

# LATE MEDIEVAL VIKINGS: THE MACDONALD RAIDS ON ORKNEY C. 1461

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The late medieval community of Orkney was a far cry from the ninth-century Viking stronghold from which it originated. Portrayed in high medieval sagas as a society imbued with the mores of militancy and fed off the spoils of foreign conquest and plunder, the Orcadian community had settled into peaceful retirement by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, cultivating a decidedly more pacific lifestyle predicated upon law and landholding.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps as a result, the late medieval period has at times been marginalised from scholarship on the pre-modern history of the Northern Isles.<sup>3</sup> Vikings, although always in high demand by students and scholars of the medieval North, were few and far between in the twilight of the Norse power in the west.<sup>4</sup>

Somewhat ironically, the last impulses of the Viking legacy in northern Britain came not from Orkney, but from the Hebrides. Although the Western Isles' formal ties to the Norwegian motherland and the Norse realm were severed when Norway ceded its dominion to Scotland in 1266, social and political organisation along Scotland's western seaboard in the late Middle Ages preserved elements of a Viking past long after they were obscured in other parts of northern

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- 1 The following is based on a paper delivered for *From Gall to Gael and Gallowglas*, SSNS' residential conference organised on Islay between 12 and 15 April 2012. Parts were adapted and included in my contribution to *Petre 2015*, 612-15. I would like to extend my thanks to James for cooperation in that piece, and in encouraging work on this chapter.
  - 2 For Viking Orkney, see e.g. Crawford 1987; Beuermann 2011. For pacification, see Grohse 2013; 2014a.
  - 3 Clouston 1932, for example, devotes 214 pages to Orkney between the ninth and fourteenth centuries, and just forty-six to the late medieval period.
  - 4 Particularly in British scholarship, studies dealing with Norse-Scottish relations rarely look beyond Norway's relinquishment of the Western Isles in 1266, an event that marked a 'Norwegian sunset' and 'Scottish dawn' in Scottish historiography (Cowan 1990). Research by Barbara E. Crawford (e.g. Crawford 2013) and William P.L. Thomson (Thomson 2008a) are notable exceptions. To apply an open definition, 'a Viking was a sea-borne raider, and to go a-viking was to undertake sea-borne raiding' (Somerville and McDonald 2013, 1). Crucially, a Viking was not a raider by profession, but rather augmented his standard means of income by way of conquest and plunder (*Ibid.*).

Europe.<sup>5</sup> Despite their ethnic and linguistic distance from the Norse world, the Gaelic-speaking Lords of the Isles continued to expand their political and socio-economic influence through seaborne raiding,<sup>6</sup> a tradition that Norwegians and Orcadians once upheld with great pride, yet had essentially abandoned in the late-thirteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Andrew Jennings has recently shed light on this phenomenon in his study of the Northern Isles in the sixteenth century, when ‘latter-day Vikings’ from the west sought to extend Hebridean lordship over Orkney and Shetland.<sup>8</sup>

Looking further back, we find Hebridean raiders earning notoriety in the Northern Isles a century or two earlier. This is witnessed most spectacularly in the fifteenth century, when Orkney fell subject to recurrent, large-scale attacks originating along Scotland’s western seaboard. The most devastating of these assaults by so-called ‘Wild-Scots’ occurred in or around 1461, when John MacDonald, Earl of Ross and Lord of the Isles, commissioned raids on the militarily hapless inhabitants of the Northern Isles.<sup>9</sup> Once raiders, the Orcadians had become the raided. The attacks are recorded in vivid detail in two letters from the burgesses, baillies, and bishop of Orkney. The first, addressed to Christian I, King of Denmark, Sweden, and Norway by his officials in Kirkwall on February 29, 1461, reports how MacDonald, the country’s ‘old great enemy’ (*antiquo inimicus*) had long striven to destroy the country through arson, plunder, and the general destruction of the inhabitants.<sup>10</sup> Their only hope, the writers claimed, was their noble prince, William Sinclair, Earl of Orkney, who took up their ‘deadly conflict’ (*letali conflictu*) against MacDonald.<sup>11</sup> The second, purportedly compiled by Thomas Tulloch, Bishop of Orkney, echoes and elaborates

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- 5 There is ample research on Norse activities in the Irish Sea and the Western Isles. See e.g. Ó Corráin 1997; McDonald 1998; Forte, Oram and Pedersen 2005, 81-117, 217-64; Beuermann 2007; Sigurðsson and Bolton 2014; Macniven 2014.
  - 6 For a general overview of the lordship, see Bannerman 1977; Grant 1988; Macdougall 2000; Kingston 2004; Oram 2014.
  - 7 Grohse 2013; 2014a.
  - 8 Jennings 2013.
  - 9 For previous discussions, see e.g. Thomson 2008a, 196-97; Boardman 2006, 175-76; Grohse 2014b, 174-76; Petre 2015, 612-15.
  - 10 *DN* v, no. 827. The letter is dated *ultimo Februarii* 1460. However, Barbara E. Crawford suggests the author was adhering to the Scottish, rather than Norwegian calendar, concluding that it refers to the close of February 1461 (Crawford 1969, 41; Petre 2015, 614; cf. *REO*, xxii).
  - 11 *DN* v, no. 827.

on the former.<sup>12</sup> He reports that MacDonald employed his ‘men of Sudor, Ireland, and the Scottish wildlands’ (*hominibus Sodorensibus Ybernensibus et Scotis siluestribus*) to invade Orkney and visit its inhabitants ‘with all manner of cruelty’ (*omnimoda crudelitate*).<sup>13</sup>

Both accounts underscore that the attacks were not isolated incidents. MacDonald and his men had striven to destroy the Orcadians, attacking and plundering the beleaguered population from ‘year to year and day to day’ (*anno in annum et indies*).<sup>14</sup> Despite describing in detail the MacDonald raids, the letters do not relate when or why the attacks began. The following examines the Hebridean raids in a broader context of foreign violence in late medieval Orkney. It aims to identify the perpetrators and explain their motives for aggression, and gauge the victims’ capacity for coping with that aggression. Whilst the struggle was undoubtedly more complex than a mere revival of Viking Age animosities, it almost certainly reflects the preservation of Viking Age mores in the west.

#### MACDONALD RAIDS ON ORKNEY – PERSONAL FEUD AND POLITICAL STRUGGLE

The letters from 1461 describe the attacks as expressions of MacDonald’s personal depravity, but are unspecific as to why he singled out the Northern Isles as a target for his aggression. A seventeenth-century MacDonald family history claims that the conflict was instigated by a personal feud between Alexander MacDonald, John’s father and predecessor as Earl of Ross and Lord of the Isles, and William Sinclair, Earl of Orkney and Caithness.<sup>15</sup> It recounts how the two men met at James II’s court and challenged one another to a gentlemen’s wager over who could host the finest breakfast feast the following morning. In spite of his attempt to rig the bet, and much to his chagrin, Sinclair was

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12 Ibid., no. 836.

13 Ibid. Clouston translates *Scotis siluestribus* as ‘Scottish caterans’ in *REO*, no. xxiii. ‘Ketherans’, the English form of the Gaelic *ceatharn*, were those Highland and Island militants ‘involved in raids and the imposition of “unjust” exactions’ (Boardman 2012, 233-34). According to the Lowland chronicler Walter Bower, ‘among the Highland Scots and Wild Scots, there are caterans, which we call ketherans’ (*ac etiam inter Scotos transalpinos et silvestres quos catervanos seo ketheranos vocamus*). *Scotichronicon*, 48-49; MacGregor 2007, 23.

14 *DN* v, no. 827.

15 *History*, 36-37.

outdone by MacDonald's venison spread.<sup>16</sup> Outraged, Sinclair asked MacDonald whether he imagined he could equal Sinclair in power and authority. McDonald replied that even his son could outmatch Sinclair and, to prove the point, would be dispatched to harass the Orkney earl's lands just as soon as they departed the king's court. Agreeing to the challenge, the two went their separate ways, presumably to make arrangements for what would become a bloody interfamilial feud. The account goes on to describe the manner in which MacDonald's son, Austin (also known as Hugh MacDonald of Sleat), together with all the 'young heritors of land', steered their galleys toward Orkney, soundly trumping the comparatively weak Orcadian opposition.<sup>17</sup> Having claimed victory, the war party ravaged Orkney, for it was 'the only reward they had for their pains and fatigue'.<sup>18</sup>

This McDonald account is captivating, but unfortunately from a dubious source. Composed by family genealogist Hugh MacDonald over a century after the events occurred, it displays features of bias one expects to find in early-modern clan histories, including its categorical celebration of clan patrons and the degradation of their enemies.<sup>19</sup> Sinclair is portrayed as a cheat and braggart and common Orcadians as 'no great warriors, whatever their gentry'.<sup>20</sup> The most unconvincing aspect is its erroneous assertion that a retainer, Murdo MacCotter, singlehandedly slew the Orkney earl.<sup>21</sup> In fact, Sinclair lived well into his seventies, and, according to the letters from 1461, was not in Orkney at the time of the attacks, but at court with young King James III in Scotland.<sup>22</sup> It is also noteworthy that Alexander MacDonald, and not one of his sons, is portrayed as Sinclair's principal adversary. It is unclear as to which of MacDonald's sons he intended to pit against Sinclair

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16 Lachlane MacLean supposedly prepared MacDonald's winning breakfast (Ibid., 36), and was later granted the Isle of Tirie (Ibid., 37), seemingly in remuneration. For MacLean as 'vassals of the lords of the Isles', see e.g. MacLean 1899, 39-55.

17 *History*, 37.

18 Ibid.

19 Petre points out that MacDonald's account intended to substantiate the claim of his particular branch of the MacDonald line (Glann Ùisdean) as rightful heritors of the lordship of the Isles and contested estates (Petre 2015, 604). For the source's provenance, see MacGregor 2002, 212; Cameron 2014, 148.

20 *History*, 37.

21 Ibid. MacCotter supposedly belonged to MacLeod of Harris' retinue and later became MacLean's standard-bearer (Ibid.), seemingly in recognition of his service.

22 *DN* v, nos. 827, 836.

when he first proposed the feud. Was it his presumed successor to the earldom and lordship, John, or his illegitimate son and the purported leader of the Orkney raid, Hugh MacDonald of Sleat? The letters from 1461 make no mention of Alexander or Hugh, mentioning only John MacDonald and his unnamed warriors.<sup>23</sup>

Although replete with narrative liberties, couched within the source are select details that will be readdressed below. We can, however, conclude it implausible that such extensive and long-term violence arose from a boastful dispute over breakfast-hosting talents. More structural, practical explanations have to be considered. One possibility is that MacDonald was reviving unmet political aspirations in the Norse island province. As Earl of Ross, MacDonald's attacks may have functioned as leverage in his campaign of encroachment in the north, reinvigorating a political campaign first championed by William III in the mid-fourteenth century.<sup>24</sup> However, without any indication that MacDonald staked claim to land, title, or office in the Norse isles, it seems improbable that the fifteen-century raids sought to revive Ross' fourteenth-century aspirations.

It is plausible that the raids were, as the MacDonald family history purports, by-products of a distinctly inner-Scottish struggle. However, personal pride was likely a secondary matter in the MacDonald-Sinclair feud, which almost certainly entailed matters of land, title, and influence in Scottish politics. Like his father, John MacDonald maintained an uneasy, and at times openly hostile, relationship with the Stewart kingship of Scotland, a stance in opposition to that taken by Sinclair.<sup>25</sup> Whilst MacDonald's alliance with the Earls of Douglas and Crawford in the 1450s positioned him as the most formidable adversary to royal authority in the north of the kingdom, Sinclair proved himself a staunch

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23 Ibid., no. 827.

24 William III of Ross sought a foothold in Caithness and then Orkney through the promotion of his then-protégés, the Sinclairs of Rosslyn, in the mid-fourteenth century, although these plans failed to materialise (Crawford 2013, 319-20).

25 See e.g. *ALI*, lxiv–lxx; Nicholson 2014. The fifteenth-century Lords of the Isles 'to all intents and purposes, [ruled] autonomously over what was arguably the most successful regional lordship to have been created in late medieval Britain and Ireland' (Petre 2015, 601). See also Boardman 2013, 152. Cf. Bannerman 1977, 214-15, which argues that the lords were not geared toward 'establishing a separatist state in the west'.

supporter of the Stewart house.<sup>26</sup> His grant of the earldom of Caithness in 1455 further anchored royal power at the northern fringes of the kingdom.<sup>27</sup> Hugh MacDonald, the illegitimate half-brother of the earl and supposed commander of the amphibious raid, had aspirations to land and power in Sinclair's Scottish patrimony and may have been responsible for inciting the MacDonald-Sinclair feud.<sup>28</sup> Both of the Orkney letters report that Sinclair was using these Scottish lands as a staging point for his struggle with MacDonald, with the baillies and burgesses explaining that the earl was 'wisely engaged in his earldom of Caithness and elsewhere in putting a stop to malicious and savage attacks of these cruel enemies' (*in comitatu suo Cathtanie et alibi inimicorum crudelium maliciosi et seuissimis propositis sagaciter obuiando*).<sup>29</sup> The letters also make clear that Sinclair was attending to his duties as guardian of the future James III during his 'tender years' (*teneris annis*) of minority, a post which MacDonald had aspired to but failed to secure.<sup>30</sup>

From this background, it is not difficult to understand MacDonald's reason for these actions against Orkney. Although Sinclair was not on the isles at the time, MacDonald must have envisioned a scenario in which devastation of Sinclair's lands to the north, and the resulting petitions for peace by the native inhabitants, would incapacitate the Orkney earl or otherwise compel him to relinquish his aspirations to power in northern Scotland.<sup>31</sup> For all its embellishments, the claim made by MacDonald's seventeenth-century historian, that the devastation in Orkney could be traced back to the political posturing of rival magnates within Scotland, seems to have some credence.

#### HEBRIDEAN RAIDING IN ORKNEY – A LEGACY OF VIOLENCE

For all their finite strategic value, MacDonald's amphibious attacks reflected a longer tradition of foreign aggression toward Orkney in the

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- 26 For the alliance between Douglas and Crawford, and a review of pertinent scholarship, see Petre 2015, 609-12. For Sinclair and the Stewart kings, see e.g. Crawford 2013, 356-65; Macdougall 2009, 41-42.
- 27 Crawford 2013, 358-59.
- 28 Boardman 2006, 176, 197n39.
- 29 *DN* v, no. 827.
- 30 *DN* v, no. 836. On Sinclair and James III's minority see Boardman 2006, 174-79; Macdougall 2009, 40-41.
- 31 Boardman 2006, 176. MacDonald raids also facilitated an aimed alliance with Yorkist England (Petre 2015, 627).

later Middle Ages. In 1312, Robert I, King of Scots, and Hákon V, King of Norway, settled damages relating to attacks in and around Orkney by unnamed ‘malefactors of Scotland’, a group of rogues of whom the Scottish king claimed no prior knowledge.<sup>32</sup> The early-fifteenth-century *Genealogy of Orkney’s Earls*, compiled by Bishop Thomas Tulloch, relates that Henry I, Earl of Orkney, was ‘for the defence of the country slain there cruelly by his enemies’ (*pro defencione patrie mihi crudeliter ab inimiciciis peremptus est*).<sup>33</sup> Historians have posited that the incursion, likely occurring sometime around 1400, was led by misguided English fishermen seeking retribution for attacks by Scottish pirates.<sup>34</sup> Another excerpt from that document recounts how the isles long suffered the ‘hostilities and wars of certain rivals and enemies’ (*hostilitatis tempore et guerrarum emulorum inimicorumque nonnullorum*)<sup>35</sup> and that the ‘principal and special house of mansion of the lord earls’ had often been reduced to nothing as the whole country was laid waste by rivals and enemies.<sup>36</sup> While the adversaries cannot be conclusively identified, the bishop’s description suggests that they included foreigners.

One source that suggests that Hebridean aggression in Orkney long predated the MacDonald raids is the so-called *Complaint of the People of Orkney*, a catalogue of grievances against their governor, David Menzies of Weem, and his mismanagement of public office.<sup>37</sup> One complaint concerned Menzies’ depraved indifference to attacks by certain ‘Wild-Scots’ (*Willeschotta*) on the island of Ronaldsay. The men of the island claimed that ‘the Wild-Scots came in such numbers to them and did them great injury to their goods, meat, and drink and much other mischief’ (*the Willeschotta komo swa margbe thil them oc giordo them stoor skada oppa there gotz maat oc dryk oc mykit annat fortreet*).<sup>38</sup>

Who were these marauders? As a proper noun, the term ‘Wild-Scots’ pertained not to just unruly interlopers with Scottish origins, but to a finite variety of Scots with supposedly identifiably uncultivated

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32 DN ii, no. 114.

33 DN xx, no. 833.

34 Thomson 2008a, 170.

35 DN xx, no. 833.

36 Ibid.

37 DN ii, no. 691.

38 Ibid.



characteristics.<sup>39</sup> The Norse term corresponds to the phraseology used by English and Lowland Scots authors to describe the people of the Highlands, Western Isles, and Ireland.<sup>40</sup> The thirteenth-century Bartholomeus Anglicus described what he saw as inherent differences between the ‘wild men’ (*silvestres*) to the north, the Scots and Irish, and their more civilised counterparts in England.<sup>41</sup> The concept of a natural dichotomy between the cultivated, law-abiding, Germanic-speaking Lowlanders and the barbaric, larcenous, Gaelic-speaking people of the Highlands and Scotland’s western seaboard islands was elaborated famously by John of Fordun. He described the latter as ‘a wild and untamed race, primitive and independent, given to rapine and the easy life’ (*ferina gens est et indomita, rudis et immorigerata, raptu capax, otium diligens, ingenio docilis et callida*).<sup>42</sup> By the early-fifteenth century, ‘Wild Scot’ had become the term used in discriminatory discourse about Highlanders and Hebrideans, as is witnessed in the works of, for example, Walter Bower (*Scotos transalpinos et silvestres quos catervanos seo ketheranos*),<sup>43</sup> John Major (*Scoti Silvestres et insulani Scoti*),<sup>44</sup> and Andrew of Wyntoun (*wyld, wykkyd Helandmen*).<sup>45</sup> Orkney’s social and linguistic ties to Scotland in the fifteenth century appear to have been forged primarily with the Lowlands, and numerous sources demonstrate Orcadians’ adoption of the ‘Teutonic’ Scots tongue that Fordun associated with civilised Scotland. Accustomed to cultural prejudices of the Lowlands, the men of Ronaldsay appear to have invoked an established stereotype of Highland Scots when describing their attackers.

Bishop Thomas used similar terminology in 1461 when he reported that MacDonald’s force included ‘men from Sudor, Ireland, and the Scottish wildlands’ (*Sodorensibus Ybernensibus et Scotis siluestribus*).<sup>46</sup> The ‘Scottish wildland’, from which the latter group originated, was presumably the same peripheral region of northern and western

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39 Previously, the description was not regarded as a proper noun, but as an adjective for certain Scots from Caithness (Imsen 2012, 20). I argued against this in Grohse 2014b, 174-76.

40 Nicholson 1968; MacGregor 2007; Broun 2007; Boardman 2007.

41 MacGregor 2007, 22-23.

42 *Chronica*, 42.

43 *Scotichronicon*, 48-49.

44 *Historia*, 13.

45 *Orygynale Cronykil*, 55.

46 *DN* v, no. 836.



Scotland which Fordun and other Lowland commentators associated with the wild Gaels. Given the parallel phraseology between the different fourteenth and fifteenth-century sources, there is little doubt that the Wild-Scots of the 1420s were of the same stock as the *Scoto transalpinos et silvestres* described in Lowland sources and the *hominibus Scotis sylvestribus* who re-emerged in Orkney around 1460.

The bishop's mention of MacDonalds' 'men from Ireland' (*hominibus Ybernensibus*) illustrates the impressive scope of his lordship at the time.<sup>47</sup> MacDonald's connection to Ulster built upon centuries of acculturation and political interaction across the Irish Sea, bonds which were manifest in the MacDonalds' lordship over the glens of Antrim.<sup>48</sup> The other named participants, the 'men from the Sudors' (*hominibus Sodorensibus*), likely originated from the inner-Hebridean caput of MacDonald's island lordship.<sup>49</sup> It is tempting to identify the Hebrideans with those mentioned in Hugh MacDonald's family history, including Hugh MacDonald of Sleat and William MacLeod of Harris.<sup>50</sup> A charter from June 28, 1449, brings the two figures' interrelations into close focus when it shows MacDonald granting Sleat in Skye to his *frater carnalis*, Hugh, a transfer to which MacLeod (*Willielmus Macleod de Glenelg*) bore witness.<sup>51</sup> Beyond filial associations, enfeoffment of this kind, both here and in further subdelegations of land, must have underpinned the cultivation of MacDonald's forces, a point which may find expression in the seventeenth-century claim that the Orkney raids were conducted largely by 'young heritors of land'.<sup>52</sup>

Taken together, the evidence is strong that the Hebridean raids on Orkney around 1460 were rooted in a tradition of aggression stemming from within the Lordship of the Isles. Hostilities may have elevated to a new level under John MacDonald, but he was not the first of his ilk to

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47 Ibid.

48 On MacDonald and Ireland, see Kingston 2004; Petre 2015, 606, 608. The MacDonald family history underscores the connection to Antrim in Ulster, claiming 'he had as strong a country as any in Ireland, to protect him from the pursuit of his enemies, the seven proportions of the glens being his property; at the same time he was much more beloved in Ireland than the king of Scots, for generally those Irish were not very obedient to the Crown of England, [and] cared very little for that of Scotland [...]' (*History*, 44).

49 Caldwell 2008.

50 *History*, 37.

51 Burke 1838, 477.

52 *History*, 37.

lead an amphibious assault on the Northern Isles. MacDonald's actions cannot be explained as merely expressions of a personal feud or even as a specific political struggle between himself (or his kinsmen) and the Sinclair earl of Orkney in the mid-fifteenth century.

Accusations of plunder are common throughout the Orcadian reports. The men of Ronaldsay's claim that Wild-Scots 'did them great injury to their goods, meat, and drink' (*stoor skada oppa there gotz maat oc dryk oc mykit annat fortreet*)<sup>53</sup> is echoed in the bishop's accusation that MacDonald's forces 'carried away with them goods, animals, utensils, jewels, money, and everything they could for their own use, leaving little or nothing except the burnt soil of the earth, empty and useless' (*depopularunt catalla animalia vtensilia jocalia nummismata et generaliter omnia bona depredarunt secum ad propria deferentes nichil vel parum reliquerunt nisi solum terre combustum vacuum et inane*).<sup>54</sup> Even in the flattering MacDonald family history, the attackers are said to have 'ravaged the country' and 'loaded their galleys', excusing their piracy as a just reward for their exhaustion.<sup>55</sup> The burgesses and baillies of Kirkwall claimed that MacDonald's raiders also attacked Shetland.<sup>56</sup> Although Shetland was not part of Sinclair's grant from the Norwegian king, the conditions of his installation charter as earl from 1434 stipulated that he was to protect those islands.<sup>57</sup> Whether MacDonald knew of this arrangement appears to have been of no consequence for his raiders looking for spoils of war.

In each of the fifteenth-century accounts, the people of Orkney are portrayed as beleaguered victims. The burgesses and baillies call them 'poverty-stricken' (*pauperculis*),<sup>58</sup> and the bishop excuses himself from visiting royal court because of his 'extreme, prevalent poverty' (*nimia vigen paupertas*).<sup>59</sup> Although perhaps embellished to inspire sympathy from the Norwegian king, such claims reflect what was a true economic stagnation in late medieval Orkney.<sup>60</sup> The *Complaint* from the 1420s reports that 'the country was plagued that grain would not grow' (*landit*

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53 *DN* ii, no. 691.

54 *DN* v, no. 836.

55 *History*, 37.

56 *DN* v, no. 827.

57 *NgL* 2r, i, no. 74.

58 *DN* v, no. 827.

59 *Ibid.*, no. 836.

60 Grohse 2014c, 313.

*war plagat thet kornit wæxte eke*),<sup>61</sup> and modern studies of cadastral surveys from the late-fifteenth century reveal the wasting of large swaths of land.<sup>62</sup> While MacDonald's raids certainly did not cause the Orcadian recession, they no doubt increased the suffering associated with them. Beyond poverty, Orkney was militarily ill-equipped to resist the amphibious attacks. While the MacDonald family history may exaggerate the Orcadians' incompetence in combat, theirs was a far less militarised society than that of their western adversaries.<sup>63</sup> Of the native members of the knightly class, few appear to have wielded any physical authority in practice as witnessed, for instance, in the rapid and forceful suppression of the Orcadians by their corrupt governor, David Menzies of Weem, and his small band of foreign retainers in the 1420s.<sup>64</sup>

This is in stark contrast to the militant milieu from which the raiders emerged. The Lordship of the Isles was, in the fifteenth-century, a 'tremendous military and naval might, being able to muster highly mobile forces, which could number several thousands of men, and keep them in the field for considerable periods'.<sup>65</sup> The so-called *Roll-Call of the Isles*, compiled roughly a century after the attacks in question, provides a rough impression of the scale of forces amassable from the Hebrides alone.<sup>66</sup> While the 6,990 men available from the Hebrides, including 2,300 elite mercenary 'gallowglasses', probably exceed the number available to MacDonald in the fifteenth century, his forces would have been substantial.<sup>67</sup> In 1437, Alexander MacDonald is reported to have commanded an island contingent of 3,000 men.<sup>68</sup> Within the maritime environs of western and northern Scotland, the lords depended on an amphibious style of warfare, using galleys, including the *luing* and *birlinn*, which 'were little different from the craft in which Vikings had operated'.<sup>69</sup> If the scale and technology of Highland and Island forces threatened political and military instability within the Scottish kingdom,

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61 *DN* ii, no. 691.

62 Thomson 2008b, 101-17.

63 Grohse 2014b. Military features in late medieval Orkney served the purposes of social structuring more than practical defence, particular with regard to the peasant population and landed aristocracy.

64 *Ibid.*, 179.

65 Petre 2015, 617. See also Kingston 2004, 172-201; Boardman 2012.

66 Skene 1880, 428-40.

67 Kingston 2004, 184.

68 *History*, 45.

69 Kingston 2004, 188. See also MacInnes 1972; Rixson 1995.

the perceived 'militarism' of their societies engendered in contemporary observers a sense of fear and disdain for the 'caterans', a pejorative label with strongly military connotations.<sup>70</sup>

What recourse, if any, did the Orcadians have to stop these attacks? It is interesting that the letters from 1460 and 1461 are not petitions for help from their king, Christian I. In each case, the writers show great faith in the abilities of their earl to quell the assaults. The burgesses and baillies claim that 'for our defence in the aforementioned, he [Sinclair] has laid out himself and his in our deadly struggle to his no small suffering and loss, bearing the expenses, labours, and dangers of war, principally for the sake of the honour of your [Christian I's] excellence' (*ob nostri defensionem a premissis de nostro letali conflictu finali detrimento apparente compaciens signanter propter vestre excellencie honorem ad guerras expensas labores et pericula*). They add that the Orcadians would have already been utterly destroyed by the sword, had it not been for 'his presence and defence' (*presencia et defensione*).<sup>71</sup> Bishop Thomas echoed these sentiments, elaborating that he was confident in Sinclair's ability to halt MacDonald 'by way of treaty or otherwise' (*per concordiam uel cessas(s)ent alias*).<sup>72</sup>

The faith placed in Sinclair by Orkney's administrators is remarkable given his apparent absence from the isles during the MacDonald raids. By Orcadian standards, he was indeed a formidable martial leader. His strength was promoted by the Norwegian king's grant of the earldom, which stipulated his obligation to serve the crown when called upon and engross his own retinue for the defence of Orkney and Shetland.<sup>73</sup> To do this, he was permitted to command Kirkwall Castle and enlist his 'kinsmen, friends and servants' (*propinquorum amicorum et seruitorum*) from beyond the border in Scotland in defence of the isles.<sup>74</sup> The question is whether this theoretical strength was employed for the practical defence of the Norse province. In fact, Sinclair's military exploits were more prolific in mainland Scotland than they ever were in Orkney. In 1455, Sinclair was entrusted by James II to accompany 'the great bumbard', perhaps the famous Mons Meg, in the siege on the

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70 Boardman 2012, 233-34.

71 *DN* v, no. 827.

72 *Ibid.*, no. 836.

73 *NgL* 2r, no. 74.

74 *Ibid.*

Douglas stronghold of Threave.<sup>75</sup> As capable a martial leader as he may have been, Sinclair is not known to have demonstrated his prowess north of the Pentland Firth, and is not in fact recorded as being present in the isles after 1439, suggesting that he essentially left the civilians of the isles unshielded from the raids of his formidable adversaries.<sup>76</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The preceding aimed to shed light on a legacy of Hebridean seaborne aggression in and around the Northern Isles in the late Middle Ages. MacDonald's raids in Orkney have previously been treated as part of the burgeoning political struggle between the Stewart crown's adherents and adversaries. Although not opposed to these views, the preceding sought to demonstrate that the expression of that rivalry in Orkney in and around 1461 was predicated upon a more endemic tradition of Hebridean hostility. For decades, perhaps centuries, so-called 'Wild-Scots' from the Highlands and islands along Scotland's western seaboards sailed to Orkney with piratical aims. Whilst personal feuds and underlying political agendas presumably heightened the tenor of hostility, the raids – from the perspective of the Orcadians who suffered under them – were essentially acts of plunder carried out by a malicious and untamed society to the west.

The raiders along Orkney's shores were borne of a highly militarised Hebridean society. Recruiting from their far-flung power base, which stretched from Ross to the Glens of Northern Ireland, the MacDonald Lords of the Isles preserved their autonomy and enhanced their power by commanding grand fleets and scores of combatants driven by the prospect of spoils. The emergence of these amphibious warriors upon the western horizons must have struck fear into the hearts of Orkney's inhabitants, who appear to have long since lost touch with the fighting spirit of their Viking forebears. Their only recourse, it seems, lay with their earl, William Sinclair, a functionary who devoted less energy to the isles' defence than he invested in pursuing his own, self-serving agendas on the Scottish mainland.

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75 Thomson 2008a, 194.

76 Grohse 2014b, 78. The weakness of Norse frontier defences lay in the endowment of earls 'with almost exclusive power to orchestrate defense', thus predisposing 'the frontier communities to the strengths and weakness of a handful of fallible individuals'.

Returning to the points raised at the outset of this chapter, the reader might ask whether the term ‘Viking’ serves any function – save sensationalism – for the study of northern Britain in the late medieval period. Andrew Jennings, for one, is willing to employ it to describe MacDonald’s raids on Orkney, the contemporary reports of which read much like a ‘monastic account of a Viking raid 500 years earlier’.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, if we divorce ourselves from the historiographic construct that is the ‘Viking Age’, we can appreciate fundamental commonalities between the seaborne exploits of Norsemen of the early medieval period and those of their Gaelic successors of Western Scotland in the late Middle Ages. For central medieval observers, the concept was largely void of ethnolinguistic connotations, but pertained principally to a lifestyle of maritime adventure in which seaborne raids created opportunities to enhance the raiders’ prestige, enrich them materially, and compel compliance from their victims. The nature of the fifteenth-century raids on Orkney, which featured pillage and plunder, and the sudden amphibious retreat of the perpetrators, gives the impression that ‘Wild Scots’ from the west had, for lack of a contemporary phrase, gone ‘a-viking’. For Orkney, a community once founded upon the exploits of famous raiders, many of whom sought fortune in the Hebrides and Northern Ireland in the early and central Middle Ages, the destructive raids on their own turf of the late medieval period were a bitter twist of fate.

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77 Jennings 2013, 36.

- qNorges gamle Love. Anden Række 1388-1604, Taranger A et al. (eds), 1904-1995, Christiania and Oslo.
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