather than the gods, as the ancestors of the earls of Orkney, and by removing any non-Scandinavian elements from the myth, *Orkneyinga Saga* makes a firm political statement. The saga essentially asserts that the earls, although they might hold their title from the Norwegian kings, do not owe them their aristocratic status or their right to their earldom. Furthermore, the early chapters of *Orkneyinga Saga* construct a subtle connection to Britain. Through the story of Earl Sigurðr 'the Mighty' 's conquest of Caithness, and his deadly victory against the Scottish mormaer Maelbrigte, the saga offers an explanation as to when, how and why the Orcadians became a mixed Norse and Gaelic

people. *Orkneyinga Saga* also served Icelandic interests by challenging the Norwegian kings' claim to authority over the Norse settlements in the northern Atlantic and Irish-Sea zone.

Yet the Orcadians' reputation as troublesome rebels could not be shaken off so easily. Although the relationship between the Orcadian earls and the Norwegian kings had dramatically changed since the twelfth century, problems still plagued the former. They continued to be viewed with suspicion, particularly at a time when tensions between Norway and Scotland were escalating towards war. Being vassals of two different kings, the earls of Orkney found themselves in the uncomfortable position of potentially angering one overlord by serving the other. The constant threat of being perceived as traitors must have weighed heavily upon them. Even more worrying was the prospect of war between both kingdoms. Such a situation would be intolerable for the unfortunate earl who would be in power at that moment. Who would they side with? What if they sided with the losing side? It was Earl Magnús III who found himself in this awkward and unbearable situation in 1263. Magnús did the only thing that he could: he did not do anything. Rather than fight with the Scots or join King Hákon Hákonarson's disastrous Largs campaign, Magnús stayed put in Orkney and waited for the storm to abate. Though Magnús came out of the conflict relatively unscathed, and was reconciled with his Norwegian sovereign (King Magnús Hákonarson) following the signing of the treaty of Perth in 1266, the people of Caithness paid a heavy price, much as they had in 1202 (maiming of Bishop John) and 1222 (murder of Bishop Adam). They were heavily fined, and a Scottish army looted their farms and lands.

However, the characteristics assigned by Norsemen and Scots to Orcadians were not all negative. Both were able to recognise that Orcadians had noble qualities – often qualities they attributed to either the Norse or Gaelic side of Orcadian identity. The noblest feature that the Orcadians had was their seeming ability to produce dynastic saints. The most famous of these was, and still is Magnús Erlendsson. Magnús is effectively the 'Perpetual Earl of Orkney' to Norway's 'Rex Perpetuus Norvegiae', Saint Óláfr Haraldsson. Magnús was later joined in the canon of Orcadian dynastic saints by his nephew, Rögnvaldr Kali Kolsson, and an attempt was also made at canonizing Rögnvaldr's grandson, Harald *ungi*. The sanctification of Magnús and Rögnvaldr was an effective political move designed to enhance the status of the Erlendr branch of the dynasty over that of the rival Páll branch. It also served to heighten the earldom dynasty as a whole. Having one dynastic saint was a prestigious and great thing in itself. Having two was truly remarkable.

As with Sveinn Ásleifarson, Orcadians could also be brave. Their bravery in battle is recorded several times, and it is apparent that they were held to be proficient and fearsome

warriors. Perhaps it was that the combination of their Celtic cunning and Norse bravery made them all the more formidable. The Orcadians' strong feelings of independence, and peerless nautical skills made them a force to be reckoned with.

Moreover, ideas of Orcadian backwardness were prejudiced and wrong. Christianity had a long and rich history in the earldoms, the archaeological and place-name evidence contradicting the saga narrative of the sudden conversion during Earl Sigurðr 'the Stout' 's reign. Orkney was well connected to the rest of Europe, and its twelfth-century cultural renaissance saw an explosion of artistic production. Numerous Orcadians were well travelled, and it was normal for Orcadian men to go on plundering expeditions around the Hebrides and Ireland. A number of Orcadians, under the command of Earl Rögnvaldr Kolsson, even journeyed as far as France, Italy, North Africa, the Byzantine Empire and Jerusalem during a crusade/pilgrimage. These contacts with the wider world certainly influenced Orcadian culture. Although Orkney's twelfth-century renaissance did place a large emphasis on the revival and the celebration of Norse traditions, such as skaldic poetry and the telling of heroic tales, these traditions took on new and exotic flavours; the old was reinvigorated with the new. Earl Rögnvaldr's skaldic poetry, for example, shows the influence of courtly love poetry and romance literature. Buildings such as Saint Magnús Cathedral in Kirkwall show the influence of Anglo-Norman religious architecture. The Saint Magnús hymn, '*Nobilis humilis*', which survives in a thirteenth-century manuscript from Iceland, shows that Orkney was at the front of the development of polyphonic music in Western Europe. The well-developed Orcadian Church also saw a growing antiquarian interest in Celtic saints' cults as part of this cultural renaissance. Ninian- and Laurence-dedications became prevalent after the arrival of Aelred of Rievaulx *Vita Niniani* in the earldoms. These could help distance the Orcadian Church from its sovereign Norwegian archbishopric of Nidaros after 1153. Orcadians also appear to have been proficient rune-carvers. The runic inscriptions found in the Maeshowe burial chamber in Orkney, are proof that some people in Orkney were experts in runic script. So adept were some that Earl Rögnvaldr boasted of mastering runic writing as one of his nine skills.

Far from being a backwater on the edge of Europe, Orkney and Caithness was at the centre of its own world. Orkney was an important centre amongst the Norse colonies of the Irish-Sea zone and of the North Atlantic. The naming of Sutherland as *Suðrland* ('southern land') and of the Hebrides as the *Suðreyjar* ('southern isles') shows the place that Orkney occupied in this Norse colonial world. Its strategic placement made it the gateway to the British Isles for anyone coming from Norway, Iceland or the Faroes. Similarly, anyone

wishing to travel to these lands from Ireland, the Hebrides or Man had to pass through Orkney. However, Scottish expansionism meant that Caithness and Orkney soon found themselves increasingly detached from the Norse sphere. Although the extinction of the Møre earldom line in 1232 signalled the end of an era, the following Angus earls were still strongly Norse in character. It was the period between 1266 and 1375 that saw a true change in direction for Orkney and Caithness.⁵¹⁶

Throughout the fourteenth century, Scottish aristocrats came to hold an increasing amount of power in Caithness, and Scottish influences were beginning to take over. The arrival of the Black Death in the earldoms around 1349 undoubtedly caused great disruption and left Orkney, and particularly Caithness, open to Scottish influence.⁵¹⁷ In 1375, the Scottish crown purchased the earldom of Caithness. The Sinclair earls of Orkney continued to rule in Orkney for 95 years, before Orkney and Shetland were pawned by Denmark-Norway to Scotland in 1468, and William Sinclair gave his title of Earl of Orkney for that of Earl of Caithness in 1470.⁵¹⁸

The transfer of Caithness, Orkney and Shetland from the Norwegian sphere to the Scottish one, and the accompanying process of Scottification, however, did not signal the end of the Orcadians' distinctness. The survival of the Norn language in Orkney and Shetland until the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries as a first language⁵¹⁹, was a testament to the enduring legacy of the Orcadians' Norse heritage. Even though the Scots language came to dominate Caithness, Orkney and Shetland, the people of the former earldoms retained their cultural customs, folkloric beliefs and tales. To this day, the Orcadian and Shetlandic identities remain special within Scotland. Orcadians and Shetlanders are very conscious of their Norse heritage. Kirkwall Airport, previously known as Grimsetter Airport, still has the name Grimsetter ('Grim's shieling') picked out in runes over its entrance. In Shetland, the festival of Up Helly Aa takes place every winter, and celebrates the islands' Norse past. During the Scottish Independence Referendum of 2014, an *Economist* article on the subject highlighted Orkney and Shetland's Scandinavian past and the Isles' distinct lack of Celtic cultural focus that characterises much of Scottish nationalism. Although Orcadian identity has

⁵¹⁶ Barbara Crawford, 'Scots and Scandinavians in Mediaeval Caithness: A Study of the Period 1266-1375', in J.R. Baldwin (editor), *Caithness. A Cultural Crossroads*, (Edinburgh, 1982), 75-85.

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁸ Crawford, *The Northern Earldoms*, 332-370.

⁵¹⁹ Michael Barnes, *The Norn Language of Orkney and Shetland*, (1998); Peter Trudgill, *Language in the British Isles*, (Cambridge, 1984), 354.

significantly changed since the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, there remains something of the medieval Orcadians' desire for self-determination. While the Orcadians have changed, their distinctness and tenacity has withstood the test of time.

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