

of both.

Within North Atlantic Europe, the study of sea-bird fowling can help fill one more small gap in our knowledge of life and work in the area, notably within the historical past. Further, it emphasises a cultural unity and cross-fertilisation which, although considerably weakened in post-Norse times and subjected to increasing outside influences and localised developments, have nonetheless been maintained throughout parts at least of the area until modern times.

Note: A more comprehensive examination will be found in "Folk Life", Vol. 12 (1974) The Journal of the Society for Folk Life Studies.

#### WHAT IS ORKNEYINGA SAGA ABOUT?

Edward J. Cowan

This paper attempted to argue the necessity of approaching the saga without any preconceived ideas based on misconceptions about Vikings, Orkney and the saga literature as a whole. The saga has often been misread, perhaps most notably with reference to Earl Rognvald and Sweyn Asleifsson. In the case of the former, the reader tends to be seduced by

his poetry, by his colourful crusade to the Mediterranean, and his building of St. Magnus Cathedral, overlooking the fact that the author's discussion of his career constitutes an essay in failure. This failure is primarily due to Rognvald's inability and lack of inclination to control the unruly Sweyn, a man persistently romanticised by commentators as one who epitomises the Viking way of life. Sweyn is an anachronism, his values decadent, in a twelfth century context.

The saga as a whole may be read as a treatise on the good ruler, a theme also central to Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla. Orkneyinga's concluding paragraph states that Sigurd Eysteinnsson, Thorfinn the Mighty and Harald Maddadhsson were the most powerful earls of Orkney. What these three have in common is the successful expansion of their territories at the expense of the King of Scots. Indeed, consideration of these three, together with other biographies noticed in the saga, make it legitimate to question just how central Orkney was to the author of the story. There is much information about events and personalities in Northern Scotland, notably Macbeth (Karl Hundason) and his kindred, the family of Frakkok of the Dales, and of Earl Harald's involvement in Scottish

politics. The older name, Jarla Saga is a much more satisfactory and less misleading title than Orkneyinga.

One of the major themes of the saga is that of the threat of encroaching Scottish feudalism. A comparison between the thirteenth century speculum, the Konungs Skuggja or King's Mirror, and the saga is instructive. The Mirror discusses at length the danger of external interference when the state is subject to internal misrule, inter-necine strife, and the destruction of the kin-ties. A graphic phrase describing rivalry within the kindred as 'a moving wheel on a restless axle' might almost serve as a subtitle for Orkneyinga. The very terminology in certain parts of the saga emphasises the threat of feudalism in the juxtaposition of such words as oðul, lén, handganga, and gerðisk hans maðr, the last three being direct borrowings from Latin feudal terminology. The spasmodic discussion of the oðul throughout the saga seems to reflect the preoccupation of the author, writing at a time when gradual inroads from the south in law and custom were already apparent.

However much of the saga originated in Orkney, the version which now exists was put together in Iceland, by an Icелander who detected in medieval

Orkney a chronicle of internal strife and external aggression similar to that which threatened his own country in the Age of the Sturlings.

#### ORKNEYINGA SAGA, JARLSHOF AND VIKING SEA ROUTES

Ian A Morrison

The account that Orkneyinga Saga gives of Earl Rognvald's shipwreck in Shetland and his subsequent adventure in the tide-race off Sumburgh Head provided the stimulus for a recent interdisciplinary expedition to the islands (Bax & Morrison 1972).

One objective of this was to attempt an empirical assessment through fieldwork of the historicity of the wreck episode. Drs Lucy Collings and Robert Farrell, both of Cornell University, re-examined the Saga text. Working in conjunction with them and with teams of divers led by Lt. Cdr. Alan Bax of the Fort Bovisand Underwater Centre of Plymouth, Dr. Ian Morrison of Edinburgh University made a geomorphological assessment of the extent of post-Viking coastal change. It was concluded (Collings, Farrell & Morrison; Morrison, in press) that there seems nothing in the Saga account of the wrecking that rings false in terms of the part of Shetland around Gulberwick to which