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Maeshowe, Orkahaugr – The names of Orkney’s great burial mound as nodes in a heteroglossic web of meaning-making

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Introduction

Situated on a central thoroughfare on the Orkney Mainland, and in the Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Area, is the c. 5000-year-old burial mound now known by the name of *Maeshowe*. In the *Orkneyinga Saga*, however, and in a runic inscription in the mound itself, the mound has another name: *Orkahaugr*, or *Orkhaugr*.

The aim here is to discuss these names focusing on reception and interpretation, asking which stories have been told about these names from the Middle Ages to the present, and what these stories can tell us regarding how those who heard and told them understood the mound: its exterior and, perhaps more importantly, its interior, contents and meaning.

The focus is not primarily what the names *Maeshowe* and *Orkahaugr* *really* mean, or in other words what they originally meant in the minds of those who coined them. As with any word, the “meaning” of a place-name also depends on the listeners: those who hear the name and make their own interpretation, and in turn use it themselves. A word is always addressed to someone, and anticipates this someone’s answer. According to Bakhtin,¹ “[l]anguage is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated – overpopulated– with the intentions of others.” Therefore, Bakhtin says, a word is “half someone else’s”. Each speaker “appropriates” the word, using it on their own terms, but this event is only one in a constant chain, or perhaps web, of similar events, leading to the word’s embedding in a constantly ongoing cultural meaning-making process. Words are therefore dialogic, and inseparable from the community, history, and place of those who use and have used them. Place-names, I assert, form part of the dialogism, or ongoing shared discourse relating to the place they name. The name is but one strand of the web of meaning-making that is spun by people and between people, developing and responding to each other over centuries or millennia. Therefore, the received meaning of a name can be different to different groups of people, separated by geography, social networks or by time as popular understandings of names change through history.

It is my intention here to explore the dialogical meaning-making in which the names *Maeshowe* and *Orkahaugr/Orkhaugr* are embedded, focusing on the Victorian period to the present in the case of *Maeshowe*, and on the Medieval period in the case of *Orkahaugr/Orkhaugr*. Both can tell us much about the visualisation of the mound and the meaning ascribed to the structure, as dialogically developed by different communities, as well as about a general visualisation of “northernness” and “vikingness” to which it is connected.

¹ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, pp. 293-94.

Maeshowe

The etymology of the name Maeshowe has not yet been fully explained. Its ending, *howe*, seems unproblematic, deriving from Old Norse *haugr*, mound.² *Maes*, however, remains enigmatic. Orkney's foremost authority on place-names, Hugh Marwick, admits that *Maes* is a "very puzzling word".³ However, he observes parallels from elsewhere in Orkney: *Masshowe* mound in the parish of Holm, he says, is pronounced "mezhou" similar to the famous Neolithic chambered tomb.⁴ A local folk etymology, which Marwick does not mention but which I have had recounted to me, claims that the mound stands in association with a former church and a path called the Mass Gate where people would walk to mass in the church. Another example cited by Marwick⁵ is *Maizer* in the isle of Sanday, which he derives from a plural form *Maes-haugar*; similarly *Mount Maisery*: a seashore mound in Sanday. Finally, Marwick⁶ mentions a mound called *Howamae* in North Ronaldsay. Other place-names containing the element *Maes*, despite not being mounds, are, according to Marwick:⁷ *Maeslee*: a beach in Shapinsay; *Maestaing* in Gairsay; *Maesquoy*: a field in Harray, which might be the same as the one Charles Tait⁸ refers to as being c. 5 km from Maeshowe, located at HY311166; *Maesdale*: a field in Burray; and *Maeswell*: a shoal off North Ronaldsay.⁹

Marwick¹⁰ does not reach a firm conclusion on how to interpret the *Maes* element. He tentatively suggests a Celtic word meaning 'field' or 'plain', reflected in Welsh *ma* or *maes* and Gaelic *magh*, and cites Jakob Jakobsen who thought that it had extended its meaning to mounds or small hills also. However, Jakobsen's reason for thinking so, according to Marwick, was due to its evident use as such in Orkney, which makes it a circular argument. Marwick gives no reference, but one must assume he means to refer to Jakobsen's *The Place-Names of Shetland*¹¹ or personal communication. Marwick rightly regards Jakobsen's explanation as "most improbable" and instead drafts in Gaelic *màs* and Old Irish *máss* meaning a 'buttock'.

Marwick's only firm conclusion is that the element *Maes* is not Norse. This leaves us with the oddity of a compound name where the generic is Norse, and the specific is not. While there is of course a parallel in the archipelago name, *Orkneyjar* (see below), it is still uncommon.

In contrast to Marwick's view stands an interpretation of the name by the Norwegian place name scholar Berit Sandnes,¹² who suggests that the specific, *Maes*, is indeed Scandinavian, and that it derives from a word *mað* meaning a meadow, especially on low lying ground near water.¹³ It is attested in Old East Norse and other Germanic languages, and it also, of course, figures in the English word *meadow* itself, where it derives from the same root. If this derivation is right, the Old Norse form of Maeshowe would be **Maðshaugr*: a mound in a meadow, provided the word was used in Old West Norse as well.

² Heggstad, *Gamalnorsk ordbok*, p. 258.

³ Marwick, 'Celtic Place-Names in Orkney', p. 260.

⁴ Marwick, 'Celtic Place-Names in Orkney', p. 260.

⁵ Marwick, 'Celtic Place-Names in Orkney', p. 260.

⁶ Marwick, 'Celtic Place-Names in Orkney', p. 260.

⁷ Marwick, 'Celtic Place-Names in Orkney', p. 260.

⁸ Tait, 'Maeshowe on the Internet', no page numbers.

⁹ Marwick, 'Celtic Place-Names in Orkney', p. 260.

¹⁰ Marwick, 'Celtic Place-Names in Orkney'.

¹¹ Jakobsen, *The Place-Names of Shetland*.

¹² Sandnes, 'Skånske stedsnavn'.

¹³ *Svenska Akademiens Ordbok* 1942 entry for *mad*.

Now, let us tune in on the dialogues of the 19th century. In 1861, Maeshowe was excavated by the gentleman antiquarian James Farrer¹⁴ and team, leading to an intensification in discussion of the name, and a geographical broadening of who took part. This dialogue, with its epicentre in the 19th century, is still being joined by new voices today.

The 19th century reception and interpretation of Maeshowe, both as a name and as a place, rely on the general contemporary reception of the Norse past, where a “Viking” (in various spellings) may be seen as variously barbarian, pagan, noble, brave, and in various ways both contrasting with and resonating with British Victorian virtues.¹⁵

In archaeology enthusiastic provincial antiquarians began to dig up and dust off Britain’s Viking past, with interpretative creativity sometimes compensating for the modest return on the spadework invested. Neglected cairns were opened, fragmented crosses reassembled, and ancient jewellery pored over. Eager eyes spotted Odinic spears and Thunoric hammers in improbable locations. Runic inscriptions yielded up or had wrenched out of them long-hidden or non-existent secrets; and the long-neglected Viking-age voices of local dialect and place-names were heeded again.¹⁶

Among Wawn’s primary sources here are Farrer’s excavation at Maeshowe, and Stephens’ interpretation of the Maeshowe runes.¹⁷ In an intellectual climate where the figure of the Viking was the romanticised other against which Victorian Britain could compare itself, expectations of the mound were naturally created, before its excavation, and following the discovery of the runic inscriptions inside.¹⁸ The first inscription to be reported, was the one now known as Or Barnes 9: “Ingibjorg the fair widow. Many a woman has come stooping in here. A great show-off. Erlingr”.¹⁹ Its discovery was reported in *The Orkney Herald* on the 23rd July 1861. Below the report, in a letter to the editor dated 20th July, Farrer himself speculates that the name *Ingibjorg* may refer to the wife of Earl Thorfinn the Mighty, who died in 1064.²⁰ As part of an ongoing discussion of the age and purpose of the mound, Farrer raises the suggestion that the mound may have been built or used by a woman for her own purpose, in this case by Ingibjorg: “Is this ancient mausoleum a tribute to the memory of her deceased lord? Perhaps the runes when deciphered may afford information on this subject.”²¹ As we shall see, the theme of a special female connection with Maeshowe soon developed further.

The next year, Farrer published interpretations of all the Maeshowe runic inscriptions, which he had obtained from professors George Stephens, Carl Christian Rafn and Peter Andreas Munch.²² In this publication, the theme of women – either beautiful, in distress, or as sorceresses – is developed. “Ingibiorgh probably resided here for safety” Stephens suggests here.²³ With reference to another inscription, Or Barnes 23, Munch suggests that Maeshowe “[...] was supposed to have been originally erected for a mighty woman called Lodbrok”,²⁴ while Rafn goes further and adds the

¹⁴ Farrer, *Maes-Howe*.

¹⁵ Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians*.

¹⁶ Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians*, p. 5.

¹⁷ Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians*, p. 236.

¹⁸ Johnston, ‘Runic Charm’.

¹⁹ Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, 95-102.

²⁰ *The Orkney Herald*, 23 July 1861, p. 3.

²¹ *The Orkney Herald*, 23 July 1861, p. 3, later reprinted in the *Dundee Courier* 7 August 1861.

²² Farrer, *Maes-Howe*.

²³ Farrer, *Maes-Howe*, p. 29.

²⁴ Farrer, *Maes-Howe*, p. 36.

purpose of sorcery: “This barrow was formerly a sorcery hall, erected for Lodbrok [...]”.²⁵ Farrer himself, in the footnotes to the volume, highlights the role of storytelling in passing down and shaping interpretation of the site: “[...] a popular tale preserved to us in Runes, [...] [tells] us that this barrow was the sorcery platform erected of old for the use of Lodbrok, and was probably also a temple and place of worship”.²⁶ In a similar, but yet more sinister vein, Carr²⁷ suggested in the *Proceedings of the Society of the Antiquaries of Scotland* that the mound may have contained a “Mirk-Quene” who “hath here decreed the depressed to become greatly exalted”. Regarding the place-name, however, Carr is of the opinion that *Maes* is Celtic, perhaps the “Cymro-British” word “Maes, a plain” or preferably the Irish *mais* meaning “massa acervus”,²⁸ i.e. a lump or heap.²⁹

However, at about the same time, an alternative interpretation of the name Maeshowe emerged: ‘Maiden’s Mound’. It does not occur in Farrer’s 1862 book, but is raised in the dialogue following its publication. *The Orkney Herald*, on the 16th September 1862, informs its readers that a new and alternative translation of the Maeshowe runic inscriptions is in progress “by a learned Icelandic scholar in one of our Universities”. The report concludes: “Tradition has been faithful in preserving the name of the place. “Mey’s Howe” signifies Maiden’s Mound.”³⁰ The next issue³¹ follows up by further informing readers that “[w]orks on Maeshowe are beginning to be promised in abundance. In addition to the one we mentioned last week, we understand that another book on the interesting antiquities of the “Maiden’s Mound” is in preparation by a Leith gentleman, and will speedily be issued.”

The “learned Icelandic scholar” may be the Rev. T. Barclay, Principal of the University of Glasgow, who in his 1863 publication³² argued strongly for the ‘Maiden’s Mound’ theory, giving its etymology as “Islandic MEY, MAY, MÆY, *virgo*, a maid; and HAUGR, Scotch HOW, *tumulus*, a sepulchral mound. MEY, a maid, is also Scotch” (Barclay 1863: 17).³³ It may have been Barclay who first suggested the ‘Maiden’s Mound’ interpretation to *The Orkney Herald*. He also makes the connection between the name and the runic inscriptions specific: “This inscription, which informs us that the chambers were erected by a lady, explains the name of the structure, and shows that tradition has been faithful in handing it down long after it had ceased to be understood.”³⁴ Barclay does not himself realise that he is taking part in a distinctly Victorian dialogue and meaning-making process, where fair maidens and sorceresses fit into the emerging discourse of the ‘Old North’.

The “Leith gentleman” is most likely J. M. Mitchell, who in 1863 also joined the polyphony and released a book³⁵ on Maeshowe where he interpreted the name thus: “It has been said that it is probably derived from the Icelandic word, “Mey,” Vigin; and it may have been in the heathen age a place dedicated to the three “Meyer,” or prophetesses, mentioned in the Edda, who predicted the fate of man [...]” before moving on to discussing alternative interpretations.

²⁵ Farrer, *Maes-Howe*, p. 37.

²⁶ Farrer, *Maes-Howe*, p. 21 n. 2.

²⁷ Carr, ‘Observations’ p. 74.

²⁸ Carr, ‘Observations’ p. 70.

²⁹ The Highland Society of Scotland, *Dictionarium scoto-celticum*, p. 615.

³⁰ *The Orkney Herald*, 16 September 1862, p. 3.

³¹ *The Orkney Herald*, 23 September 1862, p. 3.

³² Barclay, ‘Explanation’.

³³ Barclay, ‘Explanation’ p. 17.

³⁴ Barclay, ‘Explanation’ p. 17.

³⁵ Mitchell, *Mesehowe*, p. 33.

The 'Maiden's Mound' interpretation quickly became popular, and was perpetuated in other publications reaching a more general public readership. One was Daniel Gorrie's 1868 *Summers and Winters in the Orkneys*³⁶ which tells its readers:

Principal Barclay, it must be confessed, has excelled the other translators [of the runic inscriptions of Maeshowe] in giving greater intelligibility to the engravings. The last of the above-quoted inscriptions, he thinks, satisfactorily explains the name of the structure, and shows that the tradition has been faithful in handing it down long after it had ceased to be understood. *Mey* or *Mæy* is the Icelandic word for "maid", and *haugr* [...] is the Icelandic for "mound". The Maiden's Mound is thus the real meaning of the name Maeshowe.

Gorrie was also the editor of *The Orkney Herald*, and may have contributed to this newspaper's endorsement of the interpretation. Other newspapers soon joined in: The London-based *The Morning Post*, on 21st July 1868, mentions "Maes-howe, or the Maiden's Mound" in a book review of Gorrie's *Summers and Winters*. The same year, *The Alloa Advertiser*, 28th December 1868 assures its readers that there is "not a more puzzling piece of antiquities than the Maeshow in the three kingdoms", and styles it as a "Chamber of Mystery" before praising Barclay's interpretation of the runic inscriptions and quoting his etymology for the name, itself using the term "maiden mound". *The Glasgow Herald*, on 3rd August 1887, glosses "Maeshow or Maiden's Mound", *The Scotsman*, on 10th June 1889, speaks of "the mysterious Maeshowe, or Maidens' Mound". By the 7th September 1909, "Maeshowe, or the Maiden's Mound," is, according to *The Aberdeen Daily Journal*, among the "well-known antiquarian features of Orkney which must be more or less familiar."

The ideas of 'mystery' and 'female' in connection with Maeshowe neatly fitted the already existing interpretation of two nearby circles of standing stones, the *Ring of Brodgar* and *Stones of Stenness*, as the temples of the sun and moon respectively: Brodgar being visible as a large full circle, while the smaller Stenness is a half circle like a half moon. It had been around at least since the late 17th century, as James Wallace writes of it in 1693, and George Low in 1774. These older sources were also, significantly, made available in printed editions in 1879³⁷ (Low) and 1883³⁸ (Wallace). Stenness being closer to Maeshowe, its association to the moon fitted perfectly with Maeshowe's developing identity as the location of some female mystery. A local character at the time was the storyteller from Yesnaby, George Marwick (1836-1912). His collected works³⁹ are a conglomerate of obscure references to Egyptian mythology, Sanskrit, Latin and Greek, which he calls upon in order to explain accounts of local Orkney tradition, which he may or may not relay accurately. Marwick's explanation of the name Maeshowe is "the sun-worshippers' place of confinement"⁴⁰ and he tells the following story:

I remember this old man two or three times speaking about 'Mae-howe' and what he had heard his grandfather say about it. It was something to the following effect: The married women that were able in the vicinity had to go with a 'caisy' full of ashes and earth every full moon after sunset and deposit their burden either on the top or sides of this knowe to keep in the bad people inside, and to make it always stronger. And to show their detestation of the place, or the 'bad folk' within, they had to leave their excrement on the place.⁴¹

³⁶ Gorrie, *Summers and Winters*, p. 129.

³⁷ Low, *A Tour Through the Islands of Orkney and Schetland*.

³⁸ Wallace, *A Description of the Isles of Orkney*.

³⁹ Marwick, *George Marwick: the Collected Works of Yesnaby's Master Storyteller*.

⁴⁰ Marwick, *George Marwick: the Collected Works of Yesnaby's Master Storyteller*, p. 53.

⁴¹ Marwick, *George Marwick: the Collected Works of Yesnaby's Master Storyteller*, p. 55

The 20th century folklorist Ernest Marwick (1915-1977) perpetuates⁴² this story, but changes the protagonists to “young girls” in accordance with the ‘Maiden’s Mound’ theory: “[...] at one time every young girl within a mile of Maeshowe had to take a kaesy [basket] of ashes to the top of the mound each full moon, empty it there and urinate on the ashes”.⁴³ Whether or not there was ever really such a custom, for whatever purpose it may have had, it is nonetheless interesting that the story becomes entangled in the wider discourse on Maeshowe as the ‘Maiden’s Mound’.

The popular Orkney poet and novelist George Mackay Brown (1921 – 1996) also touches on the theme in several of his works, among them *An Orkney Tapestry*, where he describes Maeshowe as a burial chamber for “chiefs and high-born maidens” and as a “petrified womb” which brings promise of “resurrection and the spring-time”.⁴⁴

Today, the dialogue about the ‘Maiden’s Mound’ carries on online. In the online *Frontiers Magazine*,⁴⁵ Charles Tait, who has also written a popular guidebook to Orkney, writes:

The name Maeshowe may derive from O[ld] N[orse] Maers-howe, Maiden’s Mound. There is a persistent tradition that Maeshowe was a meeting place for young lovers. Another tale says that “at one time young girls would take some ashes to the top of the mound at full moon and urinate on them”. The age and veracity of these stories are open to the reader to decide.

The Wikipedia entry for Maeshowe adds another strand to the dialogue, by suggesting that “the female regent Mae/May was seen as the principal head of the famous festival held by the adult females after the Spring equinox, today’s ‘Easter’. Within this context the name Maes Howe seem to reflect May’s Temple”.⁴⁶ The Wikipedia author’s interpretation here shows a clear line of descent from the Victorian dialogue on fair widows, sorceresses, female mystery, temple of the moon and the ‘Maiden’s Mound’.

While these interpretations may be far removed from the intended meaning of those who in the distant past coined the name Maeshowe, such stories help people make their own sense of a place. People engage in meaning-making by sharing stories, orally, in print, and today often online. Story-sharing and the emerging meanings lead people to engage with the place, and interact with it. Today, people interact with Maeshowe for example by visiting it, uploading photos, and performing actions guided by their meaning-making, as they do for example if they choose to visit Maeshowe in spring after reading George Mackay Brown or the Wikipedia entry. Stories are therefore important responses to places even when the stories are far removed from the intended original meaning of the place-name – perhaps even more so when the original meaning of the name has been lost to us. In the remainder of this article, I will show that a parallel argument can be made for the name *Orkahaugr*, one interpretation of which may have led a group of people in the 12th century to interact with the mound in a particular way: They broke in.

⁴² Thank you to Tom Muir, who directed me to George Marwick as Ernest Marwick’s unacknowledged source.

⁴³ Marwick, *An Orkney Anthology*.

⁴⁴ Brown, *An Orkney Tapestry*, p. 139.

⁴⁵ Tait, ‘Maeshowe on the internet’.

⁴⁶ Wikipedia, ‘Maeshowe’

Orkahaugr or Orkhaugr

Like the name Maeshowe, the original meaning of the name *Orkhaugr* or *Orkahaugr* evades us today. And likewise, this name also has an exciting reception history which can give us insight into how people at specific times in the past have understood and engaged with the mound.

We may begin by observing that there are two forms of this name. Does *Orkhaugr* from the runic inscription invoke the same meaning or reception as *Orkahaugr* from *Orkneyinga Saga*, as two variants of essentially the same name? Or are they more readily understood as two similar names invoking separate meanings? And which meanings do they convey, how have they been interpreted? Which dialogues are they part of?

The variant *Orkahaugr* is found in the *Orkneyinga Saga*, chapter 93, during an episode where Earl Harald Maddadarson and a group of people affiliated with him takes shelter in the mound during a sudden blizzard.

Haralldr iarl byriþ ferþ sina at iolum ut i Orcneyiar; hann hafpi IIII skip ok tiu tigu manna. Hann la II netr við Grimsey. Þeir lendu i Hafnarvagi i Hrossey; þeir gengu þáþan inn XIII dag iola i Fiaurþ. Þeir varo i Orkahaugi [footnote: Skrevet Orkahugi] meðan el dro a, ok ærþuz þar II men fyrir þeim; ok var þeim þat farartalmi mikill. Þa var af not, er þeir komu i Fiaurþ.⁴⁷

(Earl Harald began his journey at Christmas out to Orkney. He had 4 ships and 100 men. He lay two nights by Graemsay. They landed in Hamnavoe [Stromness] on the Orkney Mainland, and they went from there on the 13th day of Christmas towards Firth. They were in Orkahaugr [footnote: written Orkahugi] while there was a blizzard, and two men went crazy for them, which slowed their journey a lot. It was night, when they came to Firth.)

The editor, Finnbogi Guðmundsson, remarks in a footnote that the manuscript form is “Orkahugi”, but it is the first “a” that concerns us here, and it is clear enough.

The variant *Orkhaugr* appears in a runic inscription within Maeshowe’s central chamber (Or Barnes 24 M):⁴⁸

§A iorsalafarar brutu orkôuh · lif mtsæilia ia^rls
§B ræist
§A Jórsalafarar brutu Orkhaug. Hlíf, matselja jarls,
§B reist.

(§A Jerusalem-travellers broke Orkhaugr. Hlíf, the earl's houskeeper, §B carved.)

I will first discuss the element *Ork*, common to both, before moving on to the compound forms *Orkhaugr* and *Orkahaugr*, and discuss whether these variant forms are likely to convey different meanings or not.

What immediately springs to mind, of course, is that the *Ork* element echoes the specific in the name of the archipelago, Orkney (Old Norse: *Orkneyjar*). *Ork* in *Orkneyjar* predates the Norse settlement of the islands, and is attested in early Irish as *Innsi Orc*, ‘Boar (people) Isle’ (Gammeltoft 2010: 19, 21).⁴⁹ There are also several Roman attestations of the *Ork* element (although some copy each other), for example Diodorus Siculus⁵⁰ who wrote in the middle of the first century BC: “Britain

⁴⁷ Finnbogi Guðmundsson, *Orkneyinga Saga*, pp. 272-73.

⁴⁸ Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, p. 189.

⁴⁹ Gammeltoft, ‘Shetland and Orkney Island-Names’, pp. 19, 21.

⁵⁰ Diodorus and Oldfather (trans.), *The Library of History of Diodorus Siculus* book 5, chapter 21.

is triangular in shape, [...] and the last [corner], writers tell us, extends out into the open sea and is named Orca". In this source, the tip of Caithness bears the *Ork* name, but the islands also came to be named as such long before the Vikings settled there. The first written source of the archipelago name is in Latin form, *Orcades*, by the Roman geographer Pomponius Mela in the first century AD.⁵¹

Was the specific element, *Ork*, conveyed to the conquering Norse population in the early 9th century by the local Pictish population of the islands? Or did the Norse already know the ancient name of the islands when they first arrived, due to contact with other European peoples and through the seafaring culture? If so, we cannot be sure of what the local Picts living in Orkney called the islands or themselves. However, given the pre-Viking Age sources for the name, it is fairly reasonable to assume that also the Pictish name, although unrecorded, would have contained the *Ork* element.⁵²

In the Old Norse name *Orkneyjar*, the Celtic/Pictish *Orc* has been phonologically adapted to resemble the similar sounding Old Norse word *orkn* (also: *erkn*, *ørkn*), which means 'grey seal', *Halichoerus gryphus*.⁵³ 'Seal islands' is of course a very fitting name for Orkney, but is not an independent name given to the islands by the Old Norse speaking population based on the observation that there are many seals along its shores. It is merely a folk-etymology to the adapted older name.

I find it reasonably likely that the incoming Norse population in one way or another associated the *Ork* specific with the existing Pictish population of the islands. Whether or not the Picts used it themselves, the Norse would have thought of the islanders as those 'Ork-island people', or perhaps even as the 'Ork people' if *Ork* was understood as a tribal name.

Having thus considered the name of the archipelago, let us now discuss the names of the mound, *Orkahaugr* and *Orkhaugr*. Let us first consider the possibility that it has nothing to do with the name *Orkneyjar*, the similarity being merely coincidental, and that *Ork* in the name of the mound has an entirely different meaning.

The *Ork* in *Orkahaugr/Orkhaugr* could for example refer to some identifying feature of the mound, such as its shape being likened to a round-lidded chest. The word *ork* (feminine) is interpreted in Zoëga's dictionary as "ark, chest, or coffin".⁵⁴ For example, a medieval runic inscription from Berge in Oppland, Norway (N 77)⁵⁵, is written on a wooden chest and reads

ræipulfr : kærpi : þerork

*Hreiðulfr gerði þar ork*⁵⁶.

(Hreiðulfr made the chest there.)

It is possible to envisage the mound of Maeshowe being likened to a round-lidded chest or coffin, with the underlying association that it also *contains* something⁵⁷.

⁵¹ Nansen, *In Northern Mists*, pp. 89-90.

⁵² Gammeltoft, 'Shetland and Orkney Islands Names', p. 21.

⁵³ Heggstad, *Gamalnorsk ordbok*, p. 131.

⁵⁴ Zoëga, Cleasby et al. *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic*.

⁵⁵ Samnordisk runtextdatabas.

⁵⁶ I am grateful to Prof. Jan Ragnar Hagland for drawing this to my attention.

⁵⁷ In this respect, the Oxford English Dictionary's definition 1b under the entry for "ark" is interesting: "Casket, treasury". Thank you to Andrea Blendl for drawing this to my attention.

Therefore, there is a distinct possibility that the name *Orkhaugr* was, at one point and at least by some people, understood as a plain compound of *Ork* and *haugr*, meaning the ‘ark-mound’ or ‘chest-mound’. This interpretation, however, does not make sense for the form *Orkahaugr* where one needs to account for the “a”. Such an “a” could theoretically be genitive plural: ‘the mound of the chests’, but in that case the *q* would change to *a*: **Arkahaugr*, and this is not an attested form.

Alternatively, as Hugh Marwick suggested, while still regarding the mound’s physical shape, *Ork* could be a term for elevation or projection. In support of this theory, in addition to the Greek and Roman notion that *Cape Orca* is the corner of Caithness (possibly Dunnet Head), Marwick cites the names *Orknagabel* in Unst (Shetland), for a cliff, and *De Muckle and Little Orka* for two hills in Dunrossness (Shetland), and the *Ness of Ork* in Shapinsay (Orkney). Marwick also lists the curious sounding name *Howe Hurkis* in Deenress (Orkney), which he says Jakobsen explains as a transposition of the elements in *Orkahaugr*.⁵⁸

However, let us also consider the possibility that the names *Orkahaugr* and *Orkhaugr* for Maeshowe do somehow derive from the name of the archipelago, *Orkneyjar*. It could for example have originated as an extrinsic name, used by Icelanders and mainland Scandinavians to refer to the most significant or best-known mound in the Orkney Islands. It may be that Maeshowe acquired some fame through its role as assembly site.⁵⁹ This explanation would make sense whether the form of the name is *Orkhaugr* or *Orkahaugr*. In the case of *Orkahaugr*, the saga form, the grammar may be interpreted as masculine plural genitive of *orkar*. If so, *orkar* would refer to the people of Orkney, the whole name being thus interpreted as ‘the mound of the Orcadians’. The *Orkneyinga Saga* (c. 1200 AD) is preserved in Icelandic manuscripts and was arguably composed in Iceland. An extrinsic name for the mound is therefore not unexpected in the saga, although an Orcadian origin for at least some of the incorporated saga material has also been argued.⁶⁰

The runic inscription (Or Barnes 24), on the other hand, is physically located in Orkney and is signed by *Hlíf*, the earl’s housekeeper. Who was *Hlíf*, and where did she come from?⁶¹ She may or may not have grown up in Orkney. If the earl she refers to is one of the Earls of Orkney, i.e. *Rognvaldr Kali Kolsson* or *Haraldr Maddaðarson*, which I would regard as likely, *Hlíf* was probably at least a long-term resident in the isles. An extrinsic name is therefore less likely to be used by *Hlíf*, and lessens the probability that *Orkahaugr* or *Orkhaugr* was an extrinsic name only.⁶²

We must therefore consider the possibility that the place-name, at least in one of its variant forms, was in use locally in Orkney, and that it was perhaps given by the first Norse population in the isles. If this is the case, what does the name say about their vision of Maeshowe? Which stories could the name have been part of, and which dialogues might have taken place?

If it was named *Orkahaugr/Orkhaugr* by the Norse population who replaced the Picts, the *Ork* element could refer to the former rulers of the isles as a tribal name: ‘The Ork people’ (whether or not the Orkney Picts themselves used that name). This naming would reflect the fact that Maeshowe is older than the Norse settlement and that it was understood as a significant landmark already at the point of Norse colonisation. The first “a” in *Orkahaugr* could then be explained as a masculine genitive plural of *orkar* where the *orkar* refers to the former (Pictish) population of Orkney, in

⁵⁸ Marwick, ‘Celtic Place-Names in Orkney’ p. 262.

⁵⁹ Sanmark, *Viking Law and Order*, pp. 221-4, 230.

⁶⁰ Beuermann, ‘Jarla Sögur Orkneyja’ p. 154.

⁶¹ Aslak Liestøl speculates that she was the daughter of Hlífolf, Earl Hákon Pálsson’s cook and the unwilling executioner of Saint Magnus, see Liestøl, ‘Runes’, p. 235.

⁶² I am grateful to Dr Alexandra Sanmark for her valuable contributions in discussing Hlíf’s role with me.

contrast to the current (Norse). Following this, it is possible to imagine a later development, when memories of who these predecessors were had faded, where *Orkahaugr/Orkhaugr* was understood less specifically as ‘the mound of those who were here before’.

We have now seen three different scenarios which could all plausibly explain the 12th / 13th century forms of name: As derived from a physical description of the mound, as an extrinsic name referring to the mound of the current (Norse) population of Orkney, and as a local name referring to the former (Pictish/legendary) population. I wish to stress at this point that one cannot expect the understanding of the name to remain constant: It might well be that the name was understood as a description of the mound’s shape by one group of people, as a reference to the name of the archipelago or current population by others, and as referring to the former culture inhabiting the islands by yet others – at different times and/or in different places. These are all polyphonic dialogues. The meanings outlined here are merely nodes in a greater dialogical web.

There is one scenario still left to discuss: one where the mound is seen as *the burial place of someone specific*. The size and prominence of the mound in the landscape would lend itself to such thinking.⁶³ This specific person or being might be mythological, for example an ancient king or earl in a mythological past.⁶⁴ For people with such an understanding, the name *Orkahaugr* could easily be taken as weak masculine genitive *singular*, derived from a personal name **Orki*, so that the whole name takes on the meaning of ‘Orki’s Mound’.

**Orki* is not a regularly attested Old Norse personal name: It is not recorded in western Scandinavia, although traces exist in Denmark and the Danelaw, and possibly in Sweden.⁶⁵ However, there is the remarkable use of it in what seems to be a patronymic derived from it in one of the runic inscriptions in Maeshowe (Or Barnes 8), where a person named *Oddr Orkasonr* is mentioned. Barnes⁶⁶ suggests that unless it was actually a regular name, meaning something like ‘the Orcadian’, the inscription could have been meant as a pun on the name *Orkahaugr*. To this I would like to add that it could of course be a further pun on a chest-like shape, for example describing someone’s belly.

It is in any case conceivable that the name *Orkahaugr* was understood in 12th century, when the runic inscriptions were made, as the mound of someone named **Orki*, in parallel to for example *Raknehaugen* (Norway), *Halvdanshaugen* (Norway) and *Anundshög* (Sweden), which in folk memory were understood as the mounds of *Rakni*, *Halvdan* and *Anund*.

This understanding could furthermore be connected with a foundation myth, with the purpose of explaining the name *Orkneyjar*. There are many parallels to this, both for larger and smaller geographical or political units. For example, from the valley of *Suldal* in *Rogaland* (Norway) comes the story that the area got its name from a *King Sold*:

Dei første som busette seg i Suldal, var komne or Sausoknå. Det var ein gut og ei jente som ville ha kvarandre; men foreldra hadde mykje imot det, så det ikkje kunne verta gjestebod av. Då rømde dei og busette seg i Suldal. Snart flytta også andre folk til. Det vart så mange at dei laut få seg ein konge. Dei fekk ein konge som heitte Sold. Etter han vart dalen kalla Solddal, og dette namnet vart seinare til Suldal.⁶⁷

⁶³ Sanmark and Ljosland, ‘Mound-breaking in the mind of the medieval Norse’.

⁶⁴ Farrer thinks along these lines when he suggests that Maeshowe was the burial mound of a legendary sea king. See Farrer, *Maes-Howe*, p. 23.

⁶⁵ Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe, Orkney*, p. 94.

⁶⁶ Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe, Orkney*, p. 94.

⁶⁷ Bjørlykke and Økland, *Segner på nettet, Suldal*.

(The first people to settle in Suldal had come from the Sausoknå parishes. It was a boy and a girl who desired one another, but their parents were much against it, so there couldn't be a traditional wedding. They eloped and settled in Suldal. Soon, other people followed, so many that they needed a king. They got a king whose name was Sold. After him, the valley was named Solddal, and this name later became Suldal.)

King Sold of Suldal is certainly not the only eponymous king of a district in Norway. In the first chapter of *Orkneyinga Saga*⁶⁸, which is a mythological tale of how Norway was founded, we also hear of a *King Sokni* from *Sognefjord* in western Norway, and from *Fridþjof's Saga* and other legendary sagas we know of a *King Hring* of *Hringaríki* in eastern Norway.

Even more excitingly, the first king to conquer mainland Norway (Old Norse: *Nórvegr*) in the mythological opening of *Orkneyinga Saga* is named *Nórr*:

Eptir þat fór Nórr í fjörð þann, er norðr gengr af Sogni; þar hafði Sókni fyrir ráðit, er nú heitir Sóknadalr. þar dvalðisk Nórr lengi, ok heitir þar nú Nórafjörðr. þar kom til móts við hann Górr, bróðir hans [...].

Górr hafði ok undir sik lagt land allt it ytra, er hann hafði sunnan farit, ok þá skiptu þeir lǫndum með sér bræðr. Hafði Nórr meginland allt, en Górr skal hafa eyjar þær allar [...].

þaðan sneri Nórr aptr norðr til ríkis þess, er hann hafði undir sik lagt; þat kallaði hann Nórveg.⁶⁹

(Afterwards Nor travelled over to the fjord to the branching off Sognefjord to the north, now called Sokna Dale as Sokni had once ruled there. Nor stayed on a long time at a place called Norumfjord, and it's there that his brother Gor joined him [...]. Gor had laid claim to all the islands on his way from the south and now the borthers divided the whole country between them. Nor was to have all the mainland and Gor the islands [...]. From there Nor made his way back north to the country he had laid claim to and called it Norway.)

Historia Norvegiae also bears witness to the story that “Norway, then, received its name from a certain king called Nórr.”⁷⁰ This brief history of Norway was composed between 1150-1300.⁷¹ Ekrem⁷² makes good case for dating it to around 1150, which would make it precisely contemporary with the runic inscriptions in Maeshowe.

Similarly, *King Dan* was a legendary king said to have founded Denmark (Old Norse: *Danmǫrk*). The legend of King Dan is found in Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum*, which was completed between 1200-1220, and describes the deeds of the Danes from the primeval King Dan up to the year 1185.⁷³ Saxo writes about King Dan: “Now Dan and Angul, with whom the stock of the Danes begins, were begotten of Humble, their father, and were the governors and not only the founders of our race.”⁷⁴

⁶⁸ Holtsmark, *Orknøyingenes saga*, pp. 11-13.

⁶⁹ Finnbogi Guðmundsson, *Orkneyinga Saga*, pp. 5-6.

⁷⁰ Kunin and Phelpstead, *A history of Norway*, p. 2.

⁷¹ Phelpstead, 'Introduction', in Kunin and Phelpstead, *A history of Norway*, p. xvi.

⁷² Ekrem, *Nytt lys over Historia Norvegie*.

⁷³ Store norske leksikon, entry for *Gesta Danorum*.

⁷⁴ Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, book 1, chapter 1, p. 1

The legend of King Dan also occurs in *Danasaga Arngríms Lærða*,⁷⁵ which is thought to derive from a lost *Skjoldunga Saga*:

Rigus nomen fuit vivo cuidam inter magnates sui temporis non infimo. Is danpri cujusdam, domini in Danpsted, filiam duxit uxorem, cui Dana nomen erat; qvi deinde Regis titulo in sua illa provincia acquisito, filium ex uxore Dana, Dan sive Danum, hæredem reliqvit; cujus Dani paternam ditionem jam adepti subditi omnes Dani dicebantur.

(Rigus was the name of a great chieftain. He went to marry Dana who was the daughter of Danps from Danpsted. He was the first to be called King of his land. He had a son by his wife who was named Dan and he became king after his father. When Dan had taken over the land from his father, then the people of this land were known as the Danes.)

There are numerous mounds in Denmark that are known in local legend as the burial mound of King Dan and named *Kong Dans høj*, *Danshøj* and variations thereof (Old Norse: *Danshaugr*). Lidegaard⁷⁶ documents six legends of a King Dan buried at Dan's mounds.

I believe that Maeshowe chambered tomb was at one point in time, in the 12th century and perhaps for some time before and after, understood in such terms. The clinching evidence, in addition to these numerous parallels, comes from *Historia Norvegiae*, a history contemporary with the Maeshowe break-in. It says: "In this sea are the Orkney islands, more than thirty in number, deriving their name from a certain earl named Orkan."⁷⁷ The Latin *Historia Norvegiae's* "Orkan" must be no less than the eponymous ruler thought to have founded Orkney, which in local folklore had his resting place in the mound of Maeshowe.

A folk-etymological understanding of *Orkahaugr* as the burial mound of Earl Orki/Orkan would help explain the interaction which we know took place in the mid-12th century: The mound was broken into. Some of the runic inscriptions left in the central chamber as a result of this incident speak of a "treasure" that the intruders expected to find there, but which seemingly was not found (Or Barnes 4, 8, 25, 26, 27, 28).⁷⁸ Others make references to sagas or saga-type stories (Or Barnes 1, 20, 23). In combination with other stories and beliefs, such as the belief in a *haugbúi*, or undead mound-spirit that guards a treasure, which is commonly attested⁷⁹ in later folklore both in Orkney and other parts of the Norse world, and saga stories of heroes overcoming such spirits and winning treasure and fame⁸⁰, the notion that *Orkahaugr* was the burial mound of Earl Orki/Orkan would help explain the intruders' desire to break in.⁸¹ The intrusion into Maeshowe in the 12th century may therefore be read as another example of how names, folk-etymologies and storytelling are all part of a dialogism, in which interaction with the place, guided by this dialogism, also plays a part.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while the original meanings of the names *Maeshowe* and *Orkahaugr/Orkhaugr* are still uncertain, I find value in exploring how the names have or may have been understood by different people at different times. If we put the search for a single, true meaning aside for a while, the emerging and changing meanings offer valuable insights into how various groups of people living in

⁷⁵ Bjarni Guðnason, "Danasaga Arngríms lærða" p. 9.

⁷⁶ Lidegaard, *Danske høje*, pp. 81, 86, 188, 200, 207, 233.

⁷⁷ Kunin and Phelpstead, *A history of Norway*, p. 8.

⁷⁸ Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*.

⁷⁹ See for example Marwick, *The Folklore of Orkney and Shetland*, p. 39, and Farrer, *Maes-Howe*, footnote 1.

⁸⁰ Beck, *Haugbrot*, pp. 215-216.

⁸¹ See full argument and references in Sanmark and Ljosland in preparation.

different time periods have engaged with and interacted with this place. The Victorian and the medieval responses to the different names for the great Orcadian burial mound share a role as nodes in a web of storytelling and meaning-making: The Victorian story-web — which to some extent still lives on today — spins tales around the notions of the mound as ‘Maiden’s Mound’ and reads into it special meanings connected with magic (or negatively as sorcery), spring, the female sex and the contrasting female attributes of virginity and fertility. The medieval story-web interprets the mound as ‘Orki’s Mound’ and weaves it into a narrative of a notable spirit inhabitant guarding a treasure, which can be conquered by the right hero. These two story-webs have much in common, in the sense that they both led to personal and communal meaning-making for those who shared it, and furthermore to certain types of interaction with the place. Examining these narratives and the connected processes of meaning-making as they developed, through the evidence still available to us, is therefore a valuable exercise. It offers insights into not only how the mound itself has been understood over time, but also into how it connects with a wider narrative web of how people in the Victorian period understood and constructed “The Old North”,⁸² as a way of making a Germanic, British, and Orcadian mythological past, and similarly how people in the 12th century understood the mythological past of their islands, represented by the burial mound of its eponymous founder. Into these stories, people connect themselves, by participating in the expanding story-webs, and by interacting with the place itself — in the case of the 12th century intruders by enacting the role of a saga hero, or as the writer of one of the Maeshowe runic inscriptions so aptly puts it: “That is a viking ... then came here underneath.”⁸³

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⁸² Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians*.

⁸³ Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, p. 61.

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