

Norse Myth in Medieval Orkney

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Michael Chesnutt (1968, 126) memorably if rather rhetorically contrasted Iceland's rich cultural heritage with the equivalent impoverishment of Orkney:

'Iceland owes her unique position as custodian of Norse literary art to her geographical isolation. Other Viking settlements, less fortunate in this respect, have lost their cultural identity. None has suffered more, in relation to the degree of its former achievements, than the earldom of Orkney.'

In the process of recently trying to reconstruct the 'Norse literary art' of medieval Orkney (Jesch, 2005, 2006, forthcoming), I have had cause to wonder about the cultural and social status of Norse mythology in this colony. Starting with Old Icelandic literary texts, I will explore the evidence for which myths may have been current in medieval, Christian Orkney. I will then also consider the evidence for paganism in Viking Age Orkney to see whether that can shed further light on mythology in the earlier period. The aim of this paper is primarily methodological: an attempt to outline the process by which we might explore Orkney's Norse 'cultural identity', rather than aiming specifically to reconstruct its long-lost myths, which may not now be possible. The evidence is fragile and inconclusive, and I will need to define 'myth' rather broadly since not all of the narratives discussed below refer specifically to the pagan gods, and some should rather be termed 'legends' than 'myths'. On the other hand, the slight (non-literary) evidence for Norse paganism in Orkney may relate to the pagan gods, but does not provide mythological narratives or even 'myths'. While it is probably impossible to provide a synthesis of Norse myth and religion in Orkney, asking the questions raises some interesting issues worth airing.

An obvious place to start is with those mythological narratives which are located, at least in some versions, in Orkney itself – there are two of these. The story of the Hjaðningavíg is said in *Skáldskaparmál* (Faulkes, 1998, 72) to have taken place in *Háey* in the *Orkneyjar*, therefore Hoy. In the text known as *Litla Skálda*, preserved in manuscripts that also contain versions of *Skáldskaparmál*, the quern Gróttá (*sic*) that makes the sea salt is said (Finnur Jónsson, 1931, 259) to lie at the bottom of the Pentland Firth, at the spot where there is a *svelgr* 'whirlpool' (referred to as *Svelgr* in ch. 74 of *Orkneyinga saga*; see also Marwick, 1929, 184).

These are both widespread and well-known tales, attested in a number of forms, and their Orcadian associations are far from universal. Thus, the Hjaðningavíg is not located in Orkney in its earliest version, Bragi's *Ragnarsdrápa* (cited by Snorri), where it is said simply to have taken place on an island, *i holmi* (Faulkes, 1998, 73). Saxo's slightly different version of the story takes place mainly in Denmark, though Hithin and Høgin do fight in the Orkneys (Fisher and Ellis Davidson, 1979, I 147). In *Sǫrla þáttur* the narrative moves from Denmark to an island called *Há*, though the latter is not specifically said to be in Orkney (Guðni Jónsson, 1954, 378, 380). There is a possible reminiscence of the story in the Old English *Widsith*, with a Baltic location,

and an even more distant Anglo-Latin analogue sets the action in Asia (Malone, 1964, 40-42).

The story of the salt mill/whirlpool is linked in *Litla Skálda* to the myth of the Danish king Fróði's magic quern Grótti and his slave-women Fenja and Menja, who grind out gold for him on it. The same link is made by Snorri (Faulkes, 1998, 52), who does not specify the location of the whirlpool, though he does call it *svelgr i hafinu*. The eddic-style poem *Grottasǫngur* that Snorri cites does not refer to either the salt mill or the whirlpool (Tolley, 1995, 68), and other versions of the story of Fróði do not mention slave-women or querns at all (Bjarni Guðnason, 1982, 5-7, 39-40).

While not all versions of these two myths have an Orcadian location, both narratives are referred or alluded to in poetry attributed to Earl Rognvaldr Kali Kolsson of Orkney, thus giving a bit more credibility to the island connection.

The narrative centring on the Hjaðningavíg is referred to in *Háttalykill*. This poem is named (as *Háttalykill inn forni*), though it is not cited, and is attributed to Rognvaldr and the Icelander Hallr Þórarinsson, in *Orkneyinga saga* (Finnbogi Guðmundsson, 1965, 185). A text survives only in late manuscripts which name it but which do not have this authorial attribution. The poem devotes two stanzas to the story, told in question-and-answer form to illustrate a metre called *greppaminni* (Jón Helgason and Holtmark, 1941, 26-7, normalised):

Hverr réð Hildi at næma?	Hverr rýðr hvassar eggjar?
Hverir daglengis berjask?	Hverr brytjar mat vargi?
Hverir síðarla sættask?	Hverr gerir hjalma skúrir?
Hver(r) siklingum atti?	Hverr eggjaði styrjar?
Heðinn réð Hildi at næma.	Haraldr rauð hvassar eggjar.
Hjaðningar æ berjask.	Herr brytjar mat vargi.
Þeir síðarla sættask.	Hjalmskúr gerir Högni.
Saman Hildir liði atti.	Hjarrandi réð gunni.

These stanzas mention the main characters in the narrative, and the main elements of the story, but there is no reference to its location, and the mythological dimension in which the warriors fight every day to be revived by Hildir, while awaiting Ragnarök, is only hinted at. *Háttalykill* thus seems to represent a rather different version of the story told by Snorri, who mentions Hjarrandi only as Heðinn's father, and who does not mention Haraldr, though the latter name may be an error in *Háttalykill* (Jón Helgason and Holtmark, 1941, 72). *Orkneyinga saga* indicates that *Háttalykill* was composed in Orkney, when Hallr was staying at Rognvaldr's court, so even if knowledge of the myth came to Orkney through the Icelander Hallr, it is likely to have become known there then if not before.¹ The question-and-answer form of the stanzas (unique in this poem) may suggest that some instruction in this myth was needed. There is later evidence, in the form of the Hildina ballad, to support the Orkney connection, and indicating that a version of the story was later known throughout the

¹ The possible Irish origins of this narrative, or at least of some of its motifs, have repeatedly been urged by Michael Chesnut (1968, 2001a, 2001b), in the context of a model of 'a not insubstantial reception in medieval Iceland of narrative materials deriving from the hybrid cultural environment of the Celtic West in the Late Norse period' with the strong probability of twelfth-century Orkney as a 'bridgehead' (2001b, 166). This model may need further testing – if correct, it may complicate but not invalidate the approach adopted here.

Northern Isles. Although the ballad was recorded on the Shetland island of Foula, its hero who kidnaps Hildina is *Iarlin o Orkneyar* (Hægstad, 1900, 14, 20) and much of the action, including the battle, takes place in the Orkneys (Hægstad, 1900, 15-18, 22-6).

The salt mill story is rather more tenuously linked to Rôgnvaldr. In st. 55 of *Orkneyinga saga* (Finnbogi Guðmundsson, 1965, 210) Rôgnvaldr uses the kenning *Fróða melder* for 'gold' in describing Ermingerör of Narbonne's hair. While this alludes to the first part of the myth, the gold mill rather than the salt mill/whirlpool, there is a possibility that Rôgnvaldr knew a version, like that of *Litla Skálda*, in which the two were connected.² The gold-kenning is explained thus in *Litla Skálda: Gull er korn eða melder Fróða konungs, en verk ambátta hans tveggja, Fenju ok Menju ...* (Finnur Jónsson, 1931, 256). While the basic kenning-type is widespread, the use of the word *meldr* is not. *Skáldskaparmál* has a different base-word, (*Fróða*) *mjöl*, in its prose explanation of the kenning (Faulkes, 1998, 51). *Meldr* does occur twice in its quotation of *Grottasöngur* (Faulkes, 1998, 53, 57), though here in the meaning 'action of grinding', rather than 'what is ground, flour, meal'. It is used in a gold-kenning (*Fenju melder*) in a stanza by Einarr Skúlason, quoted immediately after *Grottasöngur* in *Skáldskaparmál* (Faulkes, 1998, 57), and in *Háttatal* (v. 43: *Fenju melder*). These kennings associate *meldr* with Fróði's slave Fenja, who did the grinding, so that their meaning is ambiguous and in them *meldr* could be either 'act of grinding' or 'grain, corn, meal, flour'. But Rôgnvaldr's kenning only makes sense if *meldr* is given the same sense as *mjöl*, since Fróði did not do any grinding. This meaning is also suggested by the parallelism with *korn* in the *Litla Skálda* explanation.

The word *meldr* is recorded in the Northern Isles with a meaning that refers to the grain rather than to the action of grinding. For Orkney, Marwick (1929, s.v. *melder*) defines it as 'grain that has been dried on a kiln, and is ready to be ground'. For Shetland, Jakobsen (1928-32, s.v. *melder*) defines it as 'the quantity of corn ground at one time in a quern or mill'. It also appears in Faroese with a meaning very like the Shetlandic one: 'hvad der males paa engang paa en Qvern' (Svabo, 1966, s.v. *meldur*). *Meldr* is however not common in Icelandic: modern Icelandic dictionaries label it as poetic and/or archaic if they list it at all (Blöndal, 1920-24, s.v. **meldur*; Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon, 1989, s.v. *meldur*; the word does not appear in Sverrir Hólmarsson et al., 1989). Somewhere between Rôgnvaldr's use of this word and the evidence of *Litla Skálda*, we may discern the contours of an Orcadian version of the myth, which seems to be supported by later folklore evidence (Johnston, 1910, 297). These folk legends link the two parts of this myth (Fenja and Menja, and the salt mill), just as both Snorri and *Litla Skálda*, but not other versions, do. Thus, the salt mill is operated by two creatures (sometimes said to be witches) called 'Grottie Finnie' and 'Grottie Minnie'.

The poetry of Rôgnvaldr and his twelfth-century associates contains a range of kennings based on the names of gods or mythological beings, but most of these scarcely qualify as mythological allusions because of their highly conventional nature. In particular, the stanzas about Ermingerör make use of a range of goddess- and valkyrie-names. More revealing are the following slightly fuller mythological allusions

² In Jesch, forthcoming, I explore further links or similarities between Rôgnvaldr's poetry and the analyses of *Litla Skálda*.

(numbers in brackets refer to page numbers in Finnþogi Guðmundsson, 1965; the stanzas cited are by Rôgnvaldr, unless specified otherwise):

- gold as the bed of the serpent (163)
- gold as the speech of giants (196)
- gold as the brightness of water (202, 220 [Oddi])
- poetry as Óðinn's drink (195, 198)
- Óðinn hanged (221)
- Frigg's attempt to rescue Baldr from Hel (203 [Oddi])

There are also references to Norse myths and legends other than the Hjaðningavíg in *Háttalykill*. The content of this poem is essentially historical, listing the deeds of legendary heroes, starting with Sigurðr Fáfnisbani and going up through the legendary kings of Denmark to Hrólfkraki (listed in Nordal, 2001, 32). It is of interest that the poem mentions Ragnarr loðbrók and that the name Loðbrók occurs in the runic graffiti of Maeshowe (Barnes, 1994, 178-86). Unfortunately, the Maeshowe Loðbrók is feminine, making it difficult to link the two. *Háttalykill* goes on to list kings of Sweden and Norway, many of them also legendary. The preservation of the poem is such that many of its kennings are obscure or difficult to decipher, but it is clear that there are few truly mythological kennings. Only the following myths seem to be alluded to (based on the interpretations or reconstructions of Jón Helgason and Holtmark, 1941; numbers refer to stanzas in their edition):

- poetry as the liquid of dwarves (2b)
- gold as the bed or way of the serpent (3a, 4a, 10b, 24a, 27a)
- the Rhinegold, gold as the fire of the sea (4a, 26a, 28b)
- gold as the speech of giants (36a)

These map neatly onto the myths alluded to in Rôgnvaldr's poetry, and reflect the interest in myths about gold, in particular, characteristic of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Nordal, 2001, 309-38).

The twelfth-century Orcadian interest in myths about gold and poetry continues into the thirteenth. There is some evidence for poetic composition in thirteenth-century Orkney in the form of two poems attributed to Bishop Bjarni Kolbeinsson, whom *Orkneyinga saga* (ch. 84) calls a *skáld*. The first of these, *Jómsvíkingadrápa*, is attributed to Bjarni in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* (Ólafur Halldórsson, 1958-2000, I 178), which also preserves some of its stanzas. Both poet and poem are referred to, as the source for one fact, in one version of *Jómsvíkinga saga* (af Petersens, 1879, 71). The second poem, *Málsháttakvæði*, is anonymous and the attribution to Bjarni is only that of modern scholars. This attribution is at least plausible, given that both poems are preserved together in the Codex Regius of *Snorra Edda* and other similarities between them (Frank, 2004, 12).

Like *Háttalykill*, *Jómsvíkingadrápa* is a poem about the heroic deeds of legendary heroes, though in narrative rather than catalogue form. It too has the occasional use of mythological names and the even more occasional allusion to a mythological narrative (numbers refer to stanzas in Finnur Jónsson, 1912-15, BII, 1-10):

- poetry as Óðinn's drink (1, 2)
- Óðinn hanged (2)

Málsháttakvæði has been described by Roberta Frank (2004, 4) as a 'jagged, glinting conglomerate'. While basically a collection of proverbs, many of which have parallels beyond the Norse world, the poem also contains allusions to some legendary heroes, as *Háttalykill* does (Frank, 2004, 24-5), but also to a number of myths (numbers refer to stanzas in Finnur Jónsson, 1912-15, BII, 138-45):

- gold as the tears of Freyja (8)
- gold as the speech of giants (Þjazi) (8)
- Baldr in Hel, and Frigg (9)
- gold as the dwelling-place of the serpent (27)
- poetry as the mead of Óðinn (29)

In stanza 8 the poet comments that the various allusions are *nú minni forn* 'old lore now', while in stanza 9, the story of Baldr's death is said to be *heyriðkunn* 'very well known'. But this is as we would expect if the poem had indeed been composed in an Orcadian milieu where Rôgnvaldr and his associates had cultivated the poetic art in the previous century. While neither *Jómsvíkingadrápa* nor *Málsháttakvæði* make much use of Norse myth, those myths they do allude to, principally those embedded in kennings for gold and poetry, match those current in twelfth-century Orcadian poetry.

References to Norse myth in poetry associated with Orkney before the time of Rôgnvaldr are scarce. Arnorr jarlaskáld's poetry generally contains few allusions to mythological narratives, as opposed to mythical names which do not necessarily refer to specific myths (Whaley, 1998, 74), so it is difficult to deduce from this how much mythological knowledge he expected from his Orcadian audiences. He alludes to the Norse creation myth, in the kenning *erfiði Austra* (Finnbogi Guðmundsson, 1965, 83; Faulkes, 1998, 33-4) and to Óðinn's possession of the mead of poetry, in the kenning *hrosta brim Alföður* (Faulkes, 1998, 6). There may also be an allusion to the salt mill/whirlpool myth in a stanza on the battle of Rauðabjörg between Þorfinnr and his cousin Rôgnvaldr Brúsason (Finnbogi Guðmundsson, 1965, 68). This stanza names the Pentland Firth as the location of the battle, and describes how *sjár blezk* 'the sea churned' (Whaley, 1998, 261), possibly an oblique allusion to the mythological whirlpool in the Pentland Firth. It is notable that Arnórr does not share the later obsession with gold-kennings.

Possibly Orcadian stanzas from before the year 1000 (Finnbogi Guðmundsson, 1965, 11-16) are few in number and pose many problems. Even though it might be possible to construct an argument that these are genuine oral poetry from early medieval Orkney, such an argument would be complicated and problematic in many ways, not least because of the great time gap between their supposed date of composition and their earliest manuscript recordings. Much work still needs to be done, particularly on Torf-Einarr's verses, to establish a possible context of composition for them. Previous scholars have concentrated on literary interpretations that do not question the attribution (e.g. Mundal, 1993), and even Poole (1991, 170), who has argued that they represent 'an early poem (or perhaps a cycle of poems) about Torf-Einarr', has not been able to be very specific about their date or place of composition. The only clearly mythological reference in these early verses is to the *normir* who *skiptu* the death of Rôgnvaldr of Møre (Finnbogi Guðmundsson, 1965, 15).

So far, this exercise has not demonstrated an extensive knowledge of Norse myth in Viking Age and medieval Orkney. It seems rather to have confirmed the centrality of Orkney to the study and practice of skaldic poetry in the twelfth century, which involved an academic knowledge of particular myths and legends that turned out to be influential for Icelandic practice in the thirteenth century (Quinn, 1994, 70-72; Nordai, 2001, 48).

The difficulty of tracing Norse myths in Orkney before the twelfth century is undoubtedly due in part to the lack of sources securely datable to this period, apart from Arnórr's poetry. That, as already discussed, shows a general lack of interest in Norse myth, as would be expected in eleventh century poetry, when there is a sharp drop in mythological kennings in court poetry (Fidjestøl, 1993). Some scholars have therefore used more creative means to pin down Orcadian mythological knowledge. Paul Bibire has argued (1984) that an anecdote told about Rðgnvaldr, and associated with *Orkneyinga saga*, is based on the myth of Þórr fishing for the world serpent (though composed with a view to Christian interpretation). This is not in itself implausible, as the sources for this myth are widely scattered in space and time throughout the Scandinavian world. Moreover, sculpture indicates that this myth was known elsewhere in the British Isles at an even earlier date (e.g. Bibire, 1984, 92). The absence of any reference to Þórr in any Orcadian poetry is not necessarily significant – Óðinn was very clearly the favoured god for the aristocratic and erudite poetry of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries,³ but the earlier Norse inhabitants most likely worshipped other gods. While Bibire's suggestion does not presuppose any knowledge of the Þórr myth in the Northern Isles before its twelfth-century use for Christian purposes, there is some evidence for the cult of Þórr in the region. A Thor's hammer amulet, 'unique ... in Scotland' was found in the female Viking grave at the Broch of Gurness (Graham-Campbell and Batey, 1998, 128, 146-9). There may also be indications of the cult in the nearby Caithness place-name Thurso, which Thorson (1968, 71-3) has argued was originally *Þórshaugr*, but the name is difficult to interpret.

Thorson (1968, 73) draws attention to a small number of other place-names in Caithness which may represent pagan cult activities. Such names are not easy to find in Orkney (or Shetland), either. Most name-elements signify natural or topographical features, buildings, or ownership (i.e. personal names). Such names as seem to have religious reference are usually Christian, such as the several *Papeyjar* and related names, a number of names in *kirkja-*, and probably Eynhallow, or *Eyin helga* 'the holy island'. Numerous names in *-haugr* could refer to natural features, or pre-Norse archaeological remains, rather than Norse pagan burial mounds, though where they are compounded with a personal-name specific (Marwick, 1952, 36, 61, 116), there is, I suppose, a possibility that they refer to burial mounds. Marwick (1952, 2, 26, 47, 59, 171) identifies a number of place-names in Orkney that may refer to pagan gods or sites, but his suggestions are without exception cautious and few have been convinced by them (e.g. Wainwright, 1964, 154). In general, the place-names are recorded very late, and many of Marwick's admittedly tentative 'pagan' etymologies have

³ In addition to the specific myths listed above, he is frequently referred to in kennings in all of the poems mentioned.

alternative, and generally better, explanations.⁴ Thus, Odness (a pointed ness) in Orkney is more likely to be from *oddr* m. than from Odin, the god. The only apparently 'pagan' place-name recorded as early as in *Orkneyinga saga* (ch. 92) is *Hofsnes* on Stronsay, but Marwick (1952, 25) identifies this with Huip (< ON *hóp*) and describes the saga form as a 'mistake for [] *Hópsnes*'. Stronsay is a small island, and its northern headland with its tidal inlet is such a distinctive feature that it would be perverse to argue that this was a 'temple ness' as Stylegar (2004, 13) does.

This raises the question of the conversion of the Norse settlers of Orkney, and what evidence there might be of their pre-conversion religious beliefs and practices. The most obvious evidence for paganism in Orkney is the relatively large number of burials identified as pagan because of the presence of grave-goods and other features which distinguish them from contemporary Christian graves (Graham-Campbell and Batey, 1998, 127-40). Despite a few obviously pagan features, such as the Thor's hammer already mentioned, or the burial of the dead with horses and boats, even these 'may leave us uncertain with regard to pagan Norse views of the after-life, but instead [] provide glimpses of life in Scandinavian Scotland' (Graham-Campbell and Batey, 1998, 151). The suggestion that boat-burials provide an indication of the cults of Freyr and/or Freyja (Crumlin-Pedersen, 1995, 94, 97) can be difficult to substantiate in the absence of other evidence. Graham-Campbell and Batey prefer to see such graves (of which there could be as many as thirteen currently known in Scotland) as marking their occupants 'as being of some social standing' rather than that they had 'particular priestly status' (1998, 146, 150). One of the most spectacular of these graves is that at Scar, on Sanday, a boat burial containing three individuals (an elderly woman, an adult male and a child) with rich grave goods. The excavators tentatively interpreted the grave goods as suggesting that the woman buried there was a devotee, possibly even a priestess, of Freyja, combining Crumlin-Pedersen's interpretation of boat-burials with the whalebone plaque found among the woman's equipment, associating her with the goddess (Owen and Dalland, 1999, 79, 144-5). One of them has recently concluded that the whole burial may represent 'a self-conscious flourishing of pagan belief and ritual in the face of encroaching acceptance of Christianity in the tenth century' (Owen, 2004, 14-16).

The archaeological finds provide clear evidence of different burial rites practised by the Norse settlers, but little or nothing that can indicate their knowledge of Norse mythology. Indeed, Owen has emphasised the difficulties of distinguishing between 'pagan' and 'Christian', or 'Viking' and 'Pictish' graves in some Orkney cemeteries, and suggests that the situation in the tenth century was particularly fluid. There may have been substantial chronological overlap between Christian Pictish and pagan Viking burial practices, indeed there may even have been 'later waves of Viking settlers, born and bred in Norway, [] arriving as pagans in the Northern Isles in the tenth century, at a time when people of Scandinavian origin in the islands had already begun to adopt Christian burial practices' (Owen, 2004, 20; see also Graham-Campbell and Batey, 1998, 126, 136, 144). Other archaeologists are beginning to stress 'the gradual adoption during the "pagan" Viking Age of Christianity at the local private landowner level reflected in small chapels at a date significantly earlier than that indicated by the written sources for the adoption of Christianity at the higher

⁴ I am grateful to Doreen Waugh for discussing these names with me.

political level' (Morris, 2004, 195). It may be that the lack of evidence for extensive mythological narratives in Orkney is a reflection not only of the lack of written sources, but also of a situation in which there was no strong cultic situation that encouraged the preservation of such narratives.

Even if Norse myths were current in Viking Age Orkney, they may have had to be re-imported, whether from Norway, Iceland or even the Celtic world, with the twelfth-century revival of interest in stories of the old gods and heroes. Rögnvaldr spent his early years in Norway – it is just as difficult, though, to reconstruct the kind of social and cultural milieu which taught him poetry and mythology as it is to identify a similar milieu in Orkney. Or the knowledge of poetry and mythology may have come to Orkney from Iceland, with Rögnvaldr's fellow-poets, trained in the old oral traditions that were only just beginning to be recorded there. The arrival of a lot of well-trained Icelandic poets in the upwardly-mobile, wealthy and vibrant culture of twelfth-century Orkney, spiced by contact with Celtic peoples all around, may just have been the catalyst that sparked an explosion of interest in poetry and mythology which was then quickly transferred to Iceland, and continued to develop there, culminating in Snorri's *Edda*.

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