



Orkney Museum

The westward expansion of the Vikings started late in the 8<sup>th</sup> century and, apart from population and other pressures, was made possible by technology. The development of large ocean-going sailing ships, combined with a knowledge of seamanship and navigation, which could reliably transport people, livestock and goods for long distances, allowed them an ascendancy over other coastal Europeans for several centuries.

Orkney made an obvious base for these seafaring people, in a time when there was no quick land transport. While contact may already have been going on for some time before the main influx, it now seems that the Norse takeover was abrupt and complete. The Picts simply disappear. Existing settlements were taken over by the Vikings, who may even have reused some Pictish pots and other household items. Soon the invaders imposed their own farming style and land-holding patterns, which are preserved as farm names and parishes to this day.

Recent excavations have suggested that there may have been a considerable Pictish population in Orkney at the time of the Viking migrations in the 8<sup>th</sup> century and there have been suggestions that the Norse colonisation may have been peaceful. However, there is scant evidence supporting this idea.

Very few pre-Norse placenames and other words have survived suggesting that the Norse political takeover must have been fast

Whalebone plaque from boat burial, Scar, Sanday

**VIKINGS** For six hundred years Orkney was dominated by the Norse, initially invaders and then settlers from Western Norway, who rapidly colonised the islands and then went on to build the Earldom which at its peak controlled much of the

west coast of Scotland, the Isle of Man, Caithness and Sutherland. Orcadians today remain proud of their Norse heritage and, though British, maintain their historic links with Norway.

Lower guard and tang of sword Scar boat burial, Sanday



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and virtually total, and that no integration took place. The attractiveness of Orkney as a Viking base, due to position and natural resources, must have been overwhelming, and the Pictish people, leaders, churchmen and ordinary people either fled or were slaughtered.

There was a short but violent period of Viking migration at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Orkney and Shetland were seized from the Picts, followed much of the far north of Scotland and Hebrides. Once power was established there followed a further influx of settlers such that Norse culture and language totally replaced Pictish.

*Historia Norwegiae* This is well stated in *Historia Norwegiae*, written in the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century about the Picts that they “*did marvels in the morning and in the evening, in building towns, but at mid-day they entirely lost all their strength, and lurked, through fear, in underground houses*” It goes on to say “*But in due course...certain pirates...set out with a great fleet...and stripped these races of their ancient settlements, destroyed them wholly, and subdued the islands to themselves.*”

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century Orcadian historian, Storer Clouston, had no illusions about what happened, “*Surely the common-sense of the matter ...is evident. The first Norsemen...proposed to settle in these islands, whether the existing inhabitants liked it or not. They brought their swords, and if the inhabitants were numerous and offered resistance, they fought*



Brough of Birsay - Norse church

*them. If they were few and fled, they took their land without fighting. They did, in fact, exactly what we ourselves have done in later centuries, in India, America, Africa, Australia. That is the only way in which we can settle a new land-chance your luck, but always bring your gun.*”

Most of our knowledge of the Vikings comes from the sagas, which describe the feuds of great families and the deeds of great men, but do not give much detail of more mundane events or conditions. There was a climatic improvement during the Viking era which greatly aided westward expansion, the development of more advanced agriculture and population growth.

It also seems that the Vikings had mastered several other important things such as (slightly) improved domestic hygiene and midwifery, as well as being good blacksmiths, joiners, farmers, shipbuilders and seamen. Clearly many were also good men-at-arms, but this was probably only one aspect of their power. Above all they were



Linen smoother

Man's comb found at Scar boat burial, Sanday - dates to AD850-925



Orkney Museum





Norse boat-burial excavation at Westness, Rousay

craftsmen and took great pride in their work as is evident by the many high quality weapons, items of jewellery and, perhaps most important, the advanced technology of their ships and navigation skills.

only a few possible Pictish remnants. The *Orkneyinga Saga* and other Norse Sagas, mostly written in the 12<sup>th</sup> century in Iceland, give a vivid account of Viking times, with many colourful characters.

Today nearly all our placenames derive from Old Norse, with

According to the *Saga* the Earldom was founded by King



Equal-armed brooch from the Scar boat-burial

Lead weights from the Scar boat burial, Sanday



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Harald *Harfargi* (Fairhair), who set out *West over Sea* to deal with the Orkney Vikings who kept making raids on Norway. During his time it was united as one kingdom (in 892AD), and the lands *West over Sea* of Orkney, Shetland, the Hebrides and Man came under his rule.

**Earl Rognvald of More** was made Earl of Orkney, but he passed the title to his brother, Sigurd, The Mighty, the first Earl of Orkney to be recorded by history. Sigurd is best known for his death rather than his life. During one of his forays into Scotland, about AD893, he incurred the wrath of a man called Maelbrigte *Tusk*. A meeting was arranged where each was to bring 40 men and 40 horses. However Sigurd put two men on each horse, with the result that all the Scots were killed and beheaded.

The Vikings tied the heads to their saddles in triumph, but Maelbrigte had the last laugh as one of his protruding buck teeth scratched Sigurd's leg, causing a fatal infection. He is buried near Oykelbridge.

**Torf Einar** Sigurd was succeeded by another colourful character, his half-brother Torf Einar, who *"took the earldom, and was long earl, and was a man of great power"*. He was renowned for his eyesight despite being one-eyed, and is said to have shown the people how to use peat as a fuel. The *Saga* recounts how he found and slew Halfdan Fairhair on North Ronaldsay for killing his father, Rognvald,

by burning him alive in his house in Norway. He then carved the blood eagle on Halfdan's back, *"Einar had his ribs cut from the spine with a sword and the lungs pulled out through the slits in his back. He dedicated the victim to Odin as a victory offering"*

**Thorfinn Skull-Splitter**, said to be buried in the Howe of Hoxa on South Ronaldsay. He became sole Earl when his brothers were killed at the Battle of Stainmore in 954. He was said to be *"a mighty chief and warlike"*, but it is not recorded how he came by his nickname.

**Sigurd the Stout** was a powerful Earl, known for his prowess in battle, his sorcery and his ability to invoke the old gods. His mother was a sorceress and made him the enchanted Raven Banner, warning *"my belief is this: that it will bring victory to the man it's carried before, but death to the one who carries it"*.

Sigurd was forcibly converted to Christianity by King Olav Tryggvesson at Osmondwall (Kirk Hope) in Hoy in 995, on pain of the death of his son. The whole of Orkney was said to have embraced the faith. The son, Hvelp, died soon after. Sigurd renounced Christianity and repudiated King Olaf.

He was killed in 1014 at the Battle of Clontarf when he himself took up the Raven Banner, after many had fallen carrying it, *"there was no man who would bear the raven-standard and the earl bore it himself, and fell there."*



Howe of Hoxa, said to be burial place of Thorfinn "Skullsplitter"

**Thorfinn the Mighty** Sigurd's son and successor, Thorfinn, presided over the period of maximum power and extension of the Orkney Earldom. Thorfinn was a close relative of Macbeth and the Scottish author, Dorothy Dunnet, has even suggested that they may have been

the same person. He was brought up in the Scottish Court by his grandfather, Malcolm II, who granted him the Earldom of Caithness and Sutherland.

His foster father, Thorkel Fostri, played an important part in the



Osmondwall, Longhope

Norse buildings on the Brough of Birsay





Replica longship Sea Stallion in Kirkwall Bay

power struggle to become sole Earl. His main opponent was Rognvald Brusison who had the support of the Norwegian King. Eventually after several spectacular battles, house burnings and escapades, Rognvald was cornered on Papa Stronsay at Yule 1046 and killed by Thorkel. Thorfinn was said to control

nine Earldoms from his base in Birsay where he presided over a lavish household. He ruled his earldoms peacefully for another 18 years. He made a pilgrimage to Rome in 1049-50, after which the first Bishop of Orkney, Bishop Thorolf, was appointed. Thorfinn established Christ Church and a



Viking Age gold rings found in Stennes

The Broch of Burgar in Evie was the site of a hoard of silver, now lost



Bishop's Palace at Birsay.

The Norse Earls were always in as close touch with Scottish rulers as they were with their Norse superiors, frequently marrying the daughters of other noblemen, or of the Scottish or Norwegian King. Their divided loyalties frequently caused problems, but also offered opportunities for political or financial gain. It was the power struggle between Norway and Scotland which eventually led to the end of the Earldom.

In the later 10<sup>th</sup> century Norse power in the west was at its peak, with the conquest of Normandy, the discovery of America by Leif Erikson and Norse migrations to northern and eastern England.

During this time the climate was considerably better than today, which greatly facilitated long sea voyages in open boats. As a result there was close communication between the Orkney Earldom, Norway, Iceland and the Norse possessions on the west of Scotland and in Ireland.

Orkney Viking tradition was exemplified by Sweyn Asleifson, one of the leading characters in the *Orkneyinga Saga*. After the crops were sown a spring cruise was made, while after harvest an autumn mission followed. Raiding, trading, piracy and fighting were ensued by a winter of eating and drinking. The 21<sup>st</sup> century definition of a cruise and celebration is slightly different from that of our ancestors!



Skaill Hoard penannular brooch



Skaill Hoard penannular brooch

**Silver Hoards** Many hoards of valuables were hidden either by locals fearing Viking attack, or by Vikings themselves for safe-keeping. Some have since been found, such as those at Skaill, Burray, Burgar and Caldale. The first two are the largest ever found in Scotland, while the latter two became lost.

**Skaill Hoard** In March 1858 a large cache of silver objects was discovered in sand dunes near St Peter's Kirk above the Bay of

Skaill Hoard ring money and back silver



Skaill. In all there were 136 or more objects, including 10 brooches, 27 arm rings and 13 neck rings as well as coins, ingots and bits of silver, a total of over 8kg. The Crown appropriated the finds and both silver hoards now languish to this day in Edinburgh.

The most spectacular are the 10 penannular brooches which are decorated with *Mammen*-style ornamentation. The dates of the coins suggest that the hoard was buried soon after AD950,

as the newest was made in Baghdad in AD945. Studies have shown that the Skaill silver was made around AD940 and the Burray hoard around AD977.

It seems that most of the brooches were made by the same craftsman, who may have had an Irish training or background. Many of the coins, hack silver and ring money pieces probably originate in the Middle East no doubt in payment for goods or services rendered.

Part of the Burray Hoard







Norse house at Quoygrew, (Lower Trenaby), Westray

the Mull Head. It has a chapel which dates from the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Outlines of up to 30 buildings are visible. Several of these have been investigated by Cambridge University

Three Norse style houses have been excavated. They have drystone footings and had turf upper walls. The finds suggest that they had fallen into disuse by the early 12<sup>th</sup> century. Midden material into which the houses were built, dates from Pictish times.

**Mound of Snusgar** On the northeast side of the Bay of Skaill there are a number on large mounds, the largest of which is the Mound of Snusgar. Recent excavations by Oxford University have revealed Viking Age walls and middens. The building fully revealed in 2010 is about 26m long. The oldest part has

**VIKING SETTLEMENTS** have until recently not been extensively studied in Orkney. In recent year several excavations have transformed this situation. Norse longhouses at Quoygrew on Westray, the Brough of Deerness and near the Bay of Skaill in Sandwick are currently being investigated. All date from about 1000AD. Further information on each site is included in the relevant Gazetteer sections.

**Quoygrew** was a long mound above the shore of Rackwick on Westray. A large mound turned out to be a domestic midden overlying structures dating from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Excavation revealed a complex series of buildings and a large number of artefacts. The buildings on view are 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century.

**Brough of Deerness** This Viking period settlement is on top of a large stack south of

Norse longhouse excavation at the Bay of Skaill



Sigurd Towerie



Steatite fishing weights

Steatite bowl



Norse settlement excavation on the Brough of Deerness



Brooches were worn by Viking women to fasten their hangerock or an apron skirt.

benches along the side walls, which curve outwards in the centre.

The stone walls are up to 1m in height with good quality masonry especially on the interior sides. Most likely the upper sections were turf. Post holes for roof supports were found as well as several hearths. Metalworking was carried out in smaller hearths. Slag, charcoal and iron were all found.

The east end of the building was the byre, with a central paved drain. There are further buildings to the south of the byre. A large assemblage of finds includes iron, steatite, glass and pottery objects.

Three stones with incised scratches were found on the internal walls but have so far not been explained.

**EARLY NORSE SITES TO VISIT**

Kirkwall	Old St Olaf's Kirk
Birsay	Brough of Birsay The Palace area
Sandwick	Bay of Skaill
Evie	Broch of Gurness Burgar Broch
Deerness	Dingeshowe Skaill area Brough of Deerness
S Ronaldsay	Howe of Hoxa
Rousay	Westness
Eynhallow	monastery
Westray	Quoygrew Tuquoy Pierowall
Sanday	Scar Pool
Papa Stronsay Church	
S Ronaldsay	Howe of Hoxa
South Walls	Kirk Hope

**VIKING TIMELINE 1 SETTLEMENT to 1100**

- c.600 Development of sailing ocean going longships
- late 700s Norse settlement in Orkney, Picts overwhelmed
- 794 Viking attacks on islands (Irish Annals)
- 790s Major Viking attacks on Britain
- 800 Norse presence well established in Orkney
- 841 Dublin founded
- 849, 852 Large fleets of Viking ships attacking Britain
- c.880 King Harald Fairhair of Norway expedition to west Rognvald of More Earl
- c.890 Rognvald's brother, Sigurd the Mighty, Earl of Orkney
- c983 Earl Sigurd dies  
Torf Einar, youngest son of Rognvald of More earl
- 954 Earl Thorfinn Skullsplitter killed
- 937-954 Orkney used as base by King Erik Blood-Axe
- c.950 Skaill hoard buried (found 1858)
- c.991 Sigurd the Stout earl
- 986-989 Sigurd gains domination in the west marries daughter of Malcolm II of Scotland
- 995 King Olav Tryggvesson converts Sigurd Kirk Hope
- c.1000 Discovery of Vinland (America) by Erik the Red Burray hoard buried found 19<sup>th</sup> century
- 1014 Battle of Clontarf  
Sigurd killed  
Thorfinn the Mighty earl maximum power period
- c.1035 Caldale hoard hidden (found 1774, now lost)
- by 1042 In control of west again
- 1046 Earl Rognvald Brusison killed on Papa Stronsay  
Thorfinn sole earl
- c.1065 Death of Thorfinn the Mighty, Joint Earls Paul I & Erlend II
- 1066 King Harald Hardrada killed at Stamford Bridge
- 1098 King Magnus Barelegs expedition to west,  
Deaths of Paul & Erlend





St Magnus Kirk on Egilsay dates from the 11<sup>th</sup> century

**NORSE ORKNEY** The 12<sup>th</sup> century saw the martyrdom of Earl Magnus, followed by a pilgrimage to the Holy Land by his cousin, Earl Haakon Paulson, the instigator of his death. On his return Haakon built the St Nicholas Round Church in Orphir, beside the Earl's Bu with its famous drinking hall. He was succeeded by his son Paul in 1123, who in turn was succeeded in 1135 by Earl Rognvald Kolson, nephew of Magnus during whose time Orkney continued to flourish.

**St Magnus Cathedral**, commenced in 1137 by Earl Rognvald, in memory of his martyred uncle Magnus, is much the most spectacular Norse structure in Orkney. There are many other remains, such as parts of the Bishop's Palace in Kirkwall, and the Norse secular buildings and church at the Brough of Birsay. Of the several other 12<sup>th</sup> century churches, the ruins at Westness in Rousay and Eynhallow Monastery are particularly evocative.

About 1152 a group of Vikings returning from the Crusades left a spectacular collection of runic graffiti in Maeshowe, thus greatly adding to the interest of the monument for today's visitor. In addition to runes, they carved a dragon (claimed by some to be a lion, but most people think it is a dragon) and other carvings which have provided much inspiration to 20<sup>th</sup> century artists.

**Viking Age ends** With the death of the *Ultimate Viking*, Sweyn Asleifson, at Dublin on a raid in 1171, the independent power of the Earldom of Orkney was coming to a close. In 1193 a fleet manned by the *Island Beardies*, many of the leading men from Orkney and Shetland, invaded Norway with the support of the Earl. They were roundly defeated at the Battle of Florvag in 1194 near Bergen by King Sverre Sigurdsson.

The estates of those involved were confiscated by the Norwegian Crown, and a Royal *Sysselman* appointed to collect taxes and administer the seques-

trated estates on behalf of the king. More seriously Shetland was from now administered directly from Norway, while the Earl, Harald Maddadson had to give an oath of fealty to King Sverre. Thus Orkney, and even more Shetland, became much more strongly under the control of Norway.

The situation was further complicated when the Scottish King, William the Lion, took advantage of the situation by invading Caithness. The result was that the Earldom lost its Scottish lands but had at the same time to submit to the King of Scots. On the death of Harald Maddadson, himself three-quarters Scottish, in 1206, Norse power was starting to wane. The first Scottish Earl, albeit with strong Norse connections, was Magnus II, who was appointed in c.1233.

**Battle of Largs** In 1262 Norway annexed Iceland and Greenland. Late in the next late summer, King Haakon Haakonson arrived in Orkney with a large fleet of over 100 ships intent on reasserting



The "Maeshowe Dragon" was carved about 1152 by returning Crusaders

Norse power in the west of Scotland and the Hebrides. The fleet mustered at Elwick Bay in Shapinsay before heading out into the Pentland Firth from St Margaret's Hope bound for the Clyde. It stopped at several places along the way including at Kyleakin on Skye, which is named after him.

There was an indecisive skirmish, now called by the Scots the *Battle of Largs*. The main culprit was the arrival of a sudden severe gale during which the fleet was scattered and some vessels damaged. Haakon retreated to Orkney to regroup, but took ill and died in the Bishop's Palace at Yule. He was temporarily buried in St Magnus Cathedral before being returned to Bergen in 1264.

There was an indecisive skir-

St Magnus cenotaph, Egilsay



The Orphir Round Kirk was built by Earl Haakon about 1122



Crusader's cross in Maeshowe



Up Helly Aa Jarl's Squad at Langskaill, Gairsay, home of Sweyn Asleifson







Cubbie Roo's Castle on Wyre

**Treaty of Perth** By the Treaty of Perth in 1266 Norway resigned all of the Hebrides and the Isle of Man, but only on condition that Norway retained Orkney and Shetland. The agreement was that the Scots would purchase the Hebrides for 4,000 merks plus an annual payment thereafter in perpetuity of 100 merks. This *Annual of Norway* was to be handed over in St Magnus Cathedral.

Norwegian-Scottish connections were strengthened by the marriage of Alexander III's daughter to King Erik of Norway, but the accidental death of the former and the sad death of their daughter, the Maid of Norway, on her way to

become Queen of Scotland was a severe setback, compounded by the death soon after of the mother. Eventually the success of Robert the Bruce and the marriage of his sister, Isabella, to King Erik were to greatly settle relations for some time.

The Scottish Earls continued to have very strong ties with Norway, but their twin loyalties often caused them problems. During the 14<sup>th</sup> century they gradually lost power and influence as the nation states of Norway and Scotland grew. However, in about 1379 the very colourful Henry Sinclair became Earl and is reputed to have held a remarkably affluent court at Kirkwall Castle.

Memorial to King Haakon in St Rognvald's Chapel



Henry was not only expected to defend Orkney and Shetland from attack, but was also expected to provide ships and men to the Norwegian King on demand. Increasing Scots influence and a steady influx of lowland Scots during the 15<sup>th</sup> century gradually eroded the Orkney Udal Law and Norn language, the last known official Norse document being dated 1425.

**Impignoration** With the takeover of Norway by Denmark, the Norse interest in the Northern Isles further reduced, particularly as the connection had always been with Western Norway, rather than with Denmark. When the daughter of the Danish King was to marry the Scottish King in 1468, the Danes had no compunction about using Orkney, which had been Norway's closest colony, as a guarantee for the dowry, which has never been paid. Thus ended ignominiously over 600 years of Norse rule of the islands.

**Norse sites** Until recently relatively few excavations have been made at Viking sites in Orkney.

The Earl's Bu in Orphir, near the Round Kirk



Christmas tree lighting ceremony, the tree is donated annually by Hordaland



A Tog is held every year in Kirkwall on Norwegian National Day (17 May)

Sadly so far only a small selection of the recently excavated artefacts are on display in the Orkney Museum, but these do include impressive finds from the Scar boat burial. A increasing number of these sites are on display to visitors, especially during the summer excavation season. Much earlier work was poorly recorded and has never been reported on. Many artefacts simply disappeared, or are of unknown provenance.

Despite this lack of tangible evidence, the wealth of Old Norse language in the placenames and in the words still in current usage by Orcadians is a constant reminder of our Norse heritage. Local bird and plant names are

particularly preserved in common usage. Many forms of speech have carried over from the Norn into English. The combined influence of mass media, schools and incomers is fast eroding these usages.

**LATE NORSE SITES TO VISIT**

Kirkwall	St Magnus Bishop's Palace
Firth	Damsay
Orphir	Round Kirk & Bu
Stenness	Maeshowe
Sandwick	Bay of Skail
Rendall	Tingwall
	St Thomas's Kirk
Rousay	Westness
Wyre	Cubbie Roo's Castle
Egilsay	St Magnus Church
Westray	Quoygrew
Papay	St Boniface Kirk
Gairsay	Langskaill

**LATE NORSE**

**TIMELINE 1100 to 1468**

- c.1104 Earls Haakon & Magnus
- c.1105 Magnus marries Ingarth, a Scottish noble woman
- 1116/1117 Martyrdom of Magnus
- c.1120 Haakon to Rome & Jerusalem
- c.1122 St Nicholas Round Church
- 1123 Death of Haakon, Earl Paul II
- 1135 Earl Rognwald takes over
- 1137 St Magnus Cathedral started
- c.1140 First Kirkwall Castle
- 1151 Consecration of St Magnus
- 1150/51 Maeshowe runes carved
- c.1151/3 Rognwald at Crusades & Rome
- 1158 Death of Rognwald, Harald Maddadson sole Earl
- 1171 Death of Sweyn Asleifson
- 1192 Rognwald canonised
- 1194 Battle of Florvag
- 1195 Florvag settlement 1190s Threats from Scottish crown against Caithness
- 1206 Earl Harald, succeeded by sons John & David Strong
- c.1231 Murder of John last Norse Earl
- 1232 Loss at sea of heads of some of Orkney's leading families
- c.1233 First Scottish Earl Magnus II
- 1248 King of Isle of Man drowned at Sumburgh Röist with bride
- 1256 Magnus III
- 1263 Annexation of Iceland and Greenland by Norway
- 1263 Battle of Largs
- 1266 Treaty of Perth
- 1290 Margaret dies (Maid of Norway), daughter of King Erik
- 1292 King Erik remarries to Isabella sister of Robert the Bruce
- 1321 Angus line of Earls ends
- c.1336 First Sinclair Earl Malise
- 1349 Plague in Norway & Orkney
- 1379 Earl Henry Sinclair I the last Viking Earl
- 1398 Expedition to America ??
- 1400 Earl Henry II first Scottish nobleman Earl
- 1425 Complaint of the People of Orkney against David Menzies
- 1420 Thomas Tulloch Bishop & Scottish commissioner runs Earldom
- 1425 Last Norse official document
- 1433 Earliest Scottish charter
- 1434 Earl William Sinclair
- 1461 Raid by Scottish & Irish on Orkney much damage
- 1468 Impignoration
- 1470 James III buys earldom from Earl William end of Norse Earldom





The choir is the oldest part of St Magnus Cathedral

**Papa Names** The Papa names may attest to the presence of Christian sites in Orkney when the Norsemen first arrived. Alternatively they may date from the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century, when pre-Norse sites may have been reused.

Whichever is true, the many Pictish symbol stones and ancient chapel sites suggest that Christianity was well established here before the Viking takeover.

However the invading Norse had no respect for these institutions and probably took over their farms without paying much heed to the Papae, their religious artefacts or special buildings. Around 995, Christianity did reassert itself, perhaps initially by force, but later by the will of the common people.

There are several surviving Norse churches, in varying states of ruin. Some of these

are in turn built on top of much more ancient chapels. Other churches have been rebuilt, often several times, and contain the foundations or some of the walls of much more ancient structures.

In many cases churches have been rebuilt several times on the same site, so that little now remains of the Norse or earlier buildings. However a remarkable number of churches remain substantially intact. To date only St Boniface on Papay has been renovated fully.

**Kirkwall** St Magnus Cathedral, is of course, much the most spectacular of all the Orkney Norse churches. However to get a fuller picture of Late Norse Orkney it is really necessary to visit some of the earlier sites. St Olaf's was the first Viking church in Kirkwall, and was probably built by Earl Rognvald Brusison about 1035. All that remains today is an archway in St Olaf's Wynd and an aumbry in new St Olaf's on Dundas Crescent. A hogback

Aumbry from Old St Olaf's Kirk



Watergate arch, Bishop's Palace



Apse of Orphir Round Kirk

tombstone from here is now in the Orkney Museum.

**Orphir** St Nicholas Round Church was built by Earl Hakon Paulson on his return from Jerusalem about 1122, probably next to his *skali*, or drinking hall, at the Bu in Orphir. The apse is all that now remains of the only surviving round church from this time in Scotland.

**Birsay** was the main seat of the Earldom and Bishopric, at least during the time of Thorfinn the Mighty (999-1064). Much of the extensive ruins on the Brough of Birsay probably date from this time. They include a charming little chapel and a complex of buildings, some probably secular and others ecclesiastic.

The Bishop's Palace and Church were most likely in

"Mons Bellus" stone



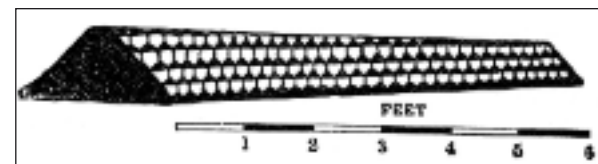
Chapel on the Brough of Birsay



Possible foundations of Christ Church under modern St Magnus Church

the vicinity of the present St Magnus Church and later Earl's Palace. The discovery of very substantial red sandstone foundations under this church, as well as the "**Mons Bellus**" stone are very suggestive of this.

**Deerness** A hogback tombstone dating from the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century, which was found in the graveyard is now kept inside the Skaill Church. This is one of five so far discovered in Orkney



Hogback tombstone from Skaill, Deerness

from St Magnus Church, Birsay - now part of two lintels







St Boniface Kirk on Papay was restored in the 1990s

The Brough of Deerness, north of the Gloup, has the ruins of a Norse chapel and several small houses. The chapel is built on top of an older structure, which may be a Pictish chapel. A rampart protects the entrance to this precipitous headland.

**Burray** St Laurence Kirk has



The monastery on Eynhallow probably dates from Norse times or earlier

St Laurence Kirk, Burray



unusual sculpted sandstone door jambs and lintels and may be on the site of a much earlier chapel dedicated to the 7<sup>th</sup> century cleric known as the *Apostle of the Picts*.

**South Ronaldsay** St Peter's and Old St Mary's Churches are both built on much older foundations, the former

including a Pictish symbol stone as a lintel. The latter is on what may be the oldest chapel site in Orkney and has an enigmatic footprint stone inside.

**Rousay** St Mary's Kirk at Swandro dates from the 12<sup>th</sup> century and, though much repaired, parts of the now dilapidated structure are very

old. It was the main church for the Westside until the 19<sup>th</sup> century clearances.

**Egilsay** St Magnus Kirk was built about 1136 on the site of an earlier chapel where Magnus is reputed to have prayed before his murder. Its distinctive type of round tower is the only one remaining in Orkney today, but in the past churches at Deerness and Stenness had similar tall towers. Now roofless, this church was formerly clad with large flagstone slates.

**Wyre** St Mary's Chapel is also from the 12<sup>th</sup> century and was probably built by Kolbein

St Mary's Kirk, Burwick, South Ronaldsay



Hruga, who lived at the Bu nearby and also built Cubbie Roo's Castle. It has interesting narrow slit windows.

**Eynhallow** The 12<sup>th</sup> century church on Eynhallow has extensive surrounding buildings. There was probably a monastery here in Norse times and the present ruins may well overlie an earlier, Pictish religious site. Later the site was used as a farm.

**Westray** has evidence of considerable Norse settlement. There was a large cemetery in the dunes at Pierowall. Lady Kirk, on the shore nearby, was rebuilt in the 1600s on top of a 13<sup>th</sup> century Norse church. The Cross Kirk, on the shore near Tuquoy, has a largely intact apse and dates from the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

**Papay.** St Boniface Church is originally 12<sup>th</sup> century, but much altered over the years. There is a 12<sup>th</sup> century hogback tombstone in the graveyard and two Pictish cross slabs were also found here. The small chapel of St Tredwells is on a small island

Cross Kirk at Tuquoy, Westray was largely demolished in the 18<sup>th</sup> century



St Mary's Chapel on Wyre may have been built by Kolbein Hruga

on the eponymous loch built on top of a broch. **Papa Stronsay** St Nicholas Chapel dates from the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. When excavated and was shown to be built on top of a small 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century Pictish monastery, which

consisted of a small chapel with several surrounding cells. **Stronsay** There are several chapel sites on Stronsay, but only St Peter's, in the graveyard west of Whitehall still has substantial ruins visible. There was probably a church

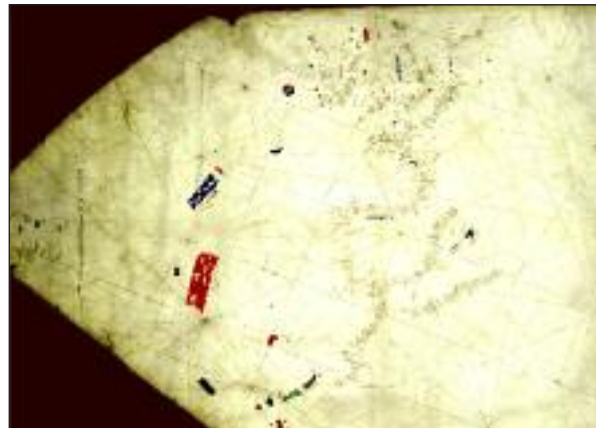


St Magnus Kirk, Egilsay

**EARLY CHRISTIAN SITES TO VISIT**

Kirkwall	Old St Olaf's St Magnus Cathedral Bishop's Palace
Orphir	St Nicholas Round
Stenness	Stenness Kirk
Harray	St Michael's Kirk
Birsay	St Magnus Broch of Birsay "Mons Bellus" stones
Holm	St Mary's
Tankerness	St Andrew's
Deerness	Skaill - hogback Brough of Deerness
Burray	St Laurence
S Ronaldsay	St Peter's Kirk Old St Mary's Kirk
Hoy	Osmondwall
Rousay	St Mary's, Swandro
Egilsay	St Magnus Kirk
Wyre	St Mary's Chapel
Eynhallow	Monastery
Westray	Cross Kirk, Tuquoy St Mary's, Pierowall St Peter's, Rapness
Papay	St Boniface St Tredwell's
Stronsay	St Peter's, Whitehall Kildinguie
Papa Stronsay	St Nicholas
Shapinsay	St Catherinés, Linton





The Pizzigano chart is said to date from 1367

**EXPLORATION** The Vikings roamed far and wide over the North Sea, Baltic, Mediterranean and across the North Atlantic Ocean. They discovered Iceland in the 9<sup>th</sup> century and by the 10<sup>th</sup> had settled in Greenland. Around 1000AD they explored the east coast of North America at least as far as Newfoundland.

They may have ventured as far as Virginia. Despite failing to establish a settlement these exploits were well known in Iceland and were recorded in their Sagas. This knowledge

was bound to be current among Norse seafarers, and especially in Orkney with its strong Norse connections.

After Iceland and Greenland were annexed by Norway in 1262 trading interest in the latter fell away. Norse power in the west was loosened further after the disastrous campaign of 1263 and Treaty of Perth in 1266, but the Norse-Scottish outlook of Orkney was to last another 200 years.

Dutch and later, English started to fish on a large scale for

Herring and Cod as the southern part of the North Sea became overfished. Hanseatic merchants traded from their bases in the Baltic with ports including Bergen, Shetland and Orkney among others.

The main export from Orkney was considerable quantities of grain which was traded for Norwegian timber and small boats. The main trade was in Stockfish, Cod which has been salted and dried outside. This was in great demand in Europe due to the Catholic demand to eat fish on Friday. It keeps well and is easy to transport compared to fresh fish.

Around the start of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, English ships started to arrive in Iceland to trade and to fish. Although the first recorded in Iceland was in 1412 they may have been earlier. The island suffered from a plague epidemic in 1402-1404, which killed about 60% of the population, which doubtless made the survivors

Replica Birlinn "Aileach" in Hoy Sound on its way to the Faeroes



Caravel with square and lateen sails from the Pizzigano map



wary of foreigners.

By 1430 over 100 fishing boats and at least 10 merchant ships were sailing to Iceland every year from East Anglia and other east coast ports. Many of these ships put into Orkney for waters and stores before heading north. Many of the English fishing boats were wellboats, with holds open to the sea so that they could deliver their last catches fresh to their home ports.

The vessels used were large with substantial crews. They were well suited for carrying cargoes the 1,500 miles or so between Iceland and south-east England. However they were slow and could not beat well into the wind. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century the Portuguese developed the *caravel*, probably influenced by small Arab fishing boats called *qaribs*.

The main sail plan innovation was the use of two or more masts. Triangular lateen sails facilitated beating far closer to the wind. The use of a combination of multiple masts with combinations of sails allowed faster and more controllable tacking, with far less risk of a miss stay. Downwind, square sails are most efficient.

Caravels were built for speed and agility rather than maximum carrying capacity, and proved highly versatile. They were carvel built on frames, which allowed sawn planks to be used. The ships were



Part of the Portuguese Cantino map from 1502

cheaper to build and lighter than clinker built hulls. With a displacement of up to 150 tons, length of 20-20m and a beam of about 6m, these ships could manage with a crew of 20 or less men, and were thus well suited for long distance sea journeys.

The development of reliable magnetic compasses, ephemeris tables and astrolabes allowed for much more

accurate navigation, and surveying. Longitude determination was to remain a serious problem until the development of accurate sea going chronometers.

The Pizzigano chart dates from 1424 and shows islands in the North Atlantic. These include the Azores which were first discovered in the 1340s. The Canaries and Madeira had been known

Caravels were developed by the Portuguese in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century







Chart of the North Atlantic and Scandinavia by Olaus Magnus, 1539

since at least the first century BC by the Romans. There is the indication of lands further to the west. The north of Britain is included, but nothing to the northwest.

By 1502 the Cantino World map was able to show the whole of Africa and Asia as far as China and Korea. It also

Whaling was a dangerous occupation, not only for the whales



includes the Caribbean, a large part of Brazil, Florida, Newfoundland, Labrador and Greenland. In 1497 the English king, Henry VII, John Cabot in search of the Northwest Passage.

Others followed, including Martin Frobisher (1576), Humphrey Gilbert (1583)

and Hudson (1609). They did not succeed in finding a sea route, but did discover a huge population of whales. Of course the Norse and the Inuit had known about them for centuries already.

Whaling in the northwest Atlantic commenced in the early 1500s, at first by the Basques alone. By 1611 the English and Dutch were starting whaling around Spitsbergen. In the early 1700s intensive fishing around Greenland was underway, especially in the Davis Strait. Orkney played a significant part in this fishery as many whalers stopped at Stromness enroute to take on water, stores and crew.

**Zeno Story** In 1365 Henry St Clair and other knights assembled in Venice to go on a crusade to Egypt, during which Alexandria was occupied. He also went to Jerusalem and was called *Henry the Holy* on his return to Scotland. He was left his father's estate at Rosslyn, near Edinburgh and in 1379 became Earl of Orkney. Thus Henry came into wealth, power and contact with Venice. He also had the usual divided loyalties to Norway, Orkney, Scotland and England.

He appears to have been well respected by Norse and Scots, and by 1390 had a small fleet of vessels at his disposal to look after his earldom. He is said to have had a decked longship for battle, two open galleys perhaps like the *Birlinn* illustrated here, and up to 10 small decked barks which were small cargo ships well-suited for northern waters.

According to a largely discredited interpretation of papers belonging to the Zeno family of Venice, a Venetian ship arrived in Orkney with Nicolo Zeno. Later his brother, Antonio, joined him. They could supply expertise that Henry lacked, such as how to forge the new cannon for shipboard use, as well as the latest navigational theories, instruments and cartographic skills. The Zenos were a prominent family involved in trading, including perhaps piracy and slave trading.

Henry is said to have made trips to Shetland and the Faeroes on behalf of the Norwegian crown to collect rent. In 1393 Nicolo may

have gone to Greenland with the Orkney Bishop, during which time he surveyed much of the southern coast. On returning with the Bishop from Gardar, he died, but his brother stayed.

In the 1360s King Edward III of England sent geographer, Nicholas of Lynn along with an Oxford friar on several exploratory trips to the northwest. One result was a book *Inventio Fortunatae*, now lost, which clearly stated that Greenland was inhabited, and later, perhaps a new map of the Atlantic, produced in Parma in 1367 someone called Pizzigano.

At about this time trade between England and Iceland was increasing, with much export of dried fish and import of a wide range of goods. English trade with Greenland was also developing. This encouraged pirates, who not only stole goods, but also traded in slaves, to operate in the area.

The story goes that some Greenland fishermen, fishing on the Grand Banks, were caught in a storm and driven far south. They were captured by Indians, to whom they taught the use of nets. Eventually one of the fishermen escaped and told his story.

Acting on this and other information he set out on for an expedition west in 1598, but received a frosty reception from the Icelanders who refused to supply water and provisions. Ten days after departure from Iceland land was reached, possibly Nova Scotia.

The *Zeno Narrative* describes a landscape that could be Cape Breton Island, where an ancient cannon was said to be discovered in 1849. This gun is like a 14<sup>th</sup> century Venetian cannon now in the Naval Museum at the Arsenale in Venice. The implication is that it could only have been made by Venetians, as no one else made guns like that. However its provenance is unsubstantiated.

Henry, Antonio and some of his men are said to have returned in 1400, having repaired their ships and built a new one locally. The Micmac Indians have a legend about *Glooskap*, who is said to have sailed away home to the country of the east. The real Henry, however, did not survive to develop his putative fledgling colony as he was killed during an English raid on Orkney shortly after his claimed return.

What is clear is that knowledge of the Atlantic and North America was far more widespread among seamen in the 14<sup>th</sup> century than has previously been realised by historians. Portuguese, Venetian, Basque, Breton and English fishermen, traders and pirates were all interested in anything which could make money. It is not surprising that they did not tell the world much!

Whether or not the tale has any truth in it, it is quite clear that by the 1390s fishermen did know about the Grand Banks and that the Orkney Earldom was quite capable of mounting just such an expedition. Whether Henry ever did so is open to speculation.