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War or Peace?  
The relations between the Picts and the  
Norse in Orkney

*1. Introduction*

Around AD 800 the Vikings came to Orkney to settle. At this time the Picts were living in the area and the Norse settled very close to, or even on top of, the old Pictish farmsteads. A mix of Pictish and Norse artefacts has also been found in the early Norse settlement layers. It has been intensely debated what happened when the two peoples met, and the finds have been interpreted as evidence for both friendly and hostile relations.

How would we be able to tell from the archaeological and historical records whether the Pictish and Viking contacts in Orkney were friendly or violent? Clear cut evidence such as defensive structures, battle fields and war cemeteries, or undisputed evidence of flourishing trade between the two peoples, frequent intermarriage or a coming together of ideas and practices from both sides (such as the Bressay slab from Shetland) have not been found in Orkney. However, Richards (1991) has looked at the Viking settlement in England using evidence like pagan graves, language development and runic inscriptions, and a similar approach can be applied to Orkney. The Orkney Isles have also got detailed rentals that can give us some information.

This article will focus mainly on the earliest period of Norse settlement, before the Norse earldom was established.

*2. Land administration*

Orkney has a detailed record of rentals, the earliest dating from 1492 (Sinclair 1492) and 1500 (Peterkin 1820). They date

back to even earlier records, *Auld Parchment Rental* (Peterkin 1820: 24), now lost. Since the taxation, *skat*, was a conservative system the records have been used for studying the Norse taxation (Thomson 1987: 116). Land in Orkney was valued in *urislunds* (*ouncelands*), which could be divided into eighteen *pennylands* or four *skattlands* that consisted of four and a half *pennylands* each (Table 1). Each *urislund* consisted of one large farm or, most commonly, a group of smaller farms (Steinnes 1959: 39). The terminology relates to the fact that a tax of one ounce of silver (18 pennies) was to be paid from each *urislund*.<sup>1</sup> The *urislunds* and *pennylands* were not defined in terms of a standard sized area, but measured the value of land for taxation. The *urislunds* usually corresponded to natural districts whereas the *pennyland*, at least in medieval times, did not exist as a recognisable unit on the ground. It was rather a measurement of shares. Thus, if someone owned one *pennyland* in a three-*pennyland* township, they were entitled to one third of all available resources in the community and one third of its responsibilities, for instance tax payments (Thomson 1987: 116-117).

The same system existed in Shetland until the late medieval period (Thomson 1987: 117). The Isle of Man was divided into six districts called *sheadlings*. Each *sheadling* was divided into *treens*, thought to correspond to the *ouncelands*, and each *treen* was divided into four *quaterlands* (Table 1) (Steinnes 1959: 42). The word *sheadling* is thought to be Norse and to relate to the Old Norse word *settungr*, which meant six-part (Marstrander 1932). Steinnes (1959: 43-44) has compared this six-fold division to his theory on *Huseby* farms in Orkney and suggests that Orkney also had a six-fold division. South-west Scotland had *pennylands* but there is little evidence of any *ouncelands* (Thomson 1987: 117). The Hebrides used the term *tirung* instead of *treen*, and it too was divided into *quaterlands*. *Tirung* is a Celtic translation of the Old Norse *eyrisland* (*ounceland*), and so is the Manx *treen*. The *tirung* was also known by the Celtic term *davoch* (Steinnes 1959: 42-43). This indicates that the land units already existed when the Norse came to settle.

Further, even though the land units relating to the

JESSICA BÄCKLUND

*ounceland* correspond to the area of Norse influence in Britain, there are no close parallels in Norway or in other areas of Norse influence. This also points towards a pre-Norse origin for the system. Additionally, the Norwegian ounce consisted of 30 pennies, whereas the Orkney ounce consisted of 18 pennies. The Norwegian system was introduced about 1030, and the Orkney system thus appears to be older (Thomson 1987: 117-118). Thomson (1987: 117) points out that there is no correlation between brochs and *ouncelands* in Orkney, and that this speaks against an Iron Age date for the land division. However, the division does not have to be as old as the building of the brochs. In fact, it would probably have been introduced as Orkney became a part of the Pictish kingdom around the 6th century, and a number of changes took place.

<b>ORKNEY &amp; SHETLAND</b>	<b>ISLE OF MAN</b>	<b>THE HEBRIDES</b>
<b>SHEADLINGS?</b>	<b>SHEADLINGS</b>	<b>SHEADLINGS</b>
<b>(HUSEBYS?)</b>		
<b>1 URISLAND</b>	<b>1 TREEN</b>	<b>1 TIRUNG</b>
(1 BIG ESTATE/ SEVERAL SMALL FARMS)	(= OUNCELAND)	(= OUNCELAND)
=		=
<b>4 SKATTLANDS</b>		<b>4 QUATERLANDS</b>
=		=
<b>18 PENNYLANDS (4 1/2 Pennylands each)</b>		<b>20 PENNYLANDS</b>
<b>(SMALL UNITS, REALLY SHARES</b>		<b>(5 Pennylands each)</b>
<b>OF AN ESTATE'S INCOME AND COSTS)</b>		

Table 1. Corresponding Norse land units in Orkney, Shetland, Isle of Man and the Hebrides.

Further indications of a Norse adherence to the native land administration system can be seen when the Pictish and Norse terms are compared (Table 2). In the Pictish system, a *davocho* seems to have consisted of *petts*, shares of this larger land unit. Thus, if the *ounceland* unit corresponds to the *davocho*,

maybe the *pennyland* unit corresponds to the *pett* (Table 2)? Both varied in size, had to do with shares and were connected to taxation. The difference is that, in medieval times at least, the *pennyland* was not recognisable on the ground as the *pett*. Further, the Pictish administrative units called *thanages* resemble the Norse *Húsabýr* districts (Table 2). They both consist of a principal residence surrounded by dependent townships. Apart from the land units, the native taxation system may also have been taken over by the Norse. The *veizla*<sup>2</sup> system for example, may have been developed from the tribal tribute payments, and the later tax paid to the royal Pictish officials, *thanes* and *mormaers*.

The Norse *bær* place names appear to be similar to the *pett* units, as they are both estates. However, the *bær* names are connected to coastal locations, which the *petts* avoid. Could the *bær* units correspond to a lost, high status Pictish coastal equivalent to the *pett* units (Table 2)?

<u>Pictish</u>	<u>Norse</u>
Thanage	Húsabýr
Davoch	Ounceland
Pett	Pennyland
Lost coastal pett-like unit?	Bær

Table 2. Hypothetical comparison between possible corresponding Pictish and Norse land units in Orkney.

In sum, it does seem that the Norse kept and later developed the native system of land administration in Orkney. This may in part explain why there is continuity on settlement sites, with the Norse buildings on top of, or very close to, the Pictish ones. This sequence can be seen at Buckquoy (Ritchie 1977), The Brough of Birsay (Curle 1982, Hunter 1986), Skaill (Buteux 1997), Pool (Hunter 1990; 1997) and on several sites around Birsay Bay (Morris 1989; 1996). Settlements such as Red Craig, Skaill and The Bu on Burray may have been estate centres taken over by the Norse (Bäcklund 2000).

### 3. *Language*

Richards (1991: 36) compares mainland England to the Isle of Man, and argues that in England the Vikings tried to blend in whereas their strategy on the Isle of Man was to dominate. He argues that in England, the Vikings did not continue to use runes or their native language for any longer period of time or to any great extent.<sup>3</sup> On the Isle of Man, there is a large collection of runes and the Norse appear to have had a large impact on the native language.

What was the language situation like in Orkney? Fellows-Jensen (1984: 150) points out that it probably was in between such extremes as England, Ireland and Normandy, where the Scandinavian tongue died out after having contributed with a few loan words, and Iceland and the Faroes where the Scandinavian language is still spoken. It may be argued that since there are so many Scandinavian place names in Orkney, the Vikings must have wiped out the native language completely, and quite fast. However, as pointed out by Richards (1991: 35), the Scandinavian place names were not necessarily coined by Viking settlers. The natives may have adopted many Scandinavian words and may have taken up Scandinavian naming habits themselves. Additionally, a settlement is usually not named by the people who live in it, but by its neighbours who have to refer to it, or tax it. Thus, places with Scandinavian names may not have been populated by Scandinavians and vice versa. Further, if, as in England, most of the land in Orkney was spoken for when the Vikings came to settle, the majority of the Scandinavian place names cannot represent new settlements. Instead, they represent the re-naming of existing estates. The settlement was not extended, simply renamed. The density of Scandinavian place names may reflect the break up of the old estates, as individual ownership became more common. Richards (1991: 36) points out that the influence of one language over another depends on their relative status and the need to borrow words to describe new things. Even if the natives continued to use their own place names instead of those of the Norse aristocracy, the names used by the dominant class

would be the ones that survived (Fellows-Jensen 1984: 152). It may be argued that the Norse settlers in Orkney replaced the native place names since they were incomprehensible to them, whereas the English place names would have been easier to understand since English is a Germanic language just as the Scandinavian ones. But, as pointed out by Fellows-Jensen (1984: 153), names do not have to be understood to function, and the Vikings in England did adopt some Celtic names. Thus, it does appear that the Norse settlement in Orkney caused the name changes, but for other reasons than the old names' incomprehensibility. Let us look at some other forms of evidence before we try to figure out the reasons behind this.

#### 4. *Runes*

In England, the Norse settlers did not generally continue to use the runic script, and only a few inscriptions have been found (Richards 1991: 126-127). On the Isle of Man there are 31 rune stones, the largest collection in the British Isles (Richards 1991: 126). Richards (1991: 28) regards this as a further expression of Norse identity and power.

About 15 Scandinavian runic inscriptions have been found in Orkney, apart from the 30 or so 12<sup>th</sup> century inscriptions at Maeshowe.<sup>4</sup> The inscriptions do not give us much information about life in the Orkneys and most of them may be late. Two fragments with runes were found on the wall of the church on the Brough of Birsay and Liestøl (1984: 225-227) interprets them as saying: '(NN raised) this (stone) after (NN)', and 'NN raised (this stone after NN)'. A stone from the round church at Orphir also has a runic inscription and Liestøl (1984: 236) interprets it as saying 'Philippus wrote the runes'. The name Bjorn is scratched on one stone in the Ring of Brodgar, and a twig rune and a cross on a boulder (Barnes 1992: 40). Objects with runes have also been found, like the seal's tooth from the Brough of Birsay with the futhark, a steatite disc from Stackrue with runes which are hard to interpret, and a bone pin from Westness with three 'a' runes. A classic memorial stone was found at Tuquoy, stating that 'Thorstein Einarsson

raised these runes' (Barnes 1992: 40).

In sum, there are few official runic inscriptions in Orkney and most of the inscriptions are more like graffiti than the commemorative inscriptions that might have been used to assert dominance in other parts of the Viking world.

## 5. *Graves*

In England, few pagan Norse graves have been found, and this may mean that the Viking settlers were assimilated into the community relatively quickly and were given a Christian burial. On the Isle of Man, the early Viking settlers were given a pagan burial (Richards 1991: 102). Thus, Richards (1991: 118-119) draws the conclusion that on the Isle of Man there may have been less of a need to integrate whereas in England the best way of dealing with the natives was to become assimilated (Richards 1991: 118-119). Additionally, none of the first generation Viking graves on the Isle of Man is female, and this may be taken to suggest that the land taking here was military in character (Graham-Campbell & Batey 1998: 111).

What about Orkney? Let us look at a few of the discovered burials. A pagan Norse cemetery and a Norse hall house have been excavated at Westness, Rousay. The cemetery showed continuity from Pictish times (Kaland 1995). The Pictish graves were marked with headstones and had been respected by the Norse (Graham-Campbell & Batey 1998: 56, 136). On Sanday, several pagan Norse graves have been found. Unfortunately, they are old and poorly recovered finds. But there is one exception, a boat grave with three bodies, a woman, a man and a child, found at Scar. It has been dated to the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century (Graham-Campbell & Batey 1998: 56, 140). The Buckquoy grave, inserted into the settlement mound, can be dated to the second part of the 10<sup>th</sup> century (Ritchie 1977: 190). At the Broch of Gurness, there are badly disturbed pagan Norse male and female graves dated to the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries (Graham-Campbell & Batey 1998: 60, 129). On the Brough of Birsay, unpublished excavations in the

1950's found two levels of graves, assumed to be Pictish and Norse on the grounds of stratigraphy, but they cannot be securely dated as the church was a place of pilgrimage in medieval times and some of the graves could date from this period (Radford 1959, Ritchie 1993: 109).

None of the pagan Norse graves in Orkney appear to be earlier than the mid 9<sup>th</sup> century (Graham-Campbell & Batey 1998: 61). The latest grave goods in the pagan graves is dated to the second half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century (Graham-Campbell & Batey 1998: 152-153). The graves found in Orkney are somewhat different from the ones from the Isle of Man. In Orkney, there are early graves with women and children, and the early Norse settlement appears to have been characterised by family groups rather than bands of warriors. It took a couple of generations before the Norse converted to Christianity and abandoned their pagan burial customs, but they appear to have respected the Pictish graves from the beginning.

## 6. *Genetic evidence*

The results of genetic comparisons between Celts, Norwegians and the current population of Orkney have recently been published (Wilson et al 2001). The Orkney sample proved to be intermediate between the Celtic and Norwegian samples. The authors (Wilson et al 2001) say that this is consistent with an admixture between the two populations.

This tells us that a lot of Norwegians settled on Orkney, which we already know, and that a lot of them had children with the local women, which is not that surprising. After all, some of the first settlers may have been unmarried, and when the second and larger wave of more organised settlers arrived (table 3), there would probably have been a shortage of women on the island.

Unfortunately, the genetic evidence cannot answer the question posed in this article – the relations between the Picts and the Norse in the early stage of settlement. We cannot know if the Viking blood that 'still flows in Orkney today' (The Times 2001) is the result of the murder of all the Pictish



## JESSICA BÄCKLUND

men as soon as the Norse sat foot on the island, or if the Pictish genes ceased to exist simply because of frequent intermarriage with the much larger number of Norse that began to settle in Orkney from the millennium.

### PIONEERING STAGE:

6th- late 8th century: Picts at Skail.

7th - early 8th century: Picts at Buckquoy

7th - 9th century: Picts on the Brough of Birsay.

Norse contacts through trade in antler, steatite, timber with these sites?

Undeveloped native economy, based on hospitality and gift giving, as indicated by the Pictish hoards.

### CONSOLIDATION STAGE:

8th/9th century: Norse settlement at Skail

AD 800: Norse settlement at Buckquoy

Early 9th century: Norse settlement on the Brough (Phase 2.1).

C. 850-late 10th century: Intermediate Norse phase on the Brough of Deerness.

More organised settlement. No Viking hoards. Either small groups of Vikings, or no need for conspicuous consumption. Trade in other materials than silver, antler, bone?

### ESTABLISHMENT STAGE:

End of 9th century: Phase 2.2. on the Brough of Birsay.

AD 900: Norse occupation ends on Buckquoy.

10th century: Skail becomes fully Norse.

10th century: Norse stone chapel on the Brough of Deerness.

Reorganisation of settlement. The Pictish influence disappears. Influx of more Scandinavians, more competition for high positions in society - conspicuous consumption? Big hoards, e. g. Burray (c. 1000), Skail (c. 950). Increasing circulation of silver.

Table 3. The different stages of Norse settlement outlined by Buteux (1997), illustrated by archaeological examples.

## 7. *Discussion*

If we start with the language, it cannot be determined if, and for how long, there was a period of bilingualism and when Norse became dominant. But that the Norse language completely wiped out the native tongue before the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century appears unlikely and it may not have been until the mid 10<sup>th</sup> century, when there may have been an increase in Scandinavian settlers and a Norse take-over of the administration (Bäcklund 2000). The impact of the Norse language may have depended more on the sheer number of Norse immigrants and their status than on any assertion of power. It may also have become fashionable to speak Norse, just as American loan words have influenced many languages in modern times. The native population may have adopted Norse naming habits in order to give an impression of established links with the powerful elite. The Norse language may also have become so widely spread because it was used by the Norse to name the properties on the islands for taxation. The old Celtic estates may have been broken up and the old names may thus have been obsolete.

The pagan burial practice seems to have spanned from the mid 9<sup>th</sup> century, presumably the time around which the majority of first generation settlers died, to the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century when Christianity appears to have fully established among the Norse. It may be tempting to interpret the Norse paganism and their use of native graveyards as a means of asserting dominance. But, as far as we know, the Norse did respect the native graves, and their use of the native graveyards may simply be another part of their take over of the estates, general settlement pattern and administration. If they had wanted to assert their dominance, the building of pagan hall houses or other monuments on the old sacred sites may have been a more efficient way. As opposed to the Isle of Man, there are relatively early female pagan graves, with Scandinavian grave goods, in Orkney, which may indicate that the early Norse settlement in Orkney was more peaceful and characterised by small family units.

There seems to be an increase in the use of runes in the later

period of Norse settlement. The question is if this was a way of asserting dominance or if it simply had to do with an increased influx of Scandinavians in the later period. The runic inscriptions come across as rather casual, as graffiti, light hearted statements about treasure and women, and what may be magical inscriptions as the futhark on the seal's tooth from the Brough of Birsay and the three 'a' runes on the bone pin from Westness. Memorial stones would surely be better suited to any attempts to assert power? However, there is only one such stone in Orkney.

In sum, there are no signs of the Norse trying to assert their dominance over the Picts in the early period of settlement. In the later period, when a new wave of more organised settlers arrived (Hunter 1986: 114), the Norse probably took over the administration in a more formal manner and made the Norse language the official language of the islands. Whether this was a way of asserting their dominance, or whether it was a natural development, is hard to say, but at least there are now reasons for not turning to the traditional interpretation automatically. This does not mean that every single Pict welcomed the Vikings as new best friends, but generally speaking the settlement appears to have been peaceful. If there had been trading contacts (Weber 1993; 1994), and even over wintering, before settlement proper, alliances between some Pictish and Norse leaders would already have been formed. Any hostile native leaders were probably persuaded, by various means, to leave their estates to make room for the newcomers who had access to desired materials like silver, antler, steatite and maybe amber and walrus ivory. To some Picts, the Scandinavians probably constituted a threat, but to others a golden opportunity (Bäcklund 2000).

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*Notes*

1. The Orkney penny did not exist as coinage. It was a measure of weight and a rate of exchange of silver and foreign coins. Pennies became an in-built feature in the taxation system where the *skat-penny* or *pennyworth* was a fixed quantity of traditional produce such as butter or malt (Thomson 1987: 118).
2. The *veizla* was a system in which the local leader, who had a duty to accommodate the king and his following when they came to stay, collected food renders. A *veizla* centre is thus thought to be characterised by a grand residence, often close to a later parish church, and a large feasting hall (Lamb 1997: 14-16; Thomson 1987: 121).
3. The durability and status of the Norse language in England and its impact on English is highly debated, however. See Barnes 1993 for a review of the main arguments
4. Barnes (1992) has listed the ones known to him at the time.

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## JESSICA BÄCKLUND

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JESSICA BÄCKLUND

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