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

it is ascribed, and much that rings true.

The Saga's account of Rognvald's visit to Sumburgh gives a vivid glimpse of the life of Viking seamen living near (or perhaps even in) the well-known settlement excavated at Jarlshof (Hamilton, 1956). Another objective of the expedition was to attempt a geographical evaluation of the environs of Jarlshof as a base for seafarers at a Viking level of nautical technology. Shetland lies at a nodal point on sea routes leading to and from the most populous part of ancient Scandinavia. It offers a staging post for voyagers to Iceland and beyond; to the Hebrides, Man, Ireland and thence southwards; or by Fair Isle and Orkney down the British east coast into the North Sea. At this node, the Mainland of Shetland runs north-south, uninterrupted by any through channel for over fifty miles. Sumburgh Head is the key turning point at its southern extremity.

In terms of practical seafaring under sail and oar, how did the advantages of the roadsteads and beaching places in the Voes around Sumburgh balance against the perils of the Roost, the tide-race that frequently presents a serious hazard to navigation off the headland? To assess this, it was necessary to try to work out how far the coast

and seabed might have changed since Viking times. Air photography, hydrographic survey techniques and control dives were used to elucidate this (Morrison 1973, and in press). Underwater visibility was superb, and diving cormorants and seals visited the scientists working on the sea bed.

It was concluded that while many details of the coastline had clearly been modified within the thousand years since Viking times (not least at Jarlshof itself), its basic layout was nevertheless much the same. Then, as now, Jarlshof had access to a range of complementary roadsteads and beaching places which between them provided shelter from weather from most points of the compass.

One often finds that in the recent past, and in antiquity too (judging from the evidence of settlement patterns and seabed finds of ancient anchors: e.g. Flemming 1971) small sailing vessels often seem to have found it judicious to put in at some convenient bay to wait for a change of wind or weather before attempting to round a dangerous promontary. It is an intriguing thought that at Sumburgh the Vikings may not have waited. The isthmus between the West Voe there and Grutness Voe is not only narrow but low and flat. For Viking seamen, used to the routine beaching of

their light-built shallow-draught ships, it would be no great matter to run vessels right across on rollers (and certainly much easier than at Tarbert in Kintyre). Thus, at this crossing point of routes, the Viking seafarers not only had alternative shelter in the bays on either side of the peninsula, but this easy portage was all that separated a choice of east or west coast departure points for those occasions when the running of the Roost made it unwise to attempt to round Sumburgh Head by sea.

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## ROYAL ASSEMBLIES IN SCANDINAVIA AND WESTERN EUROPE IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Knut Helle

In the 12th-14th centuries larger royal assemblies were summoned in all the three Scandinavian kingdoms as instruments for consultation and consent in political matters of outstanding importance, especially national legislation and acts and decisions concerning the succession to the throne. The Scandinavian assemblies in more than one way corresponded to the contemporary pattern of European parliaments and were obviously influenced by it. Chronologically, they belonged to the period when the originally feudal councils of Western Europe developed into more representative bodies, in theory as well as in practice, increasingly characterized by the term parlamentum, which was also used in Scandinavia. The Danish and Swedish assemblies remained purely aristocratic bodies with no regular attendance of others than prelates and magnates. In Norway there was also an attempt to add to the ecclesiastical and lay aristocracy a