

Northern Atlantic Islands and the Sea

Northern Atlantic Islands and the Sea:

Seascapes and Dreamscapes

Edited by

Andrew Jennings, Silke Reeploeg
and Angela Watt

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2017

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-5512-X

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-5512-9

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The Sea has brought Shetlanders into contact with other cultures and, at times, it has isolated them from developments elsewhere. For periods in its history Shetland has been stereotypically remote and inaccessible, but, on other occasions, it has been well connected and has held a central position at the junction of the North Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. For three days in April 2014, when the Islands hosted an international, multi-disciplinary Conference, organised by the University of the Highlands and Islands' Centre for Nordic Studies and entitled *The Northern Isles and the Sea*, Shetland was again at the heart of the North Atlantic sea-lanes. Scholars from Canada, the USA and Iceland, from the UK and Norway, congregated in Lerwick, Shetland's capital, to discuss the themes of North Atlantic maritime traditions, island narratives and disciplinary cross-currents from the Neolithic period through the Viking Age to the present day. A selection of the sixty-three papers given form the Chapters of this book, *Northern Atlantic Islands and the Sea: Seascapes and Dreamscapes*.

The Conference themes were chosen to reflect the reality of Shetland's cultural identity and maritime position. Shetland has a strong strand of Nordic cultural and linguistic heritage, connecting her (this seems the only appropriate pronoun) to the other Northern Atlantic Islands - the Faroes and Iceland. She is also surrounded by the ever-present dominating presence of the Atlantic Ocean. Shetland is the only truly isolated archipelago in the British Isles, being a twelve-hour ferry voyage from Aberdeen. Here, unlike one's experience on any other British island, if one stood on the shore looking to the horizon, one would not glimpse any hint of a mainland coast or distant mountains. One would only see the Ocean. Unsurprisingly, the Atlantic has been a constant in Shetland's history, influencing the Islanders' customs and forging a unique way of life dependent on its riches. In days past, Shetlanders understood and could read the surrounding seas, just as landlubbers might read the land. A good example of this deep empathy with the Ocean is discussed in Chapter Eight, *The Moder Dy: Steering by the Waves in Shetland's Seas*, by Dr Ian Napier of the North Atlantic Fisheries College, University of the

Highlands and Islands. He explores the mysterious phenomenon of the *Moder Dy* (mother swell), which eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Shetland fishermen used to find their way back to land in poor visibility. The Shetlanders' ability to read the Sea was also highlighted at the Conference by Charlie Simpson¹, Shetland's local maritime expert, in his talk about fishing meids. Meids were the traditional means by which Shetland fishermen would locate their fishing grounds or navigate safe routes avoiding hazards. They are observed transects, where two onshore landmarks are brought into line with the eye of the observer at sea.

Today the Sea, through fishing and fish-farming, still has an immense impact on Shetland's way of life and her economy. Lerwick is the second largest port for whitefish landings in the UK. According to a recent study,² 175 active commercial fishing vessels are based in the Islands; more pelagic and whitefish were landed in Shetland in 2012 than in all of England and Wales combined. In the same year, 46,220 tonnes of salmon, valued at £115 million, were farmed and £112.3 million worth of fish was landed. Aquaculture (salmon and mussels) is the largest economic sector in Shetland, responsible for £156 million of Shetland's output. Indeed 69% of all Scottish mussels are grown in Shetland. Many Shetlanders' dreams of success and economic well-being are tied intimately to the fruitful harvesting of the riches of the Sea. From the late eighteenth century until 1963, those dreams included hunting the whale. During the twentieth century, Shetlanders were heavily involved in Antarctic whaling: many thousands of men travelled the length of the Atlantic from their home Islands to the mountainous, polar island of South Georgia, working for Salvesen & Co³.

In a paper at the Conference, Dr Andrew Jennings of the Centre for Nordic Studies explored the artefacts and intangible cultural heritage which still survive today in Shetland from the great days of Arctic whaling, when Shetlanders' horizons expanded to include the Davis Straits, Baffin Island and the icy coast of Greenland. Lerwick was a vital port for the taking on of crew and provisions. It is hard to over-emphasise the importance of whaling to Shetland at this time. Shetlanders were highly sought after by the whaling captains to make up the crew. This was largely due to their boat-handling expertise and their musical abilities: whalers enjoyed being entertained with Shetland fiddle tunes. In 1825, as many as 1400 Shetlanders were aboard 70 whaling vessels. Even as late as 1874, when the Arctic fishery was long past its peak, there were still 600 to 700 men employed in this dangerous, yet exciting trade.⁴ This was a sizeable proportion of Shetland's working-age population. Shetland Museum has a number of artefacts brought back by the whalers, including

yakki-cashes, Inuit-made seal-skin tobacco pouches and model kayaks. They also have a steatite *quilliq*, which is a soapstone lamp or stove, and a *pana*, a snow knife found under the eaves of an old Shetland house. The Museum's archive includes a photograph of a ramshackle structure which once stood in Symbister on the Island of Whalsay, called the *Tuppik*, the Inuit word for a hut, bearing witness to linguistic contact between Shetlanders and Inuit⁵. Perhaps a Whalsay whaler was dreaming of good times remembered in the Arctic snows.

It was not only whaling captains who appreciated the seamanship of the Shetlanders. It also did not escape the notice of the Admiralty and large numbers of men from Shetland served in Nelson's navy during the French Wars from 1800 to 1815. Many joined unwillingly, being pressed into service. In Chapter Twelve, *Resisting Impressment*, Kim Burns explores folktales about the press gang in Orkney and Shetland. *Hoidyhols* can still be pointed out today where young men hid for fear of being taken.

It is difficult to imagine an island or treacherous coast without calling to mind the image of the lighthouse. The days of the manned lighthouse may be over, however this does not diminish their appeal. In Chapter Ten, *Cast Your Light Upon the Water*, Dr Angela Watt, herself from a lighthouse keeper's family, explores their continuing allure for artists, writers and tourists. For those who desire to get as close to Shetland's seascape as possible, there are three lighthouses which can be rented as accommodation. For others, the Ocean conjures up feelings of fear: what creatures swim unseen beneath the surface? In Chapter Thirteen, *Old Norse Dreamscapes and Seascapes of War*, Victoria Ralph discusses how, in her reimagining of the Viking Age Swedish Queen Sigríðr in stórráða, Selma Lagerlöf identifies the Ocean with Hell.

Whether Heaven or Hell, from the time of its first settlement in the Neolithic, until Norse colonies were established in the Faroe Islands and Iceland during the ninth century, Shetland was the outermost edge of the inhabited world, being, from a Mediterranean perspective, the last inhabited land in north-west Europe. In 84 AD, when the Roman fleet, which was circumnavigating Britain for its Governor Agricola, rounded Orkney, Shetland was identified as legendary Thule, described by the Greek explorer Pytheas centuries earlier. However, despite its apparent peripherality, Shetland has a rich archaeological heritage. In Chapter Nine, *Crossing to the Other Side: Representing the Journey of Life in Neolithic Shetland*, Dr Simon Clarke takes a phenomenographic approach to the understanding of the Neolithic built landscape around Mavis Grind, the narrowest point on the Shetland mainland. The extraordinary archaeological

heritage of Shetland's nearest neighbour Orkney is well known, and its impact on the visitor is discussed in Chapter Fourteen, *Islands of Significance: Authenticity and Visitor Experience at the Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site*, by Esther Renwick. Orkney also formed the topic of Dr James Barrett's keynote speech about his excavation of the high status Norse settlement at Deerness. This has rewritten our understanding of the Norse period in the Northern Isles⁶. The Norse were fortifying and living on stack-sites in both Orkney and Shetland, which viewsheds indicate commanded the surrounding seas.

Unsurprisingly, given the strong cultural and historical connections between North Atlantic insular communities, an academic conference in Shetland held particular appeal for scholars from Iceland. Both Shetland and Iceland were settled by the Norse in the latter part of the ninth century. They were particularly closely connected between 1262 and 1469, when both formed part of *Norgesveldet*, the dominion of the Norwegian kings⁷. Until the demise of Shetland Norn in the eighteenth century, Shetland and Iceland spoke related languages and, just like Iceland, studies of Shetland's folklore show a strong Norse imprint. In Chapter Eleven *In about da night wi da Erasmusons*, Jenny Murray reveals the current state of survival of traditional folklore within one Shetland family.

The Icelanders made a significant contribution to the Conference and consequently to this book. Terry Gunnell, Professor of Folkloristics at the University of Iceland, who has carried out important research into Shetland's folklore heritage⁸, delivered a keynote speech entitled *On the Border: The Liminality of the Seashore in Icelandic Folk Legends of the Past*. This forms a major Chapter in this volume. In Chapter Two, Professor Gunnell discusses the strange events and creatures which have been experienced on the Icelandic coast, that chaotic liminal zone where the wild and the civilised, the human and the animal, come into intimate contact and are melded together, where beings such as the *Hairy Man of Skarði*, who was discovered on the Meðalland sands in the south of Iceland, are revealed. This blending of animal and human at the shore has a Shetlandic cognate in the story about the Sands of Breckon on the Island of Yell, where an unfortunate girl fell asleep and, while unconscious, was raped by a seal,⁹ giving birth to a half-seal, half-human baby boy nine months later. In Chapter Three, *Sanctity and the Sea*, a related Icelandic tale of human pinniped miscegenation is discussed by Ásdís Egilsdóttir, Professor of Icelandic Medieval Literature at the University of Iceland. She examines the figure of *Selkolla* "Seal-Head", an infamous she-troll, born of lust, who can appear as a beautiful woman or a female with the head of a seal.

Several Chapters focus on the way medieval Icelandic sagas dealt with the reality of Iceland's isolated, insular identity. In Chapter Four, *From "Ísland" to "Eyland"*, Torfi H. Tulinius, Professor of Medieval Icelandic Studies at the University of Iceland, discusses the importance of Icelanders' self-perception as islanders in the Middle Ages. He analyses texts from the early twelfth to the late thirteenth centuries, and illustrates when Icelanders came to identify themselves as inhabitants of an "island-country". Insularity and liminality in the Old Norse *Íslendingasögur*, the sagas of Icelanders, is investigated in Chapter Five by Anna Katharina Heiniger, while in Chapter Six Martina Ceolin explores the various roles islands play in the late *fornaldarsögur*, the legendary sagas, with particular reference to *Áns saga bogsveigis*. In Chapter Seven, *Outlaws of the Northern Seas: A Comparison in the Norse Corpus*, Marion Poilvez discusses how stories of outlawry are entwined with accounts of islands in medieval Icelandic literature, particularly in the *Íslendingasögur* and in the outlaw episodes in the two North Atlantic insular sagas, *Orkneyinga saga* and *Færeyinga saga*.

It is a truism that, in the past, life in Shetland would have been impossible without boats. Boats were needed for transport to Shetland, for ferrying within the islands and for fishing. Indeed, it would still be very difficult if one had to rely on air transport alone. The weather often disrupts flights; the wind in winter and the fog in summer. The traditional Shetland boats, the sixareen, fourern and yoal, have Norse origins, and for centuries boats were exported to treeless Shetland from Norway, particularly from the Norwegian municipality of Tysnes, south of Bergen. It was felt to be essential that boats featured in the Conference in order to celebrate Shetland's rich sailing and rowing heritage. There was a popular, public exhibition of boat-building, using the traditional Norwegian axing technique, by the Norwegian boat-builder Hallgeir Forstrønen Bjørnevik, an expert in the building of the Oselvar boat, from the Os region south of Bergen. His presentation was supported with a keynote speech by Professor Arne Emil Christensen, Professor Emeritus in Nordic Archaeology at Oslo University, who discussed the Shetland boat and its connection with Norwegian boat-building tradition. Much of the terminology associated with traditional boats in Shetland is unsurprisingly of Norse origin. Also, as is appropriate for a windy archipelago, among the many words in Shetland dialect for different kinds of wind, some appear to be of Norse origin: *laar*, a light diffused wind, *guff*, a strong puff of wind, and *gouster*, a strong, gusty wind. These surely hark back to the days of sailing.

Shetland is not alone in having a Norse influenced boat-building heritage. Traditional boats in the *Gàidhealtachd*, Gaelic-speaking Scotland, are the focus in Chapter Fifteen, *A Preliminary Exploration of the Norse Influence on Gaelic Maritime Terminology*. Here Gavin Parsons identifies Norse loan-words in Gaelic. He also detects a pre-Norse stratum of words which indicate sophisticated boat-building in the Gaelic world prior to the arrival of the Norse and their settlement in the Hebrides and along the western littoral of Scotland. The implications are that clinker-built vessels might have reached Shetland from the Gaelic world before the Vikings sailed from Norway.

For three days in April 2014, it became apparent that, even after hundreds of years of diverging historical experience, there were still strong ties connecting the North Atlantic communities. It also became apparent that there is a rich vein of academic activity focused on, and based in, this area. This is particularly true of Iceland, in a sense the grown-up sibling amongst Northern Atlantic Islands. However, the contributions from scholars based in Orkney and Shetland also indicated the strength of scholarship in these seemingly isolated archipelagos. Peripheral they might appear to the UK, but they lie at the heart of the North Atlantic, at the intersection of British and Nordic cultures. From a Shetlandic perspective, Iceland's east coast is no further away than Manchester.

Dr Andrew Jennings, Centre for Nordic Studies, UHI.

As one can see from the varied contributions to this volume, the seascapes and dreamscapes of the Northern Atlantic Islands provide a valuable field for the research of old and new relationships that exist between the coastal communities across the North Atlantic region. These small societies are said to be marked by a particular mentality, a combination of strong individualism, but also a sense of community and solidarity.¹⁰ Mercantile links are essential to societies living in areas with limited resources or opportunities for agriculture. Both “obvious and hidden regions”¹¹ have been the result of these economic, social and political/administrative regional relationships, with complex cultural encounters occurring. These are used as the basis and context for the formation of identities, both on a sub- and transnational level¹².

Coastal culture is shaped by four important factors: the Sea; the effects of the climate (weather, temperature and wind, but also sky- and sea-states, such as visibility, ebb and flow); topography (the materials and formations of the earth's surface, both above and beneath the water); and

the production of organic materials (resources basic to human life).¹³ These diverse influences vary according to time and place, which means one can never really speak about a defined coastal culture “but more like a series of adaptations to variable conditions, an elastic or flexible lifestyle that is intimately connected to the coastal environment”.¹⁴ Shared traditions and narratives connect coastal communities in their diverse, but similarly sea-focused cultural landscapes that exist across the oceans of the world. Narratives, in turn, inform the way in which regional cultural identities are formed and maintained.¹⁵ They also form the basis of ways in which coastal communities maintain communal memories¹⁶, constructed through cultural traditions, which maintain “sub-national regions crossing international boundaries”.¹⁷ Island cultures, such as the British Isles, are also essentially coastal cultures, and need to be approached as a network of diverse identities, where both space and place are open to re-negotiation.¹⁸

Although islands have a very easily defined border, between sea and land, the cultural identities of the islanders neither define themselves in isolation or only in relation to their nearest “national centre”. In view of an intercultural analysis of cultural practices and historical narratives, the sea that surrounds the British Isles is therefore not a barrier that somehow keeps “Britishness” contained.¹⁹

Transnational links have clearly created a network of intercultural regional identities that connect the coastal communities across the North Atlantic. This opens up important new areas for the investigation of cultural transfer and the links between coastal communities through the construction and transmission of tangible and intangible coastal culture. A shared, diverse, but similarly sea-focused, cultural landscape exists across the coastal communities of the North, and informs the way in which regional cultural identities are formed and maintained.²⁰

Dr Silke Reeploeg, University of the Highlands and Islands.

It is to be hoped that this book will appeal to the interested public and to scholars of a wide range of disciplines, such as those of Island Studies, Cultural Studies, Old Norse Literature, Icelandic Studies, Maritime Heritage, Oceanography, Linguistics, Folklore, British Studies, Ethnology and Archaeology. Similarly, it should attract scholars from a wide geographical area, from the UK, Scandinavia, Europe and Canada, indeed anywhere where there is an interest in the study of islands or the North Atlantic.

The editors have dedicated this book to Hallgeir Forstrønen Bjørnevik, boatbuilder and friend, who passed away in 2016.

Notes

1. Charlie Simpson has produced the definitive work on Shetland meids. See Charles H. Simpson, *Water in Burgidale: Shetland Fisheries in a Pre-Electronic Age* (Lerwick: Shetland Amenity Trust, 2010).
2. "Shetland seafood facts" http://www.somuchtosea.co.uk/our_industry.
3. Gibbie Fraser, *Shetland's Whalers Remember* (Lerwick: Gilbert A Fraser, 2001).
4. Richard J. Smith, "Shetland and the Greenland Whaling Industry 1780-1872," *Northern Scotland* 12 (First Series), Issue 1 (1992), 67-87.
5. See <http://photos.shetland-museum.org.uk/> Photo Number R01626.
6. James H. Barrett, and Adam Slater, "New Excavations at the Brough of Deerness: Power and Religion in Viking Age Scotland," *Journal of the North Atlantic* (2009), 81-94.
7. Steinar Imsen ed., *The Norwegian Domination and the Norse World c.1100 – c.1400: 'Norgesveldet'*, Occasional Papers No.1, (Trondheim; Fagbokforlaget 2010).
8. Terry Gunnell, "Skotrarar, Skudlers, Colloughs and Strawboys: Wedding Guising Traditions in Norway, Shetland and Ireland, Past and Present," in *Atlantic Currents: Essays on Lore, Literature and Language: Essays in Honour of Séamas Ó Catháin on Occasion of His 70th Birthday, 31.12.2012*, eds. Bo Almqvist, et al. (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2012), 241-268.
9. For a version of this tale visit the School of Scottish Studies online resource <http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/32840/1>.
10. Poul Holm, "Kystkultur som forskningsemne," in *Kystsamfunnets Materielle Kultur* (Oslo: Norges Forskningsråd, 1995).
11. Harald Winge, "Regions and regional history in Norway," in *Regional Integration in Early Modern Scandinavia*, eds. Finn-Einar Eliassen, Jørgen Mikkelsen, and Bjørn Poulsen (Odense: Odense University Press, 2001).
12. Silke Reeploeg, "The Uttermost Part of the Earth: Islands on the Edge ... and in the Centre of the North Atlantic," in *Islands and Britishness: A Global Perspective*, ed. Jody Matthews, and Daniel Travers (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012).
13. Asbjørn Klepp, "Hva er kystkultur?" in *Kystkultur, Særpreg og mangfald*, eds. Arnljot Løseth, and Per Sæther (Volda: Høgskulen i Volda, 1992).
14. Klepp, "Hva er kystkultur", 11.
15. Østein Rian, "Regionens rolle i historien," *Heimen*, 34 (1997).
16. Peter Aronsson, "National cultural heritage - Nordic cultural memory: negotiating politics, identity and knowledge," in *Transnationale Erinnerungsorte: Nord- und südeuropäische Perspektive* (Berlin: BWV Verlag, 2009).
17. Winge, "Regions and regional history in Norway".
18. Silke Reeploeg, "Northern Maps: Re-negotiating space and place in coastal Scotland and Norway after 1707," *Northern Scotland*, 6 (2015), 24-48.

19. Reeploeg, "Northern Maps".

20. Rian, "Regionens rolle i historien".

CHAPTER TWO

ON THE BORDER:
THE LIMINALITY OF THE SEASHORE
IN ICELANDIC FOLK LEGENDS OF THE PAST

TERRY GUNNELL

For the people of the Northern Atlantic Islands in the past, like people everywhere else, the landscape around them served, among other things, as a kind of book. Like the streets that we grew up on, it preserved both memories and stories that people had heard from those that they encountered day-to-day, and all of these memories and stories can be viewed, in a sense, as the clothes worn by the landscape in question.¹ Usually taking the form of legends about local people and places which were meant to be believed by those who heard them,² these stories gave the landscape historical depth, character, and personality. They also gave it another unseen dimension, populating it with shadows, ghosts and various kinds of supernatural beings. In yet another sense, it might be said that, while the new visitor will tend to see only the immediate geological surface of the environment, these stories also served as a kind of “road map” for the local individual and the community. As I have noted elsewhere, they not only indicated relationships and routes taken between areas, they also:

served as a map of behaviour, underlining moral and social values and offering examples to follow or avoid. Simultaneously, they reminded people of the temporal and physical borders of their existence, questions of life and death, periods of liminality, insiders and outsiders, and continuously, the physical and spiritual division between the cultural and the wild, what Levi-Strauss might refer to as the “cooked” and the “raw”. If the map was followed, you had a good chance of living in safety. If you broke it, you stood an equally good chance of ending up in a folk legend yourself if not on a list of mortality statistics.³

In terms of borders, these legends also made it quite clear where safe “home” spaces ended and where the “outside” began.

One area that could clearly never be referred to as a “home” space for those living on islands was the shoreline, which was perhaps the most obvious border of all. This is where the trustworthy solid earth came to an end, and where the wholly untrustworthy water began. The fact that for islanders, as well as for fjord-dwellers, it often served as the main highway between places, made it no less untrustworthy. Liminality, a concept introduced by the anthropologists Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, means a sense of being “betwixt and between”,⁴ and in many senses the shoreline was the ultimate liminal space: between here and there; between above and below; between clarity and opaqueness; between life and death. It was not even constant, changing in shape and size by the hour as the tides came in and went out, and the winds rose and fell. At night, when the water became black and even more opaque, and the echoing waves would fill the silence by crashing or thundering against the rocks or sucking at the sands, it was perhaps the most mysterious and threatening of all places for those living on the coasts. There was little question about the ultimate power of the sea, as the victims of the tsunamis and the refugees attempting to cross the Mediterranean in 2015 and 2016 know to their cost. While the sea could provide a livelihood, it could also provide certain death, sometimes to entire communities, when a whole fleet of boats went down in a storm, as happened in the Gloup Fishing Disaster off Yell, Shetland, in 1881.

There can hardly have been a single North Atlantic fisherman or his wife who did not always feel a sense of foreboding when they listened to the sounds of the sea at night, wondering what the next day might bring. Indeed, one of the most widespread legends throughout the Nordic countries is that of people hearing a strange voice calling from a river or some other form of water: “The Time Has Come, But Not the Man” (ML 4050: River Claiming Its Due).⁵ In short, the sea, like the well that the *Nornir*⁶ of Old Norse mythology sat beside, has always contained a strong sense of both time and fate.

Considering what has been stated above, it is perhaps not surprising that the seashore with its sands, rocks, pools and shingle should also have resounded with countless memories and folk legends, underlining the general uncertainty and fears that people felt about this particular shifting space on the edge: this was a space where you met the “other”, not only in the form of death, but also in the shape of strange beings that came from the “outside”, beings which, like the space itself, were a blend of chaos and cosmos, the wild and the civilised, the human and the animal; beings

that questioned the moral lines between good and evil. Such experiences could change, if not totally eradicate, the day-to-day “road map” that people knew and trusted. In the examples which follow, many of the accounts telling of these strange encounters that took place on the shoreline seem to be based on personal experiences. Others are what we call migratory legends⁷ or contain migratory motifs, meaning that they were shared and passed on within many of the North Atlantic communities, and especially those situated beside the sea. This underlines that they reflect not only common fears and preoccupations, but also a particular shared culture, cultural vocabulary, part of a shared cultural memory⁸ which, in the North Atlantic, also tended to mean an intermingling of the Nordic and the Gaelic, if not also the Sámi.

In this Chapter, the focus will be placed first and foremost on Icelandic legends of the past and present which deal with the shoreline, and most commonly the shoreline at night, since, as has been noted above, that is when it is both most enchanting and most threatening, somewhat like the Sirens of Homer’s *Odyssey*. Several examples of legends will be given, along with some discussion about what these accounts reveal about Icelandic attitudes to the space in question. Since many of these accounts have parallels in other countries in the North Atlantic area, albeit with localised variations, it is likely that the discussion will also have relevance for people who lived in these areas too.

The first example is one of my personal favourites. It tells of the so-called “Hairy Man of Skarði”, who was found on the dark Meðalland sands in the south of Iceland. As will be seen from the following, this particular account provides an excellent introduction to many of the themes that will be raised later in the Chapter:

It happened a long time ago that on one of the Meðalland beaches, the body of a man was found washed up on shore, a man of very strange appearance. He was wearing no clothes, but was covered with hair, and had claws on his fingers and toes. Some people say that two such men were washed up, both exactly the same. Even though everyone was a little frightened of these bodies, they were moved to a farm, and coffins made for them, as usually happens when such an event takes place [...]. [One account says that:] The body was moved to Skarði for burial. However, when the funeral was about to take place, and people were about to sing the funeral hymns, they found themselves in difficulties, because every letter in their hymnals had turned back to front, and twisted into forms of blasphemy and curses. People thought this very strange, as might be expected, and they were lost about what to do. Little singing was done. Things went no better when the priest tried to say some words over the body. Even the blessing turned into curses as it left his lips, so he had to

stop. Nonetheless, in spite of these wonders, the body still came to lie in consecrated soil, and had earth thrown on it by the priest as was planned. Many guesses were made about who this washed-up man might have been: that he might have been one of the Hound-Turks, an evil spirit incarnate, or an ape. Whatever it was, it was not long after this funeral that people started noting ghostly activities taking place in the vicinity of the Skarði church. These got so bad that it was considered impossible to travel around there after dark. People saw the “hairy man” – as the recently buried body was called – pounding the church with planks from his coffin. Various other strange things also happened there [...]. Since the time of the funeral, people say it has been very easy to get lost in this area....⁹

One notes how the legend talks of people later “losing their way” on the Meðalland sands following the arrival of the alien being. Indeed, the account also shows accepted rules of Christian behaviour being drawn into question as easily as waves erase words written on sand. As the legend suggests, and as will be stressed later in this Chapter, people throughout the North Atlantic area were duty-bound to pick up any drowned bodies they found and ensure they received Christian burial (see reference to Icelandic moral rules given later in the Chapter), but such behaviour clearly helped little in this case. Alongside this, the legend also raises many questions about the previously accepted lines drawn between man and animal, such as those posed by Charles Darwin in the late nineteenth century in his *On the Origin of Species*. It also suggests a blurring of the lines between good and evil, the living and the dead: Christian words become swear words, and the dead rise from the earth in which they are buried. It is also worth noting that the story provides its listeners with no motive for the behaviour of the deceased “hairy man” except that he was dissatisfied with being where he was, and even more so when people attempted to bury him.

As the legend of the “hairy man” suggests, the shoreline was a place where you could come face to face with the monstrous and the undefinable. In Iceland, the most common representatives of such problematic indefinability that could confront the unwary beachcomber were the so-called *fjörulalli*, endearingly translated as “beach creep”, and other threatening monstrous half-humans which lurked along the twilight shoreline, that went by the name of *hafmenn* “sea-men” or *haftröll* “sea-trolls”.¹⁰ According to the *Sagnagrunnur* database of Icelandic folk legends in print, containing over eleven thousand legends,¹¹ around twenty-five examples exist of printed Icelandic legends dealing with each type of being, most of which tend to take the form of what we call “memorats”, that is personal-experience narratives usually told in the first person, in which people try to explain strange experiences they have had

using the limited cultural vocabulary available to them.¹² Most *fjörulalli* legends come from the western fjords of Iceland,¹³ underlining that we are dealing with beings that belonged to *local* cultural vocabulary and beliefs, and perhaps even a localised phenomenon related to a particular kind of environment.

So what was a *fjörulalli*? According to one of the sources of Jón Árnason's six-volume Icelandic folklore collection containing records from the mid-nineteenth century:

Fjörulalli, they say, come up and out of the sea on islands, and around the coast in some places, usually around lambing time, and trouble the ewes, causing all sorts of mutations in the newly borne lambs. There is one island in particular [on Breiðafjörður] near Geitey, called Mikilnefna, where ewes must never be kept at lambing time. Last year there were various ewes there, and they all had disformed lambs, for example with mouths in their throats, six to eight feet, a long tail like that of a dog, and so on; and this is how it is in many places in Eyrarsveit; you just have to make sure the sheep are up on the mainland at that time. [...] Some people say they've seen these monsters, but descriptions vary a lot.¹⁴

The collector, probably a priest, although this is not stated, adds that he does not wish to waste any further ink on this absurd *hégiljur* "invented superstition".

Most accounts of *fjörulalli* deal with people, living near the sea or walking along the shore at night, who came across a strange being which they either tried to chase or were chased by, depending on their level of courage. The following two legends, both from the western fjords of Iceland, are comparatively typical. The first tells of a man called Sigurgarður Sturluson, a worker on the Island of Hergilsey, who was outside fetching water in the sheep shed when he caught sight of a creature that he thought must be a bull that had escaped from the next farm. He started chasing it, but had to give up when it dived into the sea and disappeared. Sigurgarður described the being as having been four-footed, with short legs, short hair, a flatish head, and wide nostrils. It was apparently the size of a year-old calf. Most people who heard the story were apparently sure it had to be a *fjörulalli*.¹⁵

The second legend tells of a man called Bjarni, a worker in Sveinseyri, who was walking home one evening when he caught sight of a dark animal on the beach, which he was sure had to be a sheep. Bjarni could not see the creature well at first, owing to the darkness. When he got closer, however, he realised that it had to be something else: the animal was rough-haired and reached all the way up to his chest. It had a short neck,

and four short, powerful feet. Bjarni's impression was that it wanted to push him out into the sea and he found himself struggling with it for some time. He tried to hit it, but it seemed to be impervious to any violence. It did nothing in reply, neither biting nor striking him in any way. In the end, Bjarni escaped from the creature, but commented that his fingertips remained numb for some time after the fight. Once again, people believed that he must have encountered a *fjörulalli*.¹⁶

The limited distribution of these legends indicates that both the beliefs and the cultural vocabulary regarding the nature of the strange creatures encountered on Icelandic shorelines seem to have varied by area in Iceland, underlining how localised folklore has always been, even within such a comparatively small population: outside the western fjords, people seem to have placed such creatures more commonly under the general heading of *skrimsl* and sometimes *ófreskjur* "monsters". Descriptions continue to vary: the so-called *Flateyjarskrimsl* "monster of the Island of Flatey" in North Iceland was, for example, described as being "white as snow, and its body shone like a kind of jellyfish". The storyteller adds: "I saw no feet, and there was no tail. The eyes were huge, and there was a long trunk or snout on its head. It seemed to open its mouth or yawn, and I then got so scared I ran away."¹⁷

The *Hriseyjarskrimsl* "monster of the Island of Hrisey", on the other hand, is described as having:

squirmed its way out of the sea, stretched its neck and sniffed in all directions, and then made a great leap up onto the edge of the road. The animal seemed to have five feet, and threw itself forward on individual feet when it jumped.¹⁸

The *Pönglaskálaskrimsl* "monster of Pönglaskáli", meanwhile, "had a large body and quite long, thin legs. It was short haired",¹⁹ while the *Skrimsl á Upsaströnd* "monster of Upsaströnd" was "an enormous beast when he [the observer] got close to it, and it seemed most likely that it walked on eight feet, and was all shiny with shells on the outside,"²⁰ a description which is reminiscent of the costumes of certain nineteenth-century guisers from Shetland, described by Walter Scott in *The Pirate*, the so-called *Shoupeltins*,²¹ and the figure of the *Skeljakarl* "Shell-man", who appears and entertains guests in the fourteenth-century Icelandic saga, *Bragða-Mágus saga*.²²

Another monster that was encountered even further back in time at Eyraðakki in the south of Iceland in November 1594 was described in Jón Espólin's *Árbækur* "Annals" as having been particularly odd. This being was said to have been:

a four-footed monster, tall and straight, seal-haired, and appeared to have a head like that of a dog or hare, with big ears like the inner-soles of shoes; they lay across its back. The body was like that of a pony, although a little smoother. A white band went round its chest, which looked either grey or turf-red in colour when seen from the back. It had a long tail, with a big tuft on the end, like a lion's tail; it moved quickly like a dog; it was seen at night.²³

Considering the surroundings, one wonders whether such legends might have sprung from rare encounters with polar bears or walrus, if not escaped animals from other farms, although few if any of the descriptions seem to fit any of these animals entirely.²⁴ One would expect that most people would have recognised a sheep, a horse or a cow if they had met one in the dark. The overall result of all of these accounts was that, for listeners, they added more than a little degree of wariness with regard to a potential walk along a beach on a pitch-black winter's evening. In short, they added shape, character and imminent threat to an environment that was already very much alive, even though it was out of sight.

Legend distribution patterns (see *Sagnagrunnur* noted previously) suggest that, for some reason, the alien beasts that people encountered on the shorelines of the north-east and eastern fjords of Iceland tended to be less like animals and more like the dreaded Tibetan *yeti*: large, covered in seaweed and shells, but, in most cases in these parts, standing on no more than two feet. The beings in question were thus commonly referred to as *martröll* "sea-trolls" or *hafmenn* "sea-men". Once again, the narratives tend to take the form of memorats rather than migratory legends. The following account is comparatively typical of *martröll* legends, and shows how similar these accounts are in nature to the narratives of the *fjörulalli* in the west, in spite of the difference in appearance of the beings:

Sigtryggur left Húsavík late in the evening, as usual. As usual, he went along the beach, because he felt it easier to walk there. When he reached the stream from the Haukamýrardalur valley, a little outside Kaldbak, he saw a creature coming out of the sea and start heading towards him. To his mind, it looked human, but it was somewhat bigger than a man. He was not expecting any people to be around here, and, even though it was dark, sensed that he was not dealing with any human being. He turned up towards the turf, where there was a pile of wood, and there he grabbed hold of a sturdy piece of roofing, which he felt would serve well as a weapon. As things went, by the time Sigtryggur had taken up the block of wood, the monster had reached him, and immediately went on the attack. A hard fight now took place. Sigtryggur hit out with the wood as hard as he could, but the beast kept on attacking. Sigtryggur had the impression that this monster had arms; it was using them to hit back, giving him a number of hard

blows. The attack did not seem to be weakening and the creature did not back off however hard he hit it. Its skin seemed to be slippery like that of a jellyfish. He was starting to get worried because he was tiring fast, and had received many heavy blows. Finally, though, he managed to land a blow on one of the arms of the creature, at which point it fell back. It ran off, heading for the sea. He was sure he must have broken the arm of the beast because he saw it flopping loosely when the creature turned away. That was the only reason it had left off its attack. Sigtryggur now climbed up onto the bank as fast as he could, and headed for home. He was exhausted, as has already been described.²⁵

The account ends by saying that the next day local people who went to investigate found both the block of wood and signs of blood at the site in question. One hopes that Sigtryggur had not encountered a survivor of a shipwreck...

Hafmaður legends are slightly different from the *haftröll* accounts in that, while the beings have a similar appearance and they are encountered in similar spaces, in this case not only on beaches but also out at sea, they seem to be more directly closely connected to other forms of legend about powerful beings who rule or control nature, which one should avoid offending at all costs, and certainly not attack with logs. The supernatural rulers in question are figures like the Swedish *skogsrå* “forest ruler”,²⁶ or the Icelandic *Flyðrumóðir* “Mother of halibut”,²⁷ *Laxamóðir* “Mother of salmon”,²⁸ *Skötuamóðir* “Mother of skate”,²⁹ and *Selamóðir* “Mother of seals”,³⁰ all of which, to my mind, have very ancient roots. Indeed, most figures like these tend to be found in hunting cultures like that of the Sámi. According to Sigfús Sigfússon’s collection of folk legends, which focuses on the east fjords, a meeting with a *hafmaður* on the beach was seen first and foremost as an omen: it could be a sign that a storm was on the way.³¹ According to local beliefs, showing such figures violence could result in shipwrecks.³²

Beliefs that figures such as the *hafmenn* inhabit a parallel world below the sea, in which there are houses, fields and even domestic animals, seem to be very old in the Nordic countries. The idea might perhaps be reflected in a runic inscription found on the early eighth-century Eggja Stone from western Norway, which, according to Ottar Grønvik, makes reference to “man-fish”.³³ One of the oldest Nordic legends of such sea-people is found in the Icelandic *Landnámabók* “The Book of Settlements”, from the twelfth century, which tells of a so-called *marmennill* “merman”, who is accidentally fished out of the sea and has the power of prophesying who will live, who will die, and where people will eventually settle.³⁴ The same story, now about a *marbendill*, was clearly still being told in a slightly

different form in nineteenth-century Iceland, by which point it seems to have become attached to an international storyline also known in Ireland, where it is called the “Three Laughs of the Leprechaun”.³⁵

The most famous of the three *marbendill* legends contained in Jón Árnason’s collection tells of how one day a farmer pulled up into his boat something that looked like a human. The being said that he was a *marbendill*. The farmer asked him what he had been doing, and he answered that he had been working on his mother’s chimney, but avoided any further discussion. The story then describes what happened when they came to land:

... his dog came to meet him, and jumped up at him. The farmer reacted badly, and hit the dog. Then the *marbendill* laughed for the first time. The farmer then continued into the home field, where he tripped over a tussock, which he cursed. Then the *marbendill* laughed a second time. The farmer went on to the farm. His wife then came out to meet him, greeting him warmly, and the farmer received this warmth well. Then the *marbendill* laughed a third time. Then the farmer said to the *marbendill*: “You’ve now laughed three times, and I’m curious to know the reason for this laughter.” “There is no way that I will tell you,” said the *marbendill*, “unless you take me back to the same place where you fished me up.” The farmer promised him he would do that. The *marbendill* said: “I laughed first when you hit your dog when it came and greeted you with sincerity. I then laughed a second time when you tripped over a tussock and cursed it, because in that tussock is a treasure trove full of gold. And I then laughed a third time when you warmly received the flattery of your wife, because she is false and unfaithful. Now you have to keep all your promises to me, and take me back to the place where you fished me up.” The farmer said: “Two of the things that you have told me cannot be tested immediately, that is the loyalty of the dog, and the honesty of my wife. But I will try out whether you are telling the truth about there being treasure in the tussock, and if it is so, there is more likelihood that both of the other things are correct, and I will keep my promise.” Then the farmer went off and dug up the tussock and found a great deal of treasure, just as the *marbendill* had said. After that, he sent his ship back out to sea, and took the *marbendill* back to the same place where he had been fished up.³⁶

In thanks for returning him, the *marbendill* sent the farmer seven *sækýr* “sea cows”, although he only managed to catch one of them. The cow in question was nonetheless extremely fertile, and helped make the farmer so very rich that he named his farm Kvíguvógur “Cow Bay”.³⁷

Sækýr of the kind mentioned in the legend of the *marbendill* were yet another strange species that was directly associated with both the Icelandic seashore and the idea that a parallel world existed out of sight below the

sea. *Sækýr* legends show that the two worlds can interrelate, and underline that the sea not only brought danger but also a livelihood to those who lived beside it. Legends of *sækýr* and the benefits they could offer to farmers go back at least to the sixteenth century, and have a comparatively wide distribution in Iceland, just as they do in several other countries around the North Sea.³⁸ At least twenty-four such accounts exist in Icelandic printed collections of folktales. Most are comparatively short and take a similar form. The following account from north-east Iceland, also contained in Jón Árnason's collection, is comparatively typical:

In Breiðuvík in Borgarfjörður in Múlasýsla [in East Iceland], there lived a man called Bjarni who was nicknamed "Bjarni the Strong". One summer it so happened that Bjarni was out in the fields; the weather was rather thick and foggy. He heard the sound of cattle on the move down by the sea below the farm. He took a look through the fog and saw a flock of bulls going by, no fewer than eighteen of them, and a little boy running after them, and after him a calf. Bjarni charged off and stood in the way of the bulls because he knew they were sea bulls. When the boy saw him, he started encouraging the bulls to run. Bjarni saw that an ox was leading and that it had rings on its horns which rattled as it ran. Bjarni and the boy then started competing until they reached the shoreline. At that point Bjarni was in between the calf and the bulls. The boy headed out into the sea with the herd of bulls, but Bjarni turned to face the calf, and hit it so hard on the nose that the bladder which is said to be between the nostrils of sea bulls burst, meaning it could not get back into the sea. Bjarni then led it home to his place. It was a cow, which grew to be a twenty-mark animal, and from her stemmed the best breed of cattle to be seen in Breiðuvík for much of the century.³⁹

The *sækýr* legends are essentially a seaside variant of other equally common legends known all over the Nordic countries, which tell of people winning over, or being rewarded with, strange cattle or horses "from the other side", which apparently belong to the Icelandic *huldufólk* "hidden people" or *álfar* "elves",⁴⁰ or the Norwegian *huldre*, the equivalent of the Shetland trows, animals which, like the worlds these beings inhabited, were seen as being of much better quality than those known in the daily life of humans.⁴¹ The most unique feature of the Icelandic *sækýr* legends is the recurring belief that the Icelandic sea-cattle were equipped with bladders that apparently grew in front of their noses, which allowed them to live below the water. Once these bladders were burst, the animals apparently lost the ability to return home. Equally interesting is the fact that these legends never mention angry mer-farmers complaining about the loss of their aquatic livestock: the animals seem to be viewed as a gift

from the richer world of the “other side” to those ingenious or dextrous enough to catch them. As with the stories of “hidden” or trowie livestock, however, it is likely that the legends were primarily ætiological, and essentially a means of explaining the background of a certain successful breed of cattle or the fortune of certain farmers.

Another small group of Icelandic legends, which imply that the sea contains a rich hidden world parallel to that on land, is that which deals with the seal-people, what the Scots and Shetlanders call “selkies”.⁴² Indeed, the people of Shetland and Orkney, like those of the Faroes and Northern Norway, are well acquainted with these accounts, which are classed as international migratory legends (ML 4080: The Seal Woman).⁴³ Once again, all of these legends tend to start on the shoreline, underlining the degree to which the beach represented a liminal space in which, at certain times, the two worlds overlapped. The same liminality applies to the seal-people encountered here, which, like the “hairy man”, the “beach creeps”, the *hafmenn*, *haftröll*, *marbendlar*, *sækýr*, and the shoreline itself, are neither one thing nor the other. There is, however, a key difference about the nature of the legends of the seal-folk. Unlike the other accounts, which tend to focus on encounters with male figures on both sides (although one of the Icelandic words for monster, *ófreskja*, is grammatically female), these accounts focus on a relationship between a human man and a supernatural woman, a pattern well known from Nordic mythology and folklore.⁴⁴ These legends have an additional degree of liminality in that they tend to start on a holy day commonly associated with change or new beginnings, such as Christmas Day, New Year’s Eve or Twelfth Night, and then at the dawn of that day, at the cusp of night and morning. The most famous Icelandic account runs as follows:

Once upon a time, there was a man who lived out east in Mýrdalur who was walking along the cliffs by the sea early in the morning before anyone else was out and about; he came to the opening of a cave, out of which he could hear the sound of laughter and dancing. Outside the cave, there were a number of seal skins. He took one of the seal skins home with him and locked it in a chest.

One day, some time later, he came back to the cave opening, and there sat a pretty young woman; she was totally naked and crying bitterly. It was the seal that owned the skin the man had taken. The man gave the girl some clothes, calmed her and took her home with him. She followed his will, but didn’t get on very well with others. She would often sit and stare out to sea.

After a while, the man married her, and things went well for them; they had a number of children. The farmer kept the skin locked up in a chest and kept the key with him wherever he went. Many years later, he went out

rowing and forgot the key under his pillow at home. Others say that he had gone to a Christmas mass with other local people, but his wife was ill and couldn't go with him. Then he had forgotten to take the key out of his everyday clothes when he was getting changed. When he came back, the chest was open and the skin had gone.

She had taken the key, been curious about the chest and found the skin in it; then she could not stand the temptation, said farewell to her children, and dived into the sea. Before the woman dived into the sea, it is said that she said to herself: "Oh me oh my;/ seven children in the sea have I;/ and seven children on the land." It is said that the man was badly affected by this. When he later rowed out to fish, a seal could often be seen swimming around his ship, and it was as if tears were in its eyes. He became a very successful fisherman from that time onwards and very fortunate with objects that washed up on his shore. People often saw that, when the children he had had with his wife were walking along the shoreline, a seal would swim in front of them, and then, whether they were on the beach or shore, it would throw up to them fish of all colours and beautiful shells, but their mother never came back to land.⁴⁵

This is a legend known by almost all Icelanders, partly because it is so well told. Somewhat ironically, however, the legend was not very widespread in Iceland. There are not many more than five or six versions in total, most, quite logically, set at sites where seals were seen – if the sites are named at all.⁴⁶ The storyline itself is international. It goes back at least as far as the late thirteenth century and an Eddic poem called *Völundarkviða* "the Lay of Völundr", stanzas 1-5, echoed in the preceding prose, where it does not deal with a seal but rather three *valkyrjur* in the shape of swans, who are caught while swimming in a lake or the sea without their feathers (*álptarhamir þeirra* "their swan guises") by three northern Norwegian hunters, and temporarily made their wives for seven winters until they made an escape.⁴⁷ While the swan version of the story continued to live a good life in German folklore, in most parts of Norway the story tends to involve yet another liminal female figure called the *mara* "nightmare", who slips in through men's keyholes at night, making them breathless by sitting on their chests (ML 4010: Married to the Nightmare).⁴⁸ In the case of the *mara* legend, the woman is caught when the man blocks his keyhole, thereby preventing her escape for some years.

All of these legends, most of which deal with solo men alone in the wild at night, have a strong sense of the erotic, much like the *skogsrå* legends in Sweden noted above. It is nonetheless noteworthy how often our sympathies as listeners or readers tend to be with the women, even though certain aspects of the story suggest faint genetic links with the Greek legend of Pandora's Box in Hesiod's *Works and Days*, in which the

curious Pandora opens a jar and releases all the ills of the world. Also interesting is the way in which the seal-women, unlike the essentially lonely, landbound men of the legends, are shown as being in closer connection with nature in the shape of the sea. They come from out of the night, and start off in the company of family and friends from the sea. While the man takes the clothes and the woman, forcing her to be his wife and have his children, the woman tends to have the last word. Many women forced unwillingly into marriage would have easily understood her situation. They would note how, while the seal-wife is taken from the sea, like the *sækýr*, she succeeds in making a return to her home environment, like the *marbendill*/*marmennill*. Furthermore, like the *marbendill*, it is implied that she has power over the wealth of the sea, much like the Mothers of the salmon, skate and halibut, previously mentioned. This suggests the possibility of distant mythological links to earlier goddesses closely associated with water, like the Nordic Frigg, Sága and Rán, the *jötunn* Skaði who refuses to live with her husband Njörðr, and Celtic goddesses like Danu or Bóinn. The idea of a shape-changing woman, and not least a shape-changing woman who takes the shape of a bird, offers potential parallels to the figure of the Nordic goddess Freyja, also closely associated with the *valkyrjur*, who was believed to own a bird (falcon) costume.⁴⁹

The idea that all seals were actually semi-human, something that is nearly unavoidable if one looks into the eyes of a seal, is nonetheless comparatively widespread: according to one international ætiological motif also known in Iceland, they stemmed originally from Pharaoh's army which drowned in the Red Sea.⁵⁰

The idea of semi-human, semi-supernatural creatures that could be encountered on the seashore leads on naturally to the semi-inhuman *foreigners* speaking in strange tongues, with whom one could also come face to face in this liminal space. As noted above, the shoreline was the most obvious of borders for the island-dwellers of the North Atlantic. It was, however, not only where beings came up out of the sea but also where they might arrive from over the horizon, bringing both threats and temptations of a different kind. At the start of this Chapter, it was noted that local people wondered whether the “hairy man of Skarði” might be the devil or a “Hound-Turk”. The idea of the “Hound-Turk” was one that had particular resonance over the centuries among Icelanders. It had roots in a historical event from June and July 1627, when two large groups of Algerian pirates arrived on the south and east coasts of Iceland, killing a number of Icelanders and taking off over three hundred and fifty slaves.⁵¹ Nothing of the kind had ever occurred in Iceland before, or would ever