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## The Orkney Islands in the Viking Age

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At the height of the Viking Age the seas around northern Europe were a passage for war and trade. Viking longships ruled the seas and today the tales of the power, might and influence of these Norsemen still fascinate us. A small group of islands to the north east of Scotland, the Orkney Islands, played a crucial role in supporting the Viking network in the tenth to thirteenth century. The history of the islands and their relationship with both Scotland and Norway illuminate the discussion of the Scandinavian influence in the North Sea region.

The Orkneys are now part of Scotland but the history of the islands show that they were part of the Norwegian Scatterlands in The Viking Age<sup>1</sup>. Norway was certainly the most powerful of the three and although Scotland was always independent the links between the two countries were strong. Orkney as an outpost of Norway was a focal point which played a large part in shaping their shared history. An accurate description of the situation would be that Norway, its province, Orkney, and its close neighbor, the land of the Scots, shared affiliations, treaties and trade agreements which were influenced by the circumstances in all three regions. Orkney's importance grew beginning from being a Scandinavian outpost used for winter quarters through a thriving settlement, a source of supplies and manpower for Norway and at its height to a semi independent earldom capable of hosting diplomatic meetings between

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<sup>1</sup> I.P. Grohse, "From Asset in War to Asset in Diplomacy: Orkney in the Medieval Realm of Norway", *Island Studies Journal*, 8, no.2 (2013) : 255

heads of state or their representatives. It is clear that Norway, Orkney, and Scotland shared a relationship that was not entirely that of conquerors and conquered. How and when did Orkney become such a key player in the relations between Norway and Scotland? Were the Earls of Orkney a barrier to war between the nations? The answers to these questions will show that Orkney was a hub of commerce and diplomacy in The Late Middle Ages.

Orkney's geographical position is perhaps the first point which should be explored. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when Orkney became a Scandinavian province. We have evidence that the islands were known to be inhabited before the Viking Age. In Roman times the name Orc or Cape Orkas was recorded on maps of the British Isles<sup>2</sup>. There are a few very early mentions of the people who inhabited these northernmost islands. Two distinct early tribal peoples for which we have evidence are the Picts and the Papar. One early source states that "these islands were inhabited by the Picts, who were only a little bigger than pigmies, worked great marvels in city building each evening and morning, but at noontide they were utterly bereft of their strength and hid for fear in little subterranean dwellings"<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>, W.P.L. Thomson, *The New History of Orkney*. (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2008) 4.

<sup>3</sup> C. Phelpstead and D.I. Kunin, *A History of Norway and the Passion and Miracles of Blessed Óláfr* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research Text, 2001) 8.

The same source describes the Papar as “Africans who practiced Judaism” which seem to our modern senses entirely unbelievable, it may be that something of the essence of that bold statement is lost in translation <sup>4</sup>. The earliest note regarding attacks in the area is from Dicuil around 825 C.E. He mentions islands about two days sail away from Norway which were inhabited by Irish hermits but then abandoned because of Norse raiders<sup>5</sup>. It is not specifically noted which islands but it is probably the Faros or the Western Isles. Orkney is a little further off, however it is very unlikely that those Norse raiders who had found the northernmost islands had not discovered Orkney and Shetland as well; two days sailing is inconsequential for a Viking ship.

Sagas and myths can give clues to what was happening in the world when they were written, or sung, but, there is more than likely a great deal of poetic license contained in the fabulous stories. The truth probably lies between the lines and they can be most useful for details of everyday life which would be unnecessary to embellish. A perfect example is Einar, regarded as the first in a line of successful Earls of Orkney<sup>6</sup>. In Harold Fairhair’s saga we hear of King Harold Fairhair (of Norway) giving the title of Earl (of Orkney) to Rongvald of Mær. The fact that the Norwegian King granted the earldom is strong evidence that Orkney was regarded as an integral part of Norwegian

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

<sup>5</sup> Ducil , *The Northern Isles*, ed. F.T. Wainwright, (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1962), 131

<sup>6</sup> Heimkringla C890, in Anderson, Alan Orr (ed. and trans.), *Early Sources of Scottish History: AD 500–1286*, vol. i (Edinburgh, 1923) p.373

territories. A small number of winter shelters seem hardly likely to need an Earl to oversee them. It is more likely that Norway had so large a number of citizens on the Islands that the King needed his representative in place to ensure Norwegian law and his rule was being upheld. A snippet in the Orkneyinga saga, tells the tale of Rongvald's son Einar. He is sent off by his father to rid Orkney of Vikings who had taken over some settlements there. The Orkneyinga states 'Einar sailed west to Shetland to gather forces'<sup>7</sup>. If Einar was sure he would find manpower on the Shetland Isles it is safe to assume that there were already some Norwegian settlements on those islands. He must also have been sure that they would be ready to fight with him for Orkney. This suggests that both Shetland and Orkney were well established as territories of Norway. A few years later the Orkneyinga also mentions a quarrel resulting in Einar fleeing to Caithness, evidencing a Norwegian settlement there<sup>8</sup>. The saga finishes his tale by telling that he was a good ruler for many years and died in his bed. This is such an unusual end for a Norse hero that historians may be justified in believing it to be based in fact<sup>9</sup>.

In the absence of written records and reliable sources it is understandable that historians interpret what sparse evidence is available. One of these sources of evidence is the examination of the linguistic roots of place names. The prem-

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<sup>7</sup>. Edwards & and Pálsson H. (Ed) *Orkneyinga Saga: The History of the Earls of Orkney*, Harmondsworth, (1981) p.29

<sup>8</sup> Edwards and Pálsson, *Orkneyinga* p.32

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

ise is that tracing the Norse language in place names and dating when each name was used will map the course of Viking settlement<sup>10</sup>. It can not be considered a precise way of making a timeline for the History of the rise of the Vikings. Until the late 800's C.E. several different peoples each with a different language existed in the northern hemisphere. An early note attached to the Ravenna Cosmography written in the eight century refers to the confusion of place names which already existed in the islands:

‘Also in the same ocean are thirty-three islands called the Orchades not all of which are inhabited. Nevertheless we would wish, Christ willing, to name them, but because of the confusion resulting from this land being controlled by different peoples who, according to the barbarian fashion, call the same islands by different names, we leave their names unlisted<sup>11</sup>’.

A collection of three letters at the beginning or end of a name which may have been used on some maps and not on others can only be regarded as circumstantial evidence. Place names are useful in defining the geographical position of settlements which bear out comments in the sagas, e.g. the

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<sup>10</sup> W.F.H. Nicholaisen. ‘The Viking Settlement of Scotland: The evidence of Place Names’. in Farrell, R.T. *The Vikings* London (1982), Crawford B (ed) *Scandinavian settlement in Northern Britain: Thirteen Studies of Place -Names in their Historical Context*. London (1995)

<sup>11</sup> Ravenna Cosmography in Thomson (2008) p.42

Orkneyinga saga tells of Norse sailors wintering in Orkney<sup>12</sup>. The mention of Caithness in the Orkneyinga also illustrates the position in the late 800's C.E. of this part of the Scottish mainland being under the control of the Earls of Orkney<sup>13</sup>. Some of the present day names for geographic features and towns retain an echo of their earliest titles. It is interesting to note that some retain a version of the original Pictish names, e.g. Pitnean in Lochcarron<sup>14</sup>. This fact alone illustrates the unreliability of using place names to map the course of Viking settlements. Archeological evidence is strong that Norse settlers were present in and around those places which retained their Pictish names<sup>15</sup>. We cannot assume that those retaining the original Pictish name were never settled by Norsemen.

Evidence from archeological digs can be more reliable than place names at pinpointing when Viking settlement took place but it is hampered by the nature of the settlements themselves. Digs at Birsay on Orkney as well as Jarlshof on Shetland show that many of the buildings were abandoned and rebuilt using the same materials or stones from the beach<sup>16</sup>. The temporary na-

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<sup>12</sup> Edwards and Pálsson. *Orkneyinga* p.26

<sup>13</sup> *ibid* p.32

<sup>14</sup> Jennings, A. & Kruse, A. "One coast- three peoples: names and ethnicity in the Scottish West during the early Viking period" in Woolf, A.(ed) *Scandinavian Scotland Twenty Years After. The proceedings of a day Conference held on 19th February 2007*. St Andrews (2009) p.77

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*

<sup>16</sup> Morris, C. D. 'Viking Orkney: A Survey' in Batey, C.E., Jesch, J., Morris, C.D. (Ed.) *The Viking Age in Caithness, Orkney and the North Atlantic: Selected Papers from the proceedings of the eleventh Viking Congress, Thurso and Kirkwall, 22. August- 1. September 1989*. Edinburgh (1993) p.220

ture of early settlements may also explain why names changed over time. Perhaps the pattern of settlement was not an overwhelming force of ships traveling in a convoy but a gradual desire to make the winter quarters more comfortable or more permanent over a number of years.

One interpretation is that a year round settlement was established once an optimum number of Norsemen were aware of its useful position. It is not hard to imagine a Viking ship finding a safe haven on Orkney during a storm, and the location becoming known amongst a growing number of family and friends of the crew. A settlement could grow quite large in only a few years, either expanding a local site or establishing a new one. Once it was well known it is unlikely that a seafaring people with knowledge of the surrounding area would rename a place with which they were already familiar. As mentioned above, this is borne out by archeological evidence. The excavations at Buckquoy in Birsay evidence the gradual replacement of Pictish round houses by rectangular Viking structures, and later replacements by further Norse dwellings<sup>17</sup>.

The exact date when Orkney changed from a collection of Viking settlements to an island entirely controlled by Scandinavia remains unknown. There is no doubt that at the start of the tenth century Orkney was a territory of Norway.

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<sup>17</sup> Morris, Viking Orkney p.216

The King of Norway granted the Earl permission to rule the Islands<sup>18</sup>. The native Orcadians were either destroyed, absorbed into the Scandinavian settlements or left the Islands. The evidence we have allows for many interpretations. There is little evidence of burning, a well know Viking tactic in raids, so it is more likely that the native people accepted the new rule. What is fairly clear is that the Norse way of life became dominant. The Norse people who settled did not wipe out the native population but rather lived alongside them. We can assume that Scandinavian settlers came to live in Orkney, not to raid it and return to Norway<sup>19</sup>.

There is evidence that Orcadians were freemen living under a rule of law rather than a community of settlers and slaves. One saga tells of Sigurd, a powerful Earl, who tried to raise a fleet from Orkney to fight in England. The men were unwilling to go to war against superior numbers and did not agree to fight until they were given back their odal lands in Orkney<sup>20</sup>.

We see from the archeological record that villages were extended and building styles of both Pictish and Norse architecture existed together. Norwegian settlement was planned, the expansion into many other islands is noted in the sagas. Rather than these settlers being forced from their homeland because of

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<sup>18</sup> Edwards and Pálsson. *Orkneyinja* pp.28, 49

<sup>19</sup> Anderson, P.S. "The Norwegian Background" in Crawford B (ed) *Scandinavian settlement in Northern Britain: Thirteen Studies of Place -Names in their Historical Context*. London (1995)

<sup>20</sup> Anderson, *Early Sources* p.501

hunger or simple desire for land the expansion was due to several factors. We have evidence that Norse warriors had good weapons, they clearly were excellent shipbuilders and sailors, and they traded widely in the area. Evidence of grain crops also point to long term settlement<sup>21</sup>. This suggests a people ready to take advantage of new opportunities rather than a people struggling to feed themselves. Research has shown that added to the weapon and ship wright technology around 950 - 1050 C.E., there was the 'Fish Event Horizon' where the fish stocks grew and in fact trade in fish vied with trade in furs as a Scandinavian export<sup>22</sup>. The expansion into other areas could well be to take what we would call to day prime advantage of a new business opportunity. The archaeological evidence notes that prior to this time very few fish bones exist around sites. A thriving fish industry could explain in part how the Earls of Orkney became very wealthy. With this wealth the Earls were in a powerful position to influence their overlord the King of Norway. Orkney seems to have become a very important place for Viking ships to find men and supplies.

The logistical planning to bring people to settle the land called for much more preparation than wintering quarters for sailors. Longships must have been supplied all that was needed for the chosen location. Although we have not discovered any shipping lists the cargo is likely to have included cattle, cook-

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<sup>21</sup> Morris, Viking Orkney p.227

<sup>22</sup> Dugmore, A., Keller, C., McGovern, T.H. 'Norse Greenland Settlement: Reflections on Climate Change, Trade, and the Contrasting Fates of Human Settlements in the *North Atlantic Islands*' *Arctic anthropology* [0066-6939] (2007) vol:44 iss:1 pg:12 -36

ing utensils and farm equipment. It is an important fact to bear in mind that a ship fully supplied for settlement would be an expensive commodity. The sagas tell of Kings and Earls gifting their supporters a long ship and of ships stopping at Orkney or Shetland for men and supplies<sup>23</sup>. It is a reasonable assumption that those settlers living on Orkney would view these arrangements as part of their settlement costs. These new settlements would be an ideal calling point for voyagers from Norway to visit, to buy or trade for supplies or to pick up crew from the men who had settled their families in Orkney.

The settlement sites on the Scottish mainland in Caithness show similar findings. Freswick in Caithness, is thought to be an 'estate' mentioned in the Orkneyinga saga<sup>24</sup>. Caithness was part of the earldom of Orkney and would have been ideally placed to expand trade to a wider market. Its position on the mainland of Scotland would make it ideal for landing cargo and processing the larger fish catches that are suggested from the fish event horizon. A mainland location would give the ships a larger market to trade goods and would encourage further settlers to expand into the area.

Along with the evidence of architecture, the archeological record provides insights into the everyday way of life of the inhabitants of the islands. Grave

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<sup>23</sup> Heimskringla Saga in Anderson, Early Sources. p.393, p.451

<sup>24</sup> Morris, C.D. 'The Vikings of the British Isles: Some aspects of their settlement and economy' in Farrell, p.89

sites of men, women and children have been found; this would suggest family groups farming<sup>25</sup>. In particular the brooches in burials attest to Scandinavian workmanship<sup>26</sup>. There is often an assumption that these graves belonged to women of Scandinavian origin, however this is not necessarily true. If, as argued above, the settlers in Orkney and in Caithness intended to make a settled life, it is a safe assumption that there would be intermarriage between the Norse and the local population. It could easily be that the second generation would live alongside and integrate with local people. A brooch made in Scandinavia could be bought, gifted and worn by anyone living in a village where settlements and visiting ships were common. The evidence of treasure hoards found on Orkney show that 'ring money' was probably used for trade, but Orkney was not a main trading post<sup>27</sup>.

Various interpretations have been advanced for the hoards discovered on Orkney. There were a range of people living on the islands and there is no reason to believe that the structure of life on Orkney was different from any other settlement of the time. They were made up of families of different levels of stature in the community. The hoards found could reflect this normal spread of wealth. A few examples of the possibilities of the use of hoards are; used as

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<sup>25</sup> Wilson, *Scandinavian Settlement* p.78.

<sup>26</sup> Crawford, B. *Scandinavian Scotland*. Leicester (1987) p.119

<sup>27</sup> Morris, *Viking Orkney* pp.233-234

payment for men joining a long ship crew, or the wealth of particular families in commercial enterprise, or as the wealth of local chieftains<sup>28</sup>.

Both Scotland and Norway both had a hierarchical system, at the head of which was the King. Under his rule was a system of lower ranks, Jarls in Norway being similar to Earls or Thanes in Scotland. The Kings exercised their right to make men of their choosing Earls to rule, in their name, the territories under their dominion. Successful warriors often held more than one territory. Orkney was one of the regions where joint rule was common. Members of the same family held adjoining lands and ruled them in partnership.<sup>29</sup> The Earls of Orkney became quite powerful.

By the Eleventh Century C.E. the Earls of Orkney held, with occasional gaps, Sutherland, Caithness, Orkney and Shetland under the overlord ship of the King of Norway.<sup>30</sup> The Kingdom of Sodor and Mann to the west were also under Norwegian sovereignty. The Land of the Scots consisted of the mainland of Scotland on the east side of the country encompassing Fife, the Lothians and the border regions of Galloway. There appears to have been a period when Norway, Orkney and Scotland became closer allies than those Earls in the other Norwegian territories.

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<sup>28</sup> Barrett, J., Beukens, R., Simpson, I., Ashmore, P. Poaps, S., Huntley, J. What was the Viking Age and When did it Happen? A view from Orkney in *The Norwegian Archaeological Review* <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/sarc20> p.4

<sup>29</sup> Edwards and Pálsson. *Orkneyinga* p.49

<sup>30</sup> Donaldson, G. *A Northern Commonwealth: Scotland and Orkney*. Edinburgh (1990)

In 1098 C.E. King Magnus III Olavsson of Norway and King Edgar of Scotland met to establish their borders. Caithness was to be held as a fiefdom of Scotland by the earls of Orkney and the western Isles and Mann were agreed as Norwegian territory<sup>31</sup>. This agreement meant that the Orkney Earls, who paid tribute to the Norwegian king as part of the 'skatterland' territory, would now also pay tribute to the Scottish king for the lands they held in Caithness. The Earls agreed. It may be that they had little choice, but equally it could be interpreted as a sign that the Earls of Orkney now held such a strong position and had become so wealthy that two tributes were not burdensome. The border agreements meant that the three rulers did not raid each others territories and between them trade was the norm.

Raiding by Viking ships had not come to an end, but any raids from Norway or Orkney were concentrated on lands held by other Earls. The Orcadian Earl Sveinn in the 1150's concentrates his raiding on the Isle of Mann and Ireland, passing by other settlements around the west coast of Scotland<sup>32</sup>. The Isle of Mann was an important dominion of Norway, but Norse settlers acclimatized much more to the Gaelic way of life, probably influenced by Galloway on mainland Scotland. There is no evidence that rulers of Norway ever taxed the

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<sup>31</sup> Steinar, I. 'The Scottish Norwegian border in the middle ages' in Woolf, A.(ed) *Scandinavian Scotland Twenty Years After. The proceedings of a day Conference held on 19th February 2007*. St Andrews (2009) p25

<sup>32</sup> Ójafnad, M., Vestrolöndum, A.I. 'Sveinn Ásleifarson and the Irish Sea' in Woolf,

community there. Orkney and its Earls seem to have held a higher status than the Earldoms of the other Islands. They stand apart as the island fated by luck or by design to link Scandinavia and Scotland<sup>33</sup>.

The links between Orkney, Norway and Scotland can be found in treaties and settlements and in the marriages between the ruling families. The influence of Norway grew over the Tenth to Thirteenth centuries beginning with raiding and following with settlement and inclusion. As in other areas of Scandinavian influence Orkney seems to have held an important position between the two kingdoms of Norway and Scotland. Increasingly descendants of Earls of Orkney, Kings of Scotland and Norway intermarried, creating a dynasty of Scots and Scandinavian noble families which spanned Europe. Earl Thorfinn of Orkney is a prime example of this trend.

Thorfinn the Mighty is descended from Rognvald of Mœr who held territory on the mainland of Norway. Rognvald's descendants ruled in Orkney, following the Norwegian practice of brothers ruling jointly always subservient to the kings or sons of kings from Norway<sup>34</sup>. Thorfinn the Mighty's grandfather, Thorfinn Skull-splitter, was Rognvald's Grandson. Skull-splitter was married to Greloð, descended paternally from the Dungad an Earl of Caithness

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<sup>33</sup> Megaw, B.R.S., 'Norseman and native in the Kingdom of the Isles.' *Scottish Studies* 20 (1976), 1–44.

<sup>34</sup> Brunson, G.M. *Thorfinn the Mighty: the Ultimate Viking*. Stroud (2009) p.9

and maternally from a long line of Norwegian nobles<sup>35</sup>. This is the marriage whereby the successive Earls of Orkney laid claim to their lordship of Caithness. Eric Bloodaxe, a King in Norway and for a time ruler of York in England, married his daughter Ragnhild to Arfin, one of Thorfinn's great uncles<sup>36</sup>. Sigurd, Thorfinn's father was a powerful Earl of Orkney. Thorfinn's mother was a daughter of Malcolm II of Scotland. Sigurd was also foster father to Malcolm III of Scotland. Sigurd's brother, another Rognvald, was the leader of the Viking force which was granted Normandy in France; his dynasty produced William the Conqueror<sup>37</sup>. Thorfinn's strong family tree is another reason why Orkney seems to hold a more powerful position than the other islands. The Earls of Orkney were very well connected.

At the height of his reign in Orkney, Thorfinn extended his network by visiting other European nations<sup>38</sup>. He maintained and strengthened Orkney's close relationships with Scotland and was in Scotland in 1031 C.E. when King Canute visited. Canute at that time was King of England, Norway and Denmark. Nominally, his visit was to receive the submission of Malcolm II but it may also have been to judge if Scotland and Orkney would support his claim to the English throne<sup>39</sup>. This visit by Canute and Malcolm's submission as his

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<sup>35</sup> Thomson, p.57

<sup>36</sup> *ibid* p.59

<sup>37</sup> Donaldson, G. *A Northern Commonwealth Scotland and Norway*. Edinburgh (1990) :plate Normandy England Scotland and Orkney

<sup>38</sup> *ibid* p.85

<sup>39</sup> Thomson p.81

leigeman is one of the points on which successive English Kings claim lordship over Scotland. Ingeborg, Thorfinn's daughter was the first wife of Malcolm III. Later descendants include his grandson St. Magnus in whose honour the Cathedral in Kirkwall was built<sup>40</sup>. Thorfin cemented Orkney's position as a hub for diplomacy and commerce during the Viking Age. The Earls were in a position to influence both Scotland and Norway, their help was requested in wars and their backing was useful in diplomatic discussions<sup>41</sup>.

During Thorfin's reign the rise in the influence of the Christian Church meant that agreements between nations increasingly relied on settlement by the Pope. Support from other recognized leaders was an important part of the process. Thorfinn's pilgrimage to Rome shows that he wanted recognition from the Pope that the Earl of Orkney held an important position. As a recognized dignitary, Thorfinn could lend his support and take part in dissuasions surrounding his close neighbors. Papal Bulls have records about the Church in Scotland's independence from that of England. They state that Scotland was 'a special daughter with no intermediary'<sup>42</sup>. Support from Orkney may well have been useful in obtaining this important agreement for the church in Scotland. Christianity played an important part in the development of the power base in the North. St. Óláfr an Orcadian by birth, later King of Norway, brought

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<sup>40</sup> Cant, H.W.M., Firth, H.N. *Light in the North*. Kirkwall (1989) p.14

<sup>41</sup> Anderson. *Early Sources* p.501

<sup>42</sup> Hall, Ursula, *St Andrew and Scotland*. p.117

Christianity to Norway, Orkney and Caithness<sup>43</sup>. Scotland and Norway both established a network of churches and monasteries. In fact the founding of the first cathedral in the area was in Orkney; St. Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall was founded before St. Andrews Cathedral in Scotland. The sagas mention bishops being present at important events<sup>44</sup>. The Earldom of Orkney was subject to the Diocese of St Magnus in Kirkwall, whereas Scotland's church hierarchy lay in St Andrews. The church was a powerful force in making the way of life increasingly similar in the region. Later similarities between nations regarding burial and funeral rights result not because of the prevalence of Scandinavians in the region but because of the change from pagan to Christian worship<sup>45</sup>.

The church was a unifying force, but of course there were still vestiges of the old religions. These can be traced by examining folk lore. It is often in fairy tales that influences of past people come to light. The tales in Orkney some of which are common to the highlands of Scotland, and to other islands, point to the influence the Scandinavian culture had on the people there. The standing stones have had many myths grow up around them, Odin's stone in Orkney stood from Neolithic times until 1814. Young lovers cemented their eternal vows by clasping hands through a hole in the stone,

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<sup>43</sup> A History of Norway, and the Passion and Miracles of Blessed Olafr (London, 2001)p.32

<sup>44</sup> Annals of Ulster. p.543 Chronicles of Melrose. p.577 in Anderson *Early sources*.

<sup>45</sup> Viking Orkney p.235

allegedly made by Odin to tie his horses. The Odin oath, the words now lost to us clearly relates to the Norse God<sup>46</sup>. Other stone sculptures dating from the early Tenth Century, are the hogbacks, a kind of ancient Norse burial coffin, found in Orkney and in Govan, a suburb of Glasgow, showing that Viking influence reached the west coast as well<sup>47</sup>. Up Helly A is a present day festival derived from the Viking custom of burning ships with the dead. It is celebrated on the 13th of January, and only in the very north has the custom continued<sup>48</sup>. The customs celebrated around Christmas, or Yule, also show Scandinavian roots. The 12th of December known as Magnusmas dating from the time of St. Magnus and Tammamas on the 20th of December. There was a rule in the Norwegian calendar that owners of sheep should not card nor spin wool for the month of Yule<sup>49</sup>. These examples of Norwegian influences show that Orkney was a part of Norway. That they had close links with Scotland is already established. Orkney was unique in holding such a position close to both Scotland and Norway. It was clearly a thriving place and as noted previously its leaders were established as influential in affairs with other states.

The Earls of Orkney continued under Norwegian sovereignty but the Norwegian power base began to diminish. In Scottish history the Battle of Largs in 1263 is the celebrated date which, for the Scots, marks the beginning of the

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<sup>46</sup> Marwick, H., *The Folklore of Orkney and Shetland* (London, 1975). p.60

<sup>47</sup> *ibid* and Crawford, B *The Govan hogbacks and the multi-cultural society of tenth-century Scotland* Glasgow (2005)

<sup>48</sup> Marwick p.100

<sup>49</sup> *ibid* p118-9

end for Norwegian superiority in the region. King Håkon of Norway was defeated. The treaty of Perth 1266 between King Magnus Håkonson and Alexander II of Scotland was a result of this failed campaign. King Håkon retreated and died in Kirkwall on Orkney succeeded by Magnus<sup>50</sup>. The treaty contains the stipulation that Scotland would buy the Western Isles from Norway and pay an annual fee to the King<sup>51</sup>. There is no mention of any transference of Orkney or Caithness in this treaty and they remained definitely in Norwegian territory<sup>52</sup>.

Orkney's position after this date grew more as a base for commerce and diplomacy, the church network was used and bishops were entrusted to collect the fees outlined in the Treaty of Perth<sup>53</sup>. The Cathedral in Kirkwall was an important part of this diplomatic position. It was an imposing building and had a well supplied town which could provide anything needed for visiting dignitaries. It had an easy and frequently travelled access route. It was fairly safe as the local people could be relied upon to provide safe passage. Visitors would be housed in places which looked and felt similar to those in any other Christian states. It was an ideal place to stage meetings between dignitaries when Norway and Denmark were involved. However with the demise of the power

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<sup>50</sup> Lustig, R.I., 'The Treaty of Perth: A Re-Examination.' in *The Historical Review*, Vol. 58, Part 1 (Apr., 1979) pp.35-57

<sup>51</sup> *ibid*

<sup>52</sup> Imsen, S. 'The Scottish Norwegian border in the middle ages' in Woolfe p.9

<sup>53</sup> Grohse, p.256

base in the North, Orkney and its special place as a wealthy and integral part of the power structure in the northern seas waned.

Today Orkney is an isolated island group. It is well off the beaten path but any visitor is sure to identify the rich history which is so much part of these islands. It is clear from what remains of the architecture that the wealthy Earldom grew from humble beginnings as a winter settlement and rose to become an important link between Scotland and Norway. Both countries have left their mark. The island group's geographical position lent itself as a useful stopping point for Scandinavian voyagers and its importance grew with the growth of settlements from Norway. Dynastic marriages between the Earls and Kings of Norway and Scotland led to the three regions strengthening trade relations.

The growth of commerce was a factor in reducing the number of raids on the Scottish mainland, although the Western Isles, under the control of other Earls were still fair game until the Thirteenth Century. Orkney men were sought for crews for longships and the islands seem to have been a source of supplies for voyages of both war and exploration. The evidence for this lies in almost 500 years worth of the archeological record, linguistic study of place names and surviving written fragments. The lack of a reliable written record leaves historians a great deal of scope for different interpretations of the way of life and the possible relationships between the Scandinavian people, the Scottish people and the Orcadians. A visitor to Orkney today will see as many Norwegian

flags as Scottish ones, and very few Union Flags. There is no doubt that their Scandinavian heritage is important to the islanders and one wonders what their opinion may be on the possible dissolution of the Union between Scotland and England. Will they too seek independence in hopes of returning to the days of the strength and influence of the Orkney Earls?

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