

UHI Research Database pdf download summary

The Giantess as a Metaphor for Shetland's Cultural History

Jennings, Andrew

Published in:

Shima: The International Journal of Research into Island Cultures

Publication date:

2010

The Document Version you have downloaded here is:

Early version, also known as pre-print

[Link to author version on UHI Research Database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Jennings, A. (2010). The Giantess as a Metaphor for Shetland's Cultural History. *Shima: The International Journal of Research into Island Cultures*, 4(2), 1-14.

<http://www.shimajournal.org/issues/v4n2/c.%20Jennings%20Shima%20v4n2%201-14.pdf>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the UHI Research Database are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights:

- 1) Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the UHI Research Database for the purpose of private study or research.
- 2) You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- 3) You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the UHI Research Database

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at RO@uhi.ac.uk providing details; we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

THE GIANTESS AS A METAPHOR FOR SHETLAND'S CULTURAL HISTORY

ANDREW JENNINGS

Centre for Nordic Studies of the University of the Highlands and Islands
Millennium Institute <andrew.jennings@nafc.uhi.ac.uk>

Abstract

This paper examines the giantess figure in the traditions of Shetland. Debate continues in Shetland about the extent to which the cultural heritage of the archipelago can be described as Norse or Scottish. There is widespread popular belief in the existence of an extensive Norse cultural inheritance, a view that is not always borne out by scholarship. However, this study of the traditions surrounding the giantess, known by various reflexes of the Old Norse word *gygr*, will show that in the field of intangible cultural heritage, the Norse cultural component is strong. Indeed, if the giantess can be seen as a synecdoche for cultural tradition in general, Shetland's traditions are primarily Norse, but with a Scottish admixture.

Keywords

Shetland, Norway, Scotland, folklore, giantess

Introduction

Due to their unique geographical nature, islands form unique cultural habitats. Some are repositories of linguistic distinctiveness, home to extraordinary stories, traditions and legendary material that has been lost on the mainland. The Hebridean islands of Scotland would fall into this category. Others have provided fertile ground for more than one cultural inheritance to take root, creating a new insular identity. The Channel Islands are a good example of this, falling heir to both Norman French and English culture. Like these, Shetland is a unique cultural habitat formed of two cultural inheritances, in this case, from Norway and from Scotland. Both have contributed to the making of today's Shetland, although the Scottish cultural inheritance is clearly now in the ascendant. Despite the fact that Shetland's cultural habitat, by any objective measure, is now much more Scottish than Norse, many modern Shetlanders are proud of their perceived Norse heritage. This has its greatest, and most exciting, expression in Lerwick's annual Up-Helly-Aa fire festival in January. The belief in a heroic Norse past helps to bolster a sense of local identity and feelings of pride. Perhaps most importantly, it allows Shetland islanders to distinguish themselves from the inhabitants of mainland Scotland. However, it would not be too controversial to say that the greater part of Shetlanders' self-perception as Norse is due to the efforts of a coterie of home-grown 19th Century intellectuals and Nordophiles, who, influenced by the Romantic movement, were determined to provide Shetland with strong Viking credentials at a time when everything relating to the Vikings had glamour. They have been quite successful and according to Grydehøj (2010), the average Shetlander feels more Norse today than s/he did in 1800.

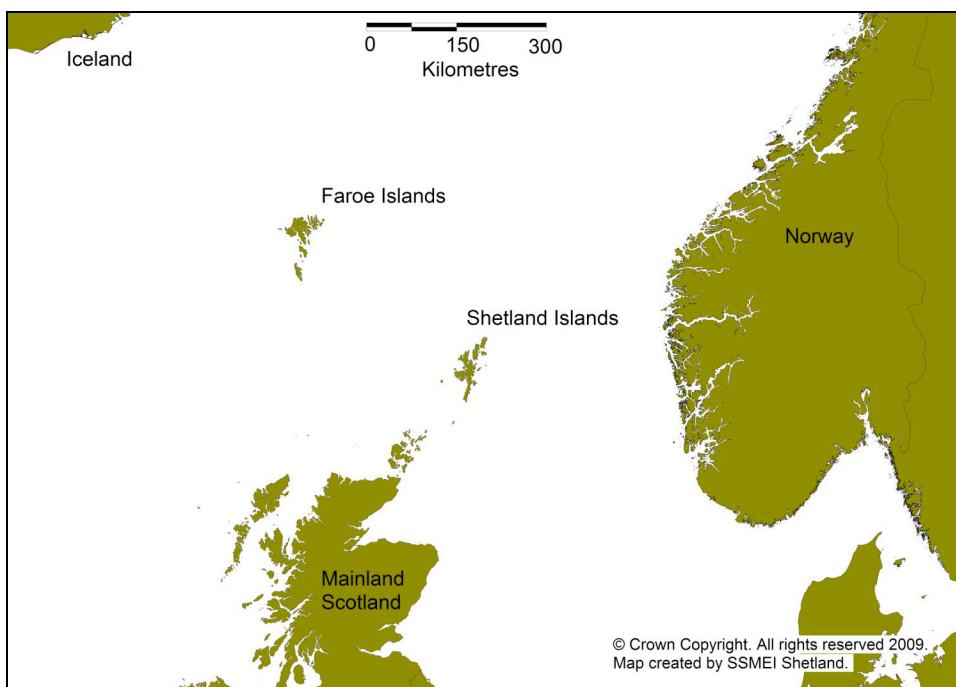


Figure 1 – map of Shetland and surrounding region

The actual extent of Shetland's Norseness is a matter of continued debate. For example, in contrast to the Faroe Islands, which some Shetlanders view with inordinate admiration, there is no surviving Scandinavian language still spoken on the archipelago. The last speakers of Norn, the Norse dialect spoken in Shetland, died out around 1800, or perhaps earlier (Barnes, 1998); and despite the extraordinary lexicographical efforts of Jakob Jakobsen (1928-32), there is little likelihood of the language being revived. However, Shetland does have a rich, distinctive linguistic heritage in the surviving Shetland dialect (Millar, 2007). But this, apart from a number of loan words associated with the weather or with crofting, and some peculiarities in pronunciation that come from the Norn substratum, is a form of the Scots language brought to the islands with the Scots settlers who arrived in Shetland after 1469. The Shetland dialect is a vehicle for some excellent contemporary poetry, particularly in the hands of the internationally recognised Christine De Luca, whose bilingual poetry collection *Mondes Parallèles*, won the Prix Du Livre Insulaire 2007 for poetry at the 9th Salon International Du Livre Insulaire (Island Book Fair) on Ouessant island, Brittany. However, despite being arguably the richest surviving example of the Scots language, the dialect appears to be viewed locally more as an example of Shetlandness rather than Scottishness. There has also been little or no attempt by Scots language enthusiasts on the mainland of Scotland to embrace Shetland as a kind of repository of national linguistic heritage, as Irish nationalists did with the islands of the west coast of Ireland. Shetland still seems to be viewed as 'other'.

In the field of traditional stories and belief there are differing opinions about the comparative extent of the contribution of Norse and Scottish cultural traditions to that of Shetland. Both have been the source of supernatural beings and folk tales. But Alan Bruford, the acknowledged expert on the folk tales of Shetland, is surely correct when he

suggests that, at least when it comes to fairy legend types, the Scottish contribution to Shetland cultural heritage is greater than the Norse (1997: 130). For example, although the fairies are usually called *trows*, which has a Norse derivation from troll, the stories about them are mainly Scottish legend types; often strikingly similar to stories from Gaelic tradition, despite an oft-heard refrain in Shetland that Gaelic culture is alien to the Isles. However, the Norse names of various supernatural beings occur relatively frequently in place-names, showing a lively, previous existence. For example, Jakob Jakobsen found place-names with *álfr* ('elf') (eg Wolvhul in Delting, Wolver(s)hul in mid Yell) and *nykr* ('water nixie') (eg Njogersjøn in Northmavine) (1936: 61,108).

Clearly, as time has passed, the Scottish element in the Shetland cultural matrix has increased, while the Norse component has decreased, often becoming no more than a linguistic remnant, either in a place-name or as a particularly appropriate word for a Shetlandic meteorological peculiarity. This change in cultural identity from Norse to 'almost' Scottish can be charted linguistically and it can also be shown in the way supernatural beings, like the *throw*, have undergone Scotticisation. However, it is also clear that Norse tradition forms the bedrock upon which later Scottish material is laid. It is Norse supernatural beings that have been commemorated in the onomastic record and Norse supernatural beings that have been Scotticised.

The Ogress/Giantess

A particularly apt metaphor for Shetland's mixed cultural heritage and its metamorphosis over time is provided by the case of the, grotesque, supernatural female - the ogress or giantess. This figure is worth studying within a Shetlandic context, because not only did the earliest Norse settlers bring their traditions about this originally divine being to Shetland (where she is commemorated in place-names and some vestigial traditions); the later Scottish settlers also brought a version with them to Shetland's shores. Although the figure of the grotesque female is now almost forgotten (showing the erosion of both cultural heritages in the face of modernity), she provides an example of the cultural history of Shetland in microcosm since both cultures contributed to Shetlandic lore about her.

It will become clear that in the case of the grotesque female the Norse contribution is far and away the most important element. The early Norse giantess figure, called variously the *trollkona*, *grýla*, *gífr* or *gýgr*, clearly haunted the Shetland landscape. Some place-names containing these elements are still easily recognisable today (eg Trollkonastack 'Troll-wife stack' at Uyea, Northmavine). Others are not so easy to recognise, particularly those that refer to the *gýgr*, the most common name for the giantess. However, Jakob Jacobsen (1936) managed to record a number of these in the late 19th Century when local pronunciation still revealed their origin (eg Geurwall [*gýgjar-hóll* 'Gýgr's hill'], near Clousta). However, before looking at other examples of place-names, firstly, a word on the nature of giantesses: what manner of being are they?

In Norse mythology, giantesses could be beautiful: Gerðr who married the god Freyr was 'of all women the fairest'. However, they were more likely to be grotesque. Famously, the giantess Gjálp tried to drown Thor by urinating into a river he was crossing, causing it to rise dramatically. They were immensely strong and, in general, they seem to personify creative, inchoate feminine power. They are representative of 'the Otherworld', the world of the monstrous, the supernatural, the region of creation and its corollary death, of wild nature that lies beyond the boundaries of the human world. In many ways they seem to personify the land itself, at least its wild aspect. One important giantess, Skaði, has a name that suggests she might be a personification of Scandinavia (Dumezil 1973: 35).

Jennings: The Giantess as metaphor for Shetland's Cultural History

According to the poem 'Háleygjatal', a 10th Century panegyric by Eyvindr Finnsson Skáldaspillir, she was the ancestress of the powerful Jarls of Hlaðir in Trøndelag. The giantess Gerðr was apparently the ancestress of the Yngling line of kings. It is possible that rulers in early Scandinavia may have legitimised their status by referring to the myth of the sacred marriage (*hierosgamos*) between an ancestral god and an ancestral giantess representing the land and claiming descent from this union. It is just possible that there are references to the Norwegian giantess Skaði in the place-names of Shetland. She might be commemorated in de braes o' Skaden and Skadaflekk. Jakobsen (1936: 119) does not offer an etymology for these names, but does suggest they are probably related to the Old Norse name Sköðin, which occurs frequently in Norway from an original *skaðvin*. The similarity to the name Skaði is striking.

For the heathen Norse, the giantess was clearly a terrifying personification of nature: a chthonic figure, a wild, dangerous spirit, an equal of the gods, a female clearly not to be taken lightly. Her importance can surely be seen in the fact that, although the old gods were dispensed with following the adoption of Christianity, she was not. The *gýgr*, as a figure of the essentially female 'Otherworld' and personification of wild nature, refused to be dumped on the refuse tip of failed gods. Norwegian folklorists were still gathering folktales about her during the 19th and early 20th Century. In these, she moves islands, alters mountains and exhibits a hatred for St Olaf (King of Norway) and the new fangled religion he introduced in the early 11th Century (just as the pre-Christian *gýgr* opposed the *æsir*). However, by this time she had become more a figure of fun rather than of fear. Here are translations of a couple of good examples: the first was collected from the fifty year old Abel Segleim, and published in Anton Espeland's collection of tales from Hordaland (1933: 45), the second is from Vik in Ringerike:

Once upon a time when St Olaf was going around the land Christening folk and building kirks there was a gýgra who wanted to close Hardangerfjord to him. She took a large island from out the sea and dragged it into Kvinnheradsfjorden. There the island broke into two parts where Kalvsund and Mjørnasund now are. At the same time the gýgra fell back into Neslia and there can still be seen the shape of her backside left in the mountain. Then she got angry and she climbed the highest point so she could see what had happened. She realised all her striving had been in vain, and in anger she slid down over Skorpegavelen and jumped across Storsund between Skorpo and Uskedalen and up on to the mountain plateau. There she took a great stone and chucked it over Skorpefjella and there one can see it to this day.

Once upon a time King Olaf wanted to build a church at Stein. A gygra didn't like what Olaf was doing. They decided to bet on the right to build it. She said that before Olaf had finished, she could build a stone bridge over the fjord. Olaf answered that if the gygra managed it, he wouldn't finish the church. But before the gygra was half-finished, she heard the church bells from Stein farm, and she saw the church standing ready. She flew into a wild rage. She went up on to the top of the highest hill in Krogskogen, later called Gyrihaugen, and began chucking large stones at the church. But she didn't manage to reach it. Then she got so mad that she pulled off her own leg and threw it at the church. The leg landed in a bog behind the church, now called Gygerputten, and there it lay and stank from that day to this. (Andreas Faye, 1833: online)

Given the clearly important place that the giantess held in Norse mythology, it is not

Jennings: The Giantess as metaphor for Shetland's Cultural History

surprising that the Viking settlers brought a belief in her with them when they sailed to Shetland. As suggested above, it is possible that Skaði, in some senses the personification of Norway, was commemorated in Shetland. However, one is on firmer footing with the word *gýgr*. Jakobsen (1936: 138) discovered quite a number of place-names with an original *gýgr* as a specific. He also noted that the Shetland dialect version of the word *gør* was still used in Unst to mean an unusually tall, masculine woman, and also, oddly, a big snowman. The place-names tend to apply to sites in the sort of wild places one would expect the *gýgr* to frequent. From this list of the surviving place-names and the stories that still cling to them it is clear that the giantess had an important place in Shetland tradition. However, it must be noted that in most cases the *gýgr* has been replaced by the *trows*, who are gradually replacing the other supernatural types. In one case, the *gýgr*'s terrifying presence is replaced by that of the equally unpleasant Devil.

Gorewell (*gýgjar-hóll* 'Gýgr's hill') on Burra is still known to Burra locals as a *trowie knowe* (a trow hillock). A local told me in 2009 that he remembers as a child, about 30 years ago, being sent there to look for *trows*. A generation before, another local told me (again in 2009) that Gorewell was a place to be avoided at night. It was also used by local fishermen as a *meid* (landmark), being somewhat easier to see from the sea. There was no awareness amongst the locals I conversed with of the meaning of the name, just a sense that it used to have supernatural associations.

Geurwall in Aithsting is another 'Gýgr's hill' and has the well known Shetland *trowie* story about Tirval o' Stivva attached to it. According to Nicolson:

When he (Tirval) came to Görwill (an alternative spelling), he heard the strains of music from within the Trowie knowe. He stopped to listen, and having a very musical ear, soon mastered the tune. When Tirvil arrived at his destination he played it as the first spring (reel) that night, and the company was charmed with the quaint melody. (1920: 9):

The Guens (from *gýgrin* 'the *gýgr*') are rugged sea-rocks near Skerries, best seen from the ferry. The Gew Stanes in Tingwall are set in a wild, bleak area, at the top of the road leading from Girsta to Stromfirth. Most intriguingly, they are near two lochs called Tirsawater, (from Old Norse *þurs* 'giant') and Trollawater, which is self-explanatory. It would be fascinating to know what the old tales of this area had to say about such an accumulation of monstrous figures. Unfortunately, only the place-names remain as mute fossils of the earlier Norse period.

Goorn on Fair Isle is also from *gýgrin*. This is a prominent headland just north of Sheep rock. This *gýgr* may originally have been one of the four *trows* mentioned in a story by Ernest Marwick: "There were four *trows* on the Fair Isle: Grotti Finnie, Luckie Minnie, Tushie and Tangie" (1975: 163-164). According to Marwick's story, Luckie Minnie slipped in a burn, while chasing an annoying small boy and she fell into Hestigoe, a geo that fills with white spume (a geo is a type of ravine that falls into the sea and is frequently found on Shetland's rugged coast). According to Marwick (ibid), people used to say that the spume was Luckie Minnie churning. This is an intriguing reference because it adds to the possibility that there are elements in the story that reflect an Old Norse myth.



Figure 2: Goorn on Fair Isle (author's photograph)

Marwick pointed out that the names Grotti Finnie and Luckie Minnie recall two giantesses from Norse mythology Fenja and Menja (1975: 32). Although Luckie Minnie also means 'Granny' in the Scots Language, this may only be a reflection of the way her name was amended when Shetland's language changed from Norn to Scots. According to the 13th Century *Edda* of Snorri Sturlusson (Finnur Jónsson, 1931), Grótti was the name of the magic mill owned by King Fróði of Denmark that would grind out whatever was asked of it. Unfortunately, no one could turn it. So he acquired two huge slave women (giantesses), Fenja and Menja, whom he set to turning the stones. Fróði ordered gold, peace and happiness to be ground out and so Denmark experienced a golden age called 'Fróði's Peace'. However, the giantesses became annoyed because they were given no rest, and so, in revenge, they ground out an army. A sea-king called Mýsingr came that very night and slew Fróði. Mýsingr took Grótti, Fenja and Menja with him on his ship. For some unaccountable reason he asked them to grind salt. At midnight they asked whether he had enough. He told them to keep grinding. Inevitably the ship sank and from that time there has been a whirlpool in the sea where the water falls through the hole in the millstone. And that was also how the sea became salty.

According to one version of the text known as *Litla Skálda*, preserved in manuscripts that also contain versions of *Skáldskaparmál* (Finnur Jónsson, 1931: 259), Grótti the magic mill is supposed to lie at the bottom of the Pentland Firth. Taking this localisation and the later survival of tradition into account, Judith Jesch (2006), a leading saga expert, has argued that this particular version of the myth could have originated in the medieval Jarldom of Orkney, of which Shetland was a part until Jarl Harald Maddadson lost control of it.

The motif of a churning giantess was also known on the Isle of Bressay, where another of the place-names survives. At the back of Bressay are the Goreskirn and the Gore's kirning stane. The former is a collapsed sea-cave that has been gradually succumbing to

Jennings: The Giantess as metaphor for Shetland's Cultural History

the power of the sea. Before it collapsed 1933, it was a funnel-shaped hole that looked like a churn. According to a story told by Elizabeth J. Smith in a *hairst* (Autumn) edition of the *New Shetlander*:

A myth had grown up round it, to the effect that the Evil One (Guir) set one foot on Anderhill and the other on the Wart, and "kirned i'da Guir's Kirn", the rhythmical thumping of the waves simulating the giant kirning. Hence the name, and in this wild and desolate spot one could imagine diabolic activity. (1980: 34-5)

Despite the fact that the *gýgr* has changed sex, this story is an authentic survival of Norse tradition. It is the only example found from Shetland where the *gýgr* (or Guir) was remembered as a gigantic supernatural being into the late 20th Century.



Figure 3 – The Gore's Kirning Stane (author's photograph)

Jakobsen (1936: 138) records another two *gýgr* place-names, de stakk o' Gørasten on Fetlar and a stone called de Gør at Mossbank. However, this is not the complete corpus. There are at least two *gýgr* place-names that Jakobsen missed, Geubery from *gýgjar* berg on North Ness, Papa Stour and da Goorl Knowe at Voe.

The *gýgr* was also known in Orkney. Orkney shares a similar cultural history to Shetland. It is also an archipelago that was culturally Norse, which was mortgaged to Scotland in 1468 and which subsequently underwent Scotticisation. Lamb, with reference to a story about a 'sea-cow' which went back to the sea after living on land, records the following saying from North Ronaldsay: "Come oot green Gorey, Wi' a' thee skory and follow me tae the sea" (2004: 87). There are at least two place-names in Orkney which refer to the *gýgr*, Gorey's Saddle on the Calf of Eday and Gorie's Bight, Marwick Head, Birsay.

Jennings: The Giantess as metaphor for Shetland's Cultural History

Despite centuries of Scotticisation, it is significant that, as late as 1914, dressing up as a *gýgr* was part of an Orcadian festival. On Papa Westray there was a festival called *Gyro Night* that was held early in February (Marwick 1975: 107). On this evening the smaller boys of the island made torches and headed out into the night to entice the *gyros*, who were older boys with masks, dressed as women. The *gyros* then chased the younger boys, trying to hit them with tangle or a piece of rope.

In Papa Westray, the word *gýgr* seems to have replaced the name of a similar being called the *grýla*, a particularly unpleasant, many-tailed ogress who was used widely across the Norse settlements in the North Atlantic to terrify children. Terry Gunnell (2001) has carried out extensive research into these figures and their part in folk drama. He shows how alive the *grýla* is in the folk traditions of both Iceland and the Faroe Islands. In Iceland, she is a very important figure in Christmas tradition, where she is ready to bundle badly behaved children into her sack. In the Faroe Islands, the *grýla* is associated with a popular dressing-up tradition much like Halloween, when guisers *ganga grýla* on the first Tuesday in Lent, known as *grýlukvöld*. The guisers used to dress up as the *grýla* in animal skins, straw or seaweed (now plastic masks are more common) and demanded offerings from the houses they visited. In Shetland, this same Norse tradition survived up until the late 19th Century. At Halloween and Old New Year young men went a-guising as *Grøliks*. They wore tall straw hats with white petticoats and shirts, their faces were veiled and they carried a *buggie*, a bag formed from the whole skin of a sheep to gather their offerings. According to Jakobsen (1928-32: 274-5), in Unst when men went guising, it was called "to gang in grøleks", almost exactly the same phrase as that use by the Faroese.

In the Shetland Islands of Yell, Fetlar and in some areas of the Shetland mainland, these *Grøliks* were called *Skeklers*. This seems to have been a similar sort of being. In the Faroe Islands, a *Jólaskakil* was the name given to a child who had behaved badly and therefore had been spanked just before Christmas. There are clearly connotations here with the Icelandic *grýla*. One gets the impression that if the *grýla* was not placated with offerings, the children were likely to be dinner. The monstrous *grýla* herself, no doubt to the great relief of the local children, has finally passed from living tradition in Shetland. Jakobsen recorded a Foula warning to children: "bide in or da øli grøli will tak de" (1928-32: 2, 74-5). Laurence Williamson of Mid Yell around 1900 mentioned the existence of folklore beings called *grulies*, which he describes as an undefined form of horror (Johnson, 1971: 116), while on Fair Isle, children were warned that the *Grullyan* would come down the chimney and take them away if they had been naughty (Lamb, 2004: 68) According to an informant of mine in 2009, she was even used as a threat in Lerwick in the 1950s, when children were warned not to go into the coal-cellar as it was the haunt of Minnie Groolie! The name *grýla* probably means 'the growler'. Just like the *gør* the *grøla* was commemorated in place-names. On Burra Island, just beside Hamnavoe, is a slope called da Grøla. The name was recorded by Jakobsen (1936: 138) and is remembered by the locals. However, it is not printed on any map. The name was probably originally attached to an unusual stone, the Giant's Stone, which, although it now lies broken, is still oddly impressive with its foot-shaped depression.

Despite being the centre of Gaelic culture in present-day Scotland, the Hebrides were also settled by the Norse in the 9th Century. In the Outer Hebrides most of the place-names are of Norse origin. Therefore, it is not surprising that they are also home to monstrous females of a Norse type. It is clear that Norse ideas have been influential on the way that the Cailleach Bheurr, originally an ancient Gaelic goddess figure, was perceived in the Hebrides and more generally in the Scottish Gaelic world (O Cruaíoch 2003: 83). Here, she seems to have a somewhat more monstrous image than her

Jennings: The Giantess as metaphor for Shetland's Cultural History

namesake in Ireland. She is imagined as a monstrous hag, very similar to the traditions about the Norwegian *gygr*, being a spirit of the mountains and a personification of wild nature and of geo-tectonic forces. She is also associated with the winter month of *am Faoilteach* 'the Wolf Time' (modern Gaelic for January). Clearly there are connotations here that recall the Old Norse figure of Skaði. In a number of tales, the Cailleach is credited with creating the Hebridean islands when the rocks she was carrying from *Lochlann* (Norway - highlighting a Norse link), fell from her apron and, just as Fenja and Menja are associated with a whirlpool, she is associated with the Corryvreckan north of the Island of Jura, where she supposedly washes her plaid.

A giantess figure ultimately owing her origin to the Norse *gygr* was also known in Lowland Scotland, whence she returned in slightly altered form to Shetland. In the Lowlands she was known as the *gyre-carlin*, a hag, or supernatural witch-figure terrifying to the peasantry, yet not without humorous potential for the sophisticated, learned *makar* or poet. Norse influence on the Scots language is not to be underestimated: it has many hundreds of words of Scandinavian origin, and one of these is *gyre-carlin*, a combination of two Norse words *gygr* and *kerling* 'old woman'. It is presumably not coincidence that *cailleach* also means 'old woman' in Gaelic. The compound *gyre-carlin* may have been created under Gaelic influence. At one time the *gyre-carlin* seems to have been a figure of great importance in Scottish folk tradition but by the early 19th Century, when the antiquarians were starting to take an interest in folklore, she was passing out of memory. One of her aspects, like the Shetland ogress *Minnie Groolie*, was as a bugbear to terrify the children.

Sir Walter Scott refers to the *gyre-carlin* in *The Antiquary* (1816) where he writes about "the worricows and gyre-carlins that haunted about the wa's at e'en" (1816/1995: 166) (*worricows* are terrifying goblins) and again in his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Borders*, where he states that, "the Fairy Queen is identified in popular tradition with the Gyre-Carlina, Gay Carlina, or mother witch of the Scottish peasantry... she is sometimes termed Nicneven" (1802: ii 198). *Nicneven* has a most interesting origin. It is a Gaelic name. Originally it might have been either *Nic Naoimhin* 'daughter of the little saint' or more likely *Nic Neamhain* 'daughter of Neamhain (a Gaelic war goddess)' (Henderson and Cowan, 2001: 15), whose name probably means 'madness' or 'frenzy' (Koch, 2006: 1350). The latter etymology might have seemed implausible if were not for the fact that O Cruaiaich (2003: 54) has shown that the *Bean Sí*, the death-messenger aspect of the *Cailleach*, derived from the early Gaelic battle-goddesses, including Neamhain. One is reminded of the wolf-riding troll-wife feeding dead warriors to her wolf before the Battle of Stamford Bridge. Clearly in Scotland, where Celtic and Germanic societies have met and mixed, the giantess figures from Gaelic and Norse tradition have been understood to be similar beings.

In his *Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway Song* (1810), R. Cromek provided the most complete description of the *gyre-carlin*:

We will close our history of witchcraft with the only notice we could collect, of a celebrated personage, called the Gyre Carlina; who is reckoned the mother of glamour, and near a-kin to Satan himself. She is believed to preside over the 'Hallowmass Rades;' and mothers frequently frighten their children by threatening to give them to M'Neven, or the Gyre Carlina. She is described as wearing a long gray mantle, and carrying a wand, which, like the miraculous rod of Moses, could convert water into rocks, and sea into solid land.

Jennings: The Giantess as metaphor for Shetland's Cultural History

Lochermoss, which extends from Solway sea to Locherbrigg-hill, was once, according to tradition, an arm of the sea, and a goodly anchorage for shipping. A proud swell of the Hallowmass tide, which swept away many steeds from the Carline's assembly, so provoked her, that, baring her withered arm, she stretched over the sea her rod of power, and turned its high waves into a quagmire!

There are still carved beaks, boats, keels, and other remains of shipping, dug up in the moss at peat casting time. (1810: 292)

Cromek also makes the link between *Nic Neven* (whom he calls *M'Neven*) and the *gyre-carlin*. It may have been in Galloway that the identification was originally made, as Galloway was Gaelic-speaking into the 17th Century, when the language was replaced by Scots. She is clearly a terrifying female spirit with the power to transmogrify nature. Lochermoss might well merit archaeological investigation. There is a clear similarity here with the *Cailleach*, also described as having a *slachdan* ('wand') or a *farachan* ('hammer'). The reference to the 'Hallowmass Rade' is intriguing. This is the Scots version of the Wild Hunt or the Gaelic *Sluagh*, the folk myth common to both Celtic and Germanic areas of Europe, when the dead, fairies or ancient gods ride helter-skelter through the sky, catching up any unwary onlookers into their chaotic thunder across the *welkin*. There are striking similarities here with the German traditional figure of *Frau Holda* or *Holle*, who led the Wild Hunt in Northern Germany.

The peasantry may have had good reason to fear the *gyre-carlin* but the Scottish poets were not so easily daunted. A humorous, ribald description, in the manner of Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1523-1552) appears in an anonymous, burlesque poem in the Bannatyne manuscript written in 1568. Here the creation of Berwick Law is attributed to the *gyre-carlin*, in a manner that recalls the scatological behaviour of Gjalp: she was supposed to have farted out Berwick Law. Having relieved herself, she then makes off across the sea on the back of pig where she marries Mohammed and becomes Queen of the Jews (not a particularly 'politically correct' poem).

When the Scots settlers started to arrive in Shetland after 1469, they brought a belief in the *gyre-carlin* with them. Here she was known as the *guykerl*. This is just an alternative Scots pronunciation of *gyre-carlin* (see Scott above). A very similar form is recorded in Jamieson's *An Etymological Dictionary The Scottish Language*:

Superstitious females, in Fife, are anxious to spin off all the flax that is on their rocks, on the last night of the year; being persuaded that if they left any unspun, the Gyre-carlin, or as they also pronounce the word, the Guy-carlin, would carry it off before morning. (1808: unpaginated)

There are few traces of the *guykerl* in the place-names of Shetland. Jakobsen (1936: 138) records the presence of a *kerl* and *gæikerl* in Nesting, which are probably the two odd rocks known today as the muckle and peerie kerl in the Loch of Skellister. However, she is not nearly as common a feature in place-names as the *gýgr*. This is due to the simple fact that the vast majority of Shetland place-names were created before the Scottish influx and within a Norse speaking milieu. Despite this lack of a presence in the landscape, *guykerls* do turn up in a number of folktales. For example, Saxby (1932: 132-3) relates the tale of Sigger the giant who came to grief chasing his wife the *Guykerl* down a hill. However, the most common stories seem to have revolved around the idea that "Guy-kerls were large old women who sifted meal in knolls" (Johnson, 1971: 138). In addition, they are blind, and young boys try and take advantage of them. Alan Bruford

Jennings: The Giantess as metaphor for Shetland's Cultural History

recorded a recent version from the great Shetland traditional storyteller Tom Tulloch in 1975 (1994: 45-47). However, in Tulloch's tale the term *guykerl* has been replaced by the more prosaic 'graet big owld wife'.

This is a version of one of these tales from one of Laurence Williamson's contacts in the 19th Century:

A little boy able to drive the kine was very hungry. But his mother said there was no meal in the house. He bid her shake all the "bogis" and pocks and see if she could get any. And she did so and got as much as baked him a little "bruni." She set it on the hearth-stone against a peat to fire. He kept turning it, and at last as he set it down it rolled on its edge and rolled over the floor, and out the door, and on and on till it came to a little hole in a knoll into which it fell. The boy observed this and saw smoke coming up the hole, so he began to dig down till he came.... Here was a great big blind "gay-kerl" (or kerl-wife) sitting sifting meal. So he took off his "breeks" and jacket, and tied about the foot of them and packed them full of meal and went home to his mother with it. Then he came back again with the sack for more. But at last the "gay-kerl" began to miss her meal and she said "If I only kyent wha is stealin my meal." At last as she moved her hand through the sieve she caught him by the little finger. She said "Here's da teef it's teen my meal." After this the giant came in and said:

*Fi fum fi fem
I fin da eir
O a earth man
An be he whik
I'r bi hi did
A'll he his hid
Wi may supir brid.*

But she said, "Yah, what fins du da eir o bot a been at a kra cam an slipped in da lum ita da fire." She asked the boy, if he had caught her stealing his meal what would he have done to her. He said he would have bound her to the stoop of the handmill and fed her till she was so fat that she could neither see nor hear, and then he would have boiled and eaten her. She said, "As du wid a dun ta me, se 'ill I du ta dee." So she bound him to the stoop of the mill and fed him up till he was very fat. One day he said that he was beginning to lose his sight and hearing. So she hung up a cauldron of water over the fire, and at last asked the boy to go and listen if it were boiling. He said "Na he was deaf, [sic] she would better listen herself." She went and laid her ear to the cauldron and he came up behind her and shoved her into it. When the giant came home he laid her up in a plate for the giant to eat. And the giant ate her all up till he came to the rump-bone, and worried upon it, and died. So the boy robbed the house of meal and silver plate and all that was in it, and he and his mother had no lack after that. (Johnson, 1971: 119-120)

The presence of the Scots *gyre-carlin* is not the only interesting thing about this tale. Because although at the tale's core is a version of the Aarne and Thompson folktale type AT 327 'The Children and the Ogre' (of which the best known is Hansel and Gretel), it shares motifs with a story from the Faroe Islands. The Faroese story from Sandur on Sandoy also features a blind giant woman living in a cave, called Gívrinarhol 'Gýgr's cave' (Craigie, 1896: 77-78). She is also robbed of her gear, although in this case she loses gold rather than meal. There are differences in the tales, but it appears that the Shetland story of the *gay-kerl* is a combination of AT 327 with a Norse tale about a *gýgr* that was

Jennings: The Giantess as metaphor for Shetland's Cultural History

preserved in the Faroe Islands. The Faroese tale also has the giantess grinding gold from the mill rather than sifting meal, which takes us right back to the giantesses Fenja and Menja grinding out gold for King Fróði. In a small way, this story encapsulates the cultural history of Shetland. An original Norse tale about the *gýgr* was given a Scots patina when the name was changed to *gay-kerl*. However, by 1971 that name had also disappeared, being replaced by 'graet big owld wife'.

Shetland is as good example of an island group whose present cultural habitat comprises more than one cultural inheritance. However, unlike islands where the cultures have not entirely blended (like Cyprus for example), in Shetland Norse and Scottish strands have mixed. Even in the case of the giantess figure, who is clearly more Norse than Scottish, mixing has occurred. The study of the giantess also proves that islands, such as Shetland, can be subject to numerous introductions and re-introductions of traditions, which affect – and can be affected by – the strands of tradition that have developed locally. Whether or not Shetlanders should be proud of their perceived Norse heritage, it must be clear, from the example of the *gýgr* that, despite Bruford's claim for fairy legends, when it comes to the reflexes of the giantess figure, Shetland tradition is indeed primarily Norse. It would be a mistake to underestimate this impression. The *gýgr* and *grýla* were Norse creatures and they did not disappear from living tradition until very recently. The latter has only just stopped haunting Lerwick coal-cellars. The Scottish influence is secondary and the *gyre-carlin* herself was also a form of the *gýgr*. However, Scottish influence does exist and surely the strangest example of it was provided by an old lady in Quarff. It was reported in the early 20th Century that she knew the names of a number of local *trows* and apparently one was called Sarah Neven. Henderson and Cowan have pointed out that this would seem to be a reference to the Scottish NicNeven, the Gaelic war goddess Neamhain herself (2001: 16)

Bibliography

Aarne, A and Thompson, S (1973) *The Types of the Folktale*, Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia

Bannatyne Manuscript (1896) Glasgow: Hunterian Club

Bruford, A.J and MacDonald, D.A (eds) (1994) *Scottish Traditional Tales*, Edinburgh: Polygon

Bruford, A.J (1997) 'Trolls, Hillfolk, Finns, and Picts: The identity of the Good Neighbours in Orkney and Shetland' in Narváez, P (ed) *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays*, Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky: 116-141

Christiansen, R (1994) *Folktales of Norway*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press

Craigie, W (ed) (1896) *Scandinavian Folklore: Illustrations of the Traditional Beliefs of the Northern Peoples*, Paisley: Alexander Gardner

Cromek, R (1810) *Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway Song*, London: Cadell and Davis

De Luca, C (2007) *Mondes parallèles [édition bilingue]; trad. de l'anglais et du shetlandic (d'après la version anglaise établie par l'auteur) par Jean-Paul Blot*, Gardonne: Fédérop

Dumezil, G (1973) *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, Berkeley: University of California Press

Jennings: The Giantess as metaphor for Shetland's Cultural History

- Espeland, A (1933) *Segn og Soge fraa Hordaland*, Skien: Norsk folkekulturs forlag
- Faulkes, A (ed) (1998) *Snorri Sturluson: Edda. Skáldskaparmál*, London: Viking Society for Northern Research
- Faye, A, (1833) *Norske Folke-Sagn*, archived online at:
http://www.geocaching.com/seek/cache_details.aspx?guid=43e72589-968b-4651-adc3-dfefb2c3a5a1 – accessed February 2010
- Grydehøj, A (2010) 'Uninherited heritage: Tradition and heritage production in Shetland, Åland and Svalbard', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* v16 n1/2: 77-89
- Gunnell, T (2001) 'Grýla, Grýlur, "Grøleks" and Skeklers: Medieval Disguise Traditions in the North Atlantic?' , *Arv: Nordic Yearbook of Folklore* n57: 33-54, archived online at:
<http://jol.ismennt.is/english/gryla-terry-gunnell.htm> - accessed October 2010
- Háleygjatal* (nd) archived online at:
http://www.heimskringla.no/wiki/H%C3%A1leygjatal_%28B1%29 – accessed February 2010
- Henderson, L and Cowan, E (2001) *Scottish Fairy Belief: A History from the Fifteenth to the Nineteenth Century*, East Linton: Tuckwell Press
- Jakobsen, J (1928-32) *An Etymological Dictionary of the Norn Language in Shetland*, London and Copenhagen: David Nutt (A.G Berry) and Wilhelm Prior
- (1936) *The Place-Names of Shetland*, London and Copenhagen: Nutt
- Jamieson, J (1808) *An Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press
- Jesch, J (2006) *Norse Myth in Orkney*, online at:
www.dur.ac.uk/medieval/www/sagaconf/jesch.htm - accessed June 2009
- Johnson, L.G (1971) *Laurence Williamson of Mid Yell*, Lerwick: Shetland Times
- Jónsson, F (ed) (1912-1915) *Den Norsk-Islandske Skjaldadigting udgiven af Kommissionen for det Arnamagnæanske Legat*, København og Kristiania: Gyldenda
- (1931) *Edda Snorra Sturlusonar udgivet efter håndskrifterne*, København: Gyldendal
- Koch, J.T (2006) *Celtic Culture: a historical encyclopedia*, Santa Barbara: ABC-Clío
- Kvideland, R and Sehmsdorf, H.K (eds) (1988) *Scandinavian Folk Belief and Legend*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
- Lamb, G (2004) *Orcadiana*, Kirkwall: Bellavista
- Marwick, E (1975) *Folklore of Orkney and Shetland*, London: Batsford
- Menzies Ferguson, R (1883) *Rambling Sketches in the Far North and Orcadian Musings*, London: Simpkin, Marshall and Company

Jennings: The Giantess as metaphor for Shetland's Cultural History

Nicolson, J (1920) *Some Folk-Tales and Legends of Shetland*, Edinburgh: Thomas Allan and Sons

O Cruailaich (2003) *The Book of the Cailleach: Stories of the Wise Woman Healer*, Cork: Cork University Press

Rabelais, F (1523-1552) *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, archived online at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/1200> - accessed June 2009

Rygh, O (1886) *Norske Gaardnavne*, archived online at: http://www.dokpro.uio.no/rygh_ng/rygh_felt.html - accessed June 2009

Saxby, J.M.E (1932) *Shetland Traditional Lore*, Edinburgh: Grant and Murray

Scott, W (1802) *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Borders*, Edinburgh: Ballantyne Press

---- (1816/1995) *The Antiquary*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press

Smith, E.J (1980) 'Disappearing Landmarks: Da Guir's Kirn', *New Shetlander (The Hairst Issue)*, Lerwick: Shetland Council of Social Service

Stewart, G (1877) *Fireside Tales*, Edinburgh: The Edinburgh Publishing Company

Tulloch, L (2006) *The Foy and other Folk Tales*, Lerwick: The Shetland Times