

The Northern Isles – between two nations¹

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Introduction

TODAY Orkney and Shetland are part of the United Kingdom. During the Middle Ages, however, they were under the sovereignty of Norway, but were also closely connected to the Scottish kingdom. In this way, the Northern Isles have received different cultural inputs, giving them a unique historical background and identity. Their Norse history is contained in the broader narrative about Norway's period of greatness in the high Middle Ages. The close proximity to Scotland was a main factor in the transfer of the islands to the Scottish crown during the fifteenth century. In the following article I want to examine how the history of Orkney and Shetland has been regarded by historians on both sides of the North Sea, i.e. in Norway and Scotland.² I do not plan to discuss empirical evidence as such, but rather the historians' interpretations of such evidence. A complete historiographical survey of the Northern Isles would, of course, be a huge task to undertake, and exceeds the scope of this article. Neither do I profess to give an overview of all important areas of research that have occupied historians – my aim is rather to concentrate on subjects that can throw light on the interaction between

1 HIFO (Den norske historiske forening) has awarded me a grant to write and publish this article, for which I am very grateful. I am also indebted to Arnved Nedkvitne for helpful comments.

2 Although Orkney and Shetland in many ways are looked upon as a single entity, none of the historians that I focus on in this article has come from Shetland or has discussed conditions there in particular. Nevertheless, I have chosen to include Shetland in many of my conclusions.

historiography and the societies in which historians live or have lived. To this end I have picked out a few common issues and areas of interest among some of the leading historians from both countries.

A superior question is historians' views on continuity versus change as regards the cultural heritage and development on the islands, and the selected period is the centuries when Orkney and Shetland were ruled by a Norwegian (and not a Danish) king, starting from c. 800. Norwegian Vikings settled in the islands in the ninth century, replacing the former Pictish culture, and the Northern Isles remained under Norwegian (and Dano-Norwegian) rule for almost 600 years. Traditionally at least, this has been the most intriguing period for Norwegian historians. It is also worth noting that *Orknøyingasaga*,³ one of the most outstanding written sources of evidence for historians, deals with this period. In 1468 Orkney was pledged to Scotland by the Dano-Norwegian king Christian I, whereas Shetland was transferred the following year. The pawning of the islands constituted a major part of the bride's dowry in the marriage between the Danish princess Margaret and the Scottish king James III. The Northern Isles were never redeemed. From then on, Orkney and Shetland became part of the Scottish kingdom, the earldom living on till 1615.

The following article is based on my dissertation 'Orknøyene og Shetland i norsk og skotsk historieforskning'.⁴ Naturally, the dissertation deals with a wider scope of issues than is possible in an article. In the former, I have discussed historians' views of the Viking settlement in the islands as such (including the 'empty land theory'), culture and social institutions in the Norse earldom, and the transfer of the Northern Isles to the Scottish Crown in 1468/69 – thus spanning the 'Norwegian' era of the islands. Here I have decided to concentrate on the issues from the middle chapter, i.e. culture and

3 *Orknøyingasaga* was written by an Icelander c. 1200. The saga tells about King Harald Fairhair granting Orkney and Shetland to Rognvald, Earl of Møre, after having defeated recalcitrant vikings who used the islands as a base for attacking Norway during the summer. In this way the Earl of Orkney had to submit to the Norwegian king. Although *Orknøyingasaga* is a valuable source, it is still regarded as historically unreliable in many respects. See note 11.

4 University of Oslo, 2002.

social institutions. These issues help to throw light on aspects of continuity and change and are well suited for presenting historians and their cultural background. My hope was to include a well-balanced selection of scholars from the three areas of Scotland, Norway and the islands themselves, but this has not been possible, since historians have dealt with the Northern Isles to varying degrees. The topics of discussion have also been decisive in my selection of historians. Furthermore, I have chosen not to differentiate between historians from the islands and those from the mainland of Scotland. The distinction between the different groups of historians comes out more clearly in my dissertation.

There are obvious dilemmas connected to a historiographical examination of this kind. I have had to select extracts from historians' research and isolate their statements in order to find answers to the questions I have chosen to pose. This does not, of course, give full credit to the work of the historians. And, as already mentioned, my selection of topics does not pay justice to all the research that has been carried out by scholars of Orkney and Shetland. Before proceeding, I would like to add that historians' writings are governed by what source material is available. Historians' views have to be grounded on analyses of empirical material and not on conjecture. Nevertheless, interpretation is necessary in dealing with the past, and it is this part of scholarly activity that I want to focus on here. As a matter of fact, it is not possible to draw a distinct line between the historians' narratives on the one side and the historical material on the other.⁵ One could say that to communicate the subject of history, one needs an underlying sense of understanding in order to simplify and group elements and sort out the less important ones. This is the eliminating filter of the historian, a significant part of which is the national tradition to which the historian belongs. It is important to render visible this particular tradition consisting of myths of origin and sense of national identity because it helps to form the historian's view of the world. Such a tradition provides the necessary framework for

5 Hans-Georg Gadamer: 'History is more than an existing and closed past, which can be viewed impartially. History is also tradition and in that way it effects us deeply. We are ourselves made part of the effects of history.' Lübeck, P. (m.fl.):

comprehending historical phenomena. Consequently, it is not possible to view history unedited, set apart from the tradition in which it was written. But to expose the 'added value' in history is not always an easy task. The beliefs and notions of historians fluctuate with the spirit of the age, which is why the chronological development in the writing of national history also needs to be considered. The Orkney historian W.P.L. Thomson makes a point about this in his book *History of Orkney*. Here he comments on his predecessors' rather biased views on the history of the islands:

The flowering of Orkney's warlike society in saga-times was regarded as the real period of greatness, and all subsequent history was a record of progressive decline from a Norse Golden Age. This romantic, but essentially pessimistic viewpoint tended to highlight Scandinavian influences and to regard contacts with Scotland as intrinsically corrupting.⁶

If the views of these historians are as biased as Thomson proclaims, why is it so? And if this is the case, one could also assume that younger scholars cannot be absolved from writing in a cultural context that in some ways has an impact on their research (see above). But the closer we get to the present times, the harder it may be to become aware of these mechanisms that influence research from without.

Returning to the subject of change versus continuity, I would like to find answers to the following questions: did historians find that society in the Northern Isles was similar to that of Norwegian society at that time, or that the seed cultivated by the Vikings in a foreign land grow into a distinctive plant? How *Norwegian* were actually Orkney and Shetland, and what other cultural impulses might have contributed to the character of the islands? I will deal with views on administrative features, ethnic relations and religious and cultural traits. Based on these, I will try to detect national differences and establish how the notions and focus of attention have changed throughout the times. Each scholar will be seen in the context of his or her cultural background.

6 Thomson 1987: xiv.

Norwegian Historians

In the past it was common to present national history as a grand synthesis, a way of writing that was highly valued in Norway. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, historical research dealt with Norway's position as an independent state in medieval times, the subsequent decline and the union with Denmark from 1536. Comparisons were made between the times before and after Danish rule. One could say that notions of history and nation were intertwined.⁷ A main issue was to examine whether Norway was oppressed by Denmark or if causes of events could be tracked down to internal conditions. During this phase of nation-building one looked to the Middle Ages to find what constituted being Norwegian, a project in which Orkney and Shetland played their part. Among the older Norwegian scholars⁸ interest was mainly in political history. They emphasized the independent state of the islands, but were also aware of the cultural influences that were brought back to the mother country. This attitude proves that the historians valued the particular traits of Orkney and Shetland and to some extent decided to study these islands on their own terms, independently of Norway.

Peter Andreas Munch (1810–1863) was the most distinguished in this group of historians. He treated the 'scatlands of the West' as an integral part of the Norwegian territory. Munch was active during the times when Norwegian history was being redefined and acknowledged after four hundred years of Danish sovereignty. His aim was to give credit to Norway's role in the medieval European community without distorting or overlooking certain elements of the past.⁹ 'Orkney concerns' played a significant role in Munch's monumental work on Norwegian history.¹⁰ Munch wrote about the Orkney earls, their changing loyalties and relations with the kings both in Norway and Scotland. He recapitulated incidents in the sagas, adding his own judgements and comments. Having reservations about the sagas and to what extent they could be trusted

7 Bagge 1996: 38.

8 In this context: from the end of the nineteenth century to the first part of the twentieth.

9 Brinchmann 1910: 43.

10 *Det norske Folks Historie*, vol. 1–7, new editions printed in 1941–43.

as historical sources, he still had no qualms about accepting their contents, especially when he could not find contradictory information elsewhere.¹¹ He also enjoyed ruminating, offering explanations that could be rather imaginative.¹²

How did Munch regard the political and cultural influence between Norway and the Northern Isles in the Norse period? He was greatly interested in the place-names, and how they had originated in Norway and found a new form in Orkney and Shetland. Apart from that, he concentrated on political history rather than analysing the formal connections between Orkney/Shetland and Norway, a common perspective in earlier historical writing. But he stressed the islands' cultural impact on Norwegian society. Orkney and Shetland were the most distinguished of the Norwegian territories in Munch's opinion, and their proximity to the British Isles made them an important gateway for European cultural influence to Norway. This factor, while deserving attention, tended to be neglected in Norway.¹³

Alexander Bugge (1870–1929) was active during a transitional period when it was still possible to pursue a holistic and synthesizing research based on historical and archaeological evidence. Bugge himself moved comfortably between the fields of history and archaeology, seeing connections between Orkney and Shetland and other regions and states of Europe. As regards the saga period, Bugge put emphasis on the ethnic background of the Orkney earls. In his *History of Norway* he stressed the fact that the earls belonged to the Northern race; but at times, opposing cultures and races clashed at the individual level, as in the case of Thorfinn, who was half Scottish on his mother's side.¹⁴ Bugge claimed that the Norse settlers in the

11 After Munch, scholars have developed a more critical attitude towards the sagas in this respect. Halvdan Koht wrote an article in *Historisk tidsskrift* in 1914 which has been regarded as a watershed in saga criticism. Koht claimed that the sagas had lost much of their credibility. He wanted to make use of the saga as a remnant of the author's life and situation, rather than as evidence of the historical events depicted in it. Koht 1914: 380 and Dahl 1990: 239.

12 Storsveen 1998: 242.

13 Munch 1839: 79. See also Øien 2002: 34–36.

14 Bugge saw a connection between Thorfinn's Celtic origin and the saga narrative that described him as 'unusually tall and strong, an ugly-looking man with a black head of hair, sharp features, a big nose and bushy eyebrows.' He was also a competent leader of men, brave, eager and hungry for material wealth. Bugge 1910: 368.

Northern and Western part of Scotland had a positive influence and calmed the temper of the Scots. In this way, the islands were less marked by Celtic culture than was the case in Ireland, a country afflicted by feuds and violence.¹⁵ Although Bugge regarded *vesterhavsoyene*¹⁶ as Norwegian, he still believed that the mixture of Norse and Celtic traits brought an alien substance into the island society. Bugge gave a vivid description of this:

A strangely wild and untamed society where even the best of men are treacherous, breaking their word, where hardly any chief dies in his bed, where mistresses and lawful wives, legitimate and illegitimate children are regarded equal. People, race and culture are in conflict.¹⁷

The idea of conflicts caused by racial differences had gained ground towards the end of the nineteenth century. The supremacy of the Germanic race, a notion widely accepted until the outbreak of the Second World War, is an extreme example.¹⁸ But Bugge had mixed ideas about the Celts, whom he also admired for their cultural and artistic abilities. In this area the Vikings received considerable inspiration and know-how, according to Bugge. On the other hand, the Vikings were able to teach trading and business to the Celts. Undoubtedly, Bugge regarded the cultural and social influence between the Northern Isles and Norway as a mutual, two-way process. Like Munch, however, he did not elaborate on aspects concerning the society and its administrative features.

When Norway became independent from Sweden in 1905, the idea of history as a maker of identity became less crucial to the Norwegian historians. They preferred to focus on empirical studies of less extensive subjects, based on available source material.

15 Bugge 1910: 91.

16 Norwegian historians (at least in the past) have preferred *vesterhavsoyene* as a combined term for Orkney and Shetland, whereas Scottish historians still use 'The Northern Isles'. The names reflect two geographical points of view.

17 Bugge 1916: 172 (my translation). Another well-known historian, Edvard Bull, wrote something similar in his work *Det norske folks liv og historie* from 1931: The mixture of Norse and Celtic blood 'brings about a certain agitation that manifests itself both in the actions and in the imagination of the people'. Bull 1931: 140 (my translation).

18 Øien 2002: 21, 31.

Whereas Munch paid much attention to the saga narratives, later generations of scholars have been met with strict, scientific demands that have made the study of the Viking Age and early medieval times more difficult. One result of this is that a great part of the research has been left to archaeologists and philologists who have had more reliable evidence material to work from.¹⁹ Historians of more recent times²⁰ have to a great degree focused on administrative functions and their development. Paying less attention to the saga narratives, analysis of the structural features and the administrative history have been put to the forefront. This has reduced the interest in the earl and the king,²¹ but the connection with Norway is still a central theme for older and younger historians alike.

Per Sveaas Andersen (1921–) has made use of the archaeological and philological work produced by others to carry out his own studies. Starting his career with issues concerning history of ideas and historiography, he focused in later years on Norwegian medieval history, including the Vikings' raids to the west.²² Sveaas Andersen believes that the relations between Norway and the Northern Isles were very close, particularly in the high Middle Ages. The common denominator was above all the important political institutions adopted from the mother country. Primarily, Sveaas Andersen has dealt with Norway's influence on the islands, leaving out possible mutual benefits. There are three main elements that he wants to focus on. First of all, he has discovered that the church organisation in Orkney developed through three different phases, like the Norwegian Church. This indicates a strong link between Norway

19 Bagge 1995: 126.

20 In this context: after 1950.

21 One important reason for this shift in interest is the authenticity problem of the sagas. See note 11.

22 Dahl 1992: 293–294. Sveaas Andersen's works in this field include the book *Vikings of the West – The Expansion of Norway in the Early Middle Ages* (1985) and the article 'Peter Andreas Munch and the Beginning of Shetland Place-Name Research' (1984) as well as others that I will refer to below. In 1995, Sveaas Andersen was presented with a book of essays by friends and colleagues in Scotland in appreciation of his interest and knowledge in the historic bonds between Norway and the Northern Isles: *Northern Isles Connections*, edited by B.E. Crawford.

and Orkney.²³ Secondly, he doubts that the chapel districts originated during Pictish times,²⁴ an opinion commonly held among Scottish historians (see below). The church developed fairly independently, but nevertheless on a Norwegian model.²⁵ Thirdly, he discusses the introduction of taxation.²⁶ According to Sveaas Andersen, this must have happened at a rather late stage, and not before the beginning of the thirteenth century when Norway was introduced to regular taxation. He thinks it unlikely that Orkney should have been the leader of a trend before any other states of Western Europe.²⁷

Steinar Imsen (1944–) is one of the leading contemporary historians dealing with the Northern Isles' connections from a Norwegian viewpoint.²⁸ Having examined the conditions in Orkney based on his knowledge of Norwegian history and evidence,²⁹ he has devoted his attention to the high and late Middle Ages in particular, as well as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Imsen is a professor at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim, being the youngest in my selection of historians. In all administrative fields in Orcadian society, Imsen draws a parallel to Norway. By emphasising a formal perspective, Imsen shows that

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- 23 During the early phase the bishop accompanied the earl, whereas later on he had his own residential seat. Finally the bishop became the earthly guardian of the saint in St. Magnus Cathedral. In the thirteenth century, however, the church became feudalized through the influence of the Scottish church. A group of Christian Picts have probably survived the Norse invasion, a complicating factor in the explanation of the spiritual development, Sveaas Andersen admits. Sveaas Andersen 1989: 9. See the following note.
- 24 The Picts inhabited Orkney and Shetland prior to the arrival of the Vikings. Historians and archaeologists have disagreed strongly about what may have happened to the Picts after the Norse invasion. Some have argued that the islands were practically uninhabited when the Vikings entered the scene, whereas others have believed that the Picts were enslaved, suppressed and killed by the Norse. See Øien 2002: 42-75 and Smith 2001: 7–32.
- 25 Sveaas Andersen 1989: 15–17.
- 26 skatt (no).
- 27 Sveaas Andersen 1991: 81. See also Øien 2002: 85-86.
- 28 A major work edited by Imsen was published in 2003: *Ecclesia Nidrosiensis 1153–1537: Søkelys på Nidaroskirkens og Nidarosprovinsens historie* (NTNU Senter for middelalderstudier, nr 15). As Orkney and Shetland formed part of the Norwegian ecclesiastical province of Nidaros (Trondheim), the book also includes articles on the Northern Isles connections: B.E. Crawford: 'The bishopric of Orkney' and B. Smith: 'Archdeacons of Shetland 1195–1567'.
- 29 Among his sources are *Hirdskræen* from c. 1270 and the settlement between Earl Harald Maddadsson and King Sverre in 1195, as presented in *Sverressaga*.

there was continuity in the Norse tradition in the islands. Moreover, the continuity persisted well into the times of Scottish rule with the impignoration of 1468 having little or no immediate effect, according to Imsen. He puts emphasis on the normative aspects in terms of the decrees from Norway, defining the position of the earl and law and order in general. By doing this, he calls attention to the stagnant characteristics of society as opposed to the older historians Munch and Bugge, who were more interested in the individual actions of the king and the earl that are presented in the saga narratives. The latter perspective makes society out to be dynamic, in terms of changing loyalties between the king and the different earls contesting for power. These two interpretations give different accounts of the medieval societies in Orkney and Shetland. Imsen's objective is to prove that the culture of the Northern Isles to a great extent was formed by Norway and Norwegian institutions, and that some of the Norse administrative features outlived those of the mother country.

The position of the Orkney earl is one example. According to Imsen, the earl's authority was restricted by the king's. There is no evidence that the Orkney earl had a more elevated position than his Norwegian counterparts, Imsen claims.³⁰ Besides, there is reason to believe that the aristocracy of Orkney, the so-called 'gødings', had closer connections with the king of Norway than with the local earl in the thirteenth century.³¹ Imsen admits, however, that there is scant evidence for this conclusion in the source material. Another instance is the court system. Lawmen and lawthings were still in operation after the pledging of the islands in the fifteenth century,³² surviving the first period seemingly without Scottish influence. The act of Magnus the Lawmender was kept until 1611, and the king's bodyguard also continued under the Scottish reign. It existed as late as 1420, more than 100 years after it was dissolved in Norway.³³ These arguments are used by Imsen to prove that Orkney and Shetland got their administrative institutions from Norway until a new system

30 Imsen 2000: 166.

31 This was especially true after 1231, when the earl spent most of his time in Scotland.

32 Until 1540.

33 Imsen 2000: 173.

was introduced which had serious effects on the traditional order of society.³⁴

This examination shows that Orkney and Shetland have kept their place in the Norwegian writing of history. Munch treated the islands as equal to the other regions on the mainland of Norway, giving them their due in the process of nation-building. Bugge put emphasis on cultural exchange and ethnic ties, whereas Sveaas Andersen and Imsen wanted to show that the islands adopted their administrative system from Norway, both in the spiritual and the secular fields. The continuity of the Norse traditions has first and foremost been stressed by Imsen.

Scottish Historians

Scottish historians of the mainland have regarded Orkney and Shetland as remote and of less concern than the dramatic highlands of the West.³⁵ Based on works in recent years, this is about to be rectified.³⁶ But the inhabitants themselves have always been fascinated by their own historical background. Many of the books and articles printed on the subject have been written by local scholars and historians, an interest that grew with the great archaeological discoveries from Neolithic times made in the nineteenth century. The transfer from Norse to Scottish rule in late medieval times has always been an important factor in the interpretation of the regional history of the Northern Isles. In 1859, David Balfour published his 'Oppressions in the islands of Orkney and Zetland', an article containing serious attacks on the Scottish overtaking of power four hundred years earlier. According to Balfour, Orkney could have had a central position within trade and northern civilization if it had not

34 Imsen 1999: 56–57.

35 Øien 2002: 16–26. This is not true as far as archaeology is concerned. Orkney boasts many significant pre-historic sites that have gained world heritage status.

36 One important contributor is the historian Gordon Donaldson, who wrote several articles and books about the islands. I have treated his views in the dissertation 'Orknøylene og Shetland i norsk og skotsk historieforskning'. However, this material does not fit into the scope of this article. Among other subjects, Donaldson has done research into the pledging of the islands in 1468/69, of which he has given a detailed account.

been for the Scots and the transfer of power in 1468. The Dano-Norwegian king was looked upon as the lawful sovereign, whereas the Scottish king was an impostor and his representatives no more than relentless suppressors. This attitude has been a strong undercurrent within the societies of Orkney and Shetland almost up to the present day. The idea that the Vikings are the real ancestors has influenced the view of the older Orkney historians³⁷ in that they regard the Norse tradition as a decisive factor in the cultural background and the self-image of the people. Today, however, notions have become more diversified.

J. Storer Clouston (1870–1944) is regarded as the most significant of the Orkney scholars in the interwar period. Being born on the mainland of Scotland, he later settled in Orkney where he established himself as a novelist and historian. Through his *History of Orkney* he recounts the captivating story of the islands. Despite certain elements believed by Clouston to have originated in the pre-Norse period, he regarded the Norse world, its mentality, culture and administrative functions as the main building stones of island society. It was evident to him that Orkney followed the pattern of the mother country.³⁸ This legacy made up the real value of the medieval culture of Orkney, whereas the later Scottish influence had disrupting effects on the islands, according to Clouston.³⁹ He compared gaining insight into the medieval society to studying a building which has gone through conversions and alterations throughout the years: one has to excavate the original structure and ignore later changes.⁴⁰ With such an attitude the multitude of impulses and gradual change tend to be overlooked or even regarded as inferior, something Clouston has been accused of. One may also add that this is a nationalistic way of thinking. Each nation has its own national spirit, and to Clouston the spirit of Orkney was mainly Norse.

Like Munch and Bugge, Clouston concentrated on the saga descriptions, adding his own personal touch. He writes about the earl Turf-Einar in the following way:

37 In this connection: before 1950.

38 Three areas of influence were udal law, jurisdiction and the *ting* organisation.

39 See also Øien 2002: 117–119.

40 Clouston 1932: 261.

Brief and few though our glimpses of Torf-Einar are, he still stands out with singular clearness; an able, astute, relentless, caustic man, with that surprising vein of open-air, clash-or-arms poetry in him, which seems to have been a trait peculiar to the men of action of that day and race; or else it has been very carefully concealed by rulers and fighting captains of more recent centuries.⁴¹

It is obvious that Clouston believed the Norse earls to possess personal qualities far superior to their successors. One can also detect a hint of the racial ideas that affected Bugge and others of his contemporaries. However, Clouston did not agree with Bugge's description of Orkney society as 'strangely wild and untamed'. The earls' conduct in the islands was far more civilized than the confrontations among the clans of Scotland, and there were comparatively less feuds or wars between groups.⁴² Whereas Bugge stressed the Celtic element as an unstable factor within the society, Clouston on the other hand believed that the Norse element had a stabilizing effect on Orkney.

Clouston was attracted to the invigorating style of the sagas that brought to life the characters of a distant past. This was something he decidedly missed in later sources. The twelfth century in Orkney was a great historical period, he proclaimed. To Clouston it must have been a happy coincidence that the saga was written towards the end of this century or at the beginning of the next, because in that way the important saga period fell within a 'memory frame' of a hundred years.⁴³ Clouston had much enthusiasm for the sagas and liked retelling them, as did the older historians.⁴⁴ An important reason for this must be that he saw the saga as a major constituent in the identity of the Orcadians. Another characteristic of Clouston's writings is his many references to Norse literature and sources. He

41 Clouston 1932: 23.

42 Clouston 1932: 192, 206–207.

43 '[...] the saga writer [...] was actually in touch with people still living, who remembered the earlier events in their youth and affairs of the mid-century as grown men and women.' (Clouston 1932: 62).

44 Still, to a certain degree Clouston was critical towards the historical value of the sagas. He pointed out that the Orkney saga left out a lot of information, since the writer's main concern was with the earl and his family. Thus it was important to leave out the temptation 'to construct missing bridges'. Clouston 1932: 56.

was well aware of discussions going on among Norwegian historians and presented his own views on several occasions. He looked to Norway when discussing conditions of Orkney medieval society, finding similarities as well as differences.⁴⁵ After having studied both Munch and Bugge, Clouston claimed Orkney society to be aristocratic like Norway's, and he emphasized the cultural refinement gained by the Orcadians when visiting the Norwegian king and his men. To illustrate this point, he gives a thorough account of *Kongespeilet* in his *History*.⁴⁶

Although Clouston believed the Norwegian influence to be a decisive factor in terms of administrative organization and culture, there were in his opinion two features that could be traced back to a pre-Norse period. As opposed to Sveaas Andersen, who believed that the chapel districts were introduced during Norse rule, Clouston's opinion was that the islands had been divided into districts by the time the church was established, into so-called *urislands*.⁴⁷ There was probably one chapel in each urisland. Clouston claimed that the church received impulses from other Norse areas through a development based on a Norwegian or Icelandic pattern,⁴⁸ but he also believed that influence was brought across from many different areas. Consequently, his parallel to Norway in the case of church development through three separate phases is not as clear-cut as that of Sveaas Andersen. Clouston wanted to emphasize even older roots

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- 45 In organizing war raids and coastal defence, Clouston seemed to recognize the division into 'war districts', which roughly corresponds with the Norwegian term *skipreide*. Hugh Marwick also wrote an article on this theory, 'Leidang in the west', *Proceeding of the Orkney Antiquarian Society*, vol. xiii, 1934/5. (*Leidang*: The Norse naval levy. *Skipreide*: A subdivision of the *leidang* which had to build, maintain and man one ship for the coastal defence system.) See also note 64.
- 46 *Kongespeilet* (The king's mirror), c. 1250. An important event during the twelfth century was the building of St. Magnus Cathedral. Leading personalities were Earl Rognvald and Bishop Bjarne, who excelled in artistic activities (Clouston 1932: 192–196).
- 47 The word *urisland* is found in the old rentals from 1492 and 1500. The Norse form of the word is *eyrisland*, whereas the modern English form has become *ounceland*. Urisland 'were, in fact, relics of far-off heathen days adapted to Christian purposes'. Clouston 1932: 154.
- 48 Clouston stated in his *History of Orkney* that the churches on Iceland were privately owned, built by chieftains, whereas in Norway the church organization developed through public channels.

of the Orkney Church, at least in the way it was organised. Concerning the issue of taxation, Clouston yet again differed in his belief from his Norwegian counterparts.⁴⁹ He declared that an administrative unit was put into use even before the Norse settlers landed in the islands, and he drew the conclusion that taxation was introduced early in the Norse period.⁵⁰

Another well-known local historian of Clouston's generation was John Mooney (1862–1950). He was a resident of Orkney throughout his whole life. Having been brought up in modest circumstances, he spent a considerable part of his time studying the history of the islands. His hometown, Kirkwall, remained his main interest, along with St Magnus Cathedral. Mooney did not belong to an academic tradition of scholars, however, and tended to accept the contents of the sagas at face value. This is quite striking, considering the fact that Mooney wrote his books and articles as late as 1940s and 1950s.⁵¹ Mooney wanted to focus on the islands' characteristics, but tended to idealize the Norse connections. Like Clouston, Mooney thought the Norse element to be the most important part in the regional identity, an identity formed once and for all during the early phase of the earldom.

Mooney took a rather categorical stance on the issue of taxation. He maintained that tax revenues went to the earls almost continuously from the ninth century until 1468. He assumed that taxation was introduced at an early stage and that the earls could dispose of it quite freely.⁵² In this way Mooney depicted the earl more as a royal sovereign than a loyal vassal to the Norwegian king.⁵³ If we

49 Øien 2002: 88. Clouston believed the tax organisation to be derived from the urisland system, which again was based on *davachs* from Pictish times – a land division unit used in the Northern and Western parts of Scotland.

50 According to Clouston, this must have happened towards the end of the ninth century, fairly soon after the creation of the Orkney earldom.

51 *The Cathedral and Royal Burgh of Kirkwall* (1947) and *Royal Charters and Records of the City of Kirkwall* (1952). Mooney's attitude to the saga literature is quite evident in the book he wrote about St. Magnus, the Orkney earl saint. The book is based on the *Orknøyingasaga* and seems to be an apologetic narrative written for religious reasons rather than an historical account based on available sources.

52 Mooney 1947: 172. In Norway the tax revenues went to the king.

53 Mooney found evidence for the early introduction of taxation in *Heimskringla* and *Orknøyingasaga*, listing several examples. Mooney 1947: 168–169, 172–175.

compare his arguments with Imsen's and Sveaas Andersen's, it seems apparent that Mooney built his conclusions on flimsy evidence.⁵⁴ He avoided any discussion about how this financial burden had developed and finally been institutionalised. Neither did he write about the connection between administration units and taxation, a theme that engaged other Scottish historians. It seems appropriate to point out that the differences of opinion may be grounded in the distinction between historical research carried out by amateurs and the more scholarly approach by professionals.

Barbara E. Crawford (1940–) was born in England, but has worked and carried out the main portion of her research in Scotland, both in archaeology and history. For this reason it seems natural to include her in the Scottish group of historians. Crawford's Ph.D dissertation is a groundbreaking work on the Orkney earldom, 'The earls of Orkney–Caithness and their relations with Norway and Scotland: 1158–1470'.⁵⁵ In a subsequent book, *Scandinavian Scotland*, she has set out to examine the traces left by the Vikings all over Scotland, from the Northern to the Western Isles as well as the mainland itself. Her project is to point out the cultural influence brought across from the Scandinavian countries, leaving a strong imprint on Scottish society. Crawford's opinion is that the Orkney earls of the early period had strong links with their mother country in terms of pagan beliefs, those links being closer than connections with Christian Ireland.⁵⁶ At the same time Orkney was the bearer of Celtic impulses from Scotland and Ireland to Scandinavia, a fact which made the Norse society in the islands altogether different from its origin.⁵⁷ However, the result constituted a mix of different Celtic impulses rather than a survival of a pre-Norse culture in the islands. Besides, one of Crawford's main concerns is to turn the other way by emphasizing the Scandinavian element in the complex identity of the Scottish people.⁵⁸

54 Whereas Sveaas Andersen has looked at the development of taxation over a long period of time in several European countries and Imsen has discussed the actual term (see Øien 2002: 93), Mooney based his view solely on English translations of the saga literature.

55 Unpublished PhD dissertation (St. Andrews 1971).

56 Crawford 1987: 168. See also 'The bishopric of Orkney' by Crawford in *Ecclesia Nidrosiensis 1153–1537* (Trondheim 2003).

57 Crawford 1987: 211–214.

The saga version of how Christianity was introduced to Orkney by the baptism of earl Sigurd,⁵⁹ should not be taken literally. Still, the incident tells us that Christianity must have been under way in the islands at the time, Crawford says.⁶⁰ The conversion of the powerful earl must have had some effect on the inhabitants of Orkney. Crawford sees the earl as a role model to the people, giving less attention to the influence brought about from the Christian areas in the South and West during the Norse period.⁶¹ Nevertheless, she seems to have found it unlikely that Christian impulses came from Norway only.⁶² Crawford's opinion is that a taxation system developed early in the islands, within the middle of the eleventh century.⁶³ The eyrisland districts were also probably used to raise a defence organisation of men and ships. In order to build her argument, Crawford makes use of the retrospective method,⁶⁴ since

58 (from previous page) 'The diversity of evidence about the Vikings in Scotland [...] provides an impressive witness to these peoples and to their distinctive contribution to the ethnic and cultural mix in the medieval kingdom of Scotland'. Crawford 1987: 221. See also Øien 2002, chapter 2.

59 *Orknøyingasaga* tells the story of Olav Tryggvason introducing Christianity to Orkney in the late tenth century by forcing Earl Sigurd to be baptized. If the earl wouldn't accept baptism, the king would have him killed.

60 Crawford 1987: 70.

61 Crawford 1987: 80.

62 Earl Thorfinn raised a cathedral (Christchurch) at Birsay, Orkney's Mainland, c. 1060. Christchurches were erected in Norway, too, but not until late eleventh century. This may signify that the Norse colonies were ahead of their mother country as far as religious practice was concerned. Impulses might then have been brought across to Norway from Orkney. This point is made both by Crawford (1983: 104–105) and Thomson (2001: 85). See note 72.

63 Crawford believes that the Orkney Earls Sigurd and Thorfinn were powerful enough to establish taxation at the end of the tenth century or at the beginning of the next. The *eyrisland* districts, divided into 18 pennylands, were the administrative base for the tax system right into modern times. Besides, one eyrisland in Orkney consisted of four *skattland*, a fact speaking for itself, Crawford claims. Crawford 1987: 90–91.

64 Crawford refers to the Orkney rentals from the sixteenth century (Crawford 1987: 85). Apart from Clouston, there is no other historian in my selection that believes in an organized naval levy system in the islands. Crawford's opinion is based on the information that invaders along the Scottish and English coasts got help from Orkney in several instances during the eleventh century (Crawford 1987: 85–86). However, Thomson (see below) sums up the current view among historians: 'Modern opinion is sceptical about *leidang* in Orkney: it is one of those theoretical constructions about what might have been, rather than a description based on any real evidence'. Thomson 2001: 215. See note 45.

there is no clear evidence in the historical sources as to when the naval levy⁶⁵ should have been introduced. Crawford does not draw the conclusion that the Norse immigrants adopted a system of administration from the Picts – in this area she sees a clear influence from Scandinavia.⁶⁶

William P. L. Thomson (1932–) has introduced a new era in the writing of history in Orkney. Having been a teacher for many years and also rector at Kirkwall Grammar School, he has written several books and articles on local history issues and place-names in the Northern Isles, the most extensive and well-known being the *History of Orkney*.⁶⁷ In this book he tries to rectify what he believes to be a distorted presentation by Clouston in his history from the 1930s. Whereas Clouston tended to put too much weight on the medieval connections between the islands and the mother country, Thomson wants to balance the view and look for other sources of influence that can be examined. The most obvious move on his part has been to write less about the Norse period and concentrate more on the later centuries.⁶⁸ The *Orknøyingasaga* in his opinion should be treated with a considerable degree of scepticism. Thomson makes use of the saga to get an outline of the history of the earldom, but he is vigilant in warning the reader not to accept the saga narrative too literally.

Nevertheless, the saga period is a cultural peak in the history of Orkney. The earl and his men were mobile, deriving impulses not only from Norway and Scotland, but also from countries further afield. Thomson's main objective is to present Orkney as a region in its own right, set apart from the rest of northern Europe. Although Norse immigrants made a long-lasting imprint on the islands through their judicial system and udal law, the islands developed distinctive features that made them altogether different, Thomson

65 Leidangsskatt (no.)

66 Crawford points to the fact that the *eyrisland* division has been used in areas with Norse place names. Crawford 1987: 86–89.

67 The first edition of Thomson's *History of Orkney* was published in 1987. The new edition from 2001, *The New History of Orkney*, includes more recent research and has gone through a substantial revision.

68 Thomson's need to contrast his views with Clouston's has subsided somewhat in the new edition of the *History*. That task was completed in the 1987 edition – however, there is no reason to believe that Thomson's attitude to Clouston and his ideas has changed.

maintains. The influences from the two contradictory sources, Norway and Scotland, mixed into something completely new.⁶⁹ In this way Thomson puts less emphasis on the Norse element in the regional identity than his predecessors Clouston and Mooney. In addition, he regards the identity as both malleable and alterable.⁷⁰

Thomson is doubtful about an early introduction of taxation, although he finds the powerful reign of Sigurd or Thorfinn to be a likely period for this administrative feature to have been established. He states, however, that 'there are difficulties in attributing formal taxation based on land units to quite such an early date'.⁷¹ As far as Christianity is concerned, he points to the Pictish Church which must have survived the Norse invasion. Thomson believes that Christianity may have been introduced to the islands in the beginning of the eighth century – at the latest.⁷² In this way Thomson presents a scenario where religious impulses reached Orkney far earlier than Norway, or even presenting Orkney as a channel of spiritual influence to its mother country.⁷³

Comparing the views of the Scottish historians that I have treated in this article, there are a few characteristics to point out. The Orkney historians have in their individual ways underlined particular traits of the islands, but they have singled out different periods of the history. Mooney shares the fascination for the saga times with Clouston, whereas Thomson wants to present a more balanced view on the full history of the islands. Crawford does not seem to have the same personal attachment to the islands as the Orcadians themselves. Thus it is less important for her to emphasize the cultural differences to Norway or underline the particular 'national spirit' of the islands. At the same time she has her mind

69 Thomson 2001: 191.

70 Øien 2002: 113–123.

71 Thomson 2001: 61–62. In the *History of 1987*, Thomson was more in line with the older historians Clouston and Mooney as regards early taxation. One reason for this update might be the new research carried out by Steinar Imsen in the 1990's (see above).

72 Thomson thinks, however, that the earls might have been slower to convert than the rest of the population. His current view on this issue differs slightly from the *History of 1987*, as he now sees a stronger continuity of the Christian faith from Pictish times. Thomson 2001: 13, 66.

73 Thomson 2001: 85. See note 65.

open to the influence that has been brought across from the Celtic areas to Orkney and then eventually to Norway.

Conclusion

There are currents within historical research that are trans-national and consequently are to be found both in Norway, Scotland and the islands of the North Sea. In this article I have touched on saga criticism. Scholars wanting to delve into the earlier phase of the earldom history have had to concentrate on the sagas to a great extent and make use of this literature as historical evidence. It is understandable that the historians are unwilling to turn down the most valuable of literature – and one should also add the main historical evidence – that exists in the Northern Isles from this period. No other area in Britain has a Norse saga connected with it. The major dilemma is whether *Orknøyingsaga* should be viewed as a literary statement depicting the attitudes and ideas of the saga writer and the cultural elite rather than as a reliable description of events recorded in the saga.⁷⁴ Previous historians did not experience this as a problem to the same degree as younger historians. The intensified criticism of evidence brought forth in the field of medieval history has resulted in less focus on the Orkney earldom. It seems correct to say, however, that scholars of the Northern Isles until quite recently lagged behind in this area. One reason for this is the fascination for the saga period that prevailed among the regional historians like Clouston in the 1930s and Mooney in the 1950s. Thomson from the 1980s, however, has proclaimed a stronger scepticism to the historical value of the sagas than his predecessors, thus being in line with current international research.

As already shown in the case of Bugge, an early trend in scientific research was the emphasis made on race and ethnicity as a factor in historical explanation. Racial thinking was part of a

74 Sigurður Nordal has some clarifying comments about this. He writes in connection with *Njálssaga* that to know that something actually has happened, is different to knowing how and why it happened. (Nordal 1965:247). Specific incidents, particularly of the violent or dramatic sort, will always be present in people's memory, whereas underlying motives are less known or more easily forgotten. In other words, Nordal finds information about specific incidents and actions more reliable than descriptions or explanations.

common, European concept that prevailed until the rise of Nazism in the 1930s when such ideas became generally unacceptable. Apart from Bugge, Clouston seems to have been somewhat influenced by such ideas. In this article I have also pointed out some differences of opinion that follow national dividing lines. Roughly the historians fall into two categories when reviewing the relations between Norway and the earldom. Firstly, the legacy from the Picts is more highly estimated among the Scottish historians than their Norwegian colleagues. Traditionally, Orkney historians have believed that a certain social continuity persisted from Pictish into Norse times through land division units. While Thomson has modified his point of view in the latest edition of his *History*, he is more than ever aware of the Pictish contributions to Orkney society, having kept track of recent research in the field. Munch does not touch on this issue at all, whereas Bugge is more focused on ethnic characteristics than the possible adoption of administrative arrangements. Imsen and Sveaas Andersen on the other hand reject the idea that Pictish customs would have had any permanent influence on the islands.⁷⁵

Secondly, the Norwegian historians tend to think that the development in the aforementioned fields started earlier in Norway, and that cultural impulses were channelled in a one-way direction from Norway to the Northern Isles. This attitude among the historians seems to have become more pronounced in later years. Both Imsen and Sveaas Andersen maintain that the administrative organisation originated in Norway, whereas Munch and Bugge are silent about the subject.⁷⁶ The Orkney historians have until recently been of the opinion that the collection of taxes and the building of chapels happened independently of, and probably earlier than in Norway.⁷⁷ Clouston and Thomson maintain that major impulses came from the South and also through the Pictish traditions in the islands, maturing within their own society and leaving out Norway as the main driving force in important areas. Crawford takes a

75 It is important to keep in mind that for a long time the Pictish past was left in obscurity, which naturally makes the views of the older historians on this subject seem outdated.

76 If Munch and Bugge had discussed this topic, they might have come to another conclusion than their successors – but this is of course mere conjecture.

77 See Thomson's attitude to taxation above.

middle position between these two groups of historians in her scepticism about a possible Pictish influence on the church organisation and the tax system. However, she believes that a development in these areas might have come earlier in the islands than in Norway, through an influence from the south passed on by a more or less independent earl.

What is the possible background for these differences of opinion? For the Orkney historians it has been vital to identify the impulses that have helped form the social institutions of the islanders, and they have found links to a pre-Norse society. What constitutes the regional identity has been in the forefront of local research, and it has been important to find the roots of the islanders' mentality, or their 'national spirit'. This spirit can be regarded as a static or dynamic force. Generally the islanders have thought the regional identity to be of Viking origin. At the same time it was not wholly adopted from Norway, since the Pictish past also had a say in the cultural development. Out of this situation there arose something completely new, according to these historians. Whereas Clouston and Mooney have been apt to regard the regional identity as a combination of a Viking origin mixed with a few Pictish traits, Thomson's choice is to view Orkney identity as a changing variable, influenced by the cultural and political conditions throughout the centuries. This means that the Scottish connection and the more recent centuries have played an equal part in the forming of the regional identity. As a matter of fact, such an identity is dynamic and ever changing.

What mattered in Norway was the part Orkney and Shetland played in the Norwegian medieval kingdom at its height of power. Through the knowledge that the islanders originated from Norwegian settlers, this might indeed have strengthened a Norwegian sense of identity – however, it is more likely that the islands were regarded first of all as important in relation to the development of the state.⁷⁸ To Munch, Orkney and Shetland were

⁷⁸ In Scotland, Orkney and Shetland have not played an important part neither in the creation of a Scottish identity nor in the development of the state (see Øien 2002: 24–25). The islands, which were included in the Scottish kingdom in 1468–69, have later played a modest role within the country as a whole.

significant in the Norwegian multicultural community and helped to explain historical incidents in Norway, but the islands were also a field of study in their own right. Bugge had a similar attitude to the islands. More recently comparative aspects have become more important. One could safely say that the islands' *raison d'être* in Norwegian historical writing of today is to throw light on conditions within Norway.⁷⁹ This shift from political and cultural history to more specialized topics is in my opinion an indication of a weakened interest in the islands on the part of Norwegian historians. The growing distance is measured in the fact that discussions about the islands' contribution to the Norwegian society, either in their own right or as mediator of British and Irish impulses, seem to be non-existent.

Per Sveaas Andersen has said about British historians that 'it seems evident that their interest is concentrated around tracing the roots of the homeland; continuity takes precedence over change.'⁸⁰ This statement is worth a comment. In my opinion, most historians focus on their own roots, like the Norwegian scholars who have wanted to find the reasons for the Viking emigration to the west. For Orkney historians it has been more natural to look at the broader aspect of history: it did not begin with the coming of the Norse settlers, as there was another culture already present which to some extent got merged with the subsequent, Norse culture of the islands. In the same way the islands did not, of course, cease to exist in the fifteenth century when Denmark-Norway lost sovereignty, but continued to develop within the frame of the Scottish kingdom. To Norway, Orkney and Shetland became a lost territory in a distant past. To summarise, the reason why Norwegian historians began to take interest in the islands was because they used to be Norse territory, inhabited by the forefathers. The weight has not been put on Celtic impulses, since they were regarded as foreign by the

79 It is useful to be aware of a more prosaic reason for the particular perspectives chosen by the scholars. First of all, they make use of their knowledge about a familiar region or country, including source material, to form historical theories. Furthermore, these theories are liable to change as research and academic discussions bring new light on the topics. This is why history is never written once and for all. See the introduction.

80 Sveaas Andersen 1986: 421.

Norwegians. Consequently, I believe that roots are important to British and Norwegian scholars alike, the difference in this connection being whether the Vikings are regarded as part of one's own past or as foreign intruders. Thus Norwegian historians have regarded the Vikings as creators of something new and looked upon the Norse society in the Northern Isles as a clear break with what they have perceived as a foreign past.

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