

# Vikings in the Nor' West

## The Roots of Orkney's Identity in Norway and Canada

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**ABSTRACT:** This article delves into the cultural identity of the Orkney Islands by examining the narratives people tell about Orkney's historical relationships with Norway and Canada. Orkney, just off the northern coast of Scotland, was settled by Scandinavians during the Viking period, and the people of Orkney still draw strongly on Scandinavian, primarily Norwegian, imagery in their own conceptions of the islands' identity. A millennium after the Vikings arrived, people went from Orkney to Canada with the Hudson's Bay Company, and family and cultural ties were forged between Orcadians and First Nations people throughout Canada. I explore both relationships through an ethnographic study of Orcadians' ideas about their islands' connections to Canada and to Norway. Both relationships include characterizations of a tough, rugged, individualistic person—a Viking explorer.

**RÉSUMÉ:** Cet article plonge au cœur de l'identité culturelle des îles Orcades en examinant les récits racontés par ses habitants sur leurs rapports historiques avec la Norvège et le Canada. Les Orcades, situées au large de la côte nord de l'Écosse, furent colonisées par les Scandinaves pendant la période Viking, et les habitants s'appuient encore fortement sur l'imagerie scandinave (particulièrement norvégienne) en ce qui a trait à leur conception identitaire de l'île. Un millénaire après l'arrivée des Vikings, le peuple des Orcades s'est déplacé vers le Canada avec la compagnie de la Baie d'Hudson et des liens familiaux et culturels furent forgés entre les Orcadiens et les peuples des Premières Nations à travers le Canada. J'explorerai ces liens à travers une étude ethnographique des conceptions des Orcadiens au sujet des liens unissant leur île au Canada et à la Norvège. Ces deux rapports incluent les caractéristiques d'un personnage rude et individualiste—un explorateur Viking.

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**T**his article examines cultural identity as it stretches across the Atlantic Ocean from Norway to Canada, via the Orkney Islands. The historical connections among these three places span ten centuries and are not linear or continuous. I am not making any claims of cultural evolutionary descent from Norway through Orkney and on to Canada. I want here to explore the connections individually—Orkney to Norway, Orkney to Canada—and present an aspect of these connections which the two relationships share: the trope of the Viking.<sup>1</sup>

## The Scandinavian Past

Orkney is a group of approximately seventy islands just off the northern coast of Scotland. Only about 15 of the islands are inhabited now, as forces, mainly economic, work to centralize the population of about 20,000. Orkney has been politically a part of Scotland since 1468, when it was given to Scotland as part of a marriage dowry by the king of Denmark. Earlier, in the ninth and tenth centuries, Orkney was settled (or conquered, depending on whom you ask: cf. Bäckland 2000, 2001; Crawford) by Vikings and quickly became an earldom under the Norwegian crown. Orkney was an important part of the Norwegian empire for over 500 years, and these five centuries have had a lasting effect on the islands and the islanders. Despite belonging to Scotland for the past 500+ years, culturally, Orkney in some ways resembles Norway more than Scotland. Bagpipes and the kilt are not part of Orcadian identity, and the Gaelic language has never been spoken in Orkney within historic memory. Bagpipes, kilts, tartans, and the Gaelic language are constructed markers of a dominant Scottish, mainly Highland-based, identity (Chapman, Macdonald, Trevor-Roper). These images are not used by Orcadians to denote their culture, at least partially because of the hegemonic relationship between Scotland and Orkney (Lange). Instead, people in Orkney stress what they view as Scandinavian aspects of their identity, stemming from the islands' history as part of the Scandinavian world, in order to create a unique identity for the islands.

Orcadians were often quick to point out to me parts of their culture that they described as obviously Norwegian, such as the Orcadian accent and dialect terms, to which they ascribe Old Norse derivations. One man told me about a trip he took to Norway with a group of other Orcadians. On this trip, he and his party overheard some Norwegians speaking at a distance and mistook their conversation for Orcadian dialect. His story stressed the similarities in the speaking patterns of the two groups, and he summed up by stating that “clearly, our accent is Norse and has survived through all the, well almost ten centuries...to us, that was really thrilling” (R1-19.09.2003). To this man, it is obvious that Orcadian speech closely

resembles spoken Norwegian. To be sure, such a claim is not unjustified. An Old Norse-derived language called *Norn* was spoken in Orkney into the eighteenth century (Barnes, Marwick), and traces of Norn vocabulary can still be heard in the islands today. The desire to equate “Orkadian” and “Norwegian” extends beyond language use, however. Orcadians are generally very interested in history, especially the history of their islands. Orkney’s historical ties to Scandinavia are emphasized in the culture today, often expressed simplistically as a cultural descent from Viking Norway to contemporary Orkney. Using connections such as language as support, people think of Orcadian culture as part of a direct lineage from the Vikings who colonized the islands from the ninth and tenth centuries. Furthermore, this period of colonization is viewed rather positively by some islanders. The man who misheard spoken Norwegian above later told me that “the Viking era was the golden age in Orkney” (R1-19.09.2003), a common statement in the islands. Another islander echoed his comments:

I think the Norse period’s looked upon or was certainly looked upon as being a golden age, where the farmers were free as odallers, and the Scots came along and—this is the kind of model that you quite often hear, or I get the impression that people are thinking—the Scots came along and took these odal freedoms away. (K4-17.02.2004)

These two Orcadians, along with many others, make connections between Orkney and a certain version of the Viking past. In the first case, the Viking period is simply a golden age when life was better, while the second man talks about specific aspects of life in the past. The *odal right* was a system in Orkney by which farmers owned their land outright, rather than being tenants to a laird. This system was put in place by the Scandinavians, the word deriving from ON *ódal*, meaning “property, patrimony, homestead, inheritance” (see Cleasby-Vigfússon). Orkney farmers were threatened with the loss of their odal right in 1468, when Scottish nobility tried to institute their land tenure system of rents paid by farmers to landlords. The island farmers fought legal battles for centuries to protect their odal right, with the arguments taking on an us-versus-them (Orkney-versus-Scotland) rhetoric. The threat posed by the Scottish system of land tenure was part of a generalized feeling that things were better before the Scots showed up—before 1468. Historical evidence such as this is put forward to justify the claim that Orkney’s golden age was the time when Vikings were in charge, and the quality of Orcadian life has been deteriorating ever since. (The historical story is much more complicated, of course; see Thomson 2001, Omand.)

There are two processes working in parallel (and often in concert) surrounding a statement such as “the Viking era was a golden age in Orkney.” There is an obvious romanticization of the Viking past, emphasizing the perceived good aspects while denying the bad. More will be said of this in a bit. Easily

overlooked is the subtle transition my first informant above makes between his two statements. After comparing it with the accent in Norway, he refers to the Orcadian accent as “Norse.” This may be explained as a synonym of “Scandinavian” or “Nordic,” but later in his interview, he slides readily into a discussion of Vikings. “Norwegian” and “Viking” become coterminous categories (via “Norse”), and Orkney is as easily equated with the one as with the other. This oversimplification elides the historical complexities of the Viking Age. The fact the Orkney was given to Scotland by a Danish king well after the time of the Vikings, for instance, does not often enter into the discussion of the Norwegian-ness of Orkney. While the people who settled the islands came primarily from the southwestern portion of what is now Norway, modern Norway as it is now conceived was a much later phenomenon. However, modern Norway has become easily and almost seamlessly equated with the Viking world in the Orcadian imagination.

Coupled with the easy equating of the categories “Norwegian” and “Viking” is a recognition of the Scandinavian period of Orkney’s history as a “golden age.” The period immediately following the pawning of the islands to Scotland in 1468 was marked by poor harvests, privation, and hardship in the Northern Isles (Thomson 2003 94). While the shift of rule to Scotland had some impact on these hardships, with the new lairds attempting to exploit the farmers, bad timing also had a hand. The poor harvests coincided with the Scots coming to power, thus they footed all of the blame for the deterioration of life in the islands. Regardless of what percentage of fault lies where, for many islanders today, Scandinavian Orkney was a bountiful place, while Scottish Orkney was a poor and difficult place to live. This translates into a less-than-favourable view of the Scottish present, and an almost wistful looking back toward a Scandinavian past. Because of the equating of “Viking” and “Norwegian,” when Orcadians look wistfully back to their golden age, they often face east toward present-day Norway.

## Romanticizing Viking Heroes

Not everyone in the islands buys into the narrative of the golden age, however. While talking about his schooling in Orkney, one person told me:

Well, I remember at the primary school, we did a project on the Vikings and it was very romantic, romanticized. Aye, I can remember that...the Vikings were pillagers and rapists and all that...I must admit that I had, I know I had a romantic kind of view of the Vikings and Norway and that too, when I was probably up til about maybe 15, no maybe 14 or something like that.

(K4-17.02.2004)

One Orcadian told me of a talk she gave about the romanticization of the Viking past. This woman studies Orkney's history as an academic subject, and she was presenting some of her findings in a public forum. She was arguing that Orkney has constructed a version of the past which focuses too much on heroic Viking stories while ignoring the positive influences of Scotland, in effect pointing out the romanticizing of the Scandinavian past. During the question-and-answer after her talk, a man in the audience responded, "But the whole point is that history is the people who won. It's only the heroes, and why would we want to be talking about those Scots. We want the saga heroes. Svein Asleifarson and Thorfinn the Mighty are the people that won, and they're the people we should be promoting, and those are the people of our past" (09-23.03.2004). This man in the audience, an Orcadian, spoke about "our past," the past of a collective Orkney, and an Orkney that therefore unanimously wants "the saga heroes." Clearly, the Scottish history of the islands is being denigrated by some ("why would we want to talk about those Scots," who were clearly not heroes in this story) in favour of a romanticized version of the Scandinavian past, when the heroes from the sagas, particularly the islands' own saga, Orkneyinga saga, trod the soil of the islands.

Orkney stresses its ties to a Norway which is presented as a land filled not just with Vikings, but with Viking heroes. Vikings have become mythologized in Orkney, as they have in many places and many contexts. The focus on heroes stresses a Viking ethos of strength, self-reliance, and independence. The image of the Viking is a powerful enough trope of strength and independence, and these aspects are only stressed when people talk about Viking heroes. Indeed, it is almost redundant to speak of "Viking heroes." The common conception of the Viking derives ultimately from the sagas, based on characters who are heroes in the literary sense of the word. The protagonists in the sagas are often depicted as paradigms, almost symbols of virtue, manhood, bravery. Orcadians often told me of the rugged nature of life in Orkney and the need to be independent, to do for oneself. It is an easy leap from the rugged independence of the typical modern islander to the strength and independence of the Viking saga heroes. This equating of Orcadian independence and Viking spirit was explicitly stated on more than one occasion:

Can you sense the tranquility of the island? And yet there's a tranquility without being lackadaisical. There's a sort of a get-up-and-go in the place. I mean, we don't necessarily, we don't depend at all on government handouts. You know, without being disparaging to our cousins on the Western Isles, in the Hebrides, they just expect everything to be handed to them. But you see, they've a totally different cultural background. Even though the Norse were there, still the Gaelic, the Celtic influence remained, whereas here the Norse was absolutely dominant, and I think because sadly in the Western Isles they don't have the same zest for doing things for themselves.

(R1-19.09.2003)

In Orkney, people do for themselves, according to this informant. They are independent, rather than relying on the government or the mainland of Scotland to provide for them, while the Western Isles always have their hand out. Importantly, the reason for this cultural difference is that Orkney has retained the rugged independence of the Norse, while the Western Isles have lost their Viking toughness and replaced it with a Celtic sense of privilege. Despite this man's claim, Orkney's agricultural economy is heavily subsidized by the government (Chalmers 137-39), as are the transportation links from Scotland to Orkney. However, the perception that Norse Orkney is independent, while the Gaelic Western Isles stretch an umbilical cord to Edinburgh, is common among Orcadians. They are Vikings, without need of help from "those Scots."

The trope of the *Viking* means more to this story than just rugged independence, however. The similarities between Orcadians and Vikings extend beyond such abstract qualities as strength and independence. What activity are Vikings best known for, aside from pillaging and plundering? It is difficult to call an image of a Viking to mind without a stereotypical dragon-prowed longboat appearing somewhere in the picture. Vikings were known as sailors, and they were particularly feared because of their ability to strike so effectively from the sea. Orcadians still pride themselves on their nautical abilities and heritage, despite the common claim that while the people of Shetland, just to the north of Orkney, are fishermen who own farms, Orcadians are farmers who happen to own boats.<sup>2</sup> Orkney today is a pastoral, agricultural place, with cattle and sheep farms far outweighing the commercial fishing fleet. However, the people cleave strongly to their oceanic history, with plans for an Orkney boat museum in development (G10-09.04.2004). Orkney still connects very strongly with the sea, and this strengthens the connections to Norway—in a straight line, Orkney is closer to Bergen than it is to London, and travel in medieval times was much faster by sea than by land. While today the sea is seen as a barrier, in 1468 it was a highway. Even though travel is now more common by land or air, Orkney continues to emphasize the past, when a boat was the best way to cover long distances. In doing so, Orkney perceives the distance to Norway as shorter than the distance across Scotland. When Orcadians speak of their sailing heritage, they see images of Viking longships, not Gaelic *currachs*.

## Eighteenth-Century Vikings

The idea of rugged independence with a twist of the maritime is based on a partial, constructed Viking identity for Norway. We know that life in the Viking time consisted of more than boldly sailing off to find riches and fame in new lands despite the danger (see Wolf 2-3). However, this part of the story has become central to Orcadians' construction of their own identity. These same

aspects—boldness, independence, sailing the seas in search of fortune—carry through Orkney’s story beyond the Viking Age. Just as the story of the bold Viking fits a narrative of people coming to the islands from coastal Norway to colonize, hardy seafaring explorers left Orkney to colonize elsewhere almost one thousand years later. From the very early eighteenth century, Orcadians were involved in the Hudson’s Bay Company, sending men to Canada.

The Company was established to exploit the natural resources of the newly opened British colonial lands in Canada (*A Brief History* 5-6). Canada was seen in Britain as a wild, untamed wilderness, full of danger and the unknown. However, it also promised great wealth and adventure for those brave enough to go there and tame the land. The people charged with this task would journey to Canada (dubbed *the Nor’ West* in Orcadian dialect), they would set up a business collecting and preparing furs and other resources from the vast wilderness, and they would do so virtually alone. The Hudson’s Bay Company sought out a certain type of man to take on such a task: he would need to be a good sailor in order to be useful on the trip to Canada, he would need to be self-reliant and hardy to forge his own existence with very little support from home, and he would need to have a thirst for adventure and wealth. The Company wanted rugged individualists with a taste for action and money. In short, the Company wanted Vikings. Where in Britain could the Hudson’s Bay Company go if they wanted to hire Vikings? Orkney, of course.

The Hudson’s Bay Company had a strong presence in Stromness, the main port town of Orkney, for many years. Remnants of that presence can still be found throughout the town, on buildings bearing the blue plaques marking historic structures in Britain. The building which currently houses the Pier Arts Centre used to be Company recruitment offices, and a private house now called The Haven was office space for Company agents. An old wellhead along the main street is now sealed off, but passersby can read on the informational sign that the well provided water for Company ships sailing off to Canada. Stromness was often the last stop for ships before crossing the Atlantic, and modern tourists are told that the Company stocked up not only on water and provisions, but on stout Orkneymen who could find their fortunes in Canada.

There were many men from Orkney who went with the Company to Canada, and many of those did make enough money to return to Orkney and buy property. A few rose through the ranks of the Company and gained fame outside of Orkney. Joseph Isbister and William Tomison are remembered as “Orkney boys who made it big” in Canada (Troup 226-28), while John Rae is practically a folk hero (Troup 228-30). Rae is even entombed next to Vikings in St. Magnus Cathedral in Orkney’s main city, Kirkwall, a cathedral built by one Norse saga hero and dedicated to another. Orcadians also note that many of the men who went to Canada stayed and married First Nations women. Typical Orcadian surnames such as Flett, Isbister, and Skail are common in pockets of Canada, and placenames such as

Orkney, Stromness, Binscarth, and Clouston dot Western Canada, evidence of settlement by Orcadians (Troup 233).

A sort of cultural exchange has come about between Orkney and some First Nations groups based upon the genetic ties resulting from the activities of the men of the Hudson's Bay Company. There have been infrequent "Homecomings," where groups of Orcadians have traveled to Canada and groups of First Nations people have traveled to Orkney. The link is perceived as very genetic—Orcadians talk about "our Canadian cousins." One woman who explored her personal family connections to Canada described her research on one particular ancestor: "I was able to trace his life in Canada, and that was so really interesting, I got completely absorbed. And this man took on a real character, a real dogged Orcadian character" (05-26.01.2004). As she traced the story of her Orcadian ancestor in Canada, she formed a picture in her mind of a rugged, strong individual, confirming the narrative of the Viking spirit leaving the islands to continue exploring west. Even for people who do not have direct familial connections, the draw to Canadians with Orkney ancestry is often strong. The "our" in "our Canadian cousins" is not necessarily my immediate family's cousins, but Orkney's cousins. Unsurprisingly, these same terms are sometimes used to discuss Orkney's Norwegian relations. While there is an informal cultural exchange relationship with a certain part of Canada set up around the Homecomings, there is a formalized relationship between Orkney and Norway, harkening back to the Viking connection discussed earlier. Orkney and the Norwegian fylke of Hordaland were twinned in the 1980s, a situation similar to forming sister cities, and there is an Orkney-Norway Friendship Association which promotes Norwegian culture in Orkney.

## Balances of Power

*Twining* may be a bit of a misnomer, as neither relationship, Orkney-Norway or Orkney-Canada, is considered equal by everyone involved. The Orkney-Norway Friendship Association has a parallel organization in Norway, the *Vennskapsforeningen Norge-Orknøyene* [literally the Norway-Orkney Friendship Association]. However, I was told that the VNO is nowhere near as large or as active as ONFA. While many people in Orkney are at least passively aware of ONFA, relatively few Norwegians are aware of VNO. In short, Norway is a lot more important to Orkney than Orkney is to Norway. One Orcadian described the Hordaland twinning as absurd, stating that such relationships are usually with places which are culturally different, whereas Orkney looks to Hordaland as a "true repository for Norse culture" which Orkney can use to replenish its Viking identity (K5-03.03.2004). Hordaland represents the imagined Viking past, regardless of the realities of life there today. It is representative of the combined *Norway/Viking trope*, and this man characterizes Orkney as somehow lesser in the

equation. The islands are depicted as feeding off Norway, trying to boost their Norse-ness in an almost parasitic relationship. Another Orcadian characterized the connection with Canada as unbalanced as well, saying that the Canadian First Nations people finding their relatives in Orkney were taking a “big step,” and that the Canadians who came to past Homecomings were very interested to learn about Orkney (05-26.01.2004)—more so than the reverse. While the Homecomings were of interest to many Orcadians, the exploration of this connection was not portrayed to me as momentous for the Orcadians involved. For Canadians, learning about their Orcadian roots was more important and exciting than learning about their Canadian cousins was for Orcadians.

In both connections—Norway to Orkney and Orkney to Canada—people described an unbalanced relationship. There seems to be a hierarchical flow from Norway through Orkney to Canada. Orkney looks to Norway as the origin of its hardy, independent nature. The rugged independence which marks Orcadians is the result of their Viking ancestry in what is presented as a very straightforwardly genetic way. Orkney looks at Canada as a descendent in a similar genetic way due to the intermarriage of Orcadian men and First Nations women. The rugged independence of the Canadians is a result of the Orkneymen who went over there, rather than the skills those men learned from the indigenous people. Orkney views its Viking past as a golden age, from which it has been descending culturally ever since. Norway is the bastion of culture, the bringer of light to Orkney. Orcadian culture is almost depicted as a Norwegian import. Orkney, in turn, brought culture to the First Nations people and the wilderness of Canada. Both the land and the people there were untamed, natural, uncorrupt, when the men of the Hudson’s Bay Company arrived. The rhetoric of the *noble savage* is not far beneath many of the conversations I had with people in Orkney about their Canadian cousins. The Vikings, however, who are often pictured as quite savage in the popular imagination, are viewed by many Orcadians as the civilizers of Orkney. Orkney imported culture from Norway, and exported it to Canada. The First Nations people who come to Orkney for Homecomings are replenishing their Orcadian-ness, rather than the Orcadians gaining anything from them. Likewise, Orkney replenishes its Viking-ness by looking to Hordaland and Norway, while Norwegians are portrayed as less interested in their “descendants” in Orkney.

Such an interpretation follows along a more general Euro-centric view of history, of course, wherein Europe is the seat of civilization and kindly brings that civilization to all the corners of the world. This colonialistic interpretation does receive a particular expression in Orkney, however, with the trope of the hardy, independent, Viking spirit threaded throughout. The historical logic of the scheme is seductive—people immigrated to Orkney from Norway in the ninth century, and emigrated from Orkney to Canada in the eighteenth, so the flow of people east to west seems to confirm chronologically the flow of culture and civilization east to west. Obviously, this is not a monolithic opinion in the islands,

but many people there spoke with me about Orkney's relationships to Canada and to Norway in these terms. Many Orcadians recognize that this view is simplistic. Several people described Orkney as cosmopolitan, a melting pot, and other such terms which undercut the descriptions of a monoculture coming from the east and moving on to the west. However, the majority interpretation of the two relationships, Orkney-Norway and Orkney-Canada, unconsciously maintains the cultural hierarchy.

## Conclusion

The people of Orkney recognize that their islands share history with both Norway and Canada. The two relationships are not necessarily conceived of or discussed as being connected. In the popular narratives, Orkney has a historical relationship with Canada, and it has a historical relationship with Norway. However, both connections share some metaphorical expression. Who was it that came to the islands on longboats? Viking heroes. Who was it that left Orkney to conquer the wilds of Canada? Viking heroes in all but name. The trope of the Viking does run through both relationships, and both are structured along a colonial power continuum that flows from east to west. While building a direct comparison between Norway and Canada may be over-reaching the ethnographic evidence, the fact that the people of Orkney present their connections to the two countries with such similarities can tell us much about how the islanders view themselves and their place in the world. Orkney's self-conception includes a sense of individualism and self-reliance on the part of the islanders. They view themselves as rugged, strong seafarers. Orcadians pride themselves on their independence, their ability to make do and do for themselves. Stories of Viking heroes and bold Canadian explorers support Orkney's claim of self-reliance. Because the connections are spoken of in genetic terms, hardiness is shown as almost bred into the people of Orkney. The stories of Norway and Canada confirm the islanders' depictions of themselves as rugged and independent by giving genetically related examples from the past. While Orkney is making connections to lands far across two seas, and back over ten centuries, by telling these narratives, the people are using the stories to say just as much about themselves and their islands today.

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#### NOTES

1. My interpretations are based on eleven months of fieldwork conducted in Orkney, where I was collecting informal narratives and exploring the cultural identity of the people in the islands.
2. For explorations of Shetland's identification with a version of a Viking past, see Brown and Abrams. The latter emphasizes the role of gender in identity construction. Interestingly, my sources in Orkney spoke of their Vikings as a masculine category. The historical importance of women in Late Medieval Scandinavia notwithstanding, the Viking world of modern Orkney was populated almost exclusively by males.

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