

**NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ANTIQUITIES OF SCOTLAND.
BICENTENARY CONFERENCE. NORTHERN AND
WESTERN ISLES IN THE VIKING WORLD: SURVIVAL
CONTINUITY AND CHANGE**

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The National Museum of Antiquities was 200 years old in January 1981 and the occasion was marked in February by the holding of an international conference whose principal aim was to take a critical look at the culture, past and present, of the Northern and Western Isles of Scotland, and to place the Isles in a North European context. The conference was arranged by Alexander Fenton, Director of the National Museum, and Hermann Pálsson of the University of Edinburgh. They invited scholars from all parts of Scandinavia and the British Isles to read papers on topics that would throw light on the history of the Isles.

The conference lectures were held in the Library of the National Museum and this meant that there was not much space available for participants other than the invited contributors. This is probably the reason for the comparative lack of preliminary publicity. Many people who would have been interested to attend knew nothing about the conference until it was all over. For their consolation it can be revealed that the Proceedings of the conference will be published by John Donald Ltd., at the end of 1981 or early in 1982. The present brief report is merely intended as an encouragement to Society members to buy the volume on its appearance.

The opening lecture was given by Dr. Kristján Eldjárn, formerly President of Iceland, who spoke about 'Graves and Grave Goods: Survey and Evaluation', while excavations in the Isles were presented by P.S. Gelling's lecture: 'The Norse Site at Skaill, Deerness, Orkney, and its immediate predecessor', and Dr. Barbara Crawford's lecture: 'Papa Stour: Survival Continuity and Change in one Shetland Island'. Dr. Arne Emil Christensen of Norway spoke on 'Boats and Boatbuilding in Western Norway and the Islands', while Professor Bjarne Stoklund of Denmark dealt with 'Building Traditions in the

Northern World', and Alexander Fenton discussed several minor features of the material culture of the Isles in his lecture: 'Northern Links – Continuity and Change'.

Economics and social history were covered by Dr. Arne Thorsteinsson of the Faroe Islands in his lecture: 'The Economic Structure of the Faroese Settlement Pattern', by Professor Gordon Donaldson in his: 'Orkney and Shetland in the Scottish Archives' and by Dr. R.G. Cant in his 'Settlement, Society and Church Organisation in the Northern Isles', while John Simpson's lecture: 'The Gowrie Conspiracy – Iceland's Continuing Interest in Scotland' emphasised the persistence of the links between the Isles and the Northern World. Gillian Fellows Jensen spoke on 'Viking Settlement in the Northern and Western Isles – the Place-Name Evidence as seen from Denmark and the Danelaw' and this outside view was complemented by the Icelander Svavar Sigmundsson's 'Critical Review of the work of Jakob Jakobsen and Hugh Marwick'. Any study of the place-names of the Isles will necessarily be indebted to the invaluable work of collection and interpretation carried out by these two scholars. Jakobsen's work also provided some of the material for Dr. K.I. Sandred of Sweden's lecture: 'Language, Taboo and Social Attitudes', although Sandred also discussed Scandinavian loan-words in the present-day speech of Edinburgh. The Scandinavian language as written in the Isles in the early period was the subject of the lecture by Aslak Liestøl of Norway, entitled 'Runes'.

The more aesthetic aspects of Scandinavian links with the Isles were by no means forgotten. Professor Bertil Almgren of Sweden discussed 'Pre-Viking Links' in a lecture lavishly illustrated by slides of sculptured stones and other decorated objects from the Isles, Scotland and Scandinavia. D.A. MacDonald discussed 'The Vikings in Gaelic Oral Tradition' and Dr. Åsa Nyman of Sweden spoke of 'Faroese Folk Tale Traditions'. The conference closed with two lectures on poetry. Dr. Bjarne Fidjestøl of Norway spoke about 'Arnórr Thórtharson, "Skald of the Orkney Jarls"', while Hermann Pálsson discussed 'Orcadian Poetry in the 12th century'.

The solemnity of the occasion marked by the conference was emphasised by the facts that conference delegates were invited to a reception by the Secretary of State for Scotland and that the National Library had arranged a commemorative exhibition 'The Northern and

Western Isles in the Viking World'.

The conference provided a marvellous opportunity for scholars interested in the links between Scandinavian and the Isles to meet each other and exchange views. The two delegates from Denmark, for example, met each other here for the first time and discovered that the study of building-traditions could sometimes throw light on the interpretation of place-names and vice versa. Those of us who were fortunate enough to be present at the conference are deeply grateful to the National Museum and to the organisers for all the hard work that went into the preparations for, and the running of, the conference and we look forward to the appearance of the published Proceedings, which will make the contents of the lectures accessible to a wider audience.