

‘Central places’ in Viking Age Orkney

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The present paper is an attempt to stimulate discussion based on an analysis of the distribution patterns of some place-names in Orkney.¹ It is argued, based on H. Marwick’s interpretations, that some of the Norse place-names in these islands seem to belong to types that in Scandinavia are considered indicative of nodal or central places of the late Iron Age. The question is posed whether we in Viking Age Orkney can expect a social organisation and a settlement structure similar to the one in the Scandinavian countries, and – if so – what constitutes such a pattern?

The Northern Isles may fulfil an important role for students of Scandinavian central places, since one from the *landnám* situation in Orkney could, potentially, reach a fuller understanding of both chronological and social aspects of the different kinds of nodal places in the Scandinavian ‘home-lands’. Other parts of Britain, such as the Scottish Western Isles, could in principle serve the same function, but in the latter case early Norse settlement sites with only one exception still await discovery (Armit 1996).

The study of central places – some Scandinavian examples

Strictly speaking, the *central place* is an archaeological concept, denoting Iron Age settlements with a rich and varied find material. Thus it covers sites that fulfilled various functions (Fabech 1999). The concept was reintroduced into Scandinavian archaeology after a symposium in Denmark in 1989, first and foremost to come to terms with a new type of metal-rich settlements that metal detector surveying had brought to light in Denmark and Sweden (*ibid.*).

Charlotte Fabech (1999: 456) writes:

‘Central place’ seemed to be a suitable term, saying nothing but that a site is central for more than itself. Thus it must not be understood in an

¹ I would like to express my gratitude towards Doreen Waugh and Liv K. Schei, whose assistance has been invaluable while preparing this paper. None of them are, however, responsible for the interpretations put forward here.

exclusively economic perspective (...). At present, it is difficult to differentiate between the various functions on the basis of the available archaeological material. However, we can assume that a centre of this kind served as the residence of the paramount leader and his or her attached specialist. They would have had a variety of functions, including monopoly of force, economic management and ceremonial legitimisation of power. Those in power in such places served strategically to unite and link together as well as to control society, economically as well as symbolically.

The Scandinavian central place seems to include not only a proper centre, but also a number of satellite settlements:

Besides agrarian hamlets, we find magnate residences with hall and production areas, cult-building/shrine and trading places. (...) Thus the central place forms a settlement cluster, and a single spot consequently does not represent it (Fabech 1999: 457; cf. Fabech & Ringtved 1995).

In a South-Scandinavian context, Charlotte Fabech and Jytte Ringtved has pointed out several characteristics that indicates aspects of central places in the Early Iron Age, the Viking Age and the Early Middle Ages, respectively (op cit.; cf. Stylegar 1999, 2001a).

However, there is another story to be told about such central places. One often imagines the cultural landscape as being the landscape of the farmer – as an agricultural landscape resulting from the economic activity of a multitude of past generations. There is of course nothing wrong with such an assumption, even if the strictly agrarian landscape tends to dominate the discourse, to the detriment of other kinds of what we may denote economic landscapes, for instance the 'seascape' of the fisherman. But at all times man's living has been not only *off* the land, but also *in* it. So, in practice, applying a strictly economical approach to the cultural landscape means risking to loose central aspects of what we can dub the *mental landscape*. If we realise that the imagined (or thought) landscape and the physical landscape are just two different aspects of one and the same thing, then it is possible to interpret the cultural landscape of past times as the result of a deliberate 'staging'. And when this 'staging' process is controlled by a small segment of the population, then it is possible to read a landscape of power from the fossilised remains of past cultural landscapes.

This, of course, is not a novel idea. It has been the basis for a vibrant brand of onomastic research in Scandinavia at least since the days of Magnus Olsen (1915, 1928). In Sweden, the study of central places from the standpoint of place-name research has been carried

out by Lars Hellberg and, in more recent years, Stefan Brink (Hellberg 1950, 1976, 1986; Brink 1996, 1997, 1999a; cf. Vikstrand 2001).

Brink (1999a:424) writes:

The contemporary terms that have been used in prehistoric time for denoting some kind of central or nodal place are: husaby (...), salr, bo/busgarðr, hof, vi/vé/væ, *al, haugr/høgher, tuna(r), *husa(r), akr, vangr, harg/horgr, stafr, vall/vollr, hilla, etc. These terms denote in some cases obviously a hall building, in other cases pagan cult sites (...), assembly sites, early estates or chieftain's farms, some kind of administrative centres, etc.'

Brink also shows how, in his Swedish material, other types of place-names seem to occur regularly in the vicinity of the central places – names like Rinkaby, Karlaby and Smedby, to name but a few (these name types seem to be particular to some Swedish regions, although some examples are known from SE Norway, as well, see Pedersen, Stylegar & Norseng 2003:267-377). Some of these names obviously contain a title of a chieftain or some other leader in society, while others denote other social groups. Quite a few names reflect pagan cult sites, while in some cases we have the names of cult leaders. 'Thus, it is actually possible to read a social order in the landscape' (Brink 1999a:425). However, for many, perhaps most, of the names that might be taken to refer to pre-Christian cultic activities, the question of what kind of sites they denote, is a difficult one. It could in some instances be a building, in others an outdoor sanctuary of some sort (see discussion in Vikstrand 2001). Suffice it to say that so-called sacral names are also regular features of central places, but that they do not necessarily *designate* such places (Vikstrand 2001).

Similar complexes are discernible in Norway as well, and this is also the case in the part of Norway where the Orkney land-takers probably originated, i.e. the SW counties of Rogaland and Vest-Agder (Olsen 1928; Stylegar & Grimm 2003). In most Norwegian regions we must believe that control over the land has been in the hands of a small segment of the population – whether we call them kings, chieftains or noblemen – at least from the Bronze Age onwards (Skre 1998; cf. Stylegar 2001b). From this period and onwards we find archaeological remains and monuments that could be taken as indications that someone has had the power and ability to 'stage' the cultural landscape to his/her own advantage – to shape it in his/her

own image, so to speak (see also Dodgshon 1987).² The resulting cultural landscape is a landscape of power.

But are central place complexes of this kind to be found in the western islands that the Norsemen targeted for colonisation? In the present author's opinion, yes. Or so it seems. Let us take a closer look at some of Orkney's North Isles. Stronsay may serve as a first and illustrative example, even if archaeology isn't of much help in this particular case. The place-names, however, seem to be.

Stronsay

The name Stronsay is obscure. The Norse form is *Strjónsey*; the first element *Strjón* being found only in place-names. Its meaning is unknown. Many fanciful interpretations have been suggested over the years, but none of them rings true, and so far the name remains an enigma (Marwick 1995a [1927]; cf. Sandnes & Stemshaug 1997).

In some ways the island's history is almost as obscure as its name (Kjörsvik Schei 2000:61-66). The *Orkneyinga Saga* describes a meeting of reconciliation between Earl Erlend Haraldson and Sweyn Asleifson off the north coast of Stronsay, but the island as such is not really important in this context. Otherwise Stronsay is barely mentioned in early sources, the island's farms being inexplicably missing in the early rentals until 1595. Hugh Marwick puts it this way:

To the student of history and archaeology, Stronsay is in the highest degree baffling and tantalising (...) at the same time one constantly meets isolated names or facts that, elusive though they may be, seem to illuminate the darkness for a moment, and give one a glimpse of the island's unlit past (1995a [1927]: 99).

Across the sheltered anchorage of Papa Sound lies the small island of Papa Stronsay, known in Norse times as *Papey in litla*. The foundations of two medieval chapels can still be seen here, dedicated to St Nicholas and to St Bride respectively. In 1998 archaeologists

² This 'staging' can of course include an element of *naming after*, as well, as pointed out by Nicolaisen in the case of Shetland: '(W)hen the Norsemen arrived in Shetland almost 1200 years ago they not only carried with them in the vocabulary of their language a large number of words suitable for the naming of geographical features of all kinds, whether natural or man-made, but also a stock of actual names which could be drawn upon whenever applicable' (2001:126).

began excavating the site of the St Nicholas chapel, which was demolished in 1782. Foundations of a Norse chapel, believed to date back to the early thirteenth century were discovered. Later excavations revealed that this medieval chapel was built on top of an earlier building that may date back to the eight or ninth century and therefore be contemporaneous with the church of St Peter in Papa Sound (Lamb 1993).

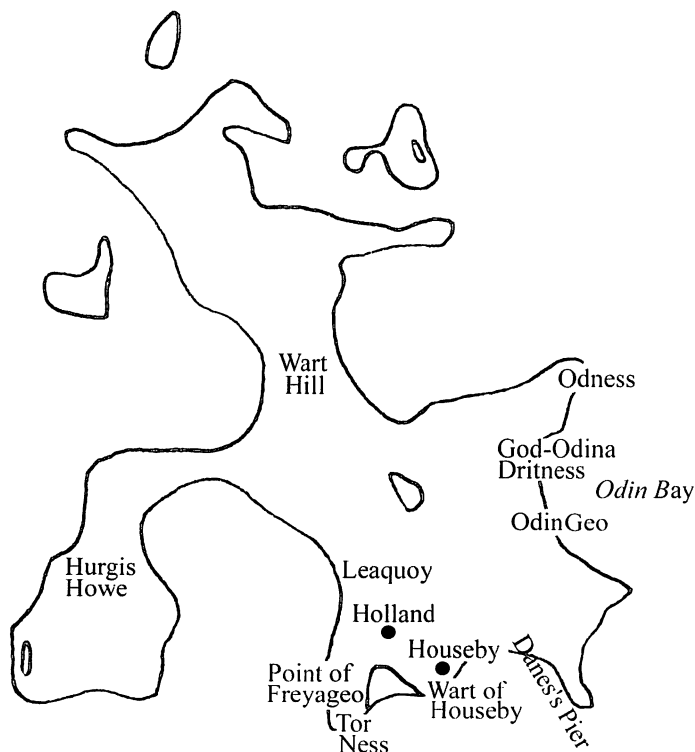


Fig. Map of Stronsay with the names discussed.

The *Orkneyinga Saga* (ch. 29) recounts the dramatic story that took place on Papa just before Christmas in 1046. The two co-ruling earls, Thorfinn the Mighty and Rognvald Brusason, had long fought each other. Arnor Thordarson, the Icelandic skald, wrote:

I saw both my benefactors
battering the other's men
– fierce was my grief –
fighting on the Firth.

Believing Thorfinn to be dead, Rognvald feels safe enough to go to Papa Stronsay to fetch malt for the Christmas ale. Thorfinn and his men follow but Earl Rognvald manages to escape.

Suddenly they heard a dog bark among the rocks down by the sea. Rognvald was carrying his lapdog with him and it was this that betrayed him. They killed him on the spot among the rocks (ch. 29).

About halfway between the two old chapels the rising ground is known as Earl's Knowe. Earl Rognvald must have gone to Papa Stronsay because the best malt was there, probably made by the monks.

The Stronsay soil is rich and makes good farming land, yet Stronsay was skatted in early times considerably less than neighbouring Sanday; along with Papa Stronsay it was valued as about 13 urisland. Much of the land was earmarked for administrative purposes and exempt from taxes; Houseby, considered the best farm in Orkney by some, was an administrative centre in Norse times, and Holland was the earl's bordland (cf. Kjorsvik Schei 1998). Houseby and Holland were a complete urisland or 18d. land each (Marwick 1995b [1931]:48). As Marwick once pointed out, 'whatever was the exact original number of urislands, the figure must have been high relative to most of Orkney' Marwick 1995a [1927]:108).

According to the 1595 rental there were practically no odallers in the island at that time, as 73 per cent of the cultivated area was earl's land, 26 per cent was church land, and just under 1 per cent was odal land. Stronsay's leading families may have sided with the Island Beardies and thus lost their land to King Sverrir after the Battle of Florvåg near Bergen in 1194 (Kjorsvik Schei 1998). This could explain the almost total absence of odal land. However, the debate on the origins of estates belonging to the 'central powers' of king and church is a long one in the Scandinavian countries, and the subject

matter is probably not exhausted in Orkney either (Bjørkvik 1993; Lindkvist 1990; Andrén 1983; Skre 1998).

Today Stronsay has some of the largest farms in the county, and much of local tradition and lore is connected with them. The northernmost farm of Huip, an old urisland farm, is named for the long, shallow oyce leading up to it, from the Norse *hóp*, a narrow bay. The *Hofsnes* of Saga fame may have been situated in this area. King and earl possessed almost all the land in the northern parish of St Peter. The name of Whitehall is fairly recent, and today’s farm represents only a part of the original estate, which was skatted as two urislands and stretched right across the island, including Clestrain and Hunton. This estate was known as Strenzie or Strynie, and may possibly have been the same as the *Brekur* of the Orkneyinga Saga, and later a seat of the Sinclair earls, as an old document has the earl mention his ‘grandson Earl Wm. at North Strynie in Stronsay’. Mentioned in the Saga is also the big bordland farm of Holland in St Nicholas parish.

Place-name patterns no doubt have a tale to tell in Stronsay, although it may not always be a simple one.

Marwick of course regarded *bae*-names as indicating the original land-takes in Stronsay as in most of Orkney (1995a [1927]:108). He thus reconstructed six ‘great original settlements’ in Stronsay (*ibid.*). While the hypothesis of a rather limited number of extensive land-takes in the island might not be too far-fetched, Gillian Fellows-Jensen has more recently proposed that the *bae*- or *boer*-names may have come into existence when a big settlement were breaking up (Fellows-Jensen 1984:155; cf. Thomson 1999:11, and, more generally, Thomson 1995 on the difficulties involved in trying to establish a chronological scheme for the settlement-names). In Norway, at least in the SW part, farm-names ending in *-by* or *-bø* has recently been interpreted as resulting from the disintegration of big Viking Age farms (Låg 1999; Stylegar 2001c).

The name of the big farm in the south of the island, **Houseby** (1595: Housbie), is, presumably, a whole other cup of tea. The farm (or, at least, the name of the farm) was made famous by the Norwegian historian Asgaut Steinnes in his monumental monograph, *Husebyar* (1955, cf. Steinnes 1959). According to Steinnes, Huseby was a technical term denoting royal administrative farms in Scandinavia, and he suggested that a system of Huseby farms were transferred to Orkney during the reign of Harald Fairhair, c. AD 900 (*op cit.*).

There are obvious difficulties with this hypothesis, not least with the early dating of the ‘Huseby system’, both in Scandinavia and in

Orkney (Wijkander 1983; Thomson 1987). However, there is little doubt that these farms were of significant social standing, a fact that is assisted among other things by (later) property relations (Thomson 1987). And, although the Huseby-names themselves might be of early medieval date and refer to farms with royal administrative functions, they are commonly believed to denote older, i.e. Viking Age, central settlements (Brink 1999b).

In Stronsay the neighbouring farm of Houseby is named Holland (1595: Holland). There may have been defence works of some kind on this farm, as indicated by the name **Viggie**, probably Norse *vígi* 'stronghold, vantage ground', although older forms of the name are missing (cf. Marwick 1995a [1927]:130. For an updated, although brief discussion of this name element in Shetland, see Waugh 2001:85-86). **Wart of Houseby**, **Wart Mound** and **Wart Hill** may designate localities that served a purpose in a (military) signalling system.

On the eastern side of Stronsay we find the large open Mill Bay with the Norwegian coast as the nearest landfall to the east. In and around this bay is found a number of seemingly pagan names. Thus, the southern ness is called Odness, but is also known as **Odin Ness** (1595: Odness; 1632: Odnes). Suggesting the name's association with Odin, Marwick, in his own words, had 'sought diligently for some more prosaic explanation, but in vain' (1995a [1927]:112, cf. 1952:26).

At the beach below the house of Odin Ness there is a broch mound that goes by the peculiar name of **God-Odina**, 'God Odin', according to Marwick's interpretation (1995a [1927]:112). The beach at this place is called **Dritness** (1595: Dirtness), although it is not a ness by any standard. Marwick (ibid.) writes:

To Saga readers, 'such names must inevitably recall the famous temple to Thor on Thorsness in Iceland, and the adjacent Drit-skær there. It is thus difficult to regard the juxtaposition here of two such names as God-Odina and Dritness as merely accidental.

The large bay to the south is called **Odin Bay**, and further west we find **Tor Ness** (origin uncertain). A bit to the north of Tor Ness the modern OS map shows a site called Point of Freyageo. According to Marwick, this is a modern misspelling of the name Fue Geo by the map-makers (ibid.). However, the name is still found on recent versions of the map, and the toponymical environment should mean that a sacral interpretation should not be completely ruled out. **Dane's Pier**, also in the southern part of the island, was according to local

tradition a viking harbour, and it might be a modified rock formation (Allen 1995).

The *Orkneyinga Saga* refers to **Hofsnes**, the ness of the *hof* or pagan temple as the place of a meeting of reconciliation between Sweyn Asleifson and Earl Erlend Haraldson during the War of the Three Earls (1152-1154). Marwick argues that the Icelandic Saga writer got it wrong, and that the place in question is Huipness (*hóp* ‘small bay’) (1995a [1927]:108). This may of course be the case, but one should not rule out the possibility that there once was a place called Hofsnes somewhere in Stronsay; alternatively, there might have been a *hof* at Hópness.

Another name, **Hurgis Howe**, applied to a field on Rothiesholm, is probably Norse *horgs haugr* ‘(heathen) altar mound’ (Marwick 1995a [1927]:124, but see the discussion of the name element ‘horg’ in Vikstrand 2001). **Staves** (1735: Staves, also Staffs) is the name of a house just to the north of Midgarth. *Stafir* ‘staff, raised pole, boundary marker etc’ is sometimes interpreted to denote a pagan place of worship, in the form of a raised wooden image (Vikstrand 2001; cf. Brink 1999a). It is not known what the Stronsay name refers to. Another kind of activity is testified by the name **Leaquoy** (*leika-kví*) on the western slope of Stebb Hill, north of Holland. The name probably designates a place where games or sports were held (the form *leika-kví* is actually on record from 1329 as a farm name in South Ronaldsay, Marwick 1995a [1927]:126; cf. 1952:29-30).

North Ronaldsay

North Ronaldsay may have been one of the first places in which settlements occurred (Kjörsvik Schei 2000:42-43). The *Orkneyinga Saga* indicates that the island played an important part in Norse times. It was here that Turf-Einar killed Halfdan Hálegg, one of the many alleged sons of King Harald Fairhair. Before he turned up in Orkney, the rebellious Halfdan had surprised Earl Rognvald at his home in Møre in western Norway, and burnt him to death along with many of his followers.

Some 200 years later, North Ronaldsay again became the stage in a play for the earldom, when the young Kali Kolsson assumed his part of both hero and knave in trying to wrest power from Earl Paul Hakonsson by fair means or foul.

North Ronaldsay does not figure in the older rentals, but it seems to have consisted mostly of old kingsland. In 1595, most of North Ronaldsay belonged to the earl.

Names indicating prominent or aristocratic settlements, like the ones seen in Stronsay and Rousay, are not documented in North Ronaldsay. The only candidate would seem to be **Harga** (1653: Harga), which appears frequently also in deeds in the form 'Hargar', usually in juxtaposition with **Howar**. The name is ON *horgar*, plural of *horg*, a heathen sanctuary or place of worship (Marwick 1995c [1923], 36; but see Vikstrand 2001, and Marwick 1952:2).

On the other end of the social scale, we have the place-names **Upper** and **Nether Cott** (1733: Upper Cot and Nether Cot), **South Cott** and **Verracott** (1653: Varicott, origin of prefix unknown) – ON *kot*, 'hut, cot'.

However, other aspects of Viking Age society are testified by the place-name material in North Ronaldsay, namely the maritime ones. On the beach west of Burrian are two places called Round **Laaber** and Lang **Laaber**, ON *hlad-berg*, 'a projecting pier, a rock where a ship is laden' (Marwick 1995c [1923]:26). The archaeologist, Sigurd Grieg, discusses place-names of this type in connection with trading activities linked to Viking Age central places (Grieg 1972; cf. Schmidt 2000). In the Linklet tun, there is a field called **Sketherhus**. Marwick suggests that this is ON *skeiðar-hús*, 'house of the race-course' (1995c [1923]:34). A more probable interpretation would be *skeið* in the sense of long-ship, the composite name thus indicating the site of a Viking Age or medieval large noust (see also Jesch 2001 for a discussion of the *skeið*). A similar name, *Skethouse*, is found in Harray.

Two other names – **Viggie** (a farm near the shore of Bride's Ness) – and **Tor Ness** (close to Holland) are similar to names discussed for Stronsay, but due to the lack of early written forms the origin are uncertain in both cases.

Rousay

Rousay is better known, archaeologically as well as from Saga testimony, than Stronsay, for instance, is. It has been referred to as 'Egypt of the North' because of the density of its prehistoric sites, and it is true that the island's concentration of archaeological monuments is impressive. A number of prehistoric chambered tombs have been excavated over the years. From the Iron Age, eight broch sites are known. On the southern coast of the island, in Westness, Viking Age

burials have been accidentally discovered at several occasions. More recently, excavations carried out at the low headland of Moaness on the Westness shore by Sigrid Kaland have uncovered a noust, a rich cemetery, and an important Norse settlement (Kaland 1973).

Today, Rousay has three main inhabited districts; Sourin, Frotoft and Wasbister, and the extensive region of The Westside, located between Wasbister and Frotoft, now all united to form the large farm of Westness (Marwick 1995f [1947]:17).

Westness has some of the best farming land in Rousay. It was the home of Earl Paul Thorfinnson's great friend and ally, Sigurd, and Westness features prominently in the *Orkneyinga Saga* (Marwick 1995f [1947]:27). According to Marwick, Sigurd's homestead was not at the site of the Westness of today – which is the old Inner Westness, but at **Skaill** (1595: Skaile), – in the old Outer Westness (ibid.). However, excavations indicate that in the 12th century the power centre was moved from Westness to Skaill.

The place-name element 'skaill' is a common one in Orkney; there are fourteen places with the uncompounded name, Skaill, and a further twelve instances of the name, Langskaill (Thomson 1987:32). A regular feature of these names seems to be their close association with church sites (ibid.). The name 'skaill' is Old Norse *skáli*, and it probably refers to a hall (in Norse sagas written in the 13th century about 10th century events, the most common term used to denote the largest and most important living-room, is *skáli*, followed by *stofa*; however, in the older Skaldic poetry other nouns are being used, like *salr*, *holl*, or *rann*, see Meulengracht Sørensen 2003:268-269). For Marwick, then, 'Skaill must have been the place where Sigurd lived and had his 'skáli' or hall. The site of that hall cannot be determined today with any confidence, but the probability is that it was in close proximity to the remains of an old tower, traditionally known as **The Wirk**, which stands just outside the churchyard of the old parish church of St. Mary, the walls of which still survive here at Skaill' (Marwick 1995f [1947]:29). 'The Wirk' is ON *virki* (Marwick 1995f [1947]:75; see discussion above).

A military function must also be attributed to **Ward Hill**. Skaill lies at the beach below. Marwick (1952:63) suggests the first element of the farm name **Faraclett** (1563: Ferracloft) in Sourin could also be an original *varði* (1952:63).

This farm at Faraclett in Rousay lies on the steep southern slopes of an extensive elevation now called The Head of Faraclett, but formerly known as The North Hill (...). As the Ward Hill of Rousay in on the west side of the island, and thus invisible in the Wasbister district as well as most of

the large Sourin district in which Faraclett is situated, it is very likely that this hill (...) would have been a beacon site also.

In the Wasbister tunship, two more 'skail' names are found – **Saviskail** (1503: Savirscale), 'the skáli by the sea', and **Langskail** (1500: Langscale; 1595: Langskail), 'the long skáli'. The presence of two 'skail' place-names in this part of the island is, according to Marwick, 'significant, pointing, it may be suggested, to early Norse settlers of chieftain or semi-chieftain class' (1995f [1947]:31).

On the farm of Hurtiso in Sourin, there are vestiges of a now defunct settlement called **Husabae** (The Taft of Husabae). This farm is not mentioned in any of the earliest rentals, so it is presumably of great antiquity (1995f [1947]:58; cf. 1995b [1931]).

Two place-names might be indicative of heathen cultic practice, although in both cases this interpretation is not without rivals. The first one is the farm name **Avaldsay** (1503: Awaldschaw, Awaldscha), *Augvalds-haugr*, 'the mound of Augvald' (Marwick 1995f [1947]:41). Marwick states that 'nothing (is) known of this man' (ibid.). However, in SW Norway, where the name 'Augvald' is found as a place-name element in the farm name Avaldsnes in Karmøy, Rogaland, Augvald is known as a legendary ruler of some of the coastal tribes, and it has recently been suggested that this eponymical hero was the object of worship in the Viking Age in this region (Vea 1999). The name itself is ON *Ogvaldr*, 'the ruler of the coast' (1999:384). As for the name **Frotoft** (1503: Frotoft) P. A. Munch suggested an original *Freys-tuþt*, indicating the site of a sanctuary of the Norse god Freyr (cited in Marwick 1995f [1947]:51). The phonetics, however, would seem to make such a derivation less probable, and Marwick finds it more likely that we are dealing with an original ON *Froða-topt*, the site or homestead of a man Frodi (1995f [1947]:51).

Hullion is a small farm in Frotoft. Phonetically, it could represent ON *hollin*, 'the hall'. If this is indeed the case, then it would be the only example in Orkney of that word (Marwick 1952:68). However, Marwick notes that the Hullion farm is, from its situation, 'pretty certainly the head-house of that old tunship' (ibid.).

The place-name **Cott**, ON *kot*, is also found in Rousay.

Papa Westray

The place-name pattern in Papa Westray is unusual, as there are no names ending in *-garth*, *-ston*, *-by* or *-bister* (Marwick 1995e [1925]). The name *Papey* itself suggests a pre-Norse religious presence. The

sanctity of Papa may have continued well into Norse times. Jarl Rognvald was buried somewhere in this island in 1046 – at that date, writes Marwick, ‘there is little doubt that Papey was the most sacred spot in the North Isles’ (Marwick 1995e [1925]:88).

According to the early rentals, from c. 1500, more than half of the land at that time belonged to king or earl, whereas as much as 40 per cent was odal land and some six per cent was bishopric land. However, the now familiar types of names are found on this island as well.

Apart from the early Christian names (like Munkarhoose, Binnas Kirk), there are two houses called **Backaskail** (c. 1740: Backiskill), *bakka-skáli*, ‘the hall at the banks’, and **Breckaskail** (c. 1740: Breakiskill), *brekku-skáli*, ‘the hall on the slope’, respectively (Marwick 1995e [1925]:94).

At the beach, there is a spot called **Skennist** (1658: Skeanes; 1664: Skaenes; 1740: Skenest). There is no ness at the site at all, and one ‘therefore would suggest an ON *skeiða-naust*, place where large vessels were laid up for the winter,’ writes Marwick (ibid.). At Skennist we still find a row of seven (rather modern) boat nousts. The name Skennist would thus be similar to *Skennestoft*, Shapinsay, and *Snaky Noust*, Westray (Marwick 1952:58), and perhaps also similar to *Sketherhus* in North Ronaldsay (see above). Another place-name on Papa Westray might also indicate a pre-modern boat house: **Nouster** (c. 1740: Nouster). For the use of the uncompounded *naustr* as a farm-name in Norway, see Hallan (1978).³

According to Marwick, the place-name **Laws Point** – denoting a site that was formerly a landing rock – is possibly ON *hlað-hamarr* or *hlað-berg* (Marwick 1995e [1925]:92).⁴

In Papa Westray there are also two ‘*kot*’ names in the form of **Cott** and **Isticoat** (Marwick 1995e [1925]:97). The farm names North **Via** and South **Via** (c. 1740: Via), according to Marwick, probably represents ON *vé-haugr*, ‘holy mound’ (1995e [1925]:95; cf. 1952, 47).

³ Unfortunately, nousts have not been much investigated in Scotland, despite their apparent density, not least in the Northern Isles (Hunter 1992:125).

⁴ Another maritime site might be found in Weellie’s Taing, which according to local tradition was used as a harbour by Vikings. The rock formation itself might have been modified to fulfil this function (Allen 1995).

Sanday

Sanday furnishes us with our final case study. It is one of the largest and most populous of the North Isles. The island is 1-3 km wide and c. 21 km long. The highest point in the island, **The Wart**, reaches 65 m.

Sanday consisted of 36 1/2 urislands (Marwick 1995h [1923]:53). The island was known as the 'granary of Orkney' and for centuries exported grain to Norway. 'There is no doubt,' writes Magnar Dalland and Olwyn Owen, 'that, in the Viking period, Sanday was incomparably the wealthiest of Orkney's northern isles' (1999:5).

'The Orkneyinga Saga contains only a scattering of references to Sanday (...); there is only one place in Sanday which the saga mentions by name, 'Volunes', and its location cannot be identified' (Thomson 1999:5). However, some of the more important recent excavations in Orkney have been carried out at Pool and Scar.

Early radiocarbon dates from Pool indicate a early primary Norse occupation, well in advance of the establishment of the Earldom in the late 800s. The boat-burial at Scar in Burness surpasses earlier Norse finds made in Sanday, and perhaps even in Orkney (Owen & Dalland 1999). Another boat-grave may have been found at South Mires in the 1790s (Graham-Campbell & Batey 1998:56).

It is in Burness, in the northern part of Sanday, that we find three 'skaill' names – **Northskaill**, **Langskaill** and **South Skaill** (Thomson 1999). Further south, in the old Sutherbie, there is a farm called **Beckaskaill**, and in Lady parish we have an uncompounded **Skaill** (Clouston 1932:15). There used to be another **Langskaill**, in Marykirk, found as a field-name in 1700 (Longskeall), according to Marwick (1952:20).

Near Pool with its good, natural harbour 'in the crofters' land below Warsetter, there is a large mound, the site of a vanished house, which is called 'not Huseby but simply **Husay**', writes Steinnes with reference to Marwick (1959:46, note): "To me", Dr Marwick writes, 'it would seem that in this Husay we have an almost exact prallel to the Rousay vanished Husabae" (ibid.). The name is documented as Houshay in 1502 and Houssay in 1595 (Marwick 1995h [1923]:59).⁵

The farm-houses of **Stove** is situated on the head of a picturesque bay flanked on the east by the ness of Hacksness. For some centuries down to c. 1920, Stove was one of the largest farms in Orkney

⁵ Pool Bay is known locally as 'the Viking harbour', and there is some suggestion that the natural rock formation has been modified to form a sort of harbour work (Allen 1995).

(Marwick 1952:15). Stove is ON *stofa*, literally ‘a room’, and, writes Marwick, ‘applied probably, like *skáli*, to a farm with a house of special or superior type’ (1952:15; cf. Crawford & Ballin Smith 1999).

The large bay on the north of Sanday is called Otterswick – and ‘points to a man named Ottarr,’ writes Marwick. However, ‘an old name for this bay was **Odinswick**’ (Marwick 1995h [1923]:57). Unfortunately, Marwick didn’t explore this name in any more detail.

Warsetter (1500: Worsetter), once residence of the Sinclairs of Warsetter, is *varð-setr*, ‘beacon-homestead’. The farm-buildings stand close to **The Wart**, the highest point of the island.

This, of course, has not been an exhaustive examination of the name material still existing in the North Isles. And there are obvious difficulties involved in trying to decipher the meaning of names that in many cases are not documented until the most recent two or three centuries. In almost all the cases I have limited the presentation to names that were discussed – and interpreted – by Marwick. But, as I hopefully has been able to show, several Orkney place-names indicate that areas in some of these islands could rightly be designated as central place complexes with clear affinities to central places in Scandinavia, with central place indicators spread out over larger areas. However, there are also some apparent differences, one of them being the complete absence of names containing references to the pagan deities Njörðr and Ullr, which otherwise figure prominently in place-names associated with SW Norwegian central places (Olsen 1915, 1928; Stylegar & Grimm forthcoming). The reason could be that these deities belong to even older strata of the Norse pantheon. Anyway, the cultural landscape of for instance Stronsay appears to be ‘staged’ in a similar way to many Scandinavian central places. Should we perhaps, then, also expect similarities between the societal organisation and settlement pattern in Orkney and in the homelands on the other side of the ocean?

Settlement and military organisation in Viking Age Orkney

The initial settlement situation in Orkney is very different from, for instance, the Icelandic one. The Orkney isles were of course settled and inhabited for a very long time before the Norse *landnám*. There is also little reason for regarding the original settler community as representative of the Norwegian population as a whole in the 9th century. The Norse in Orkney were first and foremost warriors.

In a seminal paper, the archaeologist Raymond Lamb furnishes some of the Orkney background for the initial settlement. He argues that the Pictish kingdom around AD 800 was still a force to be reckoned with in the east of what is now Scotland, and that the Viking raiders initially found more scope in the West. Alongside the Church, the Pictish king would have the support of the equestrian aristocracy.

Lamb (1993:267-68) writes:

The key to the transformation of Pictish Orkney is simply that whereas the Pictish kingdom at its height of power in the 8th century was able to take in Orkney, it was unable to hold Orkney when challenged by a new elite with superior nautical technology and, above all, pride in seamanship.

Lamb's interpretation of how this might have happened is worth quoting *in extenso*:

'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. Such war-leaders would take the place of the discredited aristocracy, exercising authority through the existing structure of power, of which the Church was a fundamental component. At the top-level of society, the social upheaval would be dramatic; at the level of those who farmed the land and paid taxes, it may have made little immediate difference. It happens that at the Deerness Skaill, a high-status site, there is a sharp brake between Pictish and Norse settlement, whereas at Buckquoy, at the peasant level, there is gradual transition' (1993:268).

According to Lamb, then, the Norse war-lords substituted themselves for the Pictish aristocracy, thus implying a situation in many ways similar to the one in Francia. It could thus be argued that the Norse *landnám* in Orkney was aristocratic from the very outset; a hypothesis that would seem to fit well with the onomastic material. Recently, Brian Smith has argued strongly against Lamb's hypothetical scenario, instead advising us to 'expect the worst' from the Vikings and suggesting that that the Picts in Orkney were killed off by the Norsemen (Smith 2001:24; cf. Crawford 1981, who discusses a similar approach for the Western Isles). The question has also been raised if one should in fact regard 'most pagan Viking graves in

Britain (and perhaps most settlements too)' as belonging to, 'by their very nature, those of the mobile upper strata of Viking Age society: people who, for whatever reason, elected and could afford to travel to, trade with and colonise other lands' (Owen 1999:184-5).

But what would an aristocratic settlement organisation look like in the Early Viking Age? There is reason to believe that a typical Viking Age farm in Scandinavia was rather large, comparable to a small manor (Christensen 1983; Näsman & Roesdahl 1993). By the end of the Viking Age, if not earlier, aristocratic estates that cover much bigger areas than earlier, seem to be in place. In parts of Sweden runic inscriptions testify that farms divided by as much as 15 km are part of one and the same leading man's estate. As for Orkney, Olwyn Owen points out that 'typicality in Viking Orkney may mean larger farms, or an agglomeration of farmsteads, (rather) than the simple farmstead excavated, for instance, at Underhoull, Unst, Shetland' (1993:336).

Norwegian society in the Viking Age was an aristocratic one. Local aristocrats entered into either alliances or feuds with each other. Tied to, and subordinated to this leading strata were big farmers and lesser aristocrats, to whom other farmers were subordinated. The subordination of the farmers was based on trust; the farmer would be protected by the aristocrat, and the former would in return transfer to the aristocrat a part of his surplus production, i.e. a primitive form of the medieval system of land rent. Outside of the bonds of this system was a substantial population of slaves, thralls (Skre 1998; Iversen 1996).

The settlement structure in the coastal districts of Norway in this period – although we still do not know very much about it – appears to be the result of a great restructuring that took place in the preceding period, perhaps around AD 600. Around this time several settlements were abandoned. Using an analogy with the situation on the Continent, where the Frankish elite in the 6th century concentrates much of their trading and other activities on their own manor farms, it has been argued that what could seem to be a period of crisis in Norway around AD 600, is actually a willed contraction or nucleation of the settlements, engineered by the land-owning aristocracy (Stylegar 2001b).

In accordance with such a hypothesis the archaeologist Bjørn Myhre has argued that the relatively low number of grave finds from the following centuries could mean that power structures in the form of chiefdoms or even kingdoms with a much higher degree of permanence and centralisation than in the preceding centuries are now established. A more substantial part of the population are being subordinated to the leading social strata, and the land is being worked

by tenants and different categories of unfree labourers. Fewer monumental burial mounds are being built than in the preceding period – partly because the subordinate population no longer had the right to build them, and partly because more free farmers now had odal rights to their farms and no longer needed to ascertain their rights by intensive mound-building (Myhre 2000:11; cf. Skre 1998; Fyllingsnes 1999). Thus, Norwegian society in the Early Viking Age was an aristocratic one.

The early royal power was based on and developed these existing, local power structures. The king made the local magnates his loyal allies. The king's men were obliged to give military support to the king, while they in return could count on the king's friendship and help in upholding their local power and their estates. The risk the king's men were running, was that their subordinate relationship with the king might mean that the latter could confiscate their estates in the case of the king's men failing to serve the king faithfully. (This must also mean that the background for the substantial amount of earl's land in places like Stronsay might have a more complex background than proposed by, for instance, Marwick).

The Scandinavian societies of the Early Viking Age, however, were still relatively open systems where individuals and families of the upper social strata continuously were forced to defend their position and status against other individuals and families, who in principle were of the same rank. The leading men in this warrior society were lords, no doubt, but they were also gracious givers – of weapon, gold rings, big feasts – and ships (Varenius 1992). Only by giving, and giving in abundance, could a leading man uphold his status relative to other leading men. But the leading men were also war-lords, for the rich gifts that they were expected to provide, did not come from the land alone (Hedeager 1994).

War and plundering was necessary to keep up the gift-giving, and tax and fines were basically just a peaceful aspect of this. The purpose of this external exploitation was to provide the chieftain with riches, glory and reputation, so that he could attract the best warriors to his following, and win the most powerful leading men as his allies. The plundering could of course go hand in hand with peaceful trading. But when the Vikings were trading, their purpose was to get hold of luxury items and precious metals that could be put to use in the internal gift-economy. And whether they plundered or were engaged in trading activities, they did it with weapons in hand. For the Vikings were first and foremost warriors (*ibid.*).

A chieftain's military following was called his *lid*. In parts of Sweden such followings are mentioned in runic inscriptions from the

11th century (Lindkvist 1990). There, these military followings are mentioned in connection with seaborne plundering expeditions. The historian Thomas Lindkvist argues that the Swedish military followings were an integral part of an economy of external plunderings in the districts around the Lake Mälär (op cit.:52). It is probable that these followings belonged to local magnates, and that military followings used for external plundering expeditions in the Viking Age were a basis for local power.

Recently, some researchers have argued that we in the *lid* of the local leading man in the Viking Age in reality have the direct predecessor of the royal levy fleet of the medieval period. Christer Westerdahl thus writes that 'the medieval levy fleets of the North, posing as Crusaders in the east are the descendants of Viking Age fleets, and that the medieval organisation of the *leding* type is derived from the *lid*' (1995:45). This is in accordance with what the Norwegian historian Alexander Bugge wrote almost 80 years ago, namely that 'when a chieftain or a big farmer took to sea – whether for war or for peaceful trading purposes – it was his *huskarler*, freeborn members of his household, who steered the ship' (1923:126).

The later Viking expeditions, like Cnut the Great's invasion of England in the early 11th century, can thus be interpreted as consisting of a number of such locally or regionally based military followings or ship crews. In Cnut's fleet chieftains from much of Scandinavia participated. A runic inscription from Evje in Aust-Agder commemorates a certain *Bjor*, who 'died in the *lid* when Cnut attacked England' (Knirk 1997). *Bjor* may have been part of the *lid* of a local or regional chieftain allied with Cnut. A similar organisation has been proposed also for the famous Swedish 'Ingvarstog' in the 11th century (Lindkvist 1990:51).

The most informative source telling of how life might be for a chieftain and his *lid*, however, even if it is a late one, is to be found in the account in the *Orkneyinga Saga* (ch. 105) of the 'earl-maker', Sweyn Asleifson of Gairsay:

Winter he would spend at home in Gairsay, where he entertained some eighty men at his own expense. His drinking hall was so big, there was nothing in Orkney to compare it with. In the spring he had more than enough to occupy him, with a great deal of seed to sow which he saw to carefully himself. And when that job was done, he would go off plundering in the Hebrides and in Ireland on what he called his 'spring-trip', then back home just after midsummer, where he stayed till the cornfields had been reaped and the grain was safely in. After that he would go off raiding again, and never came back till the first month of winter was ended. This he used to call his 'autumn-trip.

The background for these 'trips' was of course Sweyn's need to get hold of the gifts necessary to ascertain his position in Orkney society and thus the continued loyalty of his followers. His plundering expeditions were the means that made it possible for Sweyn to fulfil his social obligations in an extensive network of gifts, counter-gifts and alliances.

Irish sources describe Sweyn's force composed of (quoted after Thomson 1987:73):

warlike men, clothed round with iron, after the Danish custom; some with long coats of mail, some with iron plates skilfully sewn together; also with round, red shields, strengthened in circles with iron; men of iron minds and iron arms.

Sweyn Asleifson's *lid* consisted of 80 warriors, which might represent two ships' companies (Thomson 2001:111). Other Saga sources tell of local Norwegian chieftains with considerable armed forces at their disposal. Snorri Sturluson, for instance, writes of Eyvind Urarhorn, who was later killed in Orkney by Earl Einar:

There was a man called Eyvind Urarhorn, who was a great man, of high birth, who had his descent from the East Agder county. Every summer he went out on a Viking cruise, sometimes to the West sea, sometimes to the Baltic, sometimes south to Flanders, and had a well-armed *snekkia* of twenty benches of rowers (Saga of Olaf the Saint, ch. 60).

Gudleik Gersdke, who is also mentioned in the Saga of Olaf the Saint and also from Agder, 'was a great sailor and merchant', and he, like Eyvind, owned a ship.

'A well armed *snekkia* of twenty benches of rowers' – that is a war vessel with 40 well-equipped warriors. This is a huge *lid* to entertain. And Sweyn Asleifson is said to have a military following twice as big! Even if the main farms of Sweyn, Eyvind and Gudleik must have been big (Eyvind may have had his farm near the modern city of Kristiansand, Vest-Agder), it seems unlikely that a single farm alone could accommodate such a large number of warriors.

It is more likely that chieftains like Sweyn and his predecessors granted their trusted men the income from farms belonging to their estates. Since Viking Age estates were probably more or less locally based, at least in Norway, there is reason to believe that the men in the *lid* were residing at farms in the vicinity of the chieftain's main farm.

From the Isle of Man the chronicles relates that on the day after Gudrod Crovan's successful conquest of the island in the late 11th century, Gudrod gave his men a choice between dividing up the island

among them so that they could settle down and live there, and taking what the island had to offer in the way of plunder and returning home therewith (Marwick 1995g:135).

For SW Norway it has recently been suggested that the Viking Age boat graves are connected to such grants, as the substantial number of boat graves in the county of Vest-Agder are found in marked clusters in and around settlements that could be interpreted as manor farms (Stylegar 1999, 2000). Thus, it has been argued that the men buried in the boat graves may have belonged to a military structure similar to Sweyn Asleifson's *lid*, and that it was in the *lid* that these men had the military rank and position that this particular burial custom sometimes reveals. That boats and boat symbols would occupy an important position within this military stratum, should come as no surprise. As pointed out by Westerdahl (1995:44):

[t]he honour of being a *bonde*, a free man equipped with his own axe, sword and spear, may have been even less important than this permanent seat on a warship of one's master. This may have been the mark of distinction of a masculine warrior society, where only 'the best' are accepted into the team. Here the system presupposes rowing men, not only in the ship, but also in society as a whole, since this is only the maritime aspect of the following of a great man.

It is tempting to suggest a similar background for the Orkney boat graves. But this can be no more than a working hypothesis. The *lid*, however, must have been an integral, yes, defining, feature of Orkney society in the Viking Age, as it was in Scandinavia. The place-name pattern in some of the islands could hypothetically be linked to this aristocratic, military type of societal organisation. The war-lords themselves may have resided in places like Houseby in Stronsay (even if the Houseby-name itself is probably of younger date), Skaill in Rousay, and Langskaill in Gairsay. The northern isles of Orkney, like Sanday according to Thomson, 'is likely to have been a society dominated by unruly magnates rather than inhabited by independent peasant farmers' (Thomson 1999:6).

Concluding remarks

The purpose of this paper has been to try to show that the Scandinavian concept of the central place can be applied also in an Orkney context. The place-names in the islands of Stronsay, Rousay, North Ronaldsay, Papa Westray, and Sanday was our starting point. I

argued that the place-name patterns in these islands are rather similar to the patterns found in central place complexes of the Viking Age and early medieval period in Norway or Sweden, in the sense that names denoting superior settlements, cultic activity, defences, signalling systems, important maritime sites etc are found in rather extensive clusters. It is further argued that this place-name pattern is indicative of an aristocratic social organisation and settlement structure, and it is proposed that the *lid*-organisation known from Swedish and Norwegian Viking Age sources, as well as from Orkney at a somewhat later date, could be responsible for this.

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