

CAITHNESS IN THE SAGAS

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'Blood rains
From the cloudy web
On the broad loom
Of slaughter.
The web of man,
Grey as armour,
Is now being woven;
The Valkyries
Will cross it
With a crimson weft.

'The warp is made
Of human entrails;
Human heads
Are used as weights;
The heddle-rods
Are blood-wet spears:
The shafts are iron-bound,
And arrows are the shuttles.
With swords we will weave
This web of battle.'

(*Njals Saga* 349)

Such were the deadly verses which a man named Dorrud heard chanted in Caithness on the morning of Good Friday, 1014. Twelve ghastly women were weaving 'Odin's web', directing the fates of men on their terrible loom:

'Let him who listens
To our Valkyrie song
Learn it well
And tell it to others.'

As Dorrud watched 'they tore the woven cloth from the loom and ripped it to pieces, each keeping the shred she held in her hands...The women mounted their horses and rode away, six to the south and six to the north'.

THE WORLD OF THE SAGAS

This impressive poem, *Darraðarljóð*, with its mixture of Celtic and Norse motifs (Holtmark 1939.74-96), beautifully symbolises the cultural cross-roads and the place of Caithness in the seamless web of history. Caithness was a great Celtic beach on which the Norse wave broke. In the ebb and flow of almost five centuries two great cultures clashed and mingled. Throughout the Viking age and beyond, this area, so often regarded as remote and peripheral was actually at the centre of a world which extended beyond frontiers unimagined before the Viking expansion. Though

familiar enough, the Viking achievement is worthy of emphasis. Their revolution in maritime transport led them from Spitzbergen in the north to their colonies in Normandy and Sicily. Traders took black slaves from North Africa, through Ireland and the Hebrides to the lucrative markets of Norway. Using the stepping stone route via Shetland, the Faroes, Iceland and Greenland they reached Vinland on the North American continent. The Swedes traded across the vast plains of Russia to the Black Sea.

Fortunately for posterity the Norwegian settlers in Iceland preserved a written record in a literature as brilliant and diversified as the achievements they describe. The Icelandic sagas, those great vernacular prose narratives which must have originated, in part, in oral tradition, were written down in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The so-called family sagas are probably best known but there are also historical sagas about the kings of Norway, legendary tales about surrealistic characters who inhabit fantastic landscapes, and stories about saints. The sagas constitute a seductive subject and confronted by the dazzling society which they depict it is difficult to resist the temptation to question the legitimacy of the historian's dead hand. Few concern themselves with historicity as they watch Skarp-Hedin skating across the ice to give Thrain his death-blow in a graceful, ballet-like motion. 'The axe crashed down on his head and split it down to the jaw-bone, spilling the back-teeth on to the ice' (*Njals Saga* 203). It is difficult to avoid a thrill of horror as Helgi Harbeinsson wipes his bloody sword, which has just despatched her husband, on the sash of the smiling Gudrun who is already carrying the child who will one day avenge the death of his father (*Laxdaela Saga* 188). At the tender age of three, Egil Skallagrimsson was refused permission to attend a party — '“You're not going”, said his father, “You don't know how to behave yourself when there's company gathered and a lot of drinking going on. You're difficult enough to cope with when you're sober” ' (*Egils Saga* 79). *Grettir's Saga* displays psychological insights reminiscent of Hogg's *Justified Sinner*. In the *Prose Edda* Snorri Sturluson speculated on the origins of life (Young 1954.33). The eponymous hero of *Órvar-Odds Saga* is denied death, cursed as he is with a life of three hundred years. But the vast majority of those depicted in the sagas are ordinary, recognisable human beings seeking solutions to the predicament of life.

The sagas were literary creations intended sometimes to instruct, but almost always, above all, to entertain. As the author of *Ganger-Hrolf's Saga* put it:

'Since neither this nor any other thing can be made to please everybody, no one need believe any more of it than he wants to believe, but it's always the best and most profitable thing to listen while a story is being told, and get pleasure from it, and not be gloomy, because it's a fact that as long as people are enjoying the entertainment, they'll not be thinking any sinful thoughts.'

(Pálsson & Edwards 1971.21)

The question of how the saga men perceived the past — of what they thought history was — is highly complex. Some sagas, for example those devoted to the kings of Norway, are rather reminiscent of chronicles in the

sense that they record historical events which were actually believed to have taken place. But all sagamen were interested in the artistic possibilities of history; they provided literary statements of historical truth. The problem has been neatly epitomised by W.H. Auden — ‘The Historian cannot function without some assistance from the Poet nor the Poet without some assistance from the Historian but as in any marriage the question of who is to command and who to obey is the source of common quarrels’ (Auden 1968.49). What follows is an attempt to discern what both the poet and the historian have to offer on the history of Caithness during the saga period.

ORKNEYINGA SAGA AND EARLY NORSE CAITHNESS

Although there is no *Katnesinga Saga*, no ‘History of the Men of Caithness’, it could be argued that such a saga is preserved in *Orkneyinga Saga* which has just as much to say about the north mainland of Scotland as it does about Orkney. Indeed the fate of Caithness and its relationship to both the earldom of Orkney and the kingdom of Scotland, is one of the great themes of the story. The earliest name for *Orkneyinga* was *Jarla Saga* or *sogur*, the saga, or sagas, of the earls, a title which seems to have included the earls of Caithness (Guðmundsson 1965.vi-vii). The familiar *Orkneyinga* has rather blinded critics to the content of the saga. One of the most striking aspects of a story which everyone assumes to be about Orkney is that it proves so difficult in the opening chapters of the saga to persuade anyone to become earl of the place.

Norse Raids and Scottish Treachery

Harald Finehair grants Orkney and Shetland to Earl Rognvald of More who passes them to his brother, Sigurd the Mighty. After Sigurd’s death his son, Guthorm, ‘ruled the earldom for a year but died childless’. Earl Rognvald then sent his son Hallad westwards, ‘But vikings scoured the isles and the coast of Caithness, killing men and plundering’. Hallad was powerless to resist ‘so, tiring of his rule, he gave up the earldom and went back to Norway as a common landholder. This excursion made him a laughing stock’ (O.S.5).¹ The by now somewhat perplexed Rognvald says that of his remaining sons, two are destined for greater things. Then his eye falls upon his youngest son, Einar. ‘Considering the kind of mother you have, slave-born on each side of her family you’re not likely to make much of a ruler. The sooner you leave and the later you return the happier I’ll be’. In this unpromising material Orkney finds her master and a succession of earls who would carry her into the thirteenth century.

One other noteworthy aspect of the opening sections of *Orkneyinga Saga* centres upon content. In the brief notice of Earl Sigurd’s career there is no mention of his activities in Orkney itself. Instead, in an episode which obviously captured the imagination of the Icelanders since it is included in several sagas, Sigurd began a series of attacks upon the Scottish mainland in alliance with Thorstein the Red. Their exploits were noted in *Landnámabók* which describes the original settlement of Iceland between

c.870 and c.930. It also lists the names of the earliest settlers including a number from Ireland, the Hebrides and Scotland. One such settler was a man named Svartkel from Caithness who may be presumed to have been a Christian since his grandson addressed the following prayer to the cross (*Landnámabók* 24):

‘Good luck to the old
Good luck to the young.’

Ari Thorgilsson, the Learned, Iceland’s earliest historian, also described Sigurd’s adventures in a work now lost (*Laxdaela Saga* 51), but his exploits were also recounted in *Heimskringla*, in *Laxdaela Saga* and in *Eiriks Saga Rauða*. The reason Sigurd’s conquests were so widely known was that his ally, Thorstein, was the son of Aud the Deep-minded, daughter of Ketil Flatnose a great Norwegian chieftain who settled in the Hebrides early in the ninth century. Aud migrated to Iceland where she and her descendants settled in the Breidafjord district, an area which was to become most prolific in the production of sagas. Given the Icelandic interest in ancestor worship it is not surprising that the memory of Aud’s son Thorstein should be preserved. According to all of these sagas Thorstein and Sigurd conquered Caithness and Sutherland, Moray and Ross, and a large part of Scotland. Only Snorri Sturluson is rather conservative, contenting himself with the acquisition of Caithness and Sutherland as far as Ekkjalsbakki or Strathoykel (*Heimskringla* 78). All accounts agree that Thorstein became a king of the Scots until he was betrayed by the Scots and killed in battle. His mother, Aud, was in Caithness when she learned of his death. ‘She had a ship built secretly in a forest and when it was ready she sailed away to Iceland’ (*Landnámabók* 51).

Mediaeval Icelanders would have expected such treacherous behaviour from the Scots who enjoy a sinister and unenviable reputation in the sagas. Earl Sigurd was a notable victim of Scottish² faithlessness when he was slain by the man that he had previously killed in battle. Sigurd had obviously been corrupted by the natives during his short stay in Scotland for, having agreed to meet the Scottish earl, Maelbrigte Tusk, with forty men on each side he ‘suspected the Scots would play him false and he therefore had eighty men mounted on forty horses’. Not surprisingly Sigurd was victorious and he cut off the heads of his victims, suspending that of Maelbrigte from his own saddlebow. When the deadly tusk or tooth of Maelbrigte grazed Sigurd’s leg, he contracted blood-poisoning and died. Such head hunting recalls ancient Celtic practice. Many centuries before the fight between Sigurd and Maelbrigte, Diodorus Siculus remarked that the Celts ‘cut off the heads of enemies slain in battle and attach them to the necks of their horses’ (Ross 1970.73). There is a fascinating possibility that Eric Talbot’s exciting discoveries at the Clowe³ represent archaeological corroboration of this part of the saga, to the extent, at least, that some kind of head cult was indeed practised in Caithness. One interesting point about the unfortunate Sigurd, however, is that he was buried not in Orkney, but at Sydera in Strathoykel.

Norse Feuding

Sigurd's successor Einar, tall, ugly and one-eyed with a proclivity towards poetry and peat-cutting surely asserted some kind of proprietorial claims when he exploited the peat beds of Tarbatness (*O.S.7*). When Halfdan Long-leg, son of king Harald Finehair arrived in Orkney, Einar fled to Scotland. Having sent Halfdan to Valhalla by carving the blood-eagle on his back, Einar fled to Caithness to escape the wrath of king Harald. Einar's grandson had the misfortune to marry Ragnhild, the daughter of Eric Blood-axe of York. Ragnhild, like her infamous mother Gunnhild, was a neat example of a true Norse harpie, the kind of female capable of weaving the web of death with the Valkyries and carving the blood eagle on someone's back at one and the same time. A true 'femme fatale' she promoted a chain of carnage by offering herself to the murderers of her chosen victims beginning with her husband. Each time the panting blood-bespattered champion returned to claim his prize, he had already been marked down as the next victim of the next lay. The troubles which were to plague the northern earls until the thirteenth century were securely rooted in this series of murders. One of the murderers was told by a seer to delay his mission for a day, 'otherwise for long years there will be killings within your kindred' (*O.S.9*). Of course the advice was ignored and the north obtained the predicted legacy of feuding and internecine strife as brother contended with brother, kinsman challenged kinsman, for control of the earldom.

These tenth century earls retained their interest in Caithness. Ragnhild's first husband was killed at Murkle. She eventually married one of his brothers, Ljot, while yet another, Skuli, 'travelled across to Scotland where he was given the title of earl by the King of Scots (*O.S.10*). Skuli then gathered an army in Caithness to challenge Ljot for the earldom of Orkney. They fought two battles, the second in the district of Dale, in which Skuli enjoyed the support of forces supplied by the king of Scots and Earl MacBeth. Following Ljot's victory, MacBeth engaged him in battle at Skitten near Wick, only to be defeated by Ljot's inferior force. Ljot's successor was buried at Ham and his son Sigurd 'was powerful enough to defend Caithness against the Scots.' He too fought battles against Scottish earls at Skitten. How is this interest which all of these earls of Orkney had in Caithness to be explained? The answer is to be found in a couple of references preserved in *Landnámabók* and *Heimskringla* although curiously omitted in *Orkneyinga Saga*.

ELEVENTH CENTURY CAITHNESS: A SCOTTISH PROVINCE

Norse Aspirations: The Growth of a Celto-Norse Kindred

Ljot and Skuli were the sons of Thorfinn Skullsplitter, son of Einar. Thorfinn had married Greloth, daughter of Dungath or Duncan Earl of Caithness from whom Duncansby presumably takes its name. Furthermore, Duncan's wife was Groa, daughter of Thorstein the Red, a marriage arranged by Aud the Deep-minded after Thorstein's death

(*Heimskringla* 351; *Landnámabók* 51). This marriage created a Celto-Norse kindred to which the earls of Orkney belonged and through which they had a claim to the earldom of Caithness [Fig.2.1]. A.C. Lawrie long ago observed, 'Caithness did not form a part of Celtic Scotland; it was held by the Norsemen' (Lawrie 1905.224) but his statement must be open to

THE GROWTH OF A CELTO-NORSE KINDRED IN CAITHNESS

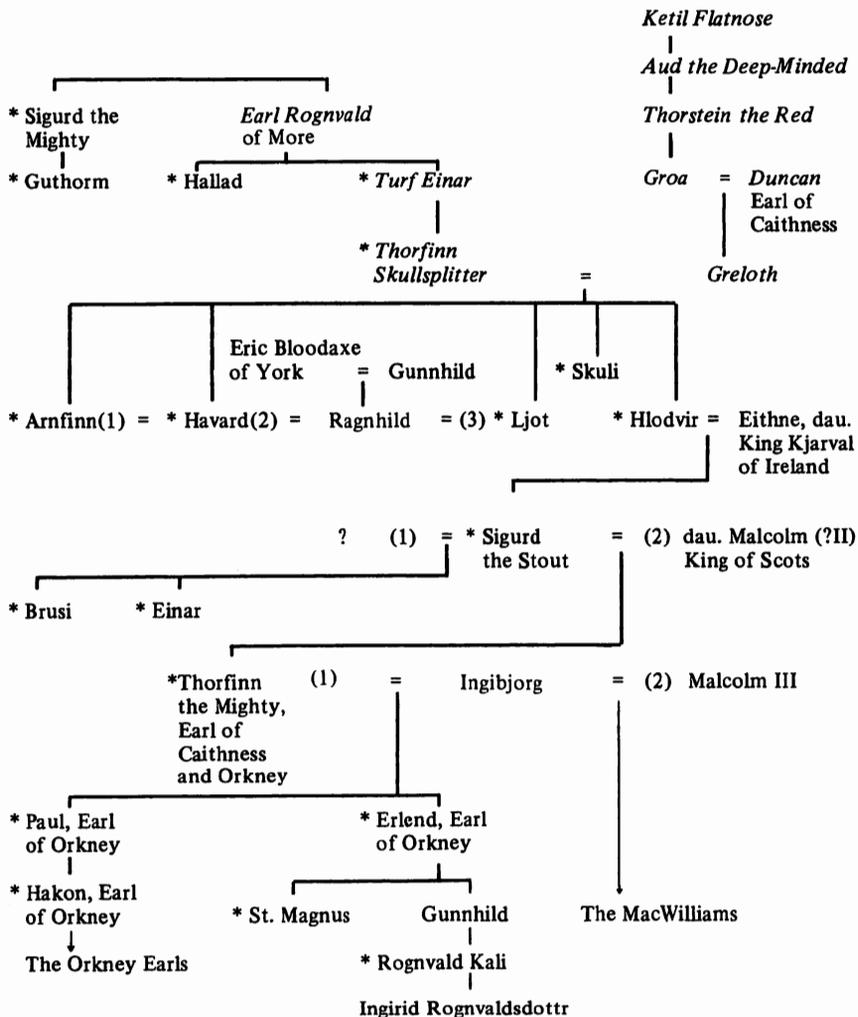


Fig. 2.1. The growth of a Celto-Norse kindred in Caithness. (Earls of Orkney are indicated* For the later succession, see Fig. 2.2).

question. The author of the twelfth century tract *De Situ Albaniæ* acknowledges the assistance of Andrew, Bishop of Caithness, in compiling his geographical description of Scotland which he divides into seven *regiones* or provinces. 'The seventh part [of Scotland] is Caithness, to this side of the mountain, and beyond the mountain; because the mountain of Mound divides Caithness through the middle' (Anderson 1922.I.cxvi; Anderson 1973.242). According to this account each of the provinces of Scotland contained a *subregio* and Caithness would seem to fit this pattern. When William the Lion invaded the north he 'bowed to his will, both provinces of the Caithnessmen' (Fordun 1871.I.274). It would thus seem that at the end of the twelfth century Caithness was still regarded as part of the kingdom of Scotland. The sagas are quite explicit on the same point for although the earls clearly depended upon the kings of Norway for their tenure of Orkney, they looked to the king of Scots for possession of Caithness.

Although no earls or mormaers of Caithness are recorded in Scottish sources, those named in *Orkneyinga Saga* such as Duncan, Maelbrigte or MacBeth all bear Gaelic names. Succession in Gaelic Scotland took place within the *derbfine*, the four generations of descent from a common male ancestor so that, at any given point, there might be several rival contenders for the mormaership. It is well attested that no incomer could be given the title of earl or mormaer unless he had some claim rooted in the kin-base. One obvious way to acquire such a claim was through marriage and this was exactly what the descendants of Thorfinn could argue. The historical accuracy of many of the saga statements about this early period must be open to question but what these statements undoubtedly do represent is the reality of the unfolding drama of Caithness as one of the great contact points between native and Norseman and this theme is partially explored in the literature of the saga period. The density of Norse settlement in the Northern Isles almost totally obliterated the native culture. Native sources for the Western Isles are scanty in the extreme. Caithness is thus uniquely well documented for the study of relations between the two cultures. It is possible to suggest a history, however imperfect, which can then be elaborated through the ancillary disciplines of archaeology, folk-lore and place-name study.

The Emergence of the Moddan Kindred of Dale

Through time the Norse involvement in Caithness increased by means of marriage, procreation and alliance. It is not, therefore, in the least surprising that Dorrud should have interested himself in the outcome of the battle of Clontarf in which Earl Sigurd fell in 1014. Sigurd had married a daughter of Malcolm, king of Scots, (*Skotakonungr*), probably Malcolm II, and their son was the memorable Thorfinn the Mighty whom Malcolm recognised as earl of Caithness. Much of Thorfinn's early career was pre-occupied with a prolonged struggle with his brothers, particularly Einar and Brusi, over the partition of the earldom of Orkney. Using Caithness as a base he eventually held not only the mainland earldom but also two

THE MODDAN KINDRED OF DALE, CAITHNESS

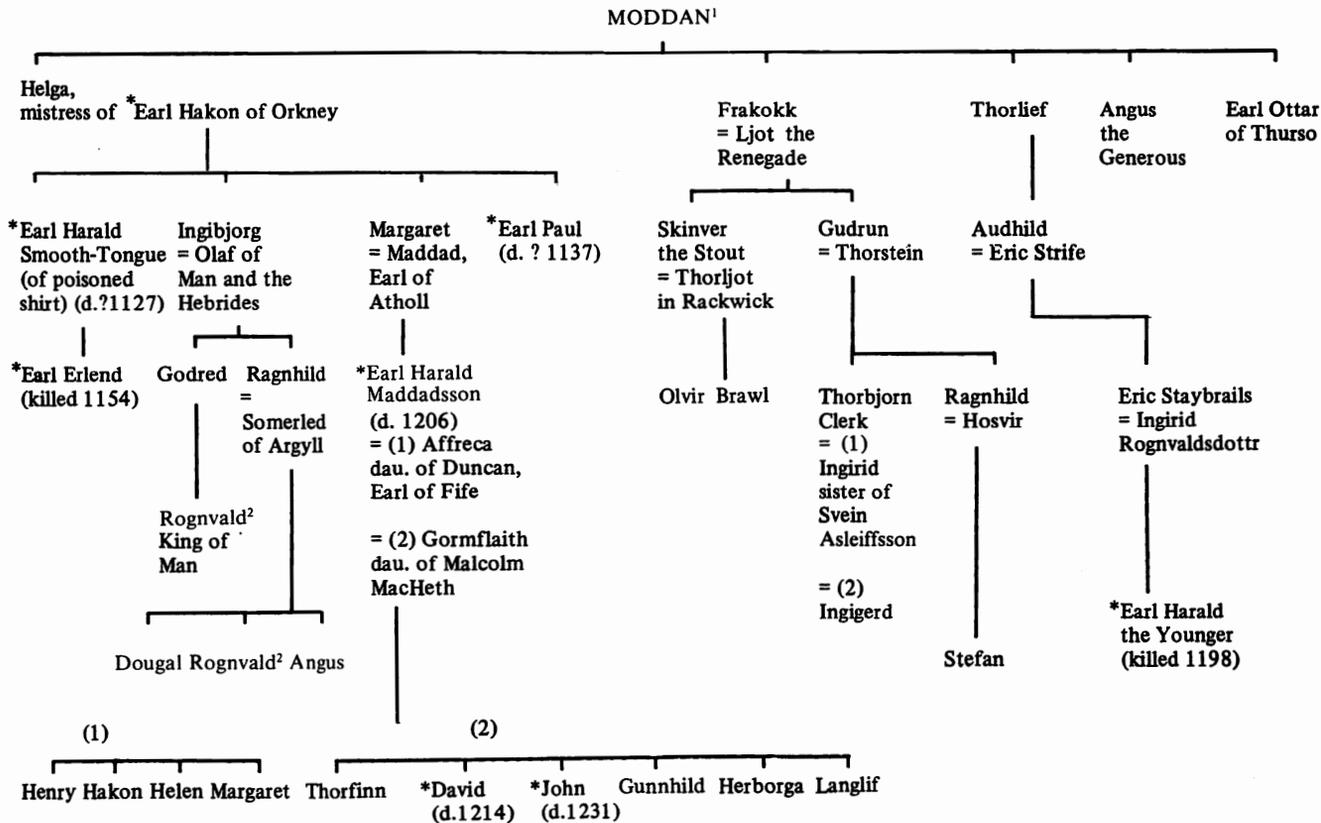


Fig. 2.2. The Moddan clan: a Celto-Norse kindred. (¹Moddan's uncle was Karl Hundason, ?alias MacBeth: ²or Reginald. Earls of Orkney are indicated*).

thirds of Orkney, though his position was jeopardised when his grandfather died to be succeeded by the mysterious Karl Hundason. King Karl preferred to recognise the claim of his nephew, Moddan, to the earldom of Caithness, so promoting an internal power struggle within the *derbfine* of the Caithness kindred. Moddan may have the same name, though he need not be the same man as Matain who appears in the Gaelic notitiae in the *Book of Deer*. Matain was the son of Cairell (Jackson 1972.30, 33) which name might recall the Karl of the saga. Coincidence, however, while it may be the stuff of history, is no basis for historical research. It is perhaps less speculative to suggest that whoever Moddan was he was almost certainly the eponymous of the extremely important Celto-Norse family known as Moddan of Dale [Fig. 2.2].

The identity of Karl Hundason has puzzled many commentators (Taylor 1937.334-342). The present writer intends to set out the full evidence for the identification elsewhere, but Karl Hundason was almost certainly MacBeth. The identification depends upon the assumption that the battle of Skitten fought in the last decade of the tenth century between Earl Sigurd and Earl Finnleikr (*O.S.*11) is the same as the battle of Duncansby mentioned in *Njal's Saga*. In the latter, Sigurd's opponent is Earl Hundi (*Njal's Saga* 183). The author of *Njala* is pretty hazy about Scottish topography and chronology. If Earl Finnleikr and Earl Hundi are one and the same then Hundason is the son of Finnleikr and it is well attested that Findlaech was indeed the name of MacBeth's father (Anderson 1922.I.579). MacBeth as mormaer of Moray was clearly attempting to exert his influence in the north in association with those who had claims to be mormaer of Caithness. Chapter Twenty of *Orkneyinga Saga* describes how Thorfinn and MacBeth fought the naval battle off Deerness. Having defeated MacBeth, Thorfinn and his foster-father, Thorkel, decide to turn their attentions to Moddan:

'They learned that Moddan was north at Thurso in Caithness with a strong force of men. He had sent for troops from Ireland, where he had a good many friends and kinsmen but he was still waiting for the reinforcements to arrive. Thorfinn and his men decided that Thorkel the Fosterer should go north to Caithness with some of their troops while Thorfinn lay at anchor off Scotland and carried on plundering there. Thorkel was able to travel in secrecy for all the people of Caithness were faithful and loyal to him. As a result there was no news of his movements until one night he turned up in Thurso, seized the house Moddan was in, and set fire to it. Moddan was asleep in an upstairs-room and as he jumped off the balcony Thorkel took a swing at his neck, slicing off his head.'

At his death c.1065 Thorfinn's obituary noted him as one of the greatest of the Orkney earls. He was deeply mourned in 'his own hereditary lands [i.e. Caithness] but in those lands which he had brought under him by the sword it seemed to many a hard lot to live under his rule' (*O.S.*32). It is known that one of the early versions of *Jarla Saga* broke off at this point and it is of interest that Caithness does not again figure prominently in *Orkneyinga* as we now have it until after the martyrdom of St Magnus c.1117. When Caithness does re-emerge, however, it does so as part of an important theme which sweeps along until the end of the story.

NORSE CLAIMS REVIVED: THE MODDAN KINDRED IN THE TWELFTH CENTURY

The Scheming of Frakokk, Helga and Harald Smooth-Tongue

Earl Hakon, who had obliquely martyred St Magnus, had two sons by different mothers. Earl Harald Smooth-Tongue was his son by his mistress, Helga, daughter of Moddan of Dale and he revived the old claim to Caithness. He was ably assisted against his brother Paul by his mother and by his aunt, the sinister Frakokk. The brothers were supposed to hold a Yule-tide feast at Orphir. Frakokk and Helga had thoughtfully prepared a Christmas present for Earl Paul in the shape of a poisoned shirt which their favourite, Harald, tried on by mistake, with dire consequences. Paul then ejected the fatal sisters from Orkney and they withdrew to Kildonan. There they were to bring up the deceased Harald's son, Erlend, and Harald's sister, Margaret, as well as two of Frakokk's grandsons, Olvir Brawl and Thorbjorn Clerk. The saga alerts its audience to future trouble. 'All these people were high-born and thought well of themselves. They all believed that they had a just claim on the earldom of Orkney which had once belonged to their kinsman, Earl Harald. Frakokk had two brothers, Angus the Generous and Earl Ottar of Thurso, a man of great character' (*O.S.*55). The very names of the Moddan clan [Fig. 2.2] indicate that it was a Celto-Norse kindred. They held territories in Thurso, in Dale and most important of all, at Helmsdale and Kildonan. It is tempting to speculate that Frakokk's husband, Ljot, earned his soubriquet 'the Renegade' for going native. He probably acquired the lands of Kildonan through his fearful wife who bore an otherwise unrecorded but probably Celtic name.⁴ The family's possession of Kildonan was highly significant for it effectively halted Norse expansion to the south.

By now Duncansby was held by a man named Olaf who also held the island of Gairsay. He had three sons, Valthjof, Gunni, and by far the best known, Svein Asleiffsson who took a matronymic on the death of his father.

When that gloriously meteoric character, Magnus Barelegs, swept down at the end of the eleventh century to seize the Hebrides for the Norwegian crown he compensated the son of a man who had died on the campaign by marrying him to the daughter of a deceased earl of Orkney. That man was named Kol and his son was Earl Rognvald, the builder of Kirkwall cathedral. Kol and Earl Rognvald made overtures to Earl Paul for a share of the earldom, threatening, in the event of a refusal, to recruit the support of Frakokk and Clan Moddan. Paul, one of the noblest characters in the whole saga, eloquently refused Rognvald's claim. 'There's no need to say anything more about it. I'll defend Orkney with the aid of my kinsmen and friends for so long as God lets me live' (*O.S.*63). Rognvald responded by appealing to a delighted Frakokk who boasted of her powerful friends and kinsmen by blood and marriage. She had some reason to boast for she had recently arranged a marriage between Margaret Hakonsdaughter and Maddad Earl of Atholl. In the event Frakokk's expedition turned out to be something of a fiasco and Earl Paul managed to defeat both Rognvald and

the Moddan kindred. Earl Paul was advised to seek support in Caithness (O.S.65), presumably to exploit current disenchantment with the increasing power of the Frakokk faction. Intermarriage between the two peoples is indicated by the name of one of Paul's followers, Eyvind Maelbrigteson. Another was Olaf of Gairsay burned to death at Duncansby by Olvir Brawl which left Olaf's son, Svein, to take his revenge in his own good time.

Svein Asleiffsson: Mischief-Maker

Svein Asleiffsson is one of the great twisters in the saga, a Loki-like character creating mischief at every turn. Following a killing he sought refuge in the Hebrides but before returning north he stopped off in Atholl to visit Earl Maddad and his recent bride. Learning of the continuing strife between Paul and Rognvald he decided ostensibly to support the Moddan faction, one of whom, Olvir, it must be remembered, had been responsible for the death of Svein's father. Svein first visited Frakokk's brother Ottar at Thurso. Ottar paid compensation for Frakokk's misdeeds while Svein, in return, promised to help Erlend Haraldsson to gain his inheritance in Orkney. Svein then contrived to kidnap Earl Paul whom he carried off to mutilation and death in an Atholl dungeon. In Atholl, Svein also arranged to have Harald Maddadsson placed in the Orkney earldom. He reported his part in Paul's disappearance to Rognvald who some months later received a visit from Bishop John who travelled from Atholl to argue Harald Maddadsson's claim. At a solemn meeting in Caithness the bishop and Rognvald agreed that Harald should be fostered by Rognvald and that when the boy came of age he should succeed to half the earldom. The bishop was John of Glasgow, the one-time tutor of David I. The placing of Harald in the earldom of Orkney is thus to be distinguished as a deliberate attempt by David, king of Scots to install his own candidate in Orkney. The House of Canmore was seeking to extend its frontier beneath the Pentland Firth. With Earl Harald, Caithness was to enter the most turbulent era of the saga period.

Peace reigned in the north. Kirkwall cathedral was under construction and the feuds for the moment were dormant. Svein, however, had still not avenged his father's killing. He requested and received two ships from Earl Rognvald:

'After that Svein prepared for the voyage, sailing south as soon as he was ready to the Moray Firth with a north-easterly wind as far as Banff, a market town in Scotland. From there he made his way beyond Moray to the Oykel, then on to Atholl where Maddad provided him with guides who knew the mountain and forest route he might choose. From Atholl he travelled by forest and mountain above all the settlements till he reached Helmsdale in the centre of Sutherland.

'Olvir and Frakokk had posted spies in every direction from which they might expect trouble from Orkney, but they didn't bargain for an attack from this one and had no idea the men were there until Svein led them down the hill-side behind Frakokk's farmstead. There Olvir Brawl faced them with sixty men, but though it didn't take long for the fighting to begin there was little resistance. Olvir and his men were unable to get away into the forest so they retreated down to the farmhouse, where there was fearful slaughter. Olvir managed to run to Helmsdale River and from there up the mountain,

over to the west coast and across to the Hebrides. Now he is out of the story. After Olvir had escaped, Svein and his men went to the farmstead and looted everything they could lay their hands on, then set fire to the house and burned everyone inside to death. That is how Frakkokk died.' (O.S.78)

The suggestion that Svein took this long circuitous route simply to catch his enemies unawares (Taylor 1938.388) seems barely tenable. The explanation is rather to be sought in the sagaman's hazy knowledge of Scottish geography. On the other hand striking corroboration for the existence of Olvir has recently been unearthed by Mr William Matheson, who has been able to demonstrate from surviving Gaelic genealogies that Olvir was an ancestor of the MacLeods (Matheson 1978.64).

Svein's machinations were to bring Caithness to the verge of civil war. When he departed for the Hebrides his steward, Margrad, behaved so oppressively that many men sought shelter from Hroald of Wick, a retainer of Earl Rognvald. Margrad, in due course, led a raid in which Hroald was killed, so forcing Svein into a defensive occupation of the fortress of Lambaborg sometimes identified with Bucholie (Omand 1972.153) although Broch of Ness south of the Bay of Freswick has also been suggested (Taylor 1938.390). Svein's escape from Lambaborg and his subsequent welcome from David I, fresh from plundering David's own foundation on the Isle of May, are alike barely credible. Indeed throughout the story Svein is depicted as a magnificent anachronism who exists, in part, to point up the weakness of Earl Rognvald's rule. He also ensured that the men of Caithness remained in a state of constant turmoil.

While Earl Rognvald was off on his fanciful crusade to the Mediterranean, king Eystein of Norway led an expedition to the west. The year was 1151. Learning that Harald Maddadsson lay at anchor at Thurso, Eystein slipped across the Pentland Firth and took him unawares. Harald was forced to ransom himself for three gold marks and to surrender his lands into the king's hands 'so that he would hold them from him ever afterwards'. As a poem in *Morkinskinna* has it (Taylor 1965.128):

'There were eighty men
with the son of Maddad.
The bold warrior won fame;
The seafarer with three cutters
Took the earl captive.
The gallant chieftain submitted
To the mighty prince!'

It was doubtless in response to Harald's apparent change of allegiance that the king of Scots granted Erlend the title of 'earl' and half of Caithness (O.S. 92). Erlend then appealed to the king of Norway for his share of the isles. While he was abroad Harald based himself at Wick and Svein remained at Freswick. The two latter had fallen out because Svein's brother had fathered a child on Harald's mother, Margaret.

Recurrent Feuding of Harald, Rognvald, Svein, Erlend and Thorbjorn Clerk

Developments in the closing section of the saga achieve a complexity which

defies reduction. What is noticable is that Caithness looms larger as the story proceeds. Earl Harald visits Thurso to make his peace with Rognvald who was up in Sutherland attending the marriage of his daughter, Ingirid, to Eric Staybrails. Eric, anxious that the two earls should come to terms 'by reason of their ties of kinship, fosterage and friendship', arranges a meeting between Harald and Rognvald at Thurso castle, an equal number of retainers on each side keeping watch outside. But the bitter feuds had reached such a pass that when Thorbjorn Clerk turned up he fell upon Rognvald's men without warning, killing thirteen of them and wounding Rognvald in the face before the fighting could be halted. Nonetheless Rognvald and Harald were reconciled and the two decided to act against Erlend and Svein. Throughout a winter of bitter weather the two factions attacked and counter-attacked, Erlend ending as a speared corpse in a heap of seaweed (*O.S.94*). Blood continued to drip from the blades. Men were killed like animals. Pacification was ruined by renewed quarrels between Thorbjorn Clerk and Svein Asleiffsson. The feuds which cursed the comital house continued to run their mindless course. What is depicted in the saga is a group of men who are trapped by forces which they do not understand, who butcher and maim and slay in spite of themselves, whose world is collapsing around them and whose actions are neither noble nor heroic.

The feuds were such a corrupting influence that they thoroughly debased the morality of the north. Botolf the Stubborn, asked by Erlend about the whereabouts of Rognvald, prostitutes poetry — which is supposed to be about truth — by compiling a poem designed to mislead Rognvald's pursuers. The earl was actually lurking in Botolf's farmhouse of Knarston but 'Botolf stretched out his arm towards the fence, and made this verse' (*O.S.94*):

'Out after eating-birds!
Fine archers, the earl's men:
hard for the hen-bird,
the head-shot on the hill.
Excellent the aim
of the elm-bows, savage
the grouse-hunt, grim
the guardian of the land.'

Svein Asleiffsson became so warped that he actually considered burning his own house on Gairsay even though it contained his wife and children because he thought Harald was inside. In a neatly observed little passage which indicates the complexities of perverted kinship, Svein's wife refuses to reveal where Harald is because '*hon var fraendkona jarls*' — she was related to the earl (*O.S. 95*). Here surely was a society slipping into chaos.

The Hunting of Thorbjorn Clerk

The earls, despite their differences at other times of the year, were in the habit of joining together for a deerhunt in late summer. In 1158 they were at Thurso when they learned that Thorbjorn Clerk was hiding in Thurso Dale. The late Dr A.B. Taylor has made much of what followed. In August

1929 'armed with saga text, map and camera, [he] set off on a bicycle to trace out the journey made by Earl Rognvald on those two fateful August days, 771 years before' (Taylor 1932.21). While Dr Taylor's investigation is of the greatest interest, he undoubtedly took liberties with the text on the basis of his own observations. Furthermore, he totally ignored the literary overtones in the description of Thorbjorn's death.

It is worth noting that the earls had come to Caithness to hunt deer; instead they hunt Thorbjorn. After spending the night in some shielings in Thurso Dale, they interrupted a scene of rural tranquillity the following morning. At the farm of Forsie the farmer, Hallvard, was standing on a stack of oats which he was building while his labourers forked to him. Thorbjorn was inside the farmhouse, drinking. When Hallvard saw it was Rognvald, he greeted him by name shouting very loudly 'and he could have been heard well enough had he been further away'. Thus was Thorbjorn warned and he swiftly attacked Rognvald. The latter received a gash in the face and while trying to dismount he was given a spear-thrust by Stefan Hosvirsson. Thorbjorn, in turn, took a spear through the thigh and lower abdomen before fleeing across the moor. Earl Harald had been riding at some distance behind Rognvald. When urged to pursue Thorbjorn he said he would wait for word of Rognvald, 'for as you know, I'm very close to Thorbjorn in kinship as well as many other ways'. He set out after Thorbjorn only after he was sure that Rognvald was actually dead. There follows a most touching scene as Thorbjorn tries to bargain for his life — Harald, it must be remembered was his foster-son. He is almost like a trapped deer, aware of the inevitable. He appeals to his kinship with Harald, to the shared past, to his honour and by implication to the earl's sense of gratitude for Thorbjorn points out that Harald has gained through the killing. Like a deer jumping a high fence to elude the hunter, he leaps nine ells across a ditch, only to double back for one last plea:

'He went up to Harald and knelt down, saying he was surrendering his head to the earl. "Look after yourself, Thorbjorn," said the earl, "I don't care to kill you"...Thorbjorn and his companions made their way to a desolate shieling called Assery. Magnus and his men were close behind and set fire to the building, but Thorbjorn's small band defended themselves bravely. All the same, when the house was burning and crumbling they came outside and at once people began to attack them wherever they were, though the fire had already weakened them. All nine companions were killed there. When they looked at Thorbjorn's wounds, they saw that his guts had fallen out through the one given him by Jomar.' (O.S. 103)

It is instructive to compare the foregoing account of Thorbjorn's noble death with the penultimate chapter of Snorri's *Heimskringla* after king Magnus Erlingsson has defeated the Birchlegs at Re. The Birchlegs' leader, Eystein, has been killed and his body is taken into the king's presence to be identified:

'There was one man sitting in the corner seat, and he was a Birchleg and no one paid any attention to him. When this man saw the corpse of his chief and recognised it, he rose suddenly and quickly. With an axe in his hand he rushed over to where King Magnus stood in the middle of the room and struck at him, and the blow fell on his neck near the shoulders. Some men saw the axe raised aloft and pushed the king away

so that the axe glanced towards the shoulder and made a big gash. Then the Birchleg raised his axe a second time and struck at Orm Kingsbrother. He lay on the raised floor and when Orm saw that the man wanted to kill him and the blow was aimed at his legs, he quickly threw his feet over his head and the axe struck the beam forming the edge of the dais and stood fast in it. But there were so many weapons driven in to this Birchleg by King Magnus' men that he could hardly fall. And only then did they see that he had dragged his intestines after him on the floor. That man's bravery was much praised by all.' (Heimskringla 820)

By the manner of his death Thorbjorn Clerk earned the praise of all as well as the sympathy and admiration of the author of *Orkneyinga Saga*.

Earl Harald Maddadsson

Earl Harald was the son of Margaret, daughter of Earl Hakon and Maddad, Earl of Atholl. The connection between the two kindreds was symbolised by Harald's grant of the church of Kildonan to the canons of Scone, which monastery was situated on the frontiers of Atholl (*O.P.S. II*, Pt 11.735). Harald also granted an annual mark of silver to Scone (Johnston 1928.2). Harald's first wife was Affreca, daughter of Duncan, Earl of Fife, the best marriage he could have made short of marrying into the immediate Scottish royal family and probably indicative of the special regard which king David had for him. He was to spearhead the advance of Scottish influence to the north. David had secured a bridehead by the creation of royal burghs at Inverness, Forres and Elgin. There is little evidence of significant penetration north of the Great Glen during his reign but a mandate does survive addressed to Rognvald, Earl of Orkney and all the goodmen of Caithness and Orkney, commanding them to respect, maintain and protect the men and possessions of the monks at Dornoch (Lawrie 1905.100).

The House of Canmore was not unchallenged in the twelfth century. The Men of Moray, who were of the kindred of MacBeth, were particular thorns in the flesh of the kings of Scots. Angus Earl of Moray was killed in 1130 (Anderson 1922.II.174). The struggle was continued by Malcolm MacHeth, Earl of Ross whose ancestry is not fully understood but who certainly had respectable claims. He allied himself with the equally recalcitrant lords of Galloway. It is recorded that after one MacHeth rising Malcolm IV 'removed them all from the land of their birth as of old Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, had dealt with the Jews, and scattered them throughout the other districts of Scotland beyond the hills' (Fordun 1871.256-7). A Mackay tradition which has by no means found universal acceptance, claims that the Mackays were descended from the MacHeths (Mackay 1906.24). Another of the great 'reactionaries' with whom MacHeth allied was Somerled of Argyll who rebelled in 1153 and again in 1164 when he was killed at Renfrew. There was yet another revolt in the 1180s by the MacWilliams who were descendants of the marriage between Malcolm III and Ingibjorg, widow of Thorfinn the Mighty (Anderson 1922.II.313).

It is of the greatest significance that Earl Harald Maddadsson put away his first wife, Affreca, in order to marry Gormflaith, daughter of Malcolm

MacHeth (Anderson 1908.318). According to Fordun, Harald was hitherto 'a good and trusty man but goaded on by his wife he had deceived his lord and risen against him' (Fordun 1871.I.274). If, as seems likely, Harald's second marriage took place around 1180, he must have been consciously identifying with the MacWilliam revolt. His change of allegiance can be interpreted as a defensive move for what he feared was the curtailment of his own power as the king of Scots advanced his frontier to the Pentland Firth.

According to *Sturlunga Saga* the powerful and wealthy Icelandic chieftain, Saemund of Oddi, wished to marry Langlif, daughter of Earl Harald but 'this was the obstacle, that Saemund would not go to Orkney for the wedding, and the earl would not send her out [to Iceland] either' (Anderson 1922.II.238; Taylor 1938.32-3). It is tempting to see these negotiations as the occasion on which something like the present version of *Orkneyinga Saga* was transmitted to Iceland. If so it is hardly surprising that the last few chapters give such a mangled account of Harald's career since there was obviously some attempt to present him in the best possible light.

Harald the Younger, grandson of Earl Rognvald, managed to receive, in the time-honoured fashion, recognition of his claims to Caithness and to Orkney from the kings of Scotland and Norway respectively. In 1194 Harald Maddadsson was rash enough to permit the recruitment of the gloriously named 'Island Beardies' within his territories, for a revolt against King Sverri of Norway. The bid failed and Harald was forced to attend the king at Bergen. There, in abject humility, Harald had to suffer the confiscation of Shetland, the forfeiture of the estates of those Orcadians who had died fighting against Sverri, a fine and the loss of half the earl's tribute or taxes (Anderson 1922.344-6). The whole episode is given only the briefest mention in *Orkneyinga Saga* which notes that Sverri 'took back from Harald the whole of Shetland, with all its taxes and revenues, and since that time the Earls of Orkney have not ruled in Shetland' (O.S.112). A certain embarrassment about Shetland may explain why there is so little mention of the place throughout the whole of the saga.

Harald's troubles were far from over. In 1196 William the Lion led an army into Caithness, destroying Thurso castle and demanding hostages. 'It was a truly massive army that the king of Scots led,' says the author of *Orkneyinga Saga*, whose chronology disagrees with other sources and who was perhaps wilfully confused about the whole sequence of events. 'He marched ahead to Ausdale near the boundary between Caithness and Sutherland and there his camp extended from one end of the valley to the other, quite a distance' (O.S.112). The most circumstantial account of William's northern campaign, as well as the most convincing chronology for Harald's later years, is found in the *Chronica* of Roger Howden, an English cleric closely associated with the court of King John (Gransden 1974.225-9). Roger was an exact contemporary of Harald. He was interested in Scandinavian affairs as well as Scottish history. The latter was

currently of some concern to King John since William claimed the northern English counties for Scotland (Stubbs 1868-71.IV.142).

William, having secured Harald the Younger's claim to half of Caithness, withdrew. Fordun neatly observed the significance of the expedition when he noted that the King 'led his army into Caithness, crossed the River Oykel, and subjugated both the provinces of the Caithnessmen' (Fordun 1871.I.274). The mystique of Ekkjalsbakki, established when the first Sigurd was buried there so long before, was dissipated forever. In 1198 the two Haralds met at Wick, the younger being killed in a fiercely fought battle. William responded by sending Rognvald or Reginald of Man into Caithness. It is noteworthy that the latter was a member of the comital *derbfine* and hence could be deemed to have some claim to Caithness. After a successful campaign Reginald withdrew, leaving three stewards in control of the province. One of these was killed on the instructions of Harald who, for good measure, seized the Bishop of Caithness from his palace at Scrabster and mutilated him (*O.S.* 111,112). Just how Harald managed to survive is something of a mystery but survive he did. Perhaps a clue is given in the English record evidence. Harald's chaplain, Adam, with some companions travelled to England on King John's business in 1201 (Bain 1881-8. I.321,324), possibly to Corbridge where John was carrying out excavations in search of treasure which turned out to be junk (Stubbs 1868-71.IV.157). Roger fitz Roger demanded ten marks for the ship in which they sailed by the king's writ. The following year Harald himself received a safe conduct to travel to Geddington (Lawrie 1910.341), but there is no indication of whether he went. Harald presumably figured in John's plans for distracting William the Lion from his designs on the northern English counties. These entries also explain Roger Howden's interest in developments in the far north. Harald was undoubtedly a figure of international stature. The words placed in his mouth during his painful interview with King Sverri were most apt. 'I am now an old man as you can see by my beard. I have drawn near to the knees of many kings, sometimes with much affection, and often in difficult circumstances' (*Sverri's Saga* 156). He was a great survivor and in that respect he was a true Caithnessian. *Orkneyinga Saga* concludes that he was one of the most powerful of all the earls.

CAITHNESS IN THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY

The saga period was not, of course, yet over. Harald had put out the eye and cut out the tongue of Bishop John at Scrabster because he seemed to favour King William's plans for Caithness. John was fortunate that St Triduana intervened to restore him. Less fortunate was Bishop Adam who rashly increased the tribute due to the church. His irate flock complained to Earl John, Harald's successor, to no avail. They took matters into their own hands, rising against the bishop at his house in Halkirk 'like wolves against the shepherd, degenerate sons against their father, and satellites of the devil against Christ the Lord; stripped him of his proper vestments, struck him, stoned him, wounded him to death with a double-sided axe and

roasted him to death in his own kitchen' (Anderson 1922. II.451). The foregoing letter from the Scottish bishops to the Pope was conceived as emotive propaganda and it worked. The bloodthirsty account of Adam's death has been widely accepted because it is contained in an episcopal letter. Had the story occurred in a saga it might have been ignored or seriously doubted, for historians tend to doubt the vernacular and revere the Latin. As it is, the saga account simply states that Adam was burned to death. Alexander II of Scotland took terrible revenge for he had the hands and feet of eighty Caithnessians struck off for their part in the crime (Anderson 1922.II.452).

Earl John Haraldsson, the last of the earls to retain the faintest flow of Scandinavian blood in his veins, was to die at Thurso in 1231. The dispute, as so often, was over land. The grandson of Eric Staybrails, a man named Snaekoll Gunnisson, claimed his rightful inheritance in Orkney. Snaekoll and his followers fell to drinking and in the time-honoured fashion they decided in their cups to prolong the festivities by indulging in a little homicide. So Earl John was slaughtered in the cellar of his house in Thurso (*Hakon's Saga* 156).

The descriptions of the killing of Bishop Adam are very reminiscent of the atrocities allegedly perpetrated by the vikings upon the church four hundred years earlier. They were intended to put Caithness beyond the pale. Though it could never be guessed from the sagas, subtler methods had long been employed for the taming of the north. The Freskins of the 'de Moravia' family had been gradually introduced into Caithness and Sutherland since at least the turn of the thirteenth century and possibly earlier (Gray 1922.passim; see also Crawford 1982. below). One of their number, Gilbert, became bishop of Caithness c.1224, transferring the see from Halkirk to the much safer Dornoch. Gilbert was later canonised but he was as hard-headed and pragmatic a saint as he must have been a bishop for his attributed miracles included the restoration of incinerated account books and the rescue of a local salmon fisher from bankruptcy. A member of his kindred became the first earl of Sutherland c.1235 presumably through inter-marriage with the Dale family, a member of Clan Moddan. This creation or recognition was an attempt perhaps to create a new earldom of Caithness or *Catanesia Maior*. That the creation was an attempt to usurp the old Caithness title is indicated by modern survivals. The Gaelic name for Sutherland is still *Cataibh* while the Gaelic title of the earl of Sutherland was *Morair Chat* (Watson 1926. 29-30; see also Nicolaisen below).

The Face of Caithness: North or South?

The valkyries whom Dorrud had observed in the early eleventh century continued to work on their dreadful loom long after the passing of the heroes of the Viking age. Caithness continued to face both ways and consequently paid the penalty. When Hakon led his great expedition to the west in 1263, Alexander III took hostages from Caithness (*Exchequer Rolls* I.13). On his arrival Hakon fined the area (*Hakon's Saga* 346), yet in 1264

the province was ravaged by a Scottish force in retaliation for its supposed assistance to the king of Norway. The earls of Caithness in future centuries were to produce some of the most barbarous and bloody individuals in the ranks of the Scottish aristocracy which is no mean feat.

Just how much survived of Viking Caithness will be discovered in other contributions to this volume. Angus Mackay who wrote two fascinating histories of the area claimed that the vikings were still well remembered. People still spoke of Muileartach, the storm fiend who lashed the sea into a white foam, as the foster-mother of Magnus, king of Lochlinn; of the cave where a maiden of Lochlinn landed:

'In another place is shown the dark reef whereon a prince of the same race perished with his whole crew; and yonder is the plain of Torrisdale where the invincible Fionn himself had to yield three paces in a titanic conflict with a son of Thor. Yea more, were not the woods of Cat destroyed by fire at the hands of the men of Lochlinn?'

(Mackay 1914.70)

In such tales Dorrud's valkyries would perhaps distinguish the last echoes of Norse Caithness in the age of the sagas.

Footnotes

1. *Orkneyinga Saga* (abbreviated in references to *O.S.*) is favoured with four English translations. The first was Joseph Anderson *The Orkneyinga Saga* (Edinburgh 1873). Anderson edited and introduced the translation of Jon A. Hjaltalin and Gilbert Goudie. This version was reprinted by The Mercat Press (Edinburgh 1975). G.W. Dasent supplied a translation for Gudbrandur Vigfusson's edition in the Rolls Series No. 88 (London 1894). For some remarks on the unconscionable time Dasent's translation took to complete see Edward J. Cowan 'Icelandic Studies in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Scotland', *Studia Islandica* 31 (Reykjavik 1972). The historian will always favour Alexander Burt Taylor's version of 1938 with its voluminous and invaluable notes. The most recent translation is that by Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (London 1978). All references to *Orkneyinga Saga* in this paper are to chapters as found in the versions of 1938 and 1978. The Icelandic edition by Finnboði Guðmundsson for the *Islensk Fornrit* series (Reykjavik 1965) has been consulted throughout.
2. Historically there were no 'Scots' in Caithness at this early date. The indigenous population was probably Pictish but Picts are nowhere mentioned in the saga literature.
3. Dr. Talbot's discoveries were reported at the Caithness Conference.
4. If Frakokk were a Norse name it would presumably have survived in a less corrupt form. Mr Elliot Rudie suggests to me that the name might be linked with 'Cailleach Coirce' or 'Killy Korky', see *Temperley* 1977. 177n.

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