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### Folklore Between the Northern and Western Islands

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## Folklore between the Northern and Western Isles

Despite often being confused with each other by the media and urban ignoramuses, Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles are distinct island groups. Northern Islanders often do not identify with Scotland's Gaelic heritage, promoting their Norse cultural affiliation instead, while the Western Isles' Gaelic identity is strong and its Norse heritage is not immediately obvious, unless one has a grounding in onomastics and can recognise that a large number of the local place-names have a Norse origin. However, despite their present differences the islands have a shared history: all three experienced extensive Norse settlement during the Viking Age, and between 1093 and 1266 they were all part of the *Norgesveldet* (the extended Kingdom of Norway). One can meet several Norse Hebrideans in the Icelandic sagas, characters like the Hebridean *seiðmenn* 'sorcerers' in *Laxdæla saga*, Kotkell, his wife Gríma and sons, who were described as *mjök fjölkunnig* 'very skilled in magic'. The political connection between the Northern Isles and the Norwegian kingdom continued until 1468/9, when they again joined the Western Isles, this time as part of Scotland. So it should not come as a surprise that, when the folklore and traditional stories of the islands are compared, there are many similarities.

All three island groups shared a traditional way of life based on subsistence farming, where, for generations, islanders faced the challenge of extracting a living from these damp, windy, treeless islands. The islanders used the resources of the land and the sea to complement their farming, fishing the offshore waters, collecting eggs and hunting seabirds, and, on occasion, hunting seals and whales. Houses were built from locally available stone and turf, and warmth was provided by burning peat. They share the same word for a peat spade. The Gaelic *tairsgeir* and the Northern Isles *tuskar* or *tushker* come from Old Norse *torfskeri* 'turf cutter'. Dean Munro's 16th century description of the traditional way of life on the now uninhabited island of North Rona will ring bells in both Orkney and Shetland.

*Within this ile there is sic faire whyte beir meal made like flour, and quhen they slay their sheipe, they slay them belly flaught, and stuffes ther skins fresche of the bear meil, and send their dewties be a servant of M'Cloyd of Lewis, with certain reistit muttan, and mony reistit foulis... In this ile they use to take maney quhails and uther grate fisches* (Munro 1961:88)

To this day, Shetlanders enjoy eating reistit mutton, the major ingredient of Tattie Soup, and Orcadians continue to make bere meal bannocks, made from locally grown bere, or six-row barley. Sea birds '*foulis*' are no longer eaten in the Northern Isles, but the *guga* 'young gannets' are still savoured in Ness in Lewis and beyond.

The shared Norse period has left its imprint on the folklore of all three island groups. From the Northern Isles there are a number of stories which actually contain fragments of Norse linguistic material. For example, when a Rousay witch successfully sinks a boat using magic, she exclaims, '*Tara gott, that's done*' (Marwick 1975:54), while in a fragment of a story from Unst, a troll wife was milking her cow when she heard, *Humpi, horni hoi minni kom karl mi mog* – difficult to interpret but of Norse origin nonetheless (Jakobsen 1985: xcvi).

From Shetland there are a number of historical traditions whose origins can be assigned to the Norse period (Jennings 2016). These include the story of Jan Tait and the Bear. In this short tale the eponymous hero is called to Norway by the king to account for his killing of the king's chamberlain. Instead of being executed, he so impresses the king by his nonchalant manner, chopping off lumps from his own feet with an axe, that the king, in return for his life, assigns him the task of rescuing the kingdom from a bear. This Jan duly does, bringing the animal back to Shetland, where it lives out its life on the small island of Linga. The relationship between this story and Icelandic tales has been explored in detail by Bo Almqvist (1991: 82-113).

From the Western Isles in D.A Fergusson's collection of North Uist folk material, there is the story about the bold seafarers of Haisgeir, the children of Magnus, the conqueror of the ocean and hero from Lochlann (Norway), who were appointed to police the western seas by the Norse kings:

*'Bha iad ag gradh gun do shuidhich na righrean Lochlannach 'us Tuathroinnech maraichean calma an eileanan Haisgeir air son cealatas cuain agus gun do dhaingnich na Triathan an sliochd's an dreachd. 'S e clan 'ic Mhanuis a theirte riutha agus 's an diubh a bhuineadh clan 'ic Uilf agus clan 'ic Odrum, Clann 'ic Odrum nan ron, siol nam fear mor a bha 'n Haisgeir, Bho Mhanus, fear ceannsail an sail, An armunn a thainig a Lochlann' (Fergusson 1984:148)*

This story may reflect historical reality. However, most traditional tales about the *Lochlannaich* or Norsemen in Western Isles, and more widely in the Gaelic world, are less historical and more supernatural in nature. For example, the story of the last *Lochlannaich* in Barra would be more typical. In this tale, *Mac an Amharuis* 'The Son of Suspicious Birth' must eradicate the *Lochlannaich* from Barra and the island of Fuday, or the chieftain of MacNeil will not acknowledge him as his son. His mother advised him that he must kill them before daybreak because they lost their superhuman strength during the night, only regaining it with the sunrise (J.L. Campbell 1939:19-20). In this story the Norsemen have become supernatural beings rather than ancestors.

This process of supernaturalisation also affected the Picts in the Northern Isles. There is an interesting parallel with the *Mac an Amharuis* story in the 12th century *Historia Norwegia*, where it says of the Picts in Orkney that they 'worked great marvels in city-building each evening and morning, but at noontide they were utterly bereft of their strength and hid for fear in little subterranean dwellings' (Kunin and Phelpstead 2001:8). The Picts might lose their superhuman strength at a different time of day from the Norsemen, but it is clearly the same idea.

The other aspect of the *Mac an Amharuis* story, and indeed of the Picts in the *Historia Norwegia*, is that these supernatural beings have disappeared. They belong to the past. Presumably this is the means by which folklore accounts for linguistic and cultural change. Shetland also has an example of a last Norsemen tale, set in Yell. In this story, the last Norsemen cry out, *Tala goola Glypapundsmaen* 'Speak well of the Glypapundsmen', as they

leave Yell for good. It is surprising that even in Shetland the Norse could be regarded as an earlier people that have disappeared, rather than as ancestors.

In the Gaelic Fionn Cycle ballads recorded in the Western Isles the *Lochlannaich* also appear as supernatural beings of giant size and superhuman strength, and *Lochlann* is described as a land of wonders somewhere over the sea. John Shaw has pointed out that the traditional manner in which the *Lochlannaich* are described in ballads and prose tales is shared with Medieval Ireland (Shaw 2008:248), which indicates Irish influence, rather than a close connection with a 'real' Norse past. However, one ballad, *Duan na Muilgheartaich*, which features a monstrous, one-eyed sea-hag, who sets out from *Lochlann* to Ireland intent on killing Fionn and his men, conforming to the trope of threats from *Lochlann*, does appear to show Norse influence. It was pointed out by Christiansen (1931: 412) that her name and nature resemble that of the *margýgr* 'sea-hag' described in the 12<sup>th</sup> century Norwegian text the *Speculum Regale*, who was seen off the coast of Greenland before great storms. *Muilgheartach* would appear to be an odd Gaelicisation of *margýgr* (MacInnes 1986/87:118). This particular ballad, which is not recorded in Ireland, is likely to have its origins in an area sharing Norse and Gaelic traditions, namely the Hebrides (Shaw 2008:47).

The land based *gýgr* 'hag' features vestigially in the folklore of the Northern Isles. She is commemorated in a number of place-names in Shetland, such as Gorewell 'the *gýgr*'s hill' on the island of Burra, and the Guirskirn, a collapsed sea-cave, which lies at the back of the island of Bressay. According to a story told by Elizabeth J. Smith:

*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. (Smith 1980: 34-5)*

In Orkney there are at least two place-names which refer to the *gýgr*, Gorey's Saddle on the Calf of Eday and Gorie's Bight, Marwick Head, Birsay. On Papa Westray there was a festival called Gyro Night, which survived into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. On an evening in early February the smaller boys of the island made torches and headed out into the night to entice the gyros, masked older boys, who were dressed as women. The gyros then chased the younger boys, hitting them with seaweed or rope (Marwick 1975: 107). Another name for the hag in Old Norse was *grýla* and Jakobsen recorded a Foula warning to children: *bide in or da øli grøli will tak de* (1928-32: 274). Laurence Williamson of Mid Yell around 1900 mentioned the existence of *grulies*, which he describes as an undefined form of horror (Johnson 1971: 116). I myself heard from a friend that in the 1950s children were warned not to go into the coal-cellar, because it was the lair of *Minnie Groolie*. On Fair Isle, children were warned that if they misbehaved the *Grullyan* would come down the chimney and take them away (Lamb, 2004: 68). Her monstrous presence is known in the Faroe Islands, where children dress up and go guizing on *grýlukvøld* 'grýla evening', the first Tuesday in Lent. In Iceland the *Grýla* is a very important Christmas figure ever ready to bundle badly behaved children into her sack (Gunnell 1995: 161).

Apart from the name *muilgheartach*, neither the *gýgr* nor the *grýla* have left obvious linguistic traces in the Hebrides. However, the Irish scholar O Cruaí (2003: 83) argues that Norse ideas about monstrous hags influenced how the Gaelic hag the *Cailleach Bheurr*, originally an ancient Gaelic goddess figure, was perceived and portrayed in the Hebrides and more generally in the Scottish Gaelic world.

In Shetland, by far the most common supernatural being is the *trow*, or *trowie* in Orkney, a name which is a scotticisation of the Old Norse *troll*. The word was known in the Western Isles when Norse was spoken there: there is a small island off Barra called Drolum 'Troll Island' (Stahl 1999:188). However, despite sharing their name with the Norwegian troll, they do not have much in common with these monstrous mountain beings and instead share characteristics with the human sized, or smaller, Norse hidden people, called *huldrefolk* in Norway and *huldufólk* in Iceland and the Faroe Islands. Indeed, sometimes they are called *hillfolk* or *hillitrows*, which could be a rationalised corruption of these names (Bruford 1991:119). Jessie Saxby (1932:130) describes the trows as, 'small grey-clad men...(who) are so fond of music they play the fiddle continually...(and) their homes are located under green knolls or sunny hillsides.' While John Spence (1899: 130) adds, 'the Wart o' Cleat on Whalsay was inhabited by trows, and many fair damsels were lured to this fairy abode, where they lived and brought forth children.' Trows also have a great deal in common with the Gaelic *sìthichean* 'fairies'. In his definitive study of Northern Isles supernatural beings, Alan Bruford (1991:118) shows that the stories told about them were strongly influenced by Scottish fairy stories, and in his study and categorisation of the migratory legends of the supernatural in Scotland, Donald Archie MacDonald (1994) provides a list of Scottish fairy legends and where they were recorded. Many of them occur in both the Northern Isles and Western Isles. An example would be the story of the man who goes into fairy hill or trowie knowe, and spends a year or more there dancing with a cask or a basket on his back, and another would be the story of the woman who is taken into the fairy hill to act as midwife to a supernatural woman.

Other supernatural beings such as the *hogboon* in Orkney, who inhabited burial mounds, and the *broonie*, a Scottish spirit who replaced him in Shetland (Marwick 1975: 40), and who both received offerings of milk, are less well remembered. At one time the *broonie* was a very well-known member of the Shetland supernatural menagerie. In 1703, the Reverend John Brand wrote in his description of Shetland that:

*Not above forty or fifty years ago, every family had a brownie, or evil spirit, so called, which served them, to which they gave a sacrifice for his service; as when they churned their milk, they took a part thereof, and sprinkled every corner of the house with it, for Brownie's use; likewise, when they brewed, they had a stone which they called "Brownie's stane", wherein there was a little hole into which they poured some wort for a sacrifice to Brownie. They also had some stacks of corn, which they called Brownie's Stacks, which, though they were not bound with straw ropes, or in any way fenced as other stacks used to be, yet the greatest storm of wind was not able to blow away straw off them. (Brand 1883: 168-170)*

There was a similar being in the Hebrides called the *gruagach*, who could be female or male and often looked after the cattle. In return for their service they received offerings of milk

from the milk maids which was poured onto a particular stone called the *clach na gruagaich*. If the offering was forgotten, the best cow might be found dead (Thompson 1997:124). The Reverend Donald MacQueen of Kilmuir in Skye provided Thomas Pennant with information about the *gruagach*, including a story of illicit sex, 'It is little more than a century ago, since he hath been supposed to have got an honest man's daughter with child, at Shulista, near to Duntulme, the seat of the family of Macdonald: though it is more probable, that one of the great man's retinue did that business for him' (Pennant 1776: 436)

A similar thing happened to a young Shetland girl on the sands of Breckon in North Yell. However, in this case the supernatural being, a beautiful man, came from the sea and seduced the girl, who nine months later gave birth to baby covered in hair like a seal with webbed hands and feet. The man was actually a transformed selkie, or seal. The ballad *The Great Silkie of Sule Skerry* (Child 113) tells a similar story. In both the Northern Isles and Western Isles, people believed there was something uncanny about seals. An early 17<sup>th</sup> century account of Shetland by the Englishman Richard James makes a direct comparison between seals and trows:

*A seale they call Trowe, that is as much as a sea divell or spirit, because manie times before they in their little thin boates have binne cast away, the seales are seene followijng, the which they take for a signe of ill lucke, and then as in other stormes and mischiefs they use to crie out A Fiand, that is A Divell.* (James 1953: 52)

In a story told by the Shetland storyteller Bruce Henderson, seals were angels who fell from heaven and landed in the sea, the trows were angels who fell on the land (Bruford 1991:121). In the Hebrides seals were believed to be the children of the king of Lochlann under a spell (Andersson 1967: 3-4). From Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles examples of the Selkie Wife story have been collected. Examples also occur in the Faroe Islands, Iceland and the Lofoten Islands in Norway, suggesting that the story spread across the North Atlantic when all these areas were still connected under Norwegian rule, probably from a point of origin in the Northern Isles. Nancy Cassell McEntire in her study of the selkie ballads and legends provides a clear summary of the legend:

*In most variants of 'The Seal Woman', the selkie is free and at ease in the world of nature, swimming among the waves in the sea as a seal or dancing along the shore as a woman. The man who finds her, however, is able to curtail her freedom by taking and hiding her seal skin. Once her skin is 'taken', she also is removed from her animal life and must conform to human society. She often longs for the sea, but she resigns herself to her fate and becomes a dutiful wife and mother. It is only by chance – a key accidentally left behind, a casual reference to the hiding place, an innocent question from one of her children – that she is given the opportunity to find her seal skin and return to her previous state. She always does, sometimes with sorrow and sometimes (less often) with playful humour.* (McEntire 2010: 127)

There are other folklore beings that could be explored here if there were space, such as the *kelpie* or water horse, which occurs as the *each uisge* in Gaelic areas and the *njuggle* in Shetland. However, finally I must mention a violent folklore being that has left its mark in

Shetland and Orkney - the *Lewisman*. There are a number of traditions associated with these marauders. There is slope beside Scousburgh, in southern Shetland, called Lewis Scord, which is supposed to hold their bones. Both the Reverend Low and Samuel Hibbert recorded traditions about their activities,

*Tradition says the Lewis-men in their plundering parties thro' the isles landed here, and after pillaging Foula burnt the wood, lest it should be a shelter to the natives in future times. In Orkney we have many like traditions, true or false is hard to determine; however, it is certain the Western Highlanders did often make summer trips to these isles, and seldom returned empty handed. What further confirms this Foula tradition is, the old people here told me they, viz. the Lewis-men, went thence to the Ness of Schetland where members of them were killed, and I have the best information from Mr Bruce of Sumburgh that on his estate the sand often blows off and discovers heaps of bones, all thrown indiscriminately together, and to this day called Lewis-men's grave. (Low 1879:103)*

*...the natives of Lewis gratified their animosity by annually visiting this province for the sake of plunder. Upon landing in Shetland they are said to have constructed some sort of inclosures on the steep banks of the coast, for the purpose of holding cattle and other plunder, preparatory for embarkation. Two fortresses well adapted for this purpose, appear on the south shores of Dunrossness; but at the Ness of Skeld, in the parish of Sandsting, there is the vestige of an enclosure to be seen, which is distinctly ascribed to these marauders (Hibbert 1931:93)*

These accounts have a basis in fact. The Northern Isles were regularly raided by Hebrideans in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, and a traditional Gaelic story about a raid to Shetland carried out by MacNeil of Barra still survives. It relates how MacNeil was coming off worst in a fight with the *Boc Shealtainneach 'Shetland Buck'*. The Barra strongman the *Gille Dubh Thangasdail* steps in to help him and kills the Buck. However, the Gille Dubh regrets his actions returns the lifted cattle and marries the Buck's daughter, settling down in Shetland, where his descendants live to this day. There is an associated song *Till an crodh, Dhòmhnail 'Return the cattle Donald'*, Donald being the name of the Gille Dubh.

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