

SHETLAND IN SAGA-TIME: Rereading the *Orkneyinga Saga*

(As will be obvious, this is the text of a popular lecture, I would like to thank the 200 people of Aith, Burravoe, Lerwick and Ollaberry who listened to it in early 1989 and discussed it with me. Dr. Barbara Crawford's work on St Magnus gave me the idea for this paper: I am grateful to her for discussing the problem with me at length. I would also like to thank John Ballantyne for his comments.)

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I

I'm one of the people who have expressed the opinion from time to time that Shetland is hardly ever mentioned in the *Orkneyinga Saga*. I recently decided to put this theory to the test, by rereading the saga from beginning to end. Since then I've read it three times, in three different translations, with one eye cocked on the original text; and I can now report not only that Shetland *is* mentioned, frequently, in it – more often than appears at first sight – but that Shetland and her fortunes are an integral part of the saga's main theme.

There is no excuse for those of us who have ignored what is written in black and white in the saga. We have easy access to a fine modern translation of it, by Herman Pálsson and Paul Edwards, in Penguin Books; and there is a brilliant scholarly translation, the translation I've used in most cases for this essay, with copious notes, by the late Alexander Taylor. Finnbogi Gudmundsson's edition of the original text, published in Reykjavik in 1965, contains the Longer and Shorter sagas of St Magnus as well, and there are renderings of these important additional texts by Sir George Dasent in the translation of the Saga commissioned by the British government nearly a hundred years ago.¹

What is the *Orkneyinga Saga* all about? Orcadian historians say that it is about Orkney. According to Pálsson and Edwards the saga has 'a special significance' for Orcadians, 'having become ... what might be called their secular scripture, inculcating in them a keener sense of their remote forebears and sharpening their awareness of a special identity'.² But is this sentimental nationalism really justified? Turning the tables on the Orcadians, I would argue that there is very little about Orkney society in the saga. There is a great deal about Orkney magnates and their quarrels, but even a superficial reading is enough to show that there is rather more about ordinary Shetlanders in it than ordinary Orcadians. This is really an accident, because the person who wrote the saga, an Icelander who visited

Shetland, Orkney and Caithness about 1200, wasn't interested in ordinary men or women at all; he was primarily interested in Earl Rognvald Kali Kolsson and his aristocratic friends and enemies and ancestors.³

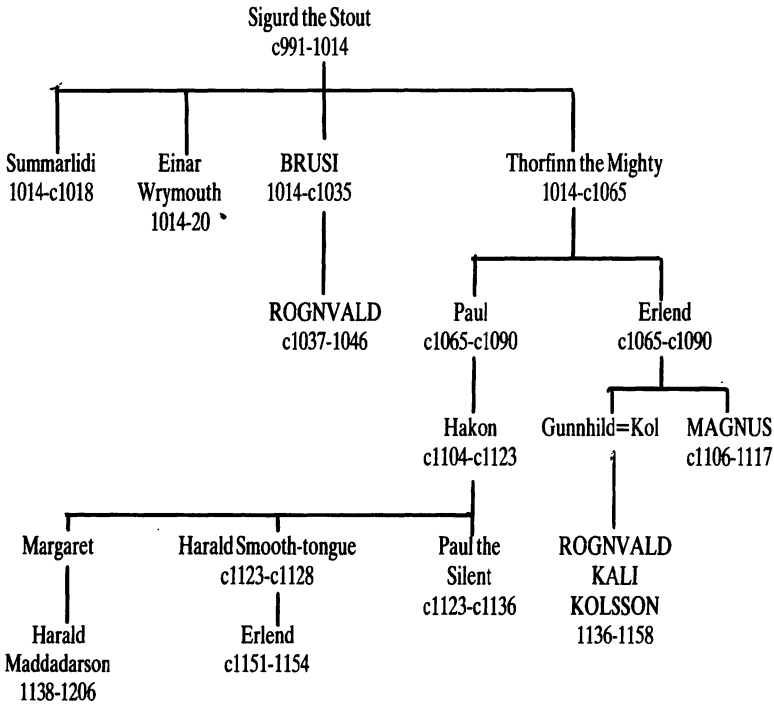
There is no evidence that there was any reference to Orkney in the saga's original title; medieval Icelanders called it the 'Earls' Saga' more often than they called it the Orkneying Saga,⁴ and some of the earls who are its main subject were earls of Shetland and Caithness as well as Orkney. Edward Cowan argued a few years ago that it could just as well be called the *Katnesinga Saga*, the saga of the men of Caithness.⁵ This is going too far. Most of the saga's action takes place in Orkney, because the earls' most valuable estates were there. But these estates comprised Shetland as well. Similarly, most of the saga is about the Orkney 'establishment',⁶ and their attempts to cling to power; but as a corollary much of it is about various claimants to the earldom, people outside the establishment or on the fringes: people like Brusi Sigurdarson, Rognvald Brusason, Magnus Erlendsson and, at first, Rognvald Kali Kolsson himself. As we'll see, these four outsiders have a special relationship with Shetland.

Keeping in mind this 'hidden structure' of the saga I now want to ask two questions: what part did Shetland play in the earls' and the claimants' calculations; and what glimpses can we catch of Shetland society as a whole in the 11th and 12th centuries?

II

I want to begin with the thirteenth chapter of the saga: that is, with the events following the death of Earl Sigurd the Stout. The earlier chapters are too fragmentary to afford us more than one or two clues about our subject. However, I'll refer in passing to the information in chapter 4, dubious though it may be, that Harald Fairhair subdued Shetland and Orkney and the Sudreyjar, the Hebrides, and that he gave Earl Rognvald of Møre Shetland and Orkney and the title of Earl of Orkney.⁷ It's clear from these references that, as might be expected, the Earldom of Orkney included Shetland from the outset.

Earl Sigurd died at the Battle of Clontarf in 1014. The saga-writer wasn't very interested in Sigurd; there are many more details about Sigurd's career in other sagas. In chapter 13, however, he warmed to his theme. He had found in some library or other three mini-sagas, 'þættir', of Earl Thorfinn the Mighty, who was five years old when his father Sigurd died. He copied them out faithfully, enlivening their rather academic style with information from oral tradition.⁸ The theme of the Thorfinn chapters, a theme central to the whole saga, is power, and how competing kinsmen and kinswomen jostled to acquire it.



[Everyone here except Gunnhild, Kol and Margaret was called Earl of Orkney. The dates given, from Taylor, 411, are those when the earls held the title. The names of the ‘outsiders’ are in capitals.]

Apart from Thorfinn Sigurd left three sons: Sumarlidi, Einar (a cantankerous man who was nicknamed ‘wrymouth’), and Einar’s polar opposite in temperament, the mild Brusi. Thorfinn was still a child, albeit a precocious one, and he lived with his grandfather, the King of Scotland, who gave him the earldom of Caithness. The other three called themselves ‘Earl of Orkney’, and each took a third, a ‘þridjung’, of the islands.⁹ Sixty years ago the Orkney historian J. Storer Clouston wrote an article about this sharing process which has been enormously influential.¹⁰ Clouston assumed that only Orkney was involved. He argued that the brothers sat down and made careful calculation of the number of land units called *oucelands* in Orkney, and divided the Orkney Mainland and Isles into three large geographical chunks. These chunks, said Clouston, were the North Isles of Orkney, the East Mainland based on Birsay and the West Mainland based on Kirkwall.

Clouston's thesis is so preposterous that it's amazing no-one has examined it closely. He should have asked: what did the brothers do with Shetland? No doubt Shetland was a poorer country than Orkney, but it does comprise 550 square miles of land area, and there were about 700 townships in Shetland in the 11th century, not many less than in Orkney. It is beyond all reason to imagine that the earls omitted it from their calculations. If Clouston had read his saga text carefully he would have discovered that the writer rarely uses the geographical term 'Orkney' in this context, unless he actually means the islands of Orkney; the normal word is 'islands', 'eyjar': what we call the Northern Isles, just as the Norse called the Hebrides the *Sudreyjar*.¹¹ Occasionally he speaks about the 'earldom' ('jarldom'), and sometimes simply the 'land': words which only a rabid Orkney nationalist would assume automatically meant the southern group of islands.

My second objection to Clouston's thesis is his theory about *how* the brothers effected their division. His elaborate account of how they lumped ouncelands together might lead the unwary to believe that there is some mention of these land units in the saga text. Not at all. The word ounceland never appears in the saga, and in fact there's no evidence that the Orkney lands were valued in ouncelands, or any other kind of land unit, in the early 11th century. We have to recall that Orkney and Shetland were unruly societies at that time. A valuation of townships according to a fixed amount of silver payable in tax by them is an unlikely institution in a disorderly country. I would expect a far more rough-and-ready kind of taxation, based on what an overlord could extort from an individual, in service or goods. Certainly that was the norm in Scandinavia at the time.¹² I'll say more in due course about the chronology of ouncelands; at the moment I'll simply point out that Clouston's argument can actually be used against him. The Shetland and Caithness lands were (in due course) valued in ouncelands as well; why, then, didn't the brothers include those ouncelands in their global figure when they shared out the estates? I shall now argue that Shetland and Caithness did come into the earls' calculations, but that these calculations had nothing to do with ouncelands. They were political and military calculations, not fiscal ones. I'll now show precisely what the earls did, and what came of it.

Sumarlidi didn't enjoy his third of the earldom, his 'realm' ('ríki'), as the saga-writer usually calls it, for long. He died in his bed. Immediately Thorfinn asked Einar for Sumarlidi's third. Einar pointed out, not unreasonably, that Thorfinn already had Caithness, and that Caithness was larger than a third of the islands.

Brusi, on the other hand, said that he didn't mind at all if Thorfinn took Sumarlidi's third. He said that he didn't covet more than the third he held

by inheritance. When I read this I immediately wonder if Brusi was too far away from Thorfinn and Einar – and from Orkney – to care very much about how they divided up the land, as long as they lived in peace. In other words, I wonder if Brusi was living in Shetland. We'll see.

Einar brushed aside Thorfinn's claim and took Sumarlidi's third under his control. He was a harsh overlord, and he forced the farmers in his realm to accompany him on viking voyages in the Hebrides. This is evidence that, as I suggested, Einar was more interested in the service of individuals in his earldom than in taxation levied on land. According to the saga he 'brought an exceedingly bad harvest in his realm through the enforced service of the bonder'. In Brusi's third of the earldom, on the other hand, there were no such services, and the farmers prospered. It's difficult to imagine such strikingly different conditions in different parts of a small group of islands like Orkney, without mass-emigration from one to the other; what is more likely than that at this stage Brusi was based in Shetland, Einar in much-oppressed Orkney, and Thorfinn in Caithness?¹³ The saga says explicitly at one point that Brusi 'had the northmost share of the islands'.¹⁴

In due course Thorfinn asked Einar again for the late Sumarlidi's realm in Orkney.¹⁵ They both gathered forces, and Brusi also gathered an army and went to mediate between them. The result of these negotiations, the first of a whole series of peaceful discussions we'll have to consider, was that Thorfinn got his third of Orkney at last, and Brusi and Einar lumped their shares together, with Einar as main overlord of them while he was alive, but with a promise that Brusi and his son Rognvald should take over both thirds if Einar died first. It may be wishful thinking on my part, but this seems to me like an ideal arrangement for political control of two widely separated parts of the same earldom: it's identical, for instance, to the 16th century situation when Robert Stewart Earl of Orkney gave his son Patrick the title 'Lord of Shetland'.¹⁶ Thorfinn continued to live in Caithness, but employed agents in Orkney to collect his taxes.

Soon afterwards Einar died: not in his bed. In accordance with the agreement I've just mentioned Brusi took control of both the thirds. Thorfinn was becoming more and more avaricious: he now demanded half the third which Einar had had. He said that Brusi 'had no need for more than a third of a disposition such as his'! In other words, the pacific Brusi was more suited to life in the sticks.¹⁷

But Brusi was made of sterner stuff. He refused to give up any of his lands, and sailed off to Norway to consult King Olaf. Olaf promised to help him, on condition that Brusi became his man: in other words, that Brusi submitted to him in a feudal relationship. If you become my man, said

Olaf, I will give you part of the islands in fief. Soon afterwards Thorfinn himself arrived in Norway, and Olaf gave him the same choice. Brusi and Thorfinn agreed; Brusi after much consideration, Thorfinn unwillingly and with every intention of breaking his promise.¹⁸

As I said, Olaf promised to give Brusi and Thorfinn separate fiefs of the islands. Olaf now made a speech to a mass-meeting where he explained what he had in mind, and in which, incidentally, he spells out for the first time the precise meaning of the word 'islands' when it is used in the saga about the Orkney earldom. Brusi and Thorfinn, he said, 'have now agreed to my absolute ownership of Orkney *and Shetland*, and have both become my men.' Thorfinn went home, licking his wounds, but Brusi stayed a while; and Olaf gave him Einar's third of the islands as a reward for his loyalty.¹⁹

It's worth looking more closely at this relationship between king and vassal, so different from the picture Orkney historians like Clouston give us of their all-powerful earls. When Olaf was discussing his proposals with the earls he told them that his predecessors had owned the islands, with the Orkney earls' consent, since Harald Fairhair's time. This is highly unlikely, given the anarchic and independent behaviour of the earls like Torf-Einar. But in the 11th century the kings of Norway were slowly but surely taming their unruly magnates.²⁰ The poet Ottar the Black composed an ode about King Olaf which implies that he was the first king to exert control over the islands and their rulers:

As subjects shall Shetlanders
Ever be known to thee.
No war-eager Prince had we
Till now in the east
Who under his yoke bowed
The lands of the west.

When they got back to the 'lands of the west' Thorfinn and Brusi lived much as they'd lived before. Thorfinn stayed in Caithness, and his agents controlled one third of the islands; Brusi had the other two-thirds of the islands, and was in sole charge of their defence. Defence was no small matter at that time, when Norwegian and Danish pirates were raiding the islands, and Brusi began to feel resentful. He pointed out to Thorfinn that although he was collecting taxes from his third of the lands, he had set up 'no defence force for Orkney and Shetland'. Note the mention of Shetland again, proving that ownership of one portion of the earldom implied general responsibilities for both Orkney and Shetland. Thorfinn admitted his responsibility, and offered to take on the whole defence of the islands if Brusi gave him his Orkney third. Brusi agreed.²¹

And that's almost the last we hear of Brusi. When Thorfinn was fighting with the King of Scotland at Deerness in Orkney in 1029, the saga writer says that 'Brusi owned the northernmost share of the islands, and was then there', to explain Brusi's failure to come to Thorfinn's aid. This suggests that Brusi was a long distance away, especially since he didn't come of the scene at all, then or later when Thorfinn pursued Karl to the Scottish Mainland.²² I'm willing to be proved wrong, but I think there's a good case that Brusi was in Shetland. If I might make an absolutely preposterous suggestion, I wonder if the island of Bressay, which appears as 'Brwsøþy', Brús(a)øþy, Brusi's Isle, in a document of 1490,²³ was Brusi's base? There's no other island of that size in Shetland whose name commemorates an individual.

III

Several years after Brusi died, his beautiful son Rognvald returned to Norway, where he spent much of his youth, having had exciting adventures in Russia and elsewhere. Rognvald discovered that Thorfinn had taken charge of all the islands (*not* all the Orkneys, as Dasent translates it),²⁴ and asked King Magnus for his support, just as his father had asked King Olaf. Magnus gave him the title of earl, the third which Olaf had given Brusi – in addition to Rognvald's own ancestral third in the north – and three warships. Rognvald sailed west, and demanded both his thirds from Thorfinn.²⁵ Fortunately for him Thorfinn was extremely busy at the time: not with his Orkney and Shetland affairs, but with his enemies further south, in the Hebrides and Ireland. He refused to admit that King Magnus had the right to give Rognvald the Orkney third in fief; but he said that if Rognvald would be his – Rognvald's – loyal kinsman and supporter, 'then I think my realm will be well bestowed'. In other words, he gave Rognvald the Orkney third, but with the implication that he rather than the king had the right to bestow it. In addition he made an extremely interesting statement from our point of view. Rognvald's 'assistance with men [he said] is worth more to me than the skatts that I get from it'. Storer Clouston claimed that this statement means what I argued against before: that the thirds were divided up according to the amount of tax they paid.²⁶ Thorfinn actually said the opposite. Clearly the Orkney earls of the early 11th century looked on their 'realms' as a ready source of fighting men, more so than money or other taxation.

Rognvald bit his tongue, only saying, 'that he thought he claimed only what seemed his own'. So began eight years of close cooperation between uncle and nephew, mostly as allies in viking expeditions to the south, with Rognvald in charge of Shetland and half of Orkney, and Thorfinn responsible for half of Orkney but living as before in Caithness.

In due course the good times came to an end. In the early 1040s King Magnus banished a nobleman from Norway, who attached himself to Thorfinn and proved extremely expensive. Thorfinn now sent men to Orkney to ask Rognvald for the other Orkney third. Rognvald replied that he wasn't willing to give up these lands, because he had them in fief from King Magnus. He then headed for Norway and asked the king for help.²⁷

Rognvald then returned to the islands with several warships, stopped first at Shetland where he picked up fighting men; then he sailed to Orkney where he gathered more. He then met Thorfinn in the famous sea-battle of Raudabjorg, where Thorfinn was successful. Rognvald escaped back to Norway, but he had acquitted himself well, and Arnor Earls'-skald, Thorfinn's relative, later wrote some flattering verses about him, where he actually calls him 'lord of the Shetlanders':²⁸

The warrior prince ...
Had all but conquered
These ancient lands.
Many his men,
Yet not of his realms.
The army betrayed
The lord of the Shetlanders.

There now followed the thrilling events which ended in the murder of Rognvald. I shan't describe them at length, because most of them happened in Orkney, but the saga-writer certainly rose to the occasion. Thorfinn took control of all the isles again; Rognvald came back to Shetland with a single ship, and arriving secretly in Orkney in the middle of Winter burnt Thorfinn's house. The time Rognvald took control of the whole islands; but Thorfinn had actually escaped from the burning house and was skulking in Caithness. At Yule 1046 Thorfin surprised Rognvald in Papa Stronsay, and one of his servants murdered him.²⁹

'Earl Thorfinn', says the saga, 'now ruled the Orkneys and all his realm'.³⁰ *St Olaf's Saga* says: 'He had under him Orkney, Shetland, and the Hebudes, besides very great possessions in Scotland and Ireland'.³¹ During the next 20 years Thorfinn changed utterly. He forsook his ancestral estates in Caithness and went to live at Birsay in Orkney. He gave up his viking trips: the first Orkney earl, as Barbara Crawford says, to do so.³² He made friends with King Harald and went to Rome, where the Pope absolved him from his sins. When he returned, 'he turned his mind to the government of his people and land, and to the making of laws'.³³

In my opinion, during these peaceful years Thorfinn and his servants valued the lands of Orkney, Shetland and Caithness in ounce-lands. I have

no documentary proof that they did so; but, as I said before, a relatively settled and orderly society is necessary before that type of land-valuation is feasible. A period devoted to 'government of ... people and land, and ... the making of laws' is a likely moment for a general valuation of land. That valuation was more likely to happen when one earl was in charge of Shetland, Orkney and Caithness. Thorfinn was familiar with the societies of the Hebrides and west of Scotland, where there were also ouncelands; there were no such land-units in Norway, and Thorfinn might well have looked at the southern system as an attractive example. Slowly Orkney and Shetland were ceasing to be a launching-pad for vikings; surely they were becoming relatively orderly societies.

IV

The *Orkneyinga Saga* has little to say about the rest of the 11th century. Thorfinn's sons Paul and Erlend took charge after their father's death; and they got on so well together that they didn't divide the earldom. If Thorfinn did indeed introduce a system of land valuation in the north in the 1050s there was a long period of calm in the islands for the new institutions to become entrenched.

It wasn't for a long time that signs of trouble began to appear. The source of it was the earls' sons: Paul's son Hakon and Erlend's sons Erling and Magnus. Hakon and Erling were overbearing men; Magnus, as we know, was a saint. 'Things came to such a pass', says the saga, 'that the kinsmen could not keep company without quarreling'.³⁴ At last Paul and Erlend divided the islands in half between them. Storer Clouston assumed from this that they divided *Orkney* in half, in other words that they halved one of the former thirds.³⁵ Once more a close reading of the saga shows what actually happened. The saga says specifically that they divided the islands 'as they had been divided between Thorfinn and Brusi'.³⁶ In other words, one of the earls had Caithness and one of the Orkney thirds – and I suspect it was Paul, because his son Hakon later had very close relationships in Caithness; and the other had the rest of Orkney and Shetland.

In the early 1090s Orkney became too hot to hold Hakon Paulsson, and he went to Norway and Sweden for a while. On his way home he found that his uncle Erlend was firmly in control in the islands, and that his father was taking very little interest in affairs there. So Hakon asked King Magnus Barelegs of Norway to take a hand in the west. He very soon regretted doing so, because Magnus took up the suggestion with gusto. The king sailed to Orkney, sent Paul and Erlend packing to Norway, installed his son Sigurd in Orkney, and took Hakon and his cousin Magnus on a viking expedition down the west coast of Scotland.³⁷

Let's turn our attention now to Hakon's cousin Magnus. It's difficult to piece together Magnus's career, because the saga writer took his account of him from a hagiographical Latin biography, which has the virtue of being almost contemporary with the events it describes, but which has nothing but praise for its subject. Furthermore, the *Orkneyinga Saga* rushes headlong towards the sensational events surrounding Magnus's death. However, a close reading of the *Longer Magnus Saga*, which also had its origin in the Latin life, and another document called the 'Legenda de Sancto Magno', adds considerably to the general picture. The Legenda tells us that Magnus, his father and brother were living in Shetland when Magnus Barelegs arrived on the scene.³⁸ There is no trace of this information in *Orkneyinga Saga*, or the *Longer Magnus Saga*, but Peter Foote has recently argued convincingly that in this case the Legenda is a better record of what was in the Latin life than the other documents.³⁹ If Magnus was really in Shetland it's a marvellous confirmation that Shetland was indeed the northmost third of the earldom.

After various adventures in the south Hakon came back to Orkney, complete with the title of earl from King Magnus and his father's realm. According to the *Longer Magnus Saga* he 'slew the guiltless steward of the king of Norway, who ... looked after that half of the isles which St Magnus owned ... for half the isles fell to St Magnus by inheritance from his father'.⁴⁰ In due course Magnus claimed that inheritance, with the king's support: much to the farmers' delight, because he was very popular.

For a while Magnus and Hakon got on well together, just as Rognvald and Thorfinn had done. Hakon stayed at least part of the time in the north of Scotland, where he and Magnus killed a relative of theirs called Donald; perhaps Magnus stayed occasionally in Shetland, where he and Hakon burned an unpleasant chieftain called Thorbjorn at Burrafirth.⁴¹ (Which of the three Burrafirths in Shetland I don't know; most historians have assumed it was West Burrafirth, but perhaps Burrafirth in Unst is more likely because the Mainland Burrafirths usually have directional adjectives attached to their names in historical documents).

These exciting and not very saintly goings-on continued for some time. Then strife reared its head again; according to the *Longer Magnus Saga* Magnus went to the English court for a while, Hakon encroached on his cousin's half in his absence, and another settlement was necessary when Magnus returned. The mediators secured an agreement 'that the earldom of Orkney, Caithness and Shetland should be equally divided between Earls Magnus and Hakon'.⁴² Once more, note the explicit description of the pieces: Shetland, Orkney, Caithness.

We all know what happened next. Hakon lured Magnus to a meeting on

Egilsay, and had him executed there. Then the miracles began. Men and women by the dozen came to his tomb at Birsay, and a campaign began for his canonisation. Historians have noted that a large proportion of those who came to Birsay and later to Kirkwall, and demanded the translation of the relics, were Shetlanders. Recently Willie Thomson has tried to explain this by suggesting that Magnus's appeal for his followers was the appeal of a voodoo cult, and that 'in a remote area like the north-west of the Shetland Mainland where the Magnus cult had such a strong appeal, the blurring of Christian and heathen belief may have been even more marked'.⁴³ In my opinion Thomson's view that Shetlanders could only take an interest in Magnus because they were afflicted by 'backwoods shamanism', as he puts it, is the latest manifestation of Orkney nationalism. I agree with Barbara Crawford that a far more likely reason for the Shetlanders' interest is the probability that Magnus was a well-known and popular figure in Shetland, and that in fact he was lord of the islands.⁴⁴

There is no proof that the Shetland campaign in favour of Magnus's sanctity was confined to or was even more marked in the north-west of the islands. In the saga many of the Shetlanders are said to live 'nordan af Hjaltlandi'; Dasent translated this 'in the north of Shetland', but it simply means 'north [of Orkney,] in Shetland'.⁴⁵ One of the Shetlanders lived in Baliasta in Unst and another in Fetlar; another in Dale: I suppose that could be Dale in Delting, but it could equally be Dale in Tingwall; a fourth lived in Sand, which is probably Sand in Sandsting. I think that Bergfinn Skatason, and Sigurd of Baliasta, and all the other Shetlanders who came to Birsay, were well-off and poor men and women from all over the islands, ordinary but afflicted human beings who were grieved by the death of their 'isle-earl', as they called Magnus, and travelled a long way to pray at his grave.

V

We now come to the final 'outsider', the outsider who became the hero of the *Orkneyinga Saga*: Rognvald Kali Kolsson. Rognvald was a nephew of St Magnus, the son of Magnus's sister. He was born in Norway, and spent his whole youth there. In Orkney, meanwhile, Earl Hakon had died, leaving two sons, Harald Smooth-tongue and Paul the Silent. Both of them were born in Caithness, and both showed signs of falling out immediately. However, Harald's aunt, a frightful person called Frakokk, made a poisoned shirt (whatever that is) to get rid of Paul, and Harald put it on by mistake, thus leaving Paul in sole charge of the earldom. Paul not surprisingly asked Frakokk to go home to Caithness.⁴⁶

In Summer 1129 King Sigurd of Norway gave Kali, as he was called, the

title of Earl of Orkney, and St Magnus's share of the islands. He also gave him the name Rognvald, because his mother Gunnhild thought that that other outsider Rognvald Brusason was the most accomplished of the Orkney earls. It's not surprising, then, that Rognvald Kali Kolsson had a great deal to do with Shetland during his attempts to get established in the islands.

Rognvald's father Kol was a crafty man. He advised Rognvald to demand his half of the isles from Paul; but anticipating refusal he told Rognvald to make a pact with Frakokk. If Paul refused, his advice went, Rognvald should ask Frakokk for military assistance, in exchange for Paul's half of the islands. Paul in due course refused and Frakokk agreed. Rognvald and Frakokk planned to meet with warships in Orkney at Midsummer 1135.⁴⁷

In summer Rognvald headed for Shetland with half a dozen ships. He beached them in Yellsound, probably somewhere on the Delting side, and got a delighted reception from the local people. The Shetlanders had no news about Frakokk, and with Rognvald they immediately embarked on a series of feasts, presumably to celebrate Johnsmas. That was a mistake. Frakokk was in fact on her way; Paul defeated her in Orkney on Friday and set off to Shetland on Saturday. He arrived at night and took the guards in Rognvald's ships by surprise. Having killed them and taken the ships he issued a challenge to Rognvald to find more ships and come to fight in Yellsound. Although Rognvald had a large number of Shetlanders with him they had no ships, and he counter-challenged Paul to fight onshore. Paul refused. As the saga says, he didn't trust the Shetlanders; after all, Shetland had been part of the 'other half' of the earldom for a long time. So Paul sailed back to Orkney with Rognvald's ships, leaving Rognvald feeling like an idiot.

In autumn Rognvald hitched a lift back to Norway with a merchant ship. He found that he was a laughing stock there, but his father reassured him. 'Much has been done', said Kol, 'if the Shetlanders are your friends'.⁴⁸

Back in Orkney Paul was taking precautions against a repetition of Rognvald's attack. He arranged a system of beacons on hilltops throughout Orkney and on Fair Isle. It's noticeable that Paul didn't even attempt to introduce this system in Shetland: Shetland was clearly right out of bounds for him. The main landowner in Fair Isle was 'a brisk stirring man' called Dagfinn Hlodvisson. Storer Clouston has argued convincingly that Dagfinn was one of Paul's 'gödlings' or chiefs, and since it's fairly clear that Dagfinn's family had been in Fair Isle for a long time, and that Fair Isle was the outlying part of an estate in Orkney, it is not unlikely that Fair Isle was the long-established boundary between the northmost third of the

earldom and the rest.⁴⁹

Rognvald now did what Brusi, Rognvald Brusason and St Magnus had done before him: he asked and got the King of Norway's support. In March 1136, before leaving, he held a council of war at the Hennør, a group of islands near Bergen. Kol made a stirring speech.

We have heard from Orkney [he said] that all men there wish to rise against you, and defend your realm against you along with Earl Paul. ... Now my advice is to seek for help where it is abundant, for I think that he may grant you your realm who had it by right: I mean St Magnus the Earl, your uncle.

Kol wasn't just speaking about supernatural help; we've already heard him commend Rognvald for getting the *Shetlanders'* help: Magnus's willing supporters in his ancestral part of the earldom.

I desire [went on Kol] that, to provide for his granting you the ancestral lands that are yours and were his, you make a vow to have a church of stone built in Kirkwall in Orkney, when you gain that realm, so that there be not a more magnificent in the land; and let it be dedicated to St Magnus the Earl your kinsman. And let it be endowed so that the foundation may increase and that to it may be brought his relics and with them the Episcopal seat.⁵⁰

We've already seen how keen the Shetlanders were on the proper disposal of St Magnus's relics; this suggestion of Kol's was masterly tactics.

The fleet now set sail, and when they arrived in Shetland they got all the Orkney news – including the news about the Fair Isle beacon. Kol looked thoughtful, and went into a huddle with his old friend Uni. As a result Kol set out to the southward with a few small boats:

And when they had gone so far that they thought their movements would be visible from Fair Isle, Kol had the sails hoisted to half-mast in all the ships, but ordered the crews to back water, so as to have as little way as possible on the ships, although the wind lay dead astern. And the further he went the higher he had the sails hoisted. Kol said that it must seem from the Fair Isle as if the ships were coming nearer and nearer as they hoisted the sails, although they scarcely moved forward at all.⁵¹

Kol was counting on the hope that Dagfinn would fire the beacon and

rush off to meet Earl Paul, thus causing maximum confusion in the enemy camp before Rognvald had even made a move. 'It might well be', said Kol, 'that this will give them something to quarrel about'. Like everything Kol did this plan was successful. The Fair Isle beacon and all the Orkney beacons went up; Dagfinn posted off to Paul; and when Paul's army discovered that they had mustered on a false goose chase one of the more impetuous of them killed Dagfinn.

Meanwhile Kol's friend Uni had thought of an even more elaborate plan. He picked three young Shetland men, and sailed to Fair Isle in a six-oared boat. He told the Fair Islanders that he was a Norwegian with a Shetland wife and three Shetland offspring; but that Earl Rognvald's men had robbed him and he was looking for a new home. (It looks as if the political separation, so to speak, between Fair Isle and Shetland was so great that Uni could count on the three Shetlanders not being recognised in the island.) Uni set up house, and while his alleged sons sailed off to fish he stayed at home to look after the catch and stores. Earl Paul had put a man called Eric in charge of the Fair Isle beacon, and Uni now approached him and offered to look after it. Eric was delighted, but he would have been less pleased if he'd seen Uni drenching the beacon with water shortly afterwards. Once again the stratagem was a complete success. Rognvald's fleet slipped past Fair Isle, and while Eric's men desperately tried to fire the beacon the enemy force was approaching Westray.⁵²

Rognvald's installation in Orkney was far smoother than he'd feared. Paul immediately agreed to a truce, and once again the islands were divided. Then another charismatic character comes on the scene: the revolting Sveinn Asleifarson, the ultimate Orkney viking, who had been in Caithness pledging his support to Erlend Haraldsson, son of Harald Smooth-tongue (whom, you'll recall, Frakokk had poisoned by mistake eight years previously). Sveinn now kidnapped Earl Paul, while Paul was hunting otters at Westness, and carried him south to Caithness; and as a result Paul was never seen in Orkney again. There were rumours that his Caithness relatives had maimed and blinded him; but the important result of these events from our point of view is the fact that Rognvald suddenly and unexpectedly 'became sole chief over the whole realm'. Shortly afterwards Kol began work on the great cathedral in Kirkwall, as a thank-you to St Magnus for his assistance.⁵³

As far as Shetland is concerned these events are the climax of the *Orkneyinga Saga*. For the next 20 years Rognvald ruled in the islands without too much interruption, most of the time with his relative Harald Maddadason as junior partner. Despite attempts from claimants in Caithness to intervene Rognvald found little difficulty in retaining power. The outsider was now in control. As a result we hear very little about

Shetland in the last third or so of the saga. Rognvald was installed in the more prosperous part of his realm, probably in Kirkwall; he and his enemies were often based in Caithness and both sides probably thought of Shetland at best as an important strategic point in their struggles, or a source of revenue.

I shan't describe the struggles in detail, because they're very complicated; the best example of them is the crisis of the early 1150s, the so-called period of the 'Three Earls', when Rognvald returned from his famous crusade to find that Erlend had ousted Harald Maddadarsen and was in charge of the islands. Rognvald quickly made an arrangement with Erlend to halve the islands between them and defend them against Harald. Erlend and Sveinn Asleifarson spent the whole summer of 1154 in Shetland, looking out for Harald, who was in Norway, and preventing all ships sailing from Shetland to Norway which might give Harald news.⁵⁴ In due course Rognvald switched sides again, and he and Harald then hunted Erlend to death.

It's not very easy to understand the way that Rognvald and Harald divided up the earldom during their long partnership. My impression is that Rognvald in his later years spent more time in Caithness, and he was eventually murdered there in 1158. Harald, on the other hand, appears in Shetland from time to time, as we might expect from a junior partner; for instance, he spent most of the spring of 1155 in Shetland.⁵⁵

VI

Strangely enough, it is in this part of the *Orkneyinga Saga*, as the result of a pure accident, that we find the most vivid description of Shetland and its society in the 12th century. In autumn 1148 Rognvald was coming from Norway to Orkney with two ships, the *Fifa* and the *Hjolph*, and on a dark Thursday night, with breakers all around them, they had to run ashore on a rocky beach. They were somewhere on the east coast of Shetland; not necessarily at Gulberwick, as almost all historians have assumed, but probably somewhere not too far away. Rognvald and his men were now stranded, and carrying what they could salvage they headed into the night to look for help. They soon came to a township, and they spread out among the houses.

As usual Rognvald felt at home in Shetland, and for a page or two he and the saga writer forget about quarrels between magnates. In the house where he found refuge the woman in charge fussed around him, asking about his voyage and pressing a skin cloak on him. Then a maid-servant called Asa and another woman went out to the well for water, but poor Asa fell into the well, and ran into the house shivering so much that no-one

could make out what she was saying. Rognvald burst out in verse (verse-making was one of his talents):

You roast yourselves by the fire [he said to the company], but Asa –
atatata – lies in water – hutututu – where must I sit? I'm rather cold.

This is the only part of the whole saga where we see the different classes of Shetland or Orkney society at their day to day work, cheek by jowl with each other. That isn't to say that there were no prosperous and haughty people in Shetland. When things had settled down, perhaps the following day, Rognvald sent 12 of his men to billet with someone called Einar, who lived at Gulberwick. Einar sent back a message that he wouldn't take in any of them unless the earl came himself. Rognvald set off himself to see Einar, who from his behaviour must have been a local chieftain, but afterwards he composed a rude verse about 'this unpleasant man'.⁵⁶

Rognvald stayed in Shetland for a long time, travelling here and there for entertainment and business, sometimes incognito. One day, dressed in a white cowl and cloak, he met an 'old and poor country man' at Sumburgh Voe. This is the one extended incident in the saga where we see and hear ordinary men and women at their work in a real Shetland place. The passage is actually missing from all but one manuscript of the saga, and wasn't accessible to an English-speaking audience until 1889, when the Shetland antiquarian Gilbert Goudie produced a translation of it. Goudie had the bright idea of retaining several Icelandic words in his rendering, to give a real Shetland flavour to the story.⁵⁷

Rognvald asked the country man why he didn't row off to the fishing like the other men, and the man said that his mate hadn't turned up.

'Would you like me to row with you?' said the man in the cowl.

'Dat would I,' said the country man. 'But I must have a share for my boat, for I have many bairns at home, and I must work for them as long as I can.'

So they rowed out in front of Sumburgh Head, and inside Hundholm (now called Horse Island); 'there was a great *stream* of tide where they were, and great whirling eddies; and they had to lie in the eddy but fish outside the *raust*'.

The man with the cowl sat in the front of the little boat and *andowed* while the country man fished. But Rognvald rowed into the *raust*, and the country man was terrified and *gret*. He said: 'Miserable was I and unlucky when I took dee today to row, for here I must die, and my folk are at home

helpless and in poverty if I am lost.’

‘Be cheery, man!’ shouted Rognvald, ‘and don’t greet. He who let us into the raust will pull us out of it.’

And that was what happened. They got out of the raust and pulled up the boat. There was a large crowd of people there, and Rognvald, his identity still a mystery to everyone, handed out fries to the poor. As he clambered up the banks to leave he slipped and slithered down again, and one of the women sitting there howled with laughter. Soon everyone was laughing at the stranger, and he muttered another of his verses:

The ‘Silken Dame’
Mocks my attire.
Too loudly she laughs
It’s ill known an earl
In fisherman’s garb.⁵⁸

After these wonderful pages, so full of life that we can picture the events happening, in places we can still see today, the saga-writer returns to his normal concerns. When Earl Rognvald dies, several years later, the *Orkneyinga Saga* is complete. There are several additional chapters, thrown together by somebody else, but they are fragmentary and confused. As far as the saga-writer as concerned his task was discharged when he completed the saga of Rognvald Kali Kolsson.

In the last of the additional chapters, almost on the last page, we read about the end of Shetland’s relationship with the Orkney earldom. In 1195, when Harald Maddadarson had been earl of Orkney, Shetland and Caithness for many years,⁵⁹ an army of Shetlanders and Orcadians, nicknamed the ‘Island-beardies’ or the ‘Gold-shanks’, sailed to Norway in a rebellion against King Sverre. Sverre defeated them, and summoned Earl Harald, now an old man, to explain himself. As the saga reports, ‘King Sverre then took over from Earl Harald all Shetland with its skatts and dues; and the Orkney earls have not held it since.’⁶⁰

So Shetland ceased to be a third of the Earldom of Orkney. During the following centuries the two groups of islands drifted further and further apart, in politics and institutions.⁶¹ However, we shouldn’t overlook the important part that Shetland had played as part of the Earldom of Orkney. Shetland was the ancestral realm of the outsiders: Brusi Sigurdarson, Rognvald Brusason, Magnus Erlendsson and Rognvald Kali Kolsson. And as well as these charismatic figures – half of whom became saints! – we catch a glimpse of other Shetlanders: haughty chieftains like Einar of Gulberwick and Thorbjorn of Burrarfirth; ordinary people like Sigrid, who

lodged with Thorlak at Baliasta in Unst, and sewed until it grew dark on St Magnus eve; and hungry and lonely people too, the men and women who flocked to Sumburgh on that autumn day in 1148 to see if there was a fish to spare for their supper. Shetland was an outpost, a stepping-stone to the greener pastures of Orkney; but at the same time she was a country with her own enthusiasms and history.

NOTES

1. H. Pálsson and P. Edwards, *Orkneyinga Saga*, Harmondsworth 1981; A.B. Taylor, *The Orkneyinga Saga*, Edinburgh and London 1938; F. Guðmundsson, *Orkneyinga Saga*, Reykjavik 1965; G.W. Dasent, *The Orkneyingers' Saga*, London 1894. I have modified some of the translations slightly after consulting Guðmundsson.
2. Pálsson and Edwards, 9.
3. Taylor, introduction, 28.
4. Taylor, introduction, 21-3. More precisely, the title 'Earls' Saga' may refer to the early part of the saga, which climaxes in the feud between Earls Rognvald and Thorfinn; there is no evidence that Snorri Sturluson, for instance, had seen more than that early section (Taylor, appendix c, 415-18).
5. E.J. Cowan, 'Caithness in the sagas', in J.R. Baldwin ed., *Caithness, a Cultural Crossroads*, Edinburgh 1982, 27.
6. A good example of this bias, no doubt unconscious, is the writer's failure even to mention that there were two rival bishops in the islands in the early 12th century: see B. Crawford, 'Birsay and the early Earls and Bishops of Orkney: *Orkney Heritage*, ii, 105-11.
7. Taylor, 138-9.
8. Taylor, introduction, 54-64.
9. Taylor, 150-1.
10. J.S. Clouston, 'Two features of the Orkney earldom', *Scottish Historical Review*, xvi, especially 15-21. Taylor, (362, 364), accepts Clouston's argument without question. For an extension of Clouston's argument and method into even more improbable territory see A. Steinnes, 'The "huseby" system in Orkney', *Scottish Historical Review*, xxxviii, 36-46.
11. For example, 'meira en þridjung eyja' (Guðmundsson, 28); 'at hálfar eyjar hefði hvárr þeira' (35); 'mun ek pá fá þér eyjar i lén' (36); 'Brúsi hafði inn nørzta hlut Eyja' (45-6); 'þorfinnr jarl hafði tekit undir sik eyjarnar allar' (56); 'ok honum þann þridjung eyja' (56); 'hafa þann þridjung af Eyjum' (56); 'tveimr hlutum eyja' (64); etc.
12. H. Björkvik, 'Skatter' in *Kulturhistorisk Leksikon for Nordisk Middelalder*.
13. Taylor, 150-1. Actually there was emigration from Einar's tyranny, to Caithness and Norway (Taylor, 152).

14. Taylor, 165. W. Thomson, *History of Orkney*, Edinburgh 1987, 45, follows Clouston in assuming that ‘the northmost share of the islands’ (‘nørtzta hlut Eyja’ [Gudmundsson 45-6]) means the North Isles of Orkney. He supports his argument with the following three references to events concerning Brusi’s son Rognvald. (1) ‘When Thorfinn was later trying to come to an agreement with Rognvald, he sent messengers “out to the isles”.’ Thorfinn was actually sending messengers “out to the isles [of Orkney from Caithness]’ (Taylor, 176). There is an identical example on p. 154 when Thorfinn sends Thorkel ‘out to the isles’ to collect scat. (2) ‘It was in Papa Stronsay that Rognvald was to be found collecting malt for his Yule festivities.’ But at that stage Rognvald was actually in control of the whole islands (Taylor, 183), and might have gone anywhere for malt. (3) ‘He was buried in Papa Westray.’ But the chapel in Papa Westray could well have been the safest appropriate holy place for his burial, since Thorfinn had gone to Kirkwall and had immediately slaughtered many of Rognvald’s supporters there (Taylor, 185).

There is a reference to the North Isles of Orkney in the saga: in chapter 67 Earl Paul ‘fór ... vida um Nordreyjar’ visiting for instance Stronsay (Gudmundsson, 155). This is the same geographical term used in Orkney today (cf. the North Isles of Shetland, similarly called the ‘nordr æyre’ in 1307 [*Diplomatarium Norvegicum*, i, 98]: ‘Nordreyjar’ is a place-name; ‘nørzta hlut Eyja’ isn’t.

15. Taylor, 153
 16. P. Anderson, *Robert Stewart*, Edinburgh 1982, 126.
 17. Taylor, 156-7.
 18. Taylor, 158-60.
 19. Taylor, 160-1.
 20. B. Crawford *Scandinavian Scotland*, Leicester 1987, 76-7.
 21. Taylor, 162-3.
 22. Taylor, 163-9.
 23. *Diplomatarium Norvegicum*, viii, 438; cf. J. Jakobsen, *The Place-Names of Shetland*, London and Copenhagen, 1936, 121.
 24. Dasent, 40; cf. Gudmundsson, 56.
 25. Taylor, 172.
 26. Clouston, ‘Two features’, 16; cf. Clouston’s astonishing statement in *A History of Orkney*, Kirkwall 1932, 34, that ‘in one passage of the saga of Thorfinn the value of a trithing was explicitly the value of its skats’!
 27. Taylor, 176-8.
 28. Taylor, 178-81. Arnor also called Thorfinn ‘Shetlander’s lord’ [‘Hialta dróttin’] and ‘lord of Shetland’; but he did so at the end of Thorfinn’s life, when he was in control of the whole earldom (G. Vigfusson and F.Y. Powell eds., *Corpus Poeticum Boreale*, ii, Oxford 1883, 195,196). It may not be fanciful to enquire if

- 'Shetlander's lord' and the later title 'Lord of Shetland' had a similar sense: see also at note 16. The saga-writer incorporated one of these verses in his text: note that Taylor mistranslates 'Hjalta dróttin' (Guðmundsson, 50) as 'Shetland's lord' (Taylor, 168).
29. Taylor, 181-5.
 30. Taylor, 188.
 31. S. Laing, *The Heimskringla*, ii, London 1844, 145. Cf. the discussion of Thorfinn's dominions in Crawford, *Scandinavian Scotland*, 75-6.
 32. B. Crawford, 'Birsay', 101.
 33. Taylor, 189; Guðmundsson, 80: 'Lét hann þa af herferdum, lagði þa hug á stjórn lýðs ok lands [ok] á lagasetning'.
 34. Taylor, 193.
 35. Clouston, 'Two features', 19-21.
 36. Taylor, 193.
 37. Taylor, 197-9.
 38. Guðmundsson, 304.
 39. P. Foote, 'Observations on *Orkneyinga Saga*', in B. Crawford ed., *St Magnus Cathedral*, Aberdeen 1988, 204-5.
 40. Dasent, 252.
 41. *Shorter Magnus Saga*, Dasent, 288.
 42. Dasent, 259.
 43. Thomson, *History*, 66-7.
 44. B. Crawford, 'The cult of the St Magnus in Shetland', in B. Crawford ed., *Essays in Shetland History*, Lerwick 1984, 65-81.
 45. Guðmundsson, 127; Dasent, 93; cf. J. Mooney, *St Magnus, Earl of Orkney*, Kirkwall 1935, 249: 'Quite a number of those who were healed at Birsay or Kirkwall were Shetlanders – most of them from the north of Shetland'.
 46. Taylor, 215-6.
 47. Taylor, 235-6.
 48. Taylor, 236-40.
 49. Taylor, 241; J.S. Clouston, 'The origin of the Orkney chiefs', *Proceedings of the Orkney Antiquarian Society*, xii, 35. Clouston, *History*, 210, refers to the absence of gödings in Shetland. This suggests, as we might expect by now, a complete failure by the 'establishment' earls like Paul to install their servants and supporters (as well as beacons) in the northern group of islands.
 50. Taylor, 248.
 51. Taylor, 249. The Stockholm ms. of the saga, used here by Taylor, gives a more complete account of the Fair Isle episode (Taylor, 386).
 52. Taylor, 249-52.
 53. Taylor, 255-61.
 54. Taylor, 314.
 55. Taylor, 327-8. Harald sent a boat to Shetland for scat in March-April 1152 (Taylor, 306), although Rogvald was away crusading at the

time, and as a result Harald was presumably collecting taxes from the whole earldom. In Spring 1153 Harald was back in Shetland, besieging the Broch of Mousa, where Erlend the Younger had eloped with his mother (Taylor, 311-12). And we've just seen how Sveinn and Earl Erlend expected Harald to come to Shetland in summer 1154 on his way home from Norway.

56. Taylor, 276-8; P. Bibire, 'The poetry of Earl Rognvald's court', in Crawford, *St Magnus Cathedral*, 230.
57. G. Goudie ed., *The Diary of the Reverend John Mill*, Edinburgh 1889, 173-5. The authenticity of the passage has been questioned, but P. Bibire, discussing its status in his article "'Few know an earl in fishing-clothes'" (in Crawford ed., *Essays*, 85-7), concludes that it 'may be as authentic as anything in *Orkneyinga Saga*'.
58. Based on Goudie, *Diary*, 174-5; Taylor, 278-80; Guðmundsson, 199-200, and Bibire, "'Few know an earl'", 84-5. 'Raust' ('í rostina' in the saga: 'strong tidal current'), is the Dunrossness pronunciation of the word pronounced 'roost' elsewhere in Shetland: J. Jakobsen, *An Etymological Dictionary of the Norn Language in Shetland*, ii, London and Copenhagen 1932, s.v. 'rust'.
59. He is described as 'Orcadensis Hetlandensis et Catanesie comes' in a document of c. 1190: *Diplomatarium Norvegicum*, i, 2.
60. Taylor, 348.
61. B. Crawford, 'The pledging of the islands in 1469: the historical background', in D.J. Withrington ed., *Shetland and the Outside World*, Oxford 1983, 32-48.