

SYNOPSIS

This paper suggests that there is acceptable evidence for the continuation of Christian sculpture and Pictish writing in Shetland in the period 800–1050, which Professor Thomas did not consider in his discussion of the finds from St. Ninian's Island and Papil. Following her more recent excavations in Orkney Dr. A. Ritchie has reopened the question of cultural and physical survival of the pre-Norse population in the northern isles of Britain, and of assimilation. A tenth-century date has long been proposed for the Bressay cross-slab with its Pictish inscription in ogam letters, which includes two Gaelic words, and one Norse, and has uniquely : between the words as in runes. A fragment from Papil which clearly resembles tombstones at Iona should also belong to that century. So does the knot-design reconstructed in Fig. 1, for it is only known otherwise from a group of monuments in Scandinavian northern England. Its use of little bosses is a link with the same area. Some ogam letters also survive on this stone.

Features of the sculpture from St. Ninian's Isle are reconsidered, and arguments put for a date no earlier than mid-ninth century rather than before 800, by comparison with Pictish sculpture in east-central Scotland and in Caithness. Although the fine processional scene from Papil is older, it may also belong to the ninth century. The writer agrees with Professor Thomas that, despite the representation of a monumental cross, it too is in the east-coast tradition rather than influenced direct from Iona.

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Magnus Magnusson, *Hakon the Old – Hakon Who?*. 28 pp., 8 illus. Largs & District Historical Society, Kirkgate House, Manse Court, Largs, Ayrshire. £1.15 (incl. postage).

Hakon IV of Norway died in Orkney after the indecisive 'Battle' of Largs in 1263. He is not one of the better-known of the post-Viking Norwegian kings and whether he was 'great' or happened just to be king during a period of national 'greatness' is one of the questions which this essay seeks to answer.

In discussing *Hakon the Old – Hakon Who?* Magnus Magnusson examines the documentary sources, especially *Hákonarsaga*; he examines the political situation within Norway and those relationships between Scotland and Norway which led to the confrontation between Hakon the Old and Alexander the Young; and he speculates on the aftermath of Largs and the Treaty of Perth.

The first part of the paper deals with the lead up to the 'Battle' of Largs, the 'battle' itself and Hakon's subsequent death. In the glorious, or is it vainglorious tradition of Harald Fine-Hair in the late 9th century, and of Magnus Bare-Legs in the late 11th century, Hakon the Old (then aged 59) was seeking to re-assert his authority over the Hebrides and Man. In July 1263, after futile discussion with Scottish envoys in Norway and with reports of Scottish atrocities in Skye filtering back from the Hebrides, the Norwegian forces sailed west – up to 160 ships and 20,000 men if Fordun's account is to be believed. By September, Hakon had taken Islay, Kintyre and Bute and sailed for the Ayrshire coast to negotiate. But the season was late; the Scots spun out the talks; and at the end of that month Norwegian ships were driven by storms on to the shore at Largs. After a few days' skirmishing the Scots withdrew; so also, shortly after, did Hakon, though he remained technically in control of the beach.

After detailing the death of Hakon in Orkney on his way home to Norway, Magnus Magnusson offers a short critique of *Hákonarsaga*, more particularly the circumstances surrounding its composition and the light that it sheds on the person of Hakon Hakonsson – a timely and cautionary reminder of the value that should be placed on the sagas as historical sources. (After the close of the Society's 1983 Easter Ross Conference, Gillian Fellows-Jensen suggested that scholars in Scotland perhaps attach too much importance to saga material as an aid to historical elucidation.)

Hákonarsaga was written by Sturla Thórdarson, nephew of the gifted Snorri Sturluson. Sturluson not only composed the *Heimskringla*, he was also an Icelandic nationalist bitterly opposed to Norwegian imperialist tendencies. Hakon had had him killed in 1241, and summoned his nephew to Norway in 1263 after the pro-Norwegian faction in Iceland had triumphed. Sturla made ready use of his literary talent in the cause of his own survival and in due course was commissioned by Magnus, son of Hakon, to write the official saga of Hakon. We do well to remember that Sturla's sources were very much second-hand. He had never been to Norway before, and knew little of the King, his life or contemporary Norwegian affairs. Hakon is praised but in guarded, elusive language, full of stock phraseology; juxtaposition links Hakon with the death of Snorri Sturluson; ambiguity masks any real appreciation of Hakon's stature – "King Hakon was not tall for a man of medium height".

This is all dealt with succinctly, and leads to the suggestion that the answer to the original question, Hakon Who? depends to a large extent on the perceptions and preoccupations of the reader and the age. The Hebridean campaign may have been imprudent, but may this not have resulted from a real concern for Norway's overseas interests, rather than from a megalomania that is implied perhaps in the Chronicle of Melrose? It must be a matter of some regret that the saga is not more explicit and that at the end of the day there is still much we do not know about Hakon IV.

The final part brings the story back to Scotland. Magnus Magnusson takes the view that Hakon the Old's involvement with Scotland did not end with his death in 1263, but rather with the death of his great-granddaughter in 1290. For whilst Alexander III of Scotland took full advantage of Hakon's death and negotiated the transfer of the

Hebrides and Man to Scotland by the Treaty of Perth (1266) in return for a lump sum and annual payment, this not only helped assure Norwegian sovereignty over Orkney and Shetland for another 200 years, but it brought about more immediate greatly improved relations between Norway and Scotland.

In the first place, the treaty recognised the obvious and the inevitable – that regardless of financial resources, with their long lines of communications across difficult seas, the Norwegians could no longer realistically expect to maintain control over groups of islands so close to the mainland of Scotland. In any long-term context, Fortress Hebrides was as unworkable then for Norway, as Fortress Falklands is for Britain today. But in addition, a marriage was arranged, and took place in 1281 between Alexander's only daughter Margaret, and Erik II the grandson of Hakon the Old.

From this point on, intertwined with his narrative, Magnus Magnusson indulges in a certain amount of wishful thinking! In 1281 and 1284 respectively, Alexander's younger son and elder son died; whilst in 1283 his daughter, Margaret Queen of Norway, also died. There were now no immediate heirs to the Scottish throne and the Scottish Parliament acknowledged the infant daughter of Margaret as heir. Far-sighted as he was, shortly after his elder son's death, Alexander had hinted to England's Edward I of the attraction of a marriage between the Maid and England's heir, Edward of Caernarvan. This was sufficient to quell dissent in Scotland about the Scottish succession after Alexander's untimely death in a fall in 1286, and the marriage contract was drawn up in 1289.

Here then is the vision of a single monarch uniting Scotland, England and Norway – a Scoto-Norwegian princess succeeding where countless generations of Vikings had failed. In reality of course, as he admits, even had the Maid of Norway not died in 1290 en route for Orkney and England, her marriage would have been unlikely to ensure peace either within Scotland or between Scotland and England. But her death also severed the close contact and new-found friendships with Norway that Hakon the Old's death had encouraged.

Hakon the Old – Hakon Who? is a very readable little booklet, attractively-written, and a valuable summary and commentary on a key turning-point in post-Viking, 'Scandinavian' Scotland. It was originally given as the Hakon Hakonsson Lecture at the 1981 Largs Viking Festival. It is sold in aid of the Scottish Churches Architectural Heritage Trust.

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