

From Asset in War to Asset in Diplomacy: Orkney in the Medieval Realm of Norway

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Abstract: The island province of Orkney played a crucial role in Norway's overseas expansion during the Early- and High-Middle Ages. Located just offshore from mainland Scotland, it provided a resort for westward-sailing fleets as well as a convenient springboard for military forays into Britain and down the Irish Sea. The establishment of a Norwegian-Scottish peace and the demarcation of fixed political boundaries in 1266 led to a revision of Orkney's role in the Norwegian realm. From that point until the its pledging to the Scottish Crown in 1468, Norway depended on Orkney as a hub for diplomacy and foreign relations. This paper looks at how Orkney figured in Norwegian royal strategies in the west and presents key examples which show its transition from a tool of war to a forum for peace.

Keywords: diplomacy, islands, medieval, Norway, Orkney, warfare

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Introduction

For roughly seven centuries, from the late-eighth until the late-fifteenth centuries, the North Sea archipelago of Orkney was under varying degrees of influence and overlordship of the Kingdom of Norway. It was one of a string of North Sea and North Atlantic islands including Greenland, Iceland, the Faeroes, Shetland, and until 1266 the Hebrides and Man, known in contemporary texts as *skattlondum* (tributary countries) of the King of Norway. As the term indicates, each of these islands owed 'skatt', a tribute or tax to Crown, although the exact nature and amount of those tributes continue to elude historians. While acts of submission by native chieftains, including the imbursement of a lump sum of wealth, appear to have been a staple means of tribute in the Early and High Middle Ages, the late medieval systems were based on regular renders provided by wider segments of the provincial communities (Imsen, 2011, pp. 13-23). Unfortunately, the scarcity of source material makes it difficult to fully appreciate the significance of economies in the Crown's relations to these dependencies. For Orkney, this is particularly so. Most of what is known of Orkney's medieval economy is derived from vague narrative references and optimistic reconstructions of land valuations based on earlier material (Marwick, 1952, pp. 206-7; Thomson, 1996; Thomson, 2001, pp. 214-5; Crawford, 2008). While it might be assumed that Orcadian capital figured prominently into the strategies of Norwegian kings, there is scant evidence of how and to what extent.

But there were other incentives for lordship over Orkney. Prior to the late-thirteenth century, there were few limits to the scope of Norway's quest for power in the west. The horizon stretched far beyond Cape Wrath, past Scotland's western seaboard and deep into the Irish Sea. Ian Beuermann viewed the Irish Sea and the adjacent shorelines as a single geopolitical zone which he referred to as the 'Viking Crescent' (Beuermann, 2006, pp. 6, 88).

The richest, most prestigious and most coveted part of that zone was Dublin (*ibid.*, p. 88), though from a strategic standpoint, the Hebrides and Man were most pivotal in terms of military and political control of the region as a whole (Beuermann, 2006, pp. 1, 275). As Beuermann noted, the Hebrides “are the link between Ireland and Scotland, and Man is the stepping-stone between England and Ireland, Scotland and Wales” (*ibid.*, p. 1). The Viking Crescent was an exceptional avenue for prosperity. Dues from pastoral farming, combined with a consistent flow of wealth from trade and plunder, made the region, at least until the late thirteenth century, “worth the while” of Norwegian kings (Beuermann, 2011; Oram, 2011). The most celebrated of those kings were those who risked their fortunes on the seas and hostile shores of Scotland, England, Wales, Man and Ireland. It was there, and not Orkney, where kings staked their greatest claims to wealth and power.

That region was not, however, exclusively theirs for the taking. Not only were Norwegian rulers challenged to assert their suzerain authority over the petty kingdoms of Man and the Isles and of Dublin: they were also faced by the formidable crowns of England and Scotland. In order to maintain an edge in this contentious and violent zone, Norwegian kings required a more permanent foothold, and it was here that Orkney fits into the scene. Situated just a few miles off the northern tip of the Scottish mainland, Orkney provided a fulcrum for forays south into Britain and further down into the Irish Sea. Logistically speaking, it was Norway’s most crucial overseas hub, with nearly every major Norwegian fleet en route to Britain or Ireland passing through its harbours. It was also securely under Norwegian domination. Whereas the islands and coastal regions of the Irish Sea were the objects of competition between rival kingdoms for much of the Early- and High-Middle Ages, Orkney was subject to the exclusive overlordship of Norway’s kings. Without interference, those kings were safe to use Orkney as a basis for their expansive campaigns.

As Norway’s fortunes in the west waned and, eventually, faltered completely under the weight of Scottish encroachment in the late-thirteenth century, the nature of the advantage provided by Orkney’s proximity to Britain changed from that of providing a base for war to that of providing a base for diplomacy. In 1266, Norway formally remitted all claims west of Cape Wrath. The Hebrides and Man, which had long been contested areas, were from then on squarely in Scotland’s area of control. With those disputes put to rest, Norway’s relations to Scotland took on a decidedly more peaceful and cooperative character. As military concerns gave way to strategies for a new brand of North Sea diplomacy, Orkney’s purpose changed to that of a peaceful and secure point of assembly for royal envoys and other agents.

It is beyond the scope of this modest contribution to present a full survey of war and peace in medieval Orkney. Instead, these features will be discussed, albeit briefly, each by way of several illustrative cases. The goal is simply to show that Orkney was more than just a quick and easy source of wealth for the Norwegian Crown. Rather, it was Norway’s most durable and advantageous window to the west.

Figure 1: Map of Britain, Ireland and surrounding isles. The unconventional arrangement depicts contemporary Norse perspectives toward the region's geography. Orkney and Shetland were known in medieval Norse texts as the 'Northern Isles' (Norðreyjar) while the Hebrides, known today as the 'Western Isles', were referred to as the 'Southern Isles' (Suðreyjar). Sailors from Norway ventured first 'west over sea' before steering south toward the Hebrides and into the Irish Sea.



Source: the author.

Geographic framework

As suggested above, Orkney's role in the medieval realm of Norway was dictated first and foremost by its uniquely advantageous geography. In order to appreciate this, one must first place it on what Tatjana N. Jackson referred to as the 'mental map of medieval Scandinavians' (Jackson, 2009). From a Norwegian perspective, Orkney fell within a broad 'western quadrant' comprising multiple Atlantic lands and islands, including also Iceland, Shetland, Britain, Ireland and even France, Spain and Africa. Within that zone, Norsemen used several different 'western ways' (*vestrvegir*) or fixed and frequented sailing itineraries in order to reach their destinations (ibid., pp. 213-4; Ridel, 2007). One of the most utilized of those routes in the Early- and High Middle Ages was that which led through Orkney, around the northern coasts of Britain and down into the Irish Sea. Contemporary observers appreciated that this was a south-western trajectory and termed the isles according to their apposition to one another, as well as to Norway; Orkney and Shetland were referred to as the 'Northern Isles' (*Norðreyjar*) while the Hebrides were known collectively as the 'Southern Isles' or 'Sudreys' (*Suðreyjar*) (Beuermann, 2006, p. 6). The fact that Orkney and Shetland were viewed as northern islands implies, perhaps, that Norse observers appreciated their proximity and close association to Norway (the 'Northern way' = *Norðrvegr*) more than they did the more distant territories to the south and west.

Orkney's principle town of Kirkwall lies just over two-hundred and sixty nautical miles from Bergen, perhaps a daunting distance from a modern, land-locked perspective, but not so disheartening for the experienced seafarers of the medieval North Sea world. An early expression of this view of the perceived proximity of Orkney and Norway comes from the 12th century *Historia Norwegiæ*:

Certain islands lying close to Gulatingslag [of Western Norway] are called by their inhabitants the Solund Islands, from which the sea that flows between Norway and Ireland is known as the Solund Sea. In these waters are situated the Orkney Islands, totaling over thirty and named after a particular Earl Orkan. They are populated by different peoples and now split into two domains; the southern isles have been elevated by petty kings, the northern graced by the protection of earls, both of whom pay no mean tribute to the kings of Norway (HN, 2003, p. 65).¹

Several things are noteworthy here. First, the author viewed the islands as lying "close to" Western Norway, a clear indication that contemporary observers had a relatively liberal perception of proximity by sea. It also underscores the idea that there was a perceived association between Orkney and the Norwegian mainland. Second, the author placed the islands directly in "the sea that flows between Norway and Ireland", thus implying that the isles were intermediary points between two prominent countries. The fact that the writer uses such a distant, western point of reference as Ireland when locating the isles shows that Norse travelers were frequently aiming for a far-flung trajectory. The isles, however important in

¹ "[S]unt ergo quedam insule preiacentes Gulacie, que ab incolis Solunde nominantur, unde Solundicum Mare dictum, quod inter Norwegiam et Iberniam fluit. In quo sunt Orchades insule numero plusquam XXX, a quodam comite Orchano nomine uocate. Que quidem diuresis incolis acculte nunc in duo regna sun diuise: Sunt enim Meradiane Insule regulis sublimate, Brumales uero comitum presidio decorate, qui utrique regibus Norwegie non modica persoluunt tribute" (HN, 2003, p. 64).

their own right, were more importantly points along the way. Finally, it is worth noting that the author groups Orkney (and presumably Shetland as well) together with the Hebrides, those being the southern isles ruled by petty kings. Once again, Orkney is classified, not as a free-standing entity, but rather as part of a much wider sphere of influence (Wærdahl, 2011, pp. 31-4). The southern waters separating Orkney from Scotland, though far narrower at just over five nautical miles, were apparently more foreboding:

At that [earlier] period these islands were not called the Orkneys but rather Pentland, so that the sea which separates the islands from Scotland is still known by the natives as the Pentland Firth; here is the most gigantic of all whirlpools, which draws in and swallows the stoutest vessels at ebb-tide, and at hightide spews up and disgorges their wreckage (HN, 2003, p. 65).²

Despite its rather fantastic imagery, the author's portrayal of the Pentland Firth as violent and treacherous has a grain of truth to it. The strong tidal streams give rise to forceful eddies which, as the quote alludes, cost countless lives over the ages (Crawford, 1987, pp. 21-2.). However, the Pentland Firth was clearly not as prohibitive a barrier as this text implies. Archeological evidence shows a strong prehistoric tradition of contact and settlement between the isles and the mainland (Thomson, 2001, pp. 1-23; Woolf, 2007, p. 13) and historical narratives relate numerous and, more often than not unencumbered, commutes between the isles and Caithness on the mainland. In his stressing the dangers of the strait, the author emphasized that Orkney was in no manner of speaking a part of Scotland. Though close, it was definitively one of those islands which paid "no mean tribute to the kings of Norway" and to none other.

Alex Woolf termed this string of islands the 'Shetland corridor' in reference to the region's northernmost archipelago (Woolf, 2007, p. 54). Shetland, being almost as close to western Norway as it is to the Scottish mainland, appears to have been the first point of call for western voyages. The author of *Historia Norwegiæ* may have had these islands in mind when speaking of those "lying close" to western Norway. And yet, as a rule, Shetland was not a direct point of departure for forays onto mainland Britain or into the Irish Sea. Stops there were generally followed by longer and busier layovers in Orkney before proceeding further south or west. Orkney's tighter proximity and access to Britain helps explain why it, and not Shetland, became the principal headquarters of the Earldom and later the Bishopric.

Warfare

Incentives for Norway's overseas expansion are far too many and complex to discuss in full here, though as noted, access to wealth and the prestige which accompanied it were major inducements for forays into Britain and the Irish Sea. While we should assume that some of these ventures were peaceful, the narrative sources tend to highlight those of a violent nature. The heading 'warfare' is employed in a most liberal and intentionally provocative sense of 'armed conflict'. In reality, the earliest examples of armed conflict dealt with here bear nothing of the more prevalent, modern concept of war as an official, large-scale conflict between

² "Sed eo tempore non Orchades, ymmo Terra Petorum dicebantur, unde adhuc Petlandicum Mare ab incolis appellatur, quod seiungit insulas a Scotia, ubi omnium maxima uorago, que fortissimas naues per ledonem attrahendo diglutit, earundem fragmenta per malenam eructando euomit. (HN, 2003, p. 64).

different political units. As there was a gradual coalescence into cohesive kingdoms, Norway and Scotland, and sub-polities, the Earldom of Orkney and the Kingdom of Man and the Isles, engaged in increasingly formalized expression of violence, the culmination being the Norwegian-Scottish conflict of 1263. Of interest here is how Orkney figured in that process, how it was used to access, exploit and secure wealth. To start, one must look to the west.

According to tradition, the founding of Orkney as a Norse earldom in the late-ninth century occurred in the course of a military campaign. Accounts of King Harald hárfagri's ('Fair-hair's') supposed conquest of Orkney vary somewhat, though the two most-often cited sources, *Orkneyinga saga* and *Heimskringla*, tell more or less the same story: certain privateers had been using Shetland and Orkney as winter bases for their summer raids into Norway. Growing weary of their attacks, the king sailed west over sea one summer, conquering Shetland, Orkney and then the Hebrides before sailing down the Irish Sea, plundering in Scotland and laying the Isle of Man under his control. One of the king's vassals, Rognvald, lost his son during the campaign and was compensated with a grant of Orkney and Shetland, the two parts of a new earldom.³ Historians have raised doubts as to the veracity of these saga accounts, all of which were composed centuries after the events reported (Crawford, 1987, pp. 53-6; Downham, 2004; Woolf, 2007, pp. 277-8, 307). Indeed, it is perhaps more useful to focus on the perceptions expressed in the stories rather than the historical facts. From that perspective, we see that Orkney was viewed not as an 'insular' case, but as part of a much further-flung string of islands under Norwegian control. The pinnacle of King Harald's legendary campaign was not the submission of Orkney, but his broader plundering and conquests in the Irish Sea. *Orkneyinga saga*, for instance, says that "[Harald] travelled all the way west to Man and plundered the villages of Man. During his campaign he fought a number of battles, winning himself territories further west than any King of Norway has done since" (OSb, 1981, p. 26).⁴ According to *Historia Norwegie*, Orkney was a launching pad for these ventures:

When they had gained safety and security by building winter residences, they went off in summer on pirating expeditions against the English and the Scots, and occasionally on the Irish; the result was that in England they brought Northumbria, in Scotland Caithness, and in Ireland Dublin and all the other coastal towns under their domination (HN, 2003, p. 67).⁵

Orkney's proximity to Britain and the Irish Sea would prove itself advantageous time and again for westward-oriented rulers. A generation later, Harald's son, Erik blóðöx ('Blood-ax'), is said to have taken Orkney as his base of power during his campaigns to seize the kingdom of Northumberland in the mid-tenth century (Downham, 2004). The legendary campaign went as follows: Having been deposed from Norway in 935, Erik first sailed to Orkney, where he collected reinforcements before sailing south toward England, plundering in Scotland along the way. After securing the kingship of Northumberland, Erik returned to Orkney, which he then

³ The account offered in *Historia Norwegiæ* reports that it was the kinsmen of Rognvaldr who led the campaign.

⁴ "hann fór allt vestr í Mön ok eyddi Manarbyggðina. Hann átti þar margar orrostur ok eignaðisk lönd svá langt vestr, at engi Nóregskonungr hefir lengra síðan." (OSa, 1987, p. 8).

⁵ "Vbi securius hiemalibus sedibus muniti, estiuo tempore tum in Anglos, tum in Scotos, quandoque in Hibernios suam excercentes tyrannidem ierunt, ut de Anglia Northimbriam, de Scotia Kathanasiam, de Hybernia Diflinniam ceterasque maritimas urbes suo imperio subiugarent." (HN, 2003, p. 66).

used as a winter base for his summer raids in Scotland, the Hebrides, Ireland and Wales. When his kingship in England was challenged, Erik secured the support of Orkney's earls before heading into the Irish Sea once more and finally back to England where he died attempting to enforce his claim. The story was much the same over a century later when King Harald harðraði ('Hard-rule') arrived in Orkney in 1066. Aiming to assert his claim to the English throne, Harald sailed first to Shetland, and then to Orkney, "where his force grew considerably, and both earls [of Orkney] decided to join him" (OSb, 1981, p. 77).⁶ He left behind his queen and their two daughters before pushing south and ultimately meeting his end at Stamford Bridge.

Although many of the details of these accounts are dubious, they demonstrate that Orkney was generally appreciated as a crucial point of assembly and an essential source of manpower. Its use in recruiting armed men reflects the strength of the earls and the extent of their local military apparatuses. In joining the Norwegian lords on their expeditions into England, the earls most likely brought with them the strength of their kinsmen, friends and vassals, thus swelling the ranks of the Norwegian forces. The episodes also show that Orkney represented a secure resort in an otherwise precarious region. While both kings met their deaths in battles on the British mainland, their experiences in Orkney are portrayed as unremarkable and safe. The fact that King Harald harðraði relied on Orkney as a haven for his wife and daughters is testament to its security. Most importantly, the episodes provide further proof that Orkney was valued as a stepping stone to other, more desirable lands. It was not as much an aim as it was a means to a much further, more illustrious end.

Orkney's purpose in the westward push is demonstrated most outstandingly in accounts of King Magnus berfœttr's ('Bare-legs') campaigns into the Irish Sea in 1098. *Orkneyinga saga* tells us that Magnus was "an ambitious man and greedy for power in other lands" (OSb, 1981, p. 83).⁷ Recognizing this, a former earl, who was set to benefit from the king's intervention, persuaded him to lead an army to conquer Orkney just as King Harald hárfagri had done. But this "princely" (*høfðingsbragð*) endeavour in Orkney was in and of itself not incentive enough for the king. Magnus agreed only after the earl reminded him that in seizing the Hebrides, "it would be easy for him to raid from there in Ireland and Scotland and, once these western regions were his, he could get reinforcements from Norway and lead an army against the English" (ibid., p. 83).⁸ After gathering many fine men and a formidable fleet, Magnus sailed west, stopping first in Orkney to replacing the reigning earls with his own son and a host of councilors. His stay in there was brief. As advertised, he quickly proceeded to Hebrides, which he took under his control before turning further south to the coasts of Wales. There, he is reported to have won a "famous victory" over the Welsh, eventually taking possession of Anglesey, "which lies as far south as any region ever ruled by the former kings of Norway and comprises a third part of Wales" (ibid., p. 85).⁹ On his return journey, King Magnus laid his claim to Kintyre and, according to the saga, made peace with King Malcolm of Scotland in an agreement whereby Magnus could take "all the islands off the west coast of Scotland which were separated by water navigable by a ship with the rudder set" (ibid., p.

⁶ "Ór Orkneyjum hafði hann lið mikit; réðusk jarlar báðir til ferðar með konungi." (OSa, 1987, p. 86).

⁷ "stórráðr ok ágjarn á ríki annarra høfðingsbragð." (ibid., p. 93).

⁸ "ef hann fengi ríki i Suðreyjum, at þaðan væri hægt at herja á Írland ok Skotland, ok ef hann kæmi undir sik Vestrlöndum, at þaðan væri gott at eflask með styrk Norðmanna á móti Englismönnum." (ibid., pp. 93-94).

⁹ "sem inir fyrri Nóregskonungar høfðu lengst eignazk suðr, Öngulsey er þriðjungur Bretlands." (ibid., p. 97).

86).¹⁰ In an exceptionally crafty manoeuvre, Magnus had the ship carried over land, thus winning the whole of Kintyre, which according to the saga “is thought to be more valuable than the best of the Hebridean islands, though not as good as the Isle of Man” (ibid., p. 86).¹¹ Again, the authenticity and details of the account are questionable (Power, 1986), but it is interesting to note that Orkney does not figure at all into the comparison of these ‘prized’ lands. This shows at least one of two things; either twelfth century writers took Orkney for granted as a dominion of the Norwegian Crown, or it was not itself considered to be an objective so much as a tool. Although the voyage was instigated by an earl in search of regaining power in Orkney, it was conquests further west which ultimately enticed the king to travel overseas.

King Hákon Hákonsson’s fateful campaign against the Scots in 1263 marked the last time a Norwegian king would venture west over sea (Sellar, 2000). As in all previous operations, Orkney played a crucial role, not as an objective *per se*, but as strategic breakpoint and as a place of respite. An ongoing dispute between the kings of Norway and Scotland over control of the Hebrides came to a head in 1262, when the King of Scotland, Alexander III, sponsored an attack on the islands of Skye. King Hákon responded by assembling a massive fleet and preparing Orkney and Shetland for the fleet’s arrival. The king sent envoys to gather pilots in Shetland and summon the king’s vassals, including the earl, in Orkney. In July 1263, the fleet set sail from Bergen toward Shetland and remained there for two weeks. It then moved south to Orkney, where it harbored in Shapinsay, conveniently close to Kirkwall. It was here that the campaign tactics were fully developed. Part of the fleet would split off to raid into the Moray Firth on the eastern coast of Scotland while the main contingent led by the king would sail west to the main objective, the Hebrides. [Figure 1](#) above shows Orkney’s advantageous position in this respect. Situated roughly at the vertex of the region, it provided access to both coasts, allowing the king to flank his opponent from two sides. Despite this tactical advantage, the Norwegian forces were eventually pushed back at the Battle of Largs and, after suffering the effects of worsening weather, were, according to the *Chronica de Mailros*, forced “back home less honorably than they came”.¹² ‘Home’ in that context was Orkney. The *Chronicon Manniæ et Insularum* reports that “Haco, King of Norway came to Scotland, but effecting nothing returned to the Orkneys, and died at Kirkwall”.¹³ Given the examples above, it is not surprising that Orkney would be deemed as a kind of ‘home’ for the Norwegian king by contemporary observers; it was the only set of islands in the region which were consistently and uncontestedly subject to Norwegian lordship and thus the only respite for the battle-worn Norwegian fleet. *Hákonar saga hákonarsonar* gives a rather detailed account of those dark winter days in Orkney, telling how estates were divvied out to the men for provision and how the king, growing increasingly weak from illness, took hospice at the bishop’s residence in Kirkwall. There, in the safe care of Orkney’s loyal bishop, the king died late that same year (HsH, 1977, pp. 207-8).

¹⁰ “Eyjar allar, þær er liggja fyrir vestan Skotland ok fara mætti stjórnföstu skipi milli ok meginlands” (OSa, 1987, p. 98).

¹¹ “Saltíri er mikit land ok betra en in bezta ey í Suðreyjum nema Mön” (ibid.).

¹² “et sic turpius quam venerant repatriare” (CM, 1835, p.190).

¹³ “Haco rex Norwagie ad partes scottiae et nihil expediens reversus est ad Orcades ibidem apud Kyrkews mortuus” (CMS, 1860, p. 27).

Norwegian expansion in the west ground to a halt in the late-thirteenth century. As William P. L. Thomson explained, the “Viking age geography was changing. The seaways through the Hebrides were no longer the golden road which led to Norse Dublin” (Thomson, 2001, p. 138). Norway had increasingly little to gain by continuing its forays in the west. According to Beuermann, a range of factors including “shifting trade patterns, the growing influence of the church, and increasing limitations to plunder by the thirteenth century would seem to have had a negative influence on the Manx-Hebridean economy, and thus on possible renders to the Norwegian crown” (Beuermann, 2011, p. 97). If Norwegian kings were less keen to exploit their power, they were also less capable. The 1263 conflict underscored just how dated and ineffectual Norway’s levied navy was in the increasingly fortified margins of the Scottish realm (Barrow, 1990, pp. 138-40; Beuermann, 2006, p. 273). As war receded into the annals in the 1260s, so too did Orkney’s main traditional purpose in the Norwegian realm.

Diplomacy

King Hákon’s death in Orkney in 1263 was a watershed event in the history of the realm of Norway. No succeeding king of Norway ventured, for purposes of conquest or fortune, west oversea during the Middle Ages. Hákon’s direct successor, Magnus Hákonsson, was a more tactful, diplomatic leader, more concerned with the stabilization of the realm than its expansion. In 1266, the Kingdoms of Norway and Scotland came to a peaceful consensus and a fixed set of terms for future relations. The conditions of the so-called Treaty of Perth were dominated by the question of royal dominion, most crucially over the disputed islands and inlands of the Hebrides and Man. Norway formally ceded all claims to those lands in exchange for Scottish recognition of its dominion over the islands of Orkney and Shetland. Implicitly, the region was thereafter bounded by a jurisdictional border running the length of the Pentland Firth. As a means of facilitating the peace, the King of Scotland pledged to provide the King of Norway with four annual payments totally 4,400 marks over the next four years, plus an additional 100 marks in annuity and forever. These payments formed the basis of a long-term diplomatic relationship between the kingdoms in which Orkney was to take an ambassadorial role in fostering. The text stipulates that the first payment was to be made “within eight days of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist, in Orkney, that is to say, the land of the lord the King of Norway, in the church of St. Magnus, into the hands of the Bishop of Orkney or the bailiff of the lord the King of Norway specially deputed by him for this purpose” (ToP, 1862, p. 213).¹⁴ All subsequent payments were to be paid in the same manner.

Whereas Orkney’s proximity to the Scottish mainland had previously been an asset in war, it was after 1266 a medium for peace. Norway’s clarification of dominion meant that Orkney was, both in notion and in law, a “land of the lord the King of Norway” and thus a relatively safe and convenient drop point for substantial and important financial transactions. By transferring the sum directly across the Pentland Firth and depositing it with Norwegian agents on Norwegian soil, Scotland minimized the logistical risks of conveying their annual payments across the North Sea to Norway. Furthermore, Orkney offered a suitably developed civic infrastructure for such a transaction. As the seat of the Bishopric of Orkney and the home of St. Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall was a favourable point of congregation for royal agents and

¹⁴ “infra octavas Nativitatis Sancti Johannis Baptistæ in Orcadia terra scilicet Domini Regis Norvegiæ, in ecclesiæ Sancti Magni, in manibus Episeopi Orchadiæ, sen Ballivi ipsius Domini Regis Norvegiæ, ad hoc per issum specialiter deputati” (DN, VIII, p. 14).

a safe depot for large sums of money. The fact that the bishop, as opposed to the earl, was picked as the primary mediator for the transactions also exemplifies the shifting nature of Norwegian-Scottish relations. Whereas the earldom had served its purposes as a military agency, the bishopric had frequently functioned as a diplomatic agency. During King Hákon Hákonsson's campaign in 1263, for instance, Orkney's bishop was chosen to lead an attempted negotiation of peace before the outbreak of open warfare (HsH, 1977, p. 202). Earls, by contrast, were bound to military service, both before and after 1266, and were rarely employed as suitable agents in formal diplomatic negotiations or transactions (Crawford, 1969, p. 44).

In 1290, Orkney was chosen as the setting for a momentous diplomatic exchange: the transfer of custody over Margaret, the 'Maid of Norway'. Born in 1283 to King Eric Magnusson of Norway and Margaret, daughter to King Alexander III of Scotland, the infant Margaret was very much a symbol of the newly established Norwegian-Scottish peace. But she also served a more practical purpose. As the sole surviving descendent of the late King Alexander III, the infant Margaret was set to succeed to the Scottish throne. With the child still in her Scandinavian homeland, diplomats from Norway, Scotland and England feverishly crisscrossed the North Sea in order to negotiate the girl's marriage to the prince of England and her transfer to British soil. King Eric eventually placed the girl in the care of a Norwegian bishop and an entourage of Norwegian and foreign envoys who would accompany her on her westward journey. It is notable, but not surprising, that the chosen route to Scotland rounded the shores of Orkney. As we have seen, it was a tried and trusted point of call for Norwegian voyages in the west and offered a convenient intermediary point for envoys to confer. As Barbara E. Crawford suggested, it is likely that the royal party was to be housed as the episcopal residence in Kirkwall, the same which housed King Hákon Hákonsson in his final weeks in 1263 (Crawford, 1990, p. 175). That site's reputation, however, was once again marred by tragedy when the young girl "died in the arms of Bishop Narve of Bergen in Orkney" in late September, 1290 (DN, VI, pp. 104-5). Orkney's role in the affair is further witnessed by several references to it in a catalogue of expenses incurred there by King Edward's envoys during their preparations for the girl's arrival in the isles (DN, XIX, p. 257). This demonstrates that not just the Norwegian king, but also the English, accepted Orkney as a suitable setting for such a momentous occasion.

There is no further evidence that Orkney was planned as the setting for a major assembly of Norwegian and Scottish envoys; but, given its logistical advantages, it likely continued to be used as a break point for some North Sea crossings. There is some evidence that it was used as a safe-haven for fugitive devotees of the Bruce faction during the Scottish Wars of Independence. In 1307, King Edward I complained to King Hákon Magnusson that the Bishop of Moray, an outlaw of the English Crown and staunch supporter of the Bruce opposition, had been "hosted by some of your subjects in the islands of Orkney" (DN, XIX, pp. 545-6). Though unconfirmed, there is also a tradition that Bruce himself spent his time in exile in the isles (Thomson, 2001, p. 148). True or not, it is clear that his wife and her entourage were heading north for safety when they were captured by allies of the English Crown, and it has been suggested that they too might have been seeking refuge in Orkney, a safe and sovereign domain of Norway (*ibid.*).

The Norwegian Crown often relied on its officials in Orkney to foster their relations with Scotland and England. The most prodigious example was Weland de Sticklaw, a Scottish cleric who in the 1290s served in the royal administration and diplomatic corps of the Kingdom of Norway (Crawford, 1990). In addition to his specific diplomatic duties, Weland also held an individual grant to “guard the body” of Magnus Jonsson, the presumed heir to the earldom, as well as governorship over the province as a whole (*ibid.*, pp. 178-9). These offices required individuals “who were familiar with the political scene in other countries, and who spoke the necessary languages” (*ibid.*, p. 179). Situated between different political, social and cultural spheres, Orkney was prime medium for fostering connections across the Norwegian-Scottish border. This explains why Weland, an individual who needed to maintain his activeness in the societies and politics of different lands, was commissioned to govern it on behalf of the Norwegian Crown.

Disputes concerning Orkney did crop up in the early-fourteenth century, though these were resolved largely through diplomatic concession. When the Treaty of Perth was renewed in 1312, King Hákon Magnusson of Norway and King Robert the Bruce of Scotland saw fit to negotiate a resolution to a series of outstanding injuries and claims made by their respective subjects in Orkney. Certain unnamed ‘malefactors’ from Scotland had previously invaded Orkney, captured a Norwegian official, stolen his goods and held him until he paid a ransom. In retribution, the Orcadians seized, beat, imprisoned and held to ransom an armiger of King Robert. Although neither aware of or responsible for the original attacks, King Robert expedited the settlement with a repartition payment of 600 marks sterling to be paid to King Hákon’s officials at St. Magnus Cathedral in Orkney (DN, III, p. 245). As an apparent gesture of goodwill, King Robert also confirmed a £5 donation which had previously been taken from the toll collections of Aberdeen and deposited annually to St. Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall. That gift remained a symbol of the Scottish Crown’s amicable stance toward Orkney’s church for years to come, appearing in numerous accounts from the Exchequer Rolls throughout the Middle Ages (Thomson, 2008, p. 149). This shows that St. Magnus Cathedral, the most important edifice in the isles, was still a useful and much valued institution for diplomacy.

Norwegian-Scottish diplomatic relations languished in the late-fourteenth and early-fifteenth centuries. As a result, the annual payment of 100 marks prescribed in the treaty from 1266, and confirmed in its renewal from 1312, fell deeply into arrears. In 1426, Norwegian and Scottish delegates assembled in Bergen, Norway to discuss the resumption of that payment. Among the delegates was Bishop Thomas Tulloch of Orkney, who was given “a special mandate” in leading the talks on the Norwegian king’s behalf (DN, VIII, p. 309). The bishop’s special function at that meeting corresponded to his intended role in the resumption of the annual payment. This is expressed clearly in a separate document issued several months later in which the bishop reiterates to the king that the payment should be made either to himself or to another civic-administrative official in Orkney (DN, II, p. 513). Whether or not the payment actually resumed is unclear (Crawford, 1969, p. 39); but the case nonetheless demonstrates that Orkney was still considered a suitable depot for the transaction. It also underscores the pivotal role of the bishop in cultivating Norwegian-Scottish relations, even at that late date. In the fifteenth century, Orkney’s bishops were natives of Scotland, and it would appear that their familiarity with Scottish society as well as their multilingual communication skills were regarded as diplomatic assets.

The mediation skills of Orkney's bishops came to bear once more in 1468, when delegates of the Norwegian and Scottish kings met in Copenhagen to negotiate the terms of Princess Margaret of Denmark's marriage to King James III of Scotland. There it was agreed that, in order to cover part of the princess' dowry, Christian I, King of Denmark and Norway, would pledge Orkney to Scotland for the value of 50,000 Rhenish florins. Orkney's bishop, William Tulloch, was one of the delegates at the meeting, though not as a representative of the Danish-Norwegian Crown, but as a general member of the Scottish embassy (NgL II, pp. 184-5). What might initially appear to have been an act of treason was in fact appreciated by the Danish-Norwegian king, who later commended the bishop and recommended that he serve as Princess Margaret's tutor until she learned to speak the Scots-English of her new homeland (Crawford, 1969, p. 50). Not viewed as irregular by contemporaries, the bishop's involvement in that affair was very much emblematic of the changing course of Orkney's medieval history: Whereas its earls had previously served in the violent expansion of Norwegian power in the west, its bishops later facilitated Norway's peaceful, gradual withdrawal.

Conclusion

The scattered source material pertaining to medieval Orkney means that most discussions, like the preceding, must largely rely on circumstantial evidence. But taken together, that evidence reflects several major trends in Norway's association with and utilization of Orkney in its foreign affairs. For much of the Middle Ages, Orkney was valued as the Norwegian Crown's most secure and frequented base for military operations in the west. This is exemplified first by the fact that every major Norwegian naval campaign into Britain or the Irish Sea included either a brief or extended stop in those isles. The fact that Norwegian kings never ventured to Orkney as a final destination also demonstrates that it was a means, rather than an end, for Norwegian campaigns. It was not until Norway's conciliation with Scotland in 1266 that Orkney moved from the interior to the forefront of the frontier. The curtailment of Norwegian power in the west and the establishment of a more rigid border led the Crown to take a different approach toward its island province in the late-thirteenth and early-fourteenth centuries. Orkney's proximity to Scotland proved to be as much an asset for diplomacy as it once had been for war. It was easily accessed from the Scottish mainland and offered a secure assembly point in St. Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall. Its officials were receptive to the differing mores of Norse, Scottish and even English societies and thus adept at representing the Norwegian king before his foreign counterparts.

In these respects, Orkney was unique in Norway's overseas realm. None of the other island provinces figured so prominently in Norway's foreign affairs, nor were they constituted and developed so specifically for that purpose. But Orkney's history, as well as its gradual marginalization, is also emblematic of the development of the Norwegian realm as a whole. In the Early and High Middle Ages, the Norwegian realm was the epitome of a thalassocracy, a sea-borne realm under the naval supremacy of the Norwegian king. Beginning in the twelfth century, Norwegian efforts to expand its power in the west contracted and by the late-thirteenth century, ceased altogether.

Orkney remained a medium for cultural and social transfer throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. But the islands themselves diminished in importance. Norway's entrance into a dynastic union with Sweden, and later Denmark in the fourteenth century drew political attentions inward to Scandinavia and further east to the Baltic. Orkney, like all of the western tributary provinces, was relegated to the periphery of the realm (Wærdahl, 2011, p. 271). As we have seen, it had never been the final destination for Norwegians in the west, but it had certainly once been an advantageous break point along a further, westward trajectory. Norway's waning geopolitical interests in the west and in Britain deprived the archipelago of its previous significance in Norway's foreign affairs. Although King Christian I's pledge of Orkney in 1468 (and later of Shetland in 1469) was theoretically redeemable, later attempts to do so were irresolute and unsuccessful. Soon after its pledging, Orkney was integrated, step by step and irrevocably, into the Kingdom of Scotland.

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