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The Picts and the Martyrs or Did Vikings Kill the Native Population of Orkney and Shetland?*

'"Good heavens!' I cried. 'Who would associate crime with these dear old homesteads!"'

– Conan Doyle, 'The adventure of the copper beeches'.

Introduction

Nearly a quarter of a century ago Iain Crawford gave a paper to the eighth Viking Congress. His title was 'War or peace'.[1] Crawford's essay, about Norse immigration in the Northern and Western Isles, and the immigrants' relationship with the native Picts, was a smashing piece of work. He was angry and scornful about what archaeologists were saying about the subject in the 1970s. For Crawford the matter had been cleared up, for once and for all, in 1962, when Frederick Wainwright's posthumously published work *The Northern Isles* came out. In two brilliant essays in that book Wainwright argued that the Pictish inhabitants of Shetland and Orkney had been 'overwhelmed by and submerged beneath the sheer weight of the Scandinavian settlement'.[2] The Picts, he concluded, 'were overwhelmed politically, linguistically, culturally and socially.'[3]

Crawford didn't succeed in persuading his audience, or, subsequently, his readers. Since the 1970s the 'Peace' School has become more and more voluble and successful. I regret this, because I go further than Crawford and Wainwright. I suspect that the Norse invaders of Orkney and Shetland didn't just

'overwhelm', or 'submerge' the native population: I think they killed them.

I begin my critique with Crawford himself. He divided his predecessors into two groups: a traditional War school, culminating in the work of Wainwright, and a relatively modern, effete Peace School. But Crawford's assessment was simplistic, in three ways.

First, there has been a Peace School for a long time. In my estimation the 'warriors' have never been very successful. The idea that the natives settled down amiably, or not quite so amiably, with the invaders, or even that there were no natives at all, was popular right from the start. The Norwegian historian Peter Andreas Munch was arguably the first sensible commentator about the history of the Northern Isles. In 1860 he wrote that the island Picts were 'absorbed' rather than exterminated – 'if, indeed,' he said, 'Shetland had any inhabitants before the Norwegians'.[4] In the same way, the saga scholar Sir George Dasent thought that 'the Northmen really found those islands empty and desolate, and that it was not before their swords that the ancient races vanished away'. 'How did they vanish,' he asked, 'leaving no trace of their nationality behind?'[5] The great Norwegian archaeologist A.W. Brøgger was still arguing a subtle version of this case in the 1930s. There were proponents of the War theory in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but they were a minority.[6]

Crawford's second error was to assume that his hero Wainwright was a fully-paid-up member of the War School. Wainwright argued cogently that the Picts were 'overwhelmed' in their native islands, but, as we'll see in a moment, he left the door slightly ajar: he envisaged a situation where they and their language, and even their religion, survived the Viking onslaught. Crawford's failure to examine Wainwright's views critically is an important defect in his argument.

Finally, Crawford underestimated his modern target. He didn't spot that the climate of Viking studies in Britain had been massively altered by the appearance of Peter Sawyer's book *The Age of the Vikings* in 1962, the same year as

Wainwright's *Northern Isles*. Sawyer argued that the Vikings came to the west in relatively small numbers,[7] and that contemporary churchmen who complained about their methods were biased and unreliable.[8] Sawyer's approach was extremely congenial to modern scholars, especially British ones. It fitted perfectly with a reaction by archaeologists, then under way, against the idea that cultures change because of invasions.[9] In particular, archaeologists working in Shetland and Orkney have been especially unwilling to envisage berserk invaders at work there. For some of these archaeologists the islands are idyllic, and it seems to be painful to them to imagine bloodshed among the 'dear old homesteads'.

There is no documentary or even archaeological evidence about these matters, to weigh up or re-examine. I can't produce new material of that kind. Instead I shall look in detail at what scholars have said on the subject, especially during the past fifty years, and ask if they have arrived at rational conclusions. I divide the commentators into two groups: those who have written about language and religion, and those who have concentrated on archaeology. I conclude by explaining what I think happened to the native inhabitants of Orkney and Shetland in the ninth century.

The Peace School I: Language and Religion

My first remarks, then, are about language and religion, and about what Wainwright and his school made of them. Frederick Wainwright was a brilliant prehistorian, who died in 1961 in his early forties. In 1952, when he was head of history at University College Dundee, he inaugurated a series of summer schools in archaeology. The first dealt with what he called 'The problem of the Picts'.

Fifty years ago nobody knew much about the Picts, and Wainwright and his colleagues, especially Robert Stevenson and Kenneth Jackson, threw a flood of light on the subject. Stevenson and Jackson spoke about Pictish art and language, respectively. None of them discussed the subject I am tackling

here; but some of their conclusions have had a major impact on the War and Peace debate.

Stevenson, for instance, touched on the well-known sculptured stone from Bressay in Shetland, which was discovered in the early 1850s. The Bressay stone has always been a puzzle. In 1855 the Irish archaeologist James Graves examined the ogham inscription on its edge, and proposed that the stone was a joint memorial to the daughter of someone called Naddodd, and to the son of a Druid called Benres. Graves thought that Naddodd was probably the Viking of that name who discovered Iceland in the ninth century, and he concluded that the inscription must be a mixture of Irish and Icelandic.[10] His view that the Bressay stone is late, and that its inscription contains words from two or even three languages, was influential.[11]

Robert Stevenson proposed, in a short paragraph, that the design on the stone was definitely late. He considered that the stone had been produced in the late ninth or even the tenth century, because of its 'haphazard scatter of decoration and a marked clumsiness of drawing'. He reckoned that it was a poor copy of a much more impressive sculpture from Papil, in the isle of Burra, to which he now assigned 'a date ... only just, if at all, prior to the Norse occupation of Shetland.'[12] The Bressay stone was, he concluded, part of the 'dregs of Pictish tradition'.[13] I have to stress, however, that Stevenson's remarks on this occasion were brief. They certainly didn't amount to a theory about War or Peace in ninth or tenth century Shetland, although the implication of them was that the person who inscribed the stone had a foot in both Pictish and Norse camps.

Stevenson's views were immediately taken up by his colleague Kenneth Jackson. Jackson's paper to the Dundee summer school was revolutionary. Until 1952 many scholars had assumed that all Picts spoke a Celtic language related to Welsh, Cornish and Breton. Jackson now rejected that view. He liked understanding things, and there were Pictish names he couldn't understand. So he concluded that the Picts must have had two languages: a Brittonic language, and an unintelligible pre-Indo-European tongue with its origin in the

Bronze Age. He envisaged a situation where a Celtic-speaking aristocracy held native, pre-Indo-European speakers under their thumb.[14]

During his discussion he too considered the Bressay stone. He spotted the word 'meqq', meaning son, on it, and assumed it was a primitive Gaelic word. He argued, following Stevenson's dating of the stone, that the oghamist had used a Gaelic rather than a Pictish word because the stone was very late. On the other hand he regarded the word 'dattrr' on the stone as the Norse word for 'daughter'. '[T]he whole thing', he concluded, much as Graves had said in 1855, 'seems to point to a very mixed language in Shetland in the late ninth or early tenth century, after the Norse settlements there'.[15] Jackson's remarks about the Bressay stone, like Stevenson's, were brief, but they have had an inordinate effect on the War and Peace debate. So has his view that the Picts spoke an ancient and unfathomable language.

Wainwright was the first to apply his colleagues' views to the War and Peace question. Like everyone else who deals with the arrival of Norse settlers in the Northern Isles, Wainwright had to face the fact that there are apparently few or no pre-Norse place-names there. This is a very curious situation, and requires an explanation. Wainwright now argued that the Picts in the islands spoke Jackson's mysterious non-Indo-European language. As a result, he hinted, we can't recognise their place-names, because we don't know what to look for. He implied that there are such names in Shetland and Orkney, but that we can't see them. He went on to accept Stevenson's dating for and argument about the Bressay stone.[16] Wainwright pointed out, too, that the Norse settlers had established chapels on the sites of Pictish chapels in the islands. 'Under these circumstances', he said, 'we cannot accept the view that the Picts and their Christianity were exterminated'.[17] He concluded that '[i]n one field only, that of religion, is it reasonably certain that the Picts exercised any great influence on the Scandinavian way of life'.[18]

I sense unease in Wainwright's writing when he arrives at this conclusion. Everything else he wrote about the Viking irruption into Orkney and Shetland points to a different

prognosis. Wainwright had reported that the Picts were 'overwhelmed by and submerged beneath the sheer weight of the Scandinavian settlement' in the islands. But if the Picts survived, with their language and religion intact, what precisely do these strong words mean?

As I said, Wainwright imagined that Shetland and Orkney contain pre-Indo-European place-names that we can't recognise.[19] It would have been useful to hear about names that he suspected might fall into this category, but he didn't list any. There are plenty of place-names that we can't explain, of course, but there are better reasons for our failure than the existence of a mysterious language. The main reason that we can't explain names is that we aren't clever enough, or that the names have become corrupt over the centuries, or both. Is there any evidence *at all* that the Picts of Orkney and Shetland, or anywhere else, spoke a pre-Indo-European language? Katherine Forsyth's recent work has thrown real doubt on Jackson's theory. She has carefully re-examined the words and inscriptions which Jackson regarded as non-Celtic and unintelligible, and paints a different picture.[20] Her main area of expertise is the ogham inscriptions of northern and eastern Scotland. According to Forsyth, scholars have 'underestimated the problems of interpreting texts in a poorly attested language written in an unfamiliar orthography, usually without word-division'. Moreover, ogham is peculiarly prone to misreading: 'if part of an ogham letter is missing it becomes a completely different letter'. Forsyth shows that some of the inscriptions incorporate personal names, and makes cogent suggestions about the likely form of others. Her conclusion is that the Picts spoke a Brittonic language, as most of Jackson's predecessors assumed, and that Jackson's non-Indo-European language is a chimera. If there are pre-Norse names in Shetland and Orkney they are likely to be Celtic, not pre-Celtic in form, and some of them at least – if there are any – ought to be recognisable!

And what of the Bressay stone? Is it as young as Stevenson imagined? Is its language as 'mixed' as Jackson proposed? Stevenson reopened the question in 1981. In the meantime Charles Thomas had written an important article about

Shetland's sculptured stones. Thomas didn't mention Bressay, but he concluded that the Papil stone was sculptured sometime after AD 750: that is, before Scandinavians arrived in the Northern Isles.[21] In 1981 Stevenson rejected Thomas's analysis, and reaffirmed and extended his original propositions. He still dated the Papil stone to the very end of the eighth century, and he now said that the Bressay stone 'seems to be a considerably later copy'. He claimed that the Bressay stone was a grave-marker for what he called a 'half-Pict', and concluded that 'there were in Shetland active Christians erecting sculptured monuments in the tenth century'.[22]

Stevenson's and Jackson's views have been influential. Three years ago Michael Barnes wrote a little book about Orkney and Shetland Norn; his section on the early days of that language is based on the arguments that Jackson and Stevenson deployed in 1952. Barnes says that '[t]here is really nothing in the linguistic evidence to conflict with the view that the incoming Scandinavians reached some kind of accommodation with the native population'. But our sole linguistic evidence is the Bressay stone! In fact, the evidence that there is Norse influence in that artefact is very meagre indeed. Katherine Forsyth has suggested that the name that looks like Naddodd on the stone may be Pictish;[23] and Barnes himself has speculated that the word 'dattr' on it may be Pictish as well.[24] These revisions immediately strip away half the evidence for a late date. Without Norse words Stevenson's date based on the sculpture begins to look suspect. Remember that Stevenson's chronology assumed a very late date for the *Papil* stone; and if we consider Thomas's arguments we have to acknowledge that there is at least doubt about that. It will be a long time before the problems of the Bressay stone are solved. But as things stand we certainly can't use it as linguistic or artistic evidence for cultural contact between Picts and Vikings.[25]

Why did the Pictish language of Shetland and Orkney disappear? Gillian Fellows-Jensen suggests that it was because there was 'no communication' between Vikings and natives in the islands.[26] Barnes disagrees. There must have

been communication, he says, because the Bressay stone proves there was. Barnes concludes that the names disappeared because of a 'low regard by the incomers for the language or languages of the people they displaced'.[27] Both suggestions are unconvincing. The Norwegian linguist Arne Kruse has asked[28]

> how such a long period of co-existence could take place without the native Pictish language leaving a large trace behind in the language of the newcomers. ... [I]s it credible [he enquires], that the Picts would have kept up their own onomasticon for such a long time without contaminating the Norse place-names? Just to say that the Norse must have had a 'low regard' for the Pictish language certainly does not satisfy this reader.

What Wainwright imagined, following Stevenson's lead, was that the Norse settlers in the islands regarded Pictish culture with contempt, to the extent that they failed to borrow a single word or place-name from them. But he also thought that the invaders respected the Pictish religion, and eventually adopted it themselves. These propositions are incompatible. They depend on one artefact – the problematical Bressay stone – and on the re-use of Pictish Christian sites in the islands by Norse settlers. There are indeed Pictish sites in the islands which later became Norse Christian sites; but centuries separate the two events. St Ninians Isle in Shetland is a good example. As Charles Thomas points out, [29]

> [T]he chapel on St Ninian's Isle was unquestionably rebuilt, but apparently not before the late eleventh or twelfth century A.D.; and no structural phase can be seen between this horizon and the eighth century.

These facts are not an argument in favour of *continuity*; they point unmistakably to *interruption*.[30]

The Peace School II: Archaeology

Let's return to Iain Crawford. Most of his wrath in 1977 was directed at Anna Ritchie, who had just excavated a site at Buckquoy in Orkney. Her work gave an enormous fillip to the Peace School.[31]

Ritchie found an impressive Pictish settlement at Buckquoy, and by excavating it began to revolutionise our knowledge of the period. She also thought that she had found the first Norse house on the site, and she noted with interest that it was full of Pictish artefacts:[32] so full, in fact, that the Norse immigrants had apparently failed to produce any of their own. Ritchie could only imagine one explanation for this state of affairs. The use of native artefacts, she argued, 'implies a close relationship with local native inhabitants.'

Crawford was scornful about this interpretation. He pointed out, correctly, that there could be other reasons for the situation that Ritchie had uncovered: disturbance on the site, for instance, or acquisition of spoil by the newcomers.[33] But Ritchie didn't take this possibility on board. Over the years her exposition of the Buckquoy material became more and more confident. In 1983, for instance, she said that the native artefacts in the Norse house proved 'that the native Picts were not only still alive but engaged in some form of active social interchange with the Norsemen'.[34] Common sense tells us that they prove no such thing.

I shall return to Ritchie's Buckquoy material later, but I want to look for a moment at the implications of her analysis. They are far from clear. In various papers she argues that there must have been something called 'integration' or 'social integration' between the Pictish and Norse settlers on the site.[35] That is a strange designation to use. 'Integration', according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is '[t]he bringing into equal membership of a common society those groups or persons previously discriminated against on racial or cultural grounds'. Even the most active member of the Peace School wouldn't contend that that happened to the Picts of Orkney and Shetland in the ninth century. So what did happen? In

Ritchie's preliminary paper of 1974 she envisages a 'relatively peaceful process of Norse colonisation rather than a military conquest', something like the scenario that Brøgger had written about in 1929. She admits that a reduction of the natives to servitude is 'certainly a possibility, but one which can never be proved'.[36] But she doesn't outline a clear *alternative* scenario.[37]

As the years passed, Ritchie claimed that other excavations in Orkney were confirming her analysis. '[A]ll the excavations that have taken place since Buckquoy', she said in 1993, 'have told the same story: so much blending of Norse and native culture that it is impossible to envisage a situation in which the Norsemen either killed or enslaved the entire population.'[38] Despite careful enquiry I have found as little trace of the putative 'blending' at other sites as we found at Buckquoy. Presumably the sites that Ritchie has in mind are those at the Brough of Birsay, next door to Buckquoy, and at Pool in Sanday. Mrs Curle did find a few Pictish pins in Norse contexts at the Brough,[39] and hazarded a guess that the Norse settlers there might have a Pictish source for them, but she didn't labour the point. In the 1980s John Hunter found '[s]everal pottery fragments ... in stratified Norse deposits' there, 'including hearths', and speculated that they 'might testify to a continuing native presence throughout the Norse period'.[40] But the objection to Curle's and Hunter's speculations is the same as the objection to Ritchie's: the survival of native artefacts doesn't prove that the natives themselves survived.

The evidence from Pool is even more slender. The best account of that aspect of the excavation available to date is in an essay of 1997 by Hunter.[41] At Pool, he says, 'a similar degree of assimilation to that estimated for Birsay has been observed on the basis of structural continuity and the persistence of native pottery'. On further examination we learn that the population at Pool had contracted before the Norse arrival, and that when the new arrivals made their home there they introduced a reinvigorated and more intense scheme of agriculture. There is nothing in Hunter's material that hints at any relationship between the old inhabitants

and the new, apart from the persistence of native pottery that we have now come to expect.[42]

Writing about Birsay in 1996 Chris Morris admitted that there were 'two possible interpretations' of that persistence. One was Ritchie's theory of amiable integration; the other was 'disturbance of Pictish layers in the Norse period, leaving residual early material in the later deposits'.[43] Until we have a fragment of evidence that the settlers and the natives fraternised with each other, other than that the second lot used artefacts belonging to the first lot, I am inclined to favour the second of Morris's alternatives. I am more inclined to do so because the alleged evidence from Buckquoy itself is showing signs of unravelling. In their recent book about Viking archaeology in Scotland, James Graham-Campbell and Colleen Batey have hinted that Ritchie's Viking house full of Pictish artefacts may not be a Viking house at all.[44]

Ritchie has said that 'archaeology provides the only hope of reaching any understanding of the race relations between Pict and Norseman'.[45] This is a brave claim, but, as we've seen, it isn't realistic. Remember that the first Norse house in Scotland wasn't discovered until the 1930s – at Jarlshof in Shetland[46] – and that we have few enough of them still. If we are even to speculate about those 'race relations' we must consider more than archaeological evidence. That's what Raymond Lamb set out to do about 15 years ago. In a series of articles Lamb has put together a theory about what happened in Orkney and Shetland in the ninth century which deserves our attention.[47] His starting-off point was what Stevenson had said about Shetland and Orkney sculpture, and he referred to the archaeological material as well; but his main ideas concern *historical* events in northern Europe.

Lamb's proposal is that, far from being a cultural backwater, Pictish Orkney had extremely sophisticated institutions, both ecclesiastical and secular. During archaeological field-work, especially in the North Isles of Orkney, he spotted a number of ancient churches with dedications to St Peter, some of them closely associated with brochs. He concluded that these churches were planted in Orkney by Pictish missionaries of the eighth century, under

the direction of the influential monk Egbert, and that in due course they established a bishopric in Papa Westray, as part of a plan to evangelise nearby Shetland.

What happened to these institutions when the Norse settlers arrived in the islands? I quote:[48]

> Facing this new force, and failing to organise successful resistance, the Pictish aristocracy in Orkney must have lost status. The key development leading to full Norse settlement would be the displacement of the Pictish aristocracy by Viking war-leaders and their war-crews. This would probably take place, at least in the initial stages, with some diplomatic concession towards the authority of the Pictish administration – the formal granting of an estate to a war-captain, confirming him in the possession of what otherwise he might have taken by force, in return for his oath of allegiance and his enlistment to repel subsequent raiders.

In other words, Orkney passed swiftly from being an orderly Pictish society, via 'diplomatic concessions', 'the formal granting of estates', and 'oaths of allegiance', to being a fairly orderly Norse one. There was no violence, or at least not much, during Lamb's transition. In particular, the Pictish church remained unscathed, still in the hands of Pictish ecclesiastics.

The interesting thing about Lamb's elegant thesis is that there isn't any evidence for it. He frequently uses the words 'must have' and 'would have', characteristic phrases of the biographer who doesn't know and can't know enough about his subject's life. It won't do. The existence of churches dedicated to St Peter, or St Boniface, in medieval Orkney (or even later) can't be deployed as evidence that the dedications were bestowed in the eighth century. It's like arguing that the church on St Ninian's Isle was dedicated to St Ninian in Pictish times.[49] To go on to link Orkney churches to Egbert of Iona, on the grounds that Egbert inspired a mission to the Continent, is even bolder. The proposition that there was a Pictish bishop in Papa Westray in the ninth century is based on the most tenuous of tenuous evidence.[50] And what evidence

is there that immigrant Scandinavians in Orkney entered into contracts, diplomatic or legal, with Pictish aristocrats? None.[51]

The Pictish church clearly had some presence in Orkney in the eighth century, and Raymond Lamb deserves praise for making us think about it. His failure is in imagining that at that time Orkney and Shetland were more sophisticated societies than they could possibly have been. Vikings certainly made agreements with and extorted tribute from aristocrats in prosperous and densely populated countries.[52] But Shetland and Orkney by definition were not and have never been societies of that kind.[53]

What Lamb doesn't ask, and what no member of the Peace School ever asks is: why should we imagine that Vikings in Orkney and Shetland regarded ecclesiastics and their property differently from churches and churchmen elsewhere? Elsewhere, as we know from record sources, Vikings slaughtered priests and pillaged churches. As Edward Cowan has remarked, they used churches as 'drive-in banks'.[54] But the Peace Scholars expect us to believe that Vikings in the Northern Isles 'respected' the Pictish clergy,[55] and permitted them to enjoy their estates throughout the ninth century.[56]

David Dumville has made some caustic remarks about the Sawyer school of Viking rehabilitation. These remarks strike me as appropriate when I read the productions of the Shetland and Orkney Peace School. 'I observe among my academic colleagues', Dumville says,[57]

> a profound disinclination to admit the extent of violence involved in many aspects of mediaeval life and in many turns of mediaeval history. In this, historians and archaeologists may reflect the attitudes of the social groups from which they are drawn. This disinclination may become absolute refusal when those whom one identifies as one's ancestors were involved.

If you want a glimpse of the kinds of violence committed by Vikings in Scotland and Ireland, based on documentary records, you should consult Dumville's work; but don't do so if

you are queasy. What Dumville is implying is that archaeologists and historians view the world from the vantage point of the study, the university library or the archaeological excavation. Violence and genocide seem to be a million miles away from such sanctuaries. But they happen.

What happened?

So what happened in the Northern Isles? I don't think that the Picts were 'absorbed' in Viking Shetland, or Viking Orkney, unless we stop being mealy-mouthed about such terms. 'That comforting and blessed word "absorption"!' remarked a Shetland antiquary, during a controversy in the *Shetland News* in 1896. 'Disputants who use this term in this connexion stand in need of being frequently reminded that when one people absorbs another it is usually the native and indigenous folk that do most of the absorbing.'[58] I don't think the Picts were just 'overwhelmed', or 'submerged', as Wainwright put it, while continuing to practise their religion and speak an unintelligible language at home. I certainly don't think that they achieved 'social integration', or that they 'blended'. And I am especially sceptical that they entered into legal contracts with their new neighbours, as Raymond Lamb would have us believe.

Some scholars who can't face the idea of extinction go for enslavement instead.[59] I reject that option, for two reasons. Here we come back to that central question of language. If the Norse immigrants in Orkney and Shetland had enslaved the native inhabitants, or enslaved the males and married the women, some of their words and lots of their names would have survived. That's what happens when conquerors arrive in a country. Colonisers are lazy, and they are only prepared to coin a certain number of new names.[60] Even in cases of genocide native place-names survive to a small extent.[61] The corollary of these well-known facts is that something unusual, something 'ominous',[62] happened in the Northern Isles. There is only a handful of pre-Norse names on record in Shetland and Orkney: names of a few large islands like Unst. As Bill

Nicolaisen has said,[63]

> [t]o all intents and purposes the Norse incomers were *from their point of view* confronted with a virtually nameless cultural landscape which, in order to make it possible to perform the speech act of identifying reference, had to be provided with place names from scratch, and instantly.

My other reason for rejecting the argument about enslavement is an anthropological one. In his recent acclaimed work *Guns, Germs and Steel* Jared Diamond presents a typology of reactions by colonisers to the people whom they colonise.[64] He describes three scenarios: conquest in regions inhabited by hunter-gatherer bands, which are thinly populated; in areas where food-producing tribes are established, which are moderately populated; and in intensive food-producing regions occupied by states or chiefdoms, which are densely populated. In the first type of situation the native inhabitants simply move away to a new location. In the third type the conquerors enslave the natives, or force them to pay tribute.

But in the moderately populated food-producing societies – the type of society that we know existed in Orkney and Shetland in the ninth century – there is usually a more drastic outcome. 'Where population densities are moderate', says Diamond,

> as in regions occupied by food-producing tribes, no large vacant areas remain to which survivors of a defeated band can flee. But tribal societies without intensive food production have no employment for slaves and do not produce large enough food surpluses to be able to yield much tribute. Hence the victors have no use for survivors of a defeated tribe .... The defeated men are killed, and their territory may be occupied by the victors.

Nearly forty years ago the Shetland toponymist John Stewart made a striking comparison between what might have happened in our islands in the ninth century, and what happened in Tasmania in the nineteenth.[65]

> The incompatibility of language [he said], cannot have been greater than that between the Australian aboriginal tongues and English, but only in Tasmania are aboriginal place-names absent, and it is a historical fact that the Tasmanians, by disease and deliberate slaughter, in spite of efforts to save them, were wiped out to the last man. It seems a fair judgement that something similar happened to the Shetlanders who did not make their escape before the Norse.

I propose that what happened to the Tasmanians is exactly what happened to the Pictish Shetlanders and Orcadians.[66] Shetland and even Orkney are small – extremely small – 'crofting counties', and they always have been. When conquering Vikings came to the Northern Isles, 1200 years ago, they had no wish or intention to share the land with their predecessors. There was no *space* for sharing, and there was nowhere to hide.[67] As Alfred Smyth has put it, 'all the evidence suggests that the Scottish Isles bore the full brunt of the fury of these invaders who were instantly conspicuous to Scots, English and Irish alike, for their brutality and heathenism'.[68]

The best source of information about what happened is a document. It isn't a contemporary record; but it was written a few centuries after the event, by someone who seems to have had first-hand knowledge of Orkney. The author of the so-called *Historia Norwegiae* describes vividly how pre-Norse Orkney and Shetland were inhabited by Picts and priests. The Picts, he says,[69] 'did marvels in the morning and in the evening, in building towns, but at mid-day they entirely lost all their strength, and lurked, through fear, in underground houses'. Perhaps he had visited Scatness in Shetland, which probably still looked like that in the twelfth century. 'But in due course', he continues, *'certain pirates ... set out with a great fleet ... and stripped these races of their ancient settlements, destroyed them wholly, and subdued the islands to themselves.'* (My italics.)

That limpid anonymous statement is the most likely explanation for the disappearance without trace of Pictish

Shetland and Orkney. We may even have a clue to the date when the process started: the Annals of Ulster announce in the year 794 'the devastation of all the islands of Britain by the heathen'.[70] I don't understand why modern scholars can't envisage such a situation. After all, our own era is the most bloody since the world began. During the twentieth century, when we were all born, 600,000 Armenians were slaughtered by Turks; Pol Pot exterminated two million Cambodians; a million Tibetans died and are still dying under the Chinese occupation. The Orkney historian Storer Clouston gave a brutal but accurate response to our problem seventy years ago.[71] Confronted by A.W. Brøgger's work of 1929, which, as I have said, painted a picture of peaceful Norse immigrants, Clouston shook his head. 'Surely the common-sense of the matter ... is evident', he said.

> The first Norsemen ... proposed to settle in these islands, whether the existing inhabitants liked it or not. They brought their swords, and if the inhabitants were numerous and offered resistance, they fought them. If they were few and fled, they took their land without fighting. They did, in fact, exactly what we ourselves have done in later centuries, in India, America, Africa, Australia. ... That is the only way in which we can settle a new land – chance your luck, but always bring your gun.

Some archaeologists have asked me: where is the archaeological evidence for annihilation? We have no mass graves of Picts, no shattered Pictish sculpture. But every archaeologist should recall Gordon Childe's ominous words: 'negative evidence is worthless'.[72] The fact that we haven't found traces of genocide, among the few sites that have been investigated, is beside the point. Remember: it isn't long since a historian was arguing in a British libel court that there's no archaeological evidence that genocide took place in the Third Reich.

It is hardly necessary to go over the argument again. If the Picts had survived, as part of a social integration programme, as Anna Ritchie would have us believe, some of their place-

names would have survived. If their leaders had come to an accommodation with the Norwegians, as Raymond Lamb imagines, the islands would be full of Celtic names. If the Pictish religion and priests lingered, as Frederick Wainwright seems to have thought, their place-names would have lingered too. But there are no such names. All we find are the sites where Picts used to live and worship, and fragments of their pottery and pins in the conquerors' houses. There is no reason to suppose that Viking behaviour in the Northern Isles was more amiable than Viking behaviour in Iona or Lindisfarne. We should expect the worst.

Notes

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1 Iain A. Crawford, 'War or peace – Viking colonisation in the Northern and Western Isles of Scotland reviewed', in Hans Bekker-Nielsen et al. eds., *Proceedings of the Eighth Viking Congress*, Odense 1981.

2 F.T. Wainwright, 'Picts and Scots', in F.T. Wainwright ed., *The Northern Isles*, Edinburgh 1962, p.116.

3 F.T. Wainwright, 'The Scandinavian settlement', in F.T. Wainwright ed., *The Northern Isles*, Edinburgh 1962, p.162.

4 P.A. Munch, *The Chronicle of Man and the Sudreys*, Christiania 1860, p. xviii.

5 Sir G.W. Dasent tr., *Icelandic Sagas vol. iii: The Orkneyingers' Saga*, London 1894, p. v.

6 For instance, Crawford assigns Shetelig to the War School. But Shetelig's account is similar to Brøgger's: Haakon

Shetelig, *Viking Antiquities in Great Britain and Ireland*, i, Oslo 1940, p.21.

[7] For a probing account of Sawyer's material and methods see N.P. Brooks, 'England in the ninth century: the crucible of defeat', in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 29, 1979.

[8] Modern scholars have been especially sniffy about the scholar Alcuin, who objected when Vikings attacked Lindisfarne in 793. Bjørn Myhre has suggested that Alcuin's complaints shouldn't 'be regarded as objective descriptions of the situation but rather as arguments in a political and ideological conflict', as if they couldn't be both ('The beginning of the Viking age – some current archaeological problems', in Anthony Faulkes and Richard Perkins eds., *Viking Revaluations*, London 1993, p.197). Unlike these commentators I am not so radical as to disallow all clerical evidence. For astringent remarks on the subject see David N. Dumville, *The Churches of North Britain in the First Viking-Age*, Whithorn 1997, p.9.

[9] Grahame Clark, 'The invasion hypothesis in British archaeology', in *Antiquity*, 40, 1966. No attitude has become so pervasive in British archaeology, and it has even coloured the debate about the Vikings in Orkney and Shetland. Writing about Orkney, Colin Renfrew states that '[o]nly in the case of the Norsemen is large-scale immigration generally accepted' ('Epilogue', in Colin Renfrew ed., *The Prehistory of Orkney*, Edinburgh 1985 p.247). 'Generally'!

[10] J. Stuart, *Sculptured Stones of Scotland*, Aberdeen 1856, p.30. Stuart thought that Graves's findings were 'rather startling'.

[11] Joseph Anderson still regarded the language as 'mixed Scandinavian and Celtic' in the 1890s: J. Romilly Allen and J. Anderson, *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland*, Edinburgh 1903, p.9.

[12] R.B.K. Stevenson, 'Pictish art', in F.T. Wainwright ed., *The Problem of the Picts*, Perth 1980, p.115.

[13] Stevenson, 'Pictish art', p.128.

[14] K.H. Jackson, 'The Pictish language', in F.T. Wainwright ed., *The Problem of the Picts*, Perth 1980, pp.152ff.
[15] Jackson, 'The Pictish language', p.142.
[16] Wainwright, 'Picts and Scots', p.115; 'The Scandinavian settlement', p.158. Note that at one point (p.159) he enters a caveat: 'If this dating is not hopelessly wide of the mark'.
[17] Wainwright, 'Picts and Scots', p.116.
[18] Wainwright, 'The Scandinavian settlement', p.158.
[19] For another recitation of the argument see William P.L. Thomson, 'Pict, Norse, Celt and Lowland Scot', in R.J. Berry and H.N. Firth eds., *The People of Orkney*, Kirkwall 1986, pp.210-11.
[20] Katherine Forsyth, *Language in Pictland*, Utrecht 1997.
[21] Charles Thomas, 'Sculptured stones and crosses from St Ninian's Isle and Papil', in Alan Small et al. eds., *St Ninian's Isle and its Treasure*, i, Oxford 1973, p.29.
[22] Robert B.K. Stevenson, 'Christian sculpture in Norse Shetland', in *Froðskaparrit*, 28-9, 1981, pp.284, 289.
[23] Katherine Forsyth, 'The ogham inscriptions of Scotland: an edited corpus', unpublished Harvard University Ph.D. 1996, p.130.
[24] Michael P. Barnes, *The Norn Language of Orkney and Shetland*, Lerwick 1998, p.7.
[25] I am grateful to Katherine Forsyth for discussion about the Bressay inscription and its date.
[26] Gillian Fellows-Jensen, 'Viking settlement in the Northern and Western Isles – the place-name evidence as seen from Denmark and the Danelaw', in Alexander Fenton and Hermann Pálsson eds., *The Northern and Western Isles in the Viking World*, Edinburgh 1984, p.152.
[27] Barnes, *The Norn Language of Orkney and Shetland*, p.8.
[28] Arne Kruse, Review of Barnes, in *Northern Studies*, 33, 1998, p.97.
[29] Thomas, 'Sculptured stones and crosses from St Ninian's Isle and Papil', p.30.
[30] The Shetland antiquary Gilbert Goudie wrote eloquently about 'continuity of occupation [of religious sites], a

continuity of resort for the purpose of interment, and the continuity of a recognised religious site from Pictish times, on through the invasion and permanent settlement of the Norsemen, to our own day' ('On rune-inscribed relics of the Norsemen in Shetland', in *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 13, 1878-9, p.139). 'It is scarcely possible to conceive such a survival', he continued, '... coincident with the total extinction of the preceding race to which those sites and traditions belonged.' But since several centuries separated the 'occupations' and the 'resorts', it is.

[31] It certainly cheered Robert Stevenson, and inspired his 1981 article about the Bressay stone (Robert B.K. Stevenson, note in F.T. Wainwright ed., *The Problem of the Picts*, Perth 1980, p.168; 'Christian sculpture in Norse Shetland', pp.283-4).

[32] Anna Ritchie, 'Excavation of Pictish and Viking-age farmsteads at Buckquoy, Orkney', in *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 108, 1976-7, p.192.

[33] Crawford, 'War or peace – Viking colonisation in the Northern and Western Isles of Scotland reviewed', p.265.

[34] Anna Ritchie, 'Birsay around AD 800', in *Orkney Heritage*, 2, 1983, p.63.

[35] Anna Ritchie, 'Pict and Norseman in Northern Scotland', in *Scottish Archaeological Forum*, 6, 1974, p.34; 'Excavation of Pictish and Viking-age farmsteads at Buckquoy, Orkney', p.64; 'Orkney in the Pictish kingdom', in Colin Renfrew ed., *The Prehistory of Orkney*, Edinburgh 1985, p.200; *Viking Scotland*, London 1993, p.27.

[36] Ritchie, 'Pict and Norseman in Northern Scotland', p.33.

[37] In 1993 she made an especially perplexing statement about the subject. 'The Vikings seem to have recognized the strength of native culture', she says, 'and to have responded with an instinctive need to dominate rather than to obliterate' (*Viking Scotland*, p.25). That makes sense, although I see no evidence for it. She goes on: 'In virtually every case, Viking settlements were built literally on top of earlier native farms.' But that seems to

me to be obliteration par excellence!

38 Ritchie, *Viking Scotland*, p.27.

39 Cecil L. Curle, *The Pictish and Norse Finds from the Brough of Birsay 1934-74*, Edinburgh 1982, p.101.

40 J.R. Hunter, *Rescue Excavations on the Brough of Birsay 1974-82*, 4, Edinburgh 1986, p.173.

41 J.R. Hunter, 'The early Norse period', in K.J. Edwards and I.B.M. Ralston eds., *Scotland: environment and archaeology, 8000 BC – AD 1000*, Chichester 1997, pp.250-2.

42 For similar claims about a site in Shetland see Stephen J. Dockrill, 'Northern exposure: phase 1 of the Old Scatness excavations 1995-8', in R.A. Nicholson and S.J. Dockrill eds., *Old Scatness Broch, Shetland: retrospect and prospect*, Bradford etc. 1998, p.74.

43 Christopher D. Morris, *The Birsay Bay Project volume 2: Sites in Birsay village and on the Brough of Birsay, Orkney*, Durham 1996, p.253. Gerald Bigelow offers us the same alternatives ('Issues and prospects in Shetland Norse archaeology', in Christopher D. Morris and D. James Rackham eds., *Norse and Later Settlement and Subsistence in the North Atlantic*, Glasgow 1992, p.15): he asks if 'potlids' found at Jarlshof are 'evidence of lasting Celtic influence, or are they simply residual artefacts from earlier strata of an intensively occupied site?'

44 James Graham-Campbell and Colleen E. Batey, *Vikings in Scotland: an archaeological survey*, Edinburgh 1998, p.163: 'The suggested cross-over nature of this assemblage—an admixture of Pictish and Norse—has provided a central element in the discussion about the nature of the takeover of Pictish settlement by the Norse. In view of the less clear-cut evidence for the primary phase (House 3), it would seem appropriate to be somewhat circumspect about the use of this small artefactual assemblage from Buckquoy in this connection.'

45 Ritchie, 'Pict and Norseman in Northern Scotland', p.23. A recent study (James F. Wilson et al., 'Genetic evidence for different male and female roles during cultural transitions

in the British Isles', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA*, 98, issue 9, 24 April 2001), suggests cautiously that an investigation of DNA in Orkney may provide new evidence for some interbreeding of Picts and Vikings in AD 800. This paper provides evidence for a large Scandinavian component in Orcadian DNA, as we would expect. But marriage between Scandinavian Orcadians and immigrant spouses with Pictish blood might have happened at any time during the centuries *after* AD 800.

46 Mortimer Wheeler ('Civil service archaeology', in *Antiquity*, 31, 1957, p.236), recalled 'how, in the middle 'thirties, the discovery of Viking houses at Jarlshof by Dr A.O. Curle brought something nearly approaching a flush of excitement to the honoured countenance of that seasoned and unshakable Scot. The emotion was sternly checked, but some of us lesser folk were less inhibited.'

47 Raymond Lamb, 'Carolingian Orkney and its transformation', in Colleen E. Batey, Judith Jesch and Christopher D. Morris eds., *The Viking Age in Caithness, Orkney and the North Atlantic*, Edinburgh 1993; 'Papil, Picts and Papar', in Barbara E. Crawford ed., *Northern Isles Connections*, Kirkwall 1995; 'Pictland, Northumbria and the Carolingian empire', in Barbara E. Crawford ed., *Conversion and Christianity in the North Sea World*, St Andrews 1998.

48 Lamb, 'Carolingian Orkney and its transformation', p.268.

49 For some salutary remarks about that proposition see Thomas, 'Sculptured stones and crosses from St Ninian's Isle and Papil', p.14.

50 Lamb's evidence is (1) the dedications on the island to St Boniface and St Tredwell; (2) 'a number of enigmatic late references to early bishops in Orkney'; and (3) Thomson's suggestion that St Findan may have sojourned on the island with a Pictish bishop (William P.L. Thomson ed., 'St Findan and the Pictish-Norse transition', in R.J. Berry and H.N. Firth eds., *The People of Orkney*, Kirkwall 1986, pp.279ff.). I am not so confident about this material

as Lamb and Thomson. My reading of Findan's *Vita* in particular (for the Latin text and an accurate English translation see Reidar Th. Christiansen, 'The People of the North', in *Lochlann*, 2, 1962, pp.148-64) doesn't make me less sceptical. Thomson's attempt to place Findan on a tiny island adjacent to Papa Westray, following alleged topographical hints in the *Vita*, is unconvincing.

[51] Lamb's promotion of his theory has become increasingly imaginative. In 'Pictland, Northumbria and the Carolingian empire', p.44, he paints a striking but fictional picture of a visit to the Pictish court by an Orkney magnate or his representative.

[52] Niels Lund, 'Allies of God or man? the Viking expansion in a European perspective', in *Viator*, 20, 1989, p.56.

[53] Lamb's mentor D.P. Kirby, 'Bede and the Pictish church', *Innes Review*, 24, 1973, pp.20, 24, is more pessimistic than Lamb about the prospects of reconstructing eighth century Christian missions in Pictland.

[54] Edward J. Cowan, 'Destruction of a Celtic people: the Viking impact upon Pictland', in *Celtic Connections*, 16, 1989, p.102.

[55] For instance, Ronald Cant, 'The medieval church in Shetland: organisation and buildings', in Doreen J. Waugh ed., *Shetland's Northern Links: language and history*, Edinburgh 1996, pp.160-1: 'By the end of the ninth century the incoming Norwegians ... clearly held in papar in some respect'; Val Turner, *Ancient Shetland*, London 1998, p.103: 'The incoming population may have respected the "papar"'.

[56] Simon Buteux has taken up Lamb's theory, and applies it to the archaeological site at Skaill in the east Mainland of Orkney (*Settlements at Skaill, Deerness, Orkney: excavations by Peter Gelling of the prehistoric, Pictish, Viking and later periods, 1963-1981*, Oxford 1997, pp.261-5). He is also impressed by the alleged evidence of 'integration' at Pool, Buckquoy and the Brough of Birsay. He concedes, however, that there is no evidence at all at Skaill from the 'pioneer' phase of Norse immigration into

Orkney.

[57] Dumville, *The Churches of North Britain in the First Viking-Age*, p.8.

[58] Letter by 'T.E.' (probably the stockbroker Thomas Edmondston), *Shetland News*, 22 February 1896. In the *Shetland News* of 7 December 1895 he had suggested that the Norse 'absorbed' races 'as Joshua was ordered to make of the Canaananites, and as Kentucky backwoodsmen made of the Shawnie Indians'.

[59] A much quoted example is James Graham-Campbell, *The Viking World*, London 1980, p.68. In recent years the proposition that Viking society was sustained by large numbers of slaves, shared by Marxists and reactionaries, has come under scrutiny. For a sceptical view see Niels Lund, 'Viking age society in Denmark—evidence and theories', in Niels Skyum-Nielsen and Niels Lund eds., *Danish Medieval History: new currents*, Copenhagen 1981, pp.22-3, 27, 32-3.

[60] Uriel Weinreich, *Languages in Contact: findings and problems*, New York 1953 repr. The Hague 1974, p.57.

[61] Forsyth, *Language in Pictland*, p.22

[62] 'It is ominous', said F.W.L. Thomas in 1884 ('What is a pennyland? or ancient valuation of land in the Scottish Isles', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, vi, 1883-4, p.269), 'that not one Celtic place-name can be surely recognised, nor could there have been, at that time, much intermarriage, or the Celtic speech would have overborne the Norse, as the Norse has been overborne in the Hebrides by the Gaelic'.

[63] W.F.H. Nicolaisen, 'Early Scandinavian naming in the Western and Northern Isles', in *Northern Scotland*, 3, 1979-80, p.110. My italics.

[64] Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel: a short history of everybody for the last 13,000 years*, London 1998, pp.291-2.

[65] John Stewart, *Shetland Place-names*, Lerwick 1987, p.19.

[66] In this connexion it is worth looking at N.J.B. Plomley, *Tasmanian Aboriginal Place Names*, Occasional Paper 3, Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery, Tasmania, n.d.

Plomley has only one suggestion to make about why Tasmania's native names disappeared. He puts it down to (p.3) 'the almost total want of real communication between Aboriginal and settler'. Where have I heard that excuse before? Fortunately, or unfortunately, we know exactly what happened to the native Tasmanians, and 'lack of communication' isn't an appropriate description of it. For the sorry story see Mark Cocker, *Rivers of Blood, Rivers of Gold*, London 1998, pp.115-84.

[67] Maybe an exception was Da Pettasmog (= 'the Picts' hiding place'), at the foot of cliffs near Saxavord in Unst, 'a slope to which the passage down from the rocky wall above is easier than in any other neighbouring place, while, on the other hand, they who remain down here are hidden from those who remain above': Jakob Jakobsen, *The Place-names of Shetland*, London 1936, p.169. Only someone in extremis would climb into this chasm. Of course, the name may simply have been bestowed by an Unst storyteller in more recent times.

[68] Alfred P. Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men: Scotland AD 80-1000*, Edinburgh 1984, p.146.

[69] Gustav Storm ed., *Monumenta Historica Norvegiae: Latinske kildeskrifter til Norges historie i middelalderen*, Oslo 1880, p.90.

[70] Seán Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill eds., *The Annals of Ulster*, Dublin 1983, p.250. Alfred Smyth assumes that this entry refers to Orkney and Shetland: *Warlords and Holy Men: Scotland AD 80-1000*, p.145.

[71] J. Storer Clouston, 'A fresh view of the settlement of Orkney', in *Proceedings of the Orkney Antiquarian Society*, ix, 1930-1, p.38.

[72] V. Gordon Childe, *Social Evolution*, London 1951, p.55.