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Published in:
Innes Review

Publication date:
2024

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Citation for published version (APA):

Plumb, O. (2024). Where were the Orcades? Early medieval engagement with the islands at the end of the Earth in texts and maps. *Innes Review*, 75(1), 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.3366/inr.2024.0356>

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This article has been published by Edinburgh University Press in *Innes Review* 75.1 (2024): 1-22

<https://doi.org/10.3366/inr.2024.0356>

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Oisín Plumb

Where were the *Orcades*? Early medieval engagement with the islands at the edge of the Earth in texts and maps.

Abstract: This paper considers the portrayal of the *Orcades* and the North Atlantic in a range of seventh- to eleventh-century insular sources. It is argued that the content of early medieval insular written sources suggests that *Orcades* should not necessarily be translated as ‘Orkney’ in every case, and that it is plausible that on many occasions, a territory encompassing a wider range of the island groups of Scotland is intended. Consideration of the depiction of the *Orcades* on the *mappa mundi* within British Library Cotton MS Tiberius B.v/1 bolsters this conclusion. New multi-spectral images of the map suggest that, despite apparent adjustments to the extent of the *Orcades* during the process of the map’s production, a very large archipelago covering an extensive territory off northern Britain was intended from the time of the map’s initial creation.

Keywords: *Orcades*, Orkney, Shetland, Western Isles, British Library MS Cotton Tiberius b. v/1, *Mappa Mundi*.

Introduction

The *Orcades* were well known to classical scholars. They frequently appear in texts representing the edge of the inhabited world, their boreal location ensuring that they held the menacing mystique associated with all things northern.¹ Regardless of the symbolic status that the *Orcades* held, some of the classical accounts hint at a not-too-distant familiarity with the archipelago known today as Orkney. Tacitus perhaps provides the most convincing example.

hanc oram nouissimi maris tunc primum Romana classis circumuecta insulam esse Britanniam adfirmavit, ac simul incognitas ad id tempus insulas (quas Orcadas uocant) inuenit domuitque. dispecta est et Thule, quia hactenus iussum et hiems adpetebat. Sed mare pigrum et graue

¹ Peter Davidson, *The Idea of North* (London: Reaktion, 2016), p. 31; Duncan Sneddon, *Adomnán of Iona’s Vita Sancti Columbae: a literary analysis*, PhD Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2018, pp. 219-222; Oisín Plumb, ‘“Beyond the range of human exploration”: Cormac and the “North” in the Seventh Century’, in Oisín Plumb, Alexandra Sanmark and Donna Heddle (eds.), *What is North? Imagining the North from Ancient times to the Present Day* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020), pp. 37-51, pp.37, 40-41;

*remigantibus perhibent ne uentis quidem proinde attolli, credo quod rariores terrae montesque, causa ac materia tempestatum, et profunda moles continui maris tardius impellitur.*²

Round these coasts of remotest ocean the Roman fleet then for the first time sailed, ascertained that Britain is an island, and simultaneously discovered and conquered what are called the *Orcades*, islands hitherto unknown. Thule too was descried in the distance, which as yet had been hidden by the snows of winter. Those waters, they say, are sluggish, and yield with difficulty to the oar, and are not even raised by the wind as other seas. The reason, I suppose, is that lands and mountains, which are the cause and origin of storms, are here comparatively rare, and also that the vast depths of that unbroken expanse are more slowly set in motion.³

Instances such as this, where classical use of *Orcades* can be interpreted as ‘Orkney’ under a (reasonably) uncritical reading of the account, with *Thule* here perhaps interpreted as Fair Isle, coupled with the clear survival of the term into modern times in Orkney, has entrenched the notion that the names should be understood as synonymous. Where the term *Orcades* appears in early medieval insular sources, it is invariably translated as either ‘the Orkneys’⁴ or, in line with accepted modern Orcadian usage, the singular ‘Orkney’.⁵ My aim in this paper, is to suggest that caution is merited here and that in early medieval insular sources, we should not always assume that the *Orcades* were conceived of as identical with the islands now called Orkney. In some ways, it is surprising that such hesitancy needs to be stated. It would never be assumed that when Bede refers to an event within the territory of *gens Nordanhymbrorum*, this necessarily took place in the modern English county of Northumberland.⁶ Indeed it is interesting to note that Classicists have often been happy to allow for a wider geographical application of the term *Orcades* than medievalists. For example, Eric Herbert Warmington and Martin J. Millett define *Orcades* as ‘the Orkney and Shetland Islands’⁷ Furthermore, the well-known application of *Orcas* to a promontory on the British mainland within Classical sources emphasises that the term has never been one universally associated with Orkney alone.⁸ However, previous statements urging caution in our understanding of the term have proved more controversial than anticipated, and thus a more dedicated consideration of the issue is

² A. J. Woodman (ed.), *Tacitus: Agricola* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 45.

³ Alfred John Church, William Jackson Brodrigg (eds.), *Cornelius Tacitus, The Life of Cnaeus Julius Agricola*, Available at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0081%3Achapter%3D10> (last accessed 23 November 2023).

⁴ A term which is anathema to anyone who has spent any length of time living in the archipelago.

⁵ F.T. Wainwright, ‘The Picts and the Problem’, in F. T. Wainwright (ed.), *The Problem of the Picts* (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1955), pp. 1-53, p. 35; James Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland: Scotland to 795* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 204; T. M. Charles-Edwards (ed. and trans.) *The Chronicle of Ireland*, Volume 1, Translated Texts for Historians 44 (Liverpool: Liverpool university Press, 2006), pp. 112, 164 and 183.

⁶ For example, *Historia Ecclesiastica* III, 1.

⁷ Warmington, Eric Herbert, and Martin J. Millett. "Orcades." In *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). Available at <https://www-oxfordreference-com.umi.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/acref/9780199545568.001.0001/acref-9780199545568-e-4583> (last accessed 23 November 2023).

⁸ C. H. Oldfather (trans.), *Diodorus Siculus: Library of History*, V. 21, Loeb Classical Library 340, (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1939), Volume 3, pp. 152-153; Charles Müller (ed.), *Claudii Ptolemaei Geographia*, vol. 1 (Paris: Alfredo Firmin Didot, 1883) p. 83.

merited.⁹ In what follows, I discuss a range of Insular depictions of the *Orcades* and the North Atlantic which were compiled in their surviving forms between the seventh and eleventh centuries. This includes consideration of a depiction on the *Anglo-Saxon mappa mundi* within British Library Cotton MS Tiberius B.v/1, where new multi-spectral scans shed light on the probable processes of composition. It should be stated at the outset that it is highly plausible that in some cases, the use of the term *Orcades* within early medieval sources does indeed correspond to Orkney. Indeed, the shifting of political and ecclesiastical power within the period of our sources, which saw the end of Pictish identity and the coming of Norse political and cultural influence, would strongly caution against assuming that the meaning of any territorial label remained static. This is all the more reason to show caution when interpreting the terms used within the sources.

Written sources

The Annals of Ulster contain three independent references to a territory named *Orc* or *Orcades*:

AU 580.2: *Fecht Orc la hAedhan mc. Gabrain* [The expedition to *Orc* by Aedan son of Gabrán]

AU 682.4: *Orcades delete sunt la Bruide* [The *Orcades* were destroyed by Bruide]

AU 709.4: *Bellum for Orcaibh in quo filius Artablair iacuit* [A battle [gained] over the men of *Orc*, in which Artablair's son fell].¹⁰

A further chronicle reference, occurring in the Annals of Clonmacnoise, can be dismissed: *Niva Mac Oirck, prince of ye Orcades* appears in a list of those killed in the Battle of Allen in 720.¹¹ However, the equivalent entry in the Fragmentary Annals is *Nuada Uirc ri Guill 7 Irguill*.¹² In the account of the Battle of Allen in the Yellow Book of Lecan, the name is listed as *Nuada mac Oirc rí Gall*.¹³ The reference to the *Orcades* in the Annals of Clonmacnoise is likely to be either an error or extrapolation based on the patronym.¹⁴ Of the three remaining chronicle entries, the amount that can be said varies. In the first, we have a clearly identifiable protagonist - Aedán mac Gabrán, King of Dalriada from c. 574 to c. 609.¹⁵ Little else can be said about this entry and a shorter apparent duplicate entry for the following year which lists

⁹ Neil McGuigan, 'Oisín Plumb, Picts and Britons in the Early Medieval Irish Church: Travels West Over the Storm-Swelled Sea' (review), *Northern Scotland*, Volume 13 Issue 1 (2022), pp. 87-89.

¹⁰ Seán Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill (eds. and trans.), *The Annals of Ulster* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1983), pp. 90-91, 146-47. The translations have been adapted to remove the presumption that *Orc* and *Orcades* should be translated as 'Orkney'.

¹¹ Denis Murphy, SJ (ed.), *The Annals of Clonmacnoise* (Dublin: RSI, 1896), p. 113.

¹² John O'Donovan (ed. and trans.), *Annals of Ireland: Three Fragments, Copied from Ancient Sources by Dubhaltach Mac Fírbisigh* (Dublin: Irish Archaeological and Celtic Society, 1860), pp. 48-49.

¹³ Whitley Stokes (ed. and trans.), 'The Battle of Allen', *Revue Celtique* 24 (1903), pp. 41-70, pp. 52-53.

¹⁴ See Oisín Plumb, *Picts and Britons in the Early Medieval Irish Church: Travels west over the storm-swelled sea* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020), pp. 147-148.

¹⁵ Marjorie Anderson, 'Aedán [Aedan, Aidan] mac Gabrán (c. 535–609?)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004), available at <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/222>> (last accessed 23 November 2023).

only *Fecht Orc* [The expedition to Orc].¹⁶ James Fraser suggests it possible that this ‘extremely precocious sea-raid’ was launched after the death of Báetán of Dál Fiatach, who according to an Irish genealogy had been submitted to by Aedán.¹⁷ An entry in AU 582.1 lists *Bellum Manonn in quo uictor erat Aedhan mc. Gabrain* [The battle of Manu, in which Aedán son of Gabrán was victor].¹⁸ There is disagreement over the likely location of this Manu, with both the Isle of Man and Manau near the Forth being plausible candidates.¹⁹ Nonetheless, it seems that whatever the catalyst for Aedán’s expedition to *Orc*, the event prefigured further ‘expansionist efforts’.²⁰ The entry in AU 709.4 also gives us little certainty: *Bellum for Orcaibh in quo filius Artablair iacuit* [A battle [gained] over the men of *Orc*, in which Artablair’s son fell]. Nothing is known of the slain protagonist or his father. However, the entry does imply that there was some amount of volatility in *Orc* in the early eighth century.²¹

The ‘destruction’ of the *Orcades* highlighted in AU 682.4 gives us rather more room for reasoned speculation, as it fits well with other contemporary evidence. It has been argued that the event may have been part of a programme of consolidation of Northern territory by the Pictish king Bridei son of Beli, also evidenced in a siege at Dunnottar recorded in AU 681.5.²² An insight into the perceived relationship between the *Orcades* and the Pictish kingship in the years immediately following this event may be gleaned from an anecdote within Adomnán’s *Life of Saint Columba*, written around 697.²³

Alio in tempore Cormacus, Christi miles, de quo in primo huius opusculi libello breuiter aliqua commemorauimus pauca, etiam secunda uice conatus est herimum in ociano quaerere. Qui postquam a terris per infinitum ocianum plenís enauigauit uelís, hisdem diebus sanctus Columba, cum ultra dorsum moraretur Britanniae, Brudeo regi praesente Orcadum regulo commendauit, dicens: ‘Aliqui ex nostris nuper emigrauerunt, desertum in pilago intransmeabili inuenire obtantes. Qui si forte post longos circuitus Orcadas deuenierint insulas, huic regulo cuius obsedes in manu tua sunt deligenter commenda, ne aliquid aduersi intra terminos eius contra eos fiat.’ Hoc uero sanctus ita dicebat quia in spiritu praecognouit quod post aliquot menses idem Cormaccus esset ad Orcadas uenturus. Quod ita postea euenit. Et propter supradictam sancti uiri commendationem de morte in Orcadibus liberatus est uicina

At another time, Cormac, a soldier of Christ, of whom we have briefly related some few things in the first book of this work, attempted for the second time to seek a desert place in the ocean.

¹⁶ Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill (eds. and trans.), *The Annals of Ulster*, pp. 90-91.

¹⁷ Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, p. 123; Philip Irwin, ‘Báetán mac Cairill’ (d. 581), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004), available at <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/50088> (last accessed 23 November 2023).

¹⁸ Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill (eds. and trans.), *The Annals of Ulster*, pp. 90- 91

¹⁹ Charles-Edwards (ed. and trans.), *The Chronicle of Ireland*, Vol. 1, p. 113, n. 6; Marjorie Anderson, ‘Aedán [Áedan, Aidan] mac Gabrán (c. 535–609?)’; Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, p. 133.

²⁰ Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, p. 123.

²¹ Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill (eds. and trans.), *The Annals of Ulster*, pp. 166-67; Plumb, “‘Beyond the range of human exploration’”, p. 44.

²² Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill (eds. and trans.), *The Annals of Ulster*, pp. 146-147; William Thomson, *The New History of Orkney*, 3rd edn (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2008), p. 9; Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, p. 214; Plumb, “‘Beyond the range of human exploration’”, p. 44.

²³ Richard Sharpe (ed. and trans.), *Life of St Columba* (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 55.

After he had sailed away from the land, with full sails, over the limitless ocean, in those days Saint Columba, while he was beyond the spine of Britain, charged king Brude, in the presence of the subject-king of the *Orcades*, saying: ‘Some of our people have recently gone out desiring to find a desert place in the sea that cannot be crossed. Earnestly charge this king, whose hostages are in your hand, that, if after long wanderings our people chance to land in the islands of the *Orcades*, nothing untoward shall happen to them within his territories.’ The saint spoke thus because he foreknew in the spirit that after some months this Cormac would come to the *Orcades*. And it did afterwards so happen. And because of the aforesaid commendation of the holy man, Cormac was delivered from imminent death in the *Orcades*.²⁴

There has been much discussion over the provenance of this anecdote. It is very likely that Adomnán took the anecdote from an earlier collection, though how much earlier remains a matter of some debate.²⁵ Regardless of the tale’s origins, Adomnán’s presentation of the anecdote makes two points clear to his contemporary readership: The *Orcades* owe their Christian heritage to the Columban Church and their political fealty to the Pictish kingship. The placement of the anecdote as second in a sequence of three voyages of Cormac, of increasing extremity, suggests that the *Orcades* represents the edge of the inhabited world: The location of Cormac’s departure for his first voyage is western Mayo, an area associated with Patrick’s missions. The location of his third voyage is the Northern Seas ‘beyond the range of human exploration’. The three voyages in order thus can be taken to represent the former edge of Christendom, the edge of the inhabited world, and the ends of the earth. The spiritual and temporal concerns of the most northerly inhabited place are thus in the hands of the Columban Church and the Pictish kingship,²⁶ though the events of AU 709.4 might suggest that the rule of the Pictish kingship was not as strong as Adomnán or his source indicates. David Dumville argues that further evidence for the contemporary perception that the *Orcades* were Pictish may be seen in a ninth century manuscript fragment in which an adjusted version of Bede’s chronicle summary at the end of *Historia Ecclesiastica* states that the *Orcadas* are *insulas Pictorum*.²⁷

It is well known that there are large geographical gaps in our sources for the far northern Pictish areas, particularly on the north-western seaboard. This absence is often (albeit not always entirely satisfactorily) explained through the assertion that there were no notable polities in these areas. The same argument has been applied to Shetland. Alex Woolf suggests that the relative paucity of examples of Pictish art in Shetland argues for ‘sporadic links rather

²⁴ VC II, 42, Alan Orr Anderson and Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson (eds.), *Adomnán, Life of Columba*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 166–67.

²⁵ See for example, James Fraser, ‘Adomnán, Cumméne Ailbe, and the Picts’, *Peritia* 17-18 (2003-04), pp. 183-98; Plumb, “‘Beyond the range of human exploration’”.

²⁶ VC I, 6, and II 42, Anderson and Anderson (eds.), *Adomnán, Life of Columba*, pp.28-31 and 166–71; Nathalie Stalmans and Thomas Charles-Edwards, ‘Saints of Meath’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004), available at < <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/51010>> (last accessed 24 November 2023); Dan Tipp and Jonathan M. Wooding, ‘Adomnán’s Voyaging Saint: The Cult of Cormac ua Liatháin’, in Jonathan M. Wooding (ed.), *Adomnán of Iona: Theologian, Lawmaker, Peacemaker* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2010), pp. 237–52, p. 242; Plumb, “‘Beyond the range of human exploration’”.

²⁷ David N. Dumville, ‘A note on the Picts in Orkney’, *Scottish Gaelic Studies* 12 part 2 (1976), p. 266; David N. Dumville, ‘A new chronicle fragment of early British history’, *The English Historical Review* Vol. 88, No. 347 (April 1973), pp. 312-314.

than full engagement with the Verturian hegemony', in common with Skye, the Outer Hebrides and the north-western mainland of Scotland.²⁸ However, Shetland's location at the extreme north of the Insular cultural sphere gives some cause for caution here. As we have seen Adomnán's portrayal of a *regulus* of the *Orcades*, whose actions are dictated by the Pictish king, who is in turn instructed by Columba, is done in such a way as to emphasise Columban influence over the northern extremities of the inhabited world and Pictish suzerainty over the same location's temporal concerns. If the *regulus* is indeed literarily 'under king of the Orkneys',²⁹ then the omission of Shetland must be accounted for.

It is unlikely that Adomnán or his source would have been unaware of the existence of Shetland. Even if there are fewer examples of 'Pictish Art' in Shetland than are found elsewhere, it is clear from what survives that there were adequate connections to other 'Pictish' areas and the wider insular world.³⁰ Indeed, the unique bear 'symbol' from Old Scatness is testament to vibrant engagement with, rather than poor emulation of, the Pictish symbol tradition.³¹ It could be countered that given the uncertainty of the chronology of Shetland's Christianisation, Adomnán or his sources may have wished to deliberately overlook Shetland as an inconvenient pagan blot in an otherwise Christian seascape. However, if this were the case, it would seem unlikely that observers inclined to be critical of Iona, would have failed to draw attention to the Columban church's continuing failure to evangelise the entirety of the North.³²

When contemplating the omission of Shetland from the sources, Dicuil's *Liber de mensura orbis terrae* provides further food for thought. Dicuil was an Irish scholar at the Frankish court in the first part of the ninth century. *De mensura orbis terrae* was composed in 825.³³ Dicuil's critique of classical references to Thule, in which he appeals to the authority of clerics he had spoken to thirty years prior, is well-known for its detailed description of a landmass whose properties are strikingly similar to Iceland.³⁴ Following this, note is made of what appear to be two separate archipelagos:

*Sunt aliae insulae multae in septentrionali Britanniae oceano quae a septentrionalibus
Britanniae insulis duorum dierum ac noctium recta nauigatione plenis uelis assiduo feliciter*

²⁸ Alex Woolf, *From Pictland to Alba: 789- 1070*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 13.

²⁹ These words are used in Sharpe's translation. Anderson and Anderson do not translate *Orcades*, though 'Orkney' is assumed in their commentary. See Sharpe (ed. and trans.), *Life of St Columba*, p. 196; Anderson and Anderson (eds.), *Adomnán, Life of Columba*, pp. xx and xxxiv.

³⁰ Ian G. Scott and Anna Ritchie, *Pictish and Viking-Age carvings from Shetland* (Edinburgh: RCAHMS, 2009); Iain Fraser, *The Pictish Symbol Stones of Scotland* (Edinburgh: RCAHMS, 2008), pp. 132-35 and 139-40.

³¹ Scott and Ritchie, *Pictish and Viking-Age carvings from Shetland*, pp. 2 and 14; Fraser, *The Pictish Symbol Stones of Scotland*, pp. 134-135.

³² For a consideration of Northumbrian attitudes to the Columban Church see Clare Stancliffe, *Bede, Wilfrid, and the Irish* (Jarrow : St. Paul's Church, 2003); Clare Stancliffe, 'British and Irish contexts', in Scott DeGregorio (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Bede* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 69- 83; and T. M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 429-38.

³³ J.J. Tierney with L. Bieler (ed. and trans.), *Dicuili liber de mensura orbis terrae*, *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae* vol. vi, (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1967), p. 17.

³⁴ See Dicuil, VII.11 J.J. in Tierney with L. Bieler (ed. and trans.), *Dicuili liber de mensura orbis terrae*, p. 75.

uento adiri quaeunt. Aliquis presbyterreligiosus mihi retulit quod in duobus aestiuis diebus et una intercedente nocte nauigans in duorum nauicula transtrorum in unam illam introiuit.

Illae insulae sunt aliae paruulae, fere cunctae simul angustis distantes fretis; in quibus in centum ferme annis heremitae ex nostra Scottia nauigantes habitauerunt. Sed sicut a principio mundi desertae semper fuerunt ita nunc causa latronum Normannorum uacuae anchoritis plenae innumerabilibus ouibus ac diuersis generibus multis nimis marinarum auium. Numquam eas insulas in libris auctorum memoratas inuenimus.

There are many other islands in the ocean to the north of Britain which can be reached from the northern islands of Britain in a direct voyage of two days and nights with sails filled with a continuously favourable wind. A devout priest told me that in two summer days and the intervening night he sailed in a two-benched boat and entered one of them.

There is another set of small islands, nearly all separated by narrow stretches of water; in these for nearly a hundred years hermits sailing from our country, Ireland, have lived. But just as they were always deserted from the beginning of the world, so now because of the Northman pirates they are emptied of anchorites, and filled with countless sheep and very many diverse kinds of sea-birds. I have never found these islands mentioned in the authorities.³⁵

There does seem to be a clear distinction between the first group of islands and those ‘always deserted from the beginning of the world’. If the description of the second archipelago may plausibly suggest the Faeroe Islands, it is tempting to consider the possibility that the first represents Shetland. However, there is very little to go on. There is no overt reference to whether these islands are populated. We are told that they are two day’s sail in favourable conditions from ‘the northern islands of Britain’. However, we have no clear indication of what we should understand by this term. The term could refer to the Western Isles, Orkney, or Shetland. It is also unclear whether Dicuil, who must have been aware of the term *Orcades*, would consider the term to be identical to ‘the northern islands of Britain’. It is notable that the islands ‘deserted from the beginning of the world’ are explicitly said to be absent from the authorities. Might we infer from this that Dicuil felt no such omission regarding the first islands? If so, one interpretation would be that he believed *Orcades* to encompass these.

When discussing the absence of Shetland from the sources, we might come across the objection that we have a plausible term for Shetland in Irish sources in *Inse Catt*.³⁶ Watson argued that this term was the pre-Norse name for Shetland, suggesting a ‘tribe of cats’ associated with the North Highland mainland and today attested both in the Old Norse derived Caithness (*Katanes*) and in the Gaelic term for Sutherland (*Cataibh*).³⁷ Some caution is merited here. The application of the term to Shetland does at first glance seem counterintuitive. Indeed, if we were looking for territories which might be most logically labelled ‘the islands of Cat’, then those adjacent to Caithness (i.e. Swona, Stroma, Orkney and the Pentland Skerries) would be top of our list. This is of course not a reason to dismiss the possibility of a toponymic, political or cultural link which united Shetland with Caithness and Sutherland, but excluded

³⁵ Dicuil, VII. 14-15 in Tierney with L. Bieler (ed. and trans.), *Diculi liber de mensura orbis terrae*, pp. 74- 77.

³⁶ James Henthorn Todd (ed. and trans.), *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1867), p. 152.

³⁷ William J. Watson, *The Celtic place names of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2011), p.30.

Orkney. However, Andrew Jennings points to the lateness of the earliest attestations - in the twelfth century *Cogad Gáedel re Gallaib* and *Tochmarc Luaine ocus aided Athairne*. Jennings also points to Alexander Carmichael's attestation of the term in reference to North Uist.³⁸ While the provenance of the account of Saint Torannán, in which the term features, cannot be said to have any great antiquity, perhaps owing its origins to the Louvain Franciscans,³⁹ the incidental use of the term *Inse Cat* in the context of the Western Isles should at least suggest some hesitation in necessarily assuming that the term indicates Shetland. Uncertainty over the exact whereabouts of 'the islands of Cat' is not a unique problem. The veritable menagerie of northern place or tribal names potentially connected with animals which are attested by ancient sources are virtually impossible to assign to discrete and exclusive geographic territories - for example Ptolemy has *Ταρουεδόμη* (*Tarvedunum*, 'bull fort') as another term for *Ὀρκὰς ἄκρα* (*Orcas prom.*, 'boar promontory') at the northernmost point of the Scottish mainland.⁴⁰ Indeed, Jakob Jakobsen, who visited Shetland in 1893 argued for a survival of *Orka* in his own time in both Unst and the southern part of Mainland Shetland:

On the west coast of Unst there is a promontory, a steep projecting rocky formation, commonly called "de *Orknagabel*". At first sight this name might appear to spring from an *"orkna-gaffl" (from O.N. "orkn", a seal); but this cannot be the case. The Unst fishermen often use this place as a landmark when finding a fishing ground, and call it "de *Orka* or *Orki* [ò 'rka, ó 'rki]", de face o' O. de gable o' O., and this name, now preserved only as a sea term, must be the original one. Thus it is the promontory itself which is (was) named *Orka*. In the west of Dunrossness, north of Fitful Head, there are two hills named *Orka* [*årka*]: de *mukkel* and de little O. ...the ancient Greek author Diodorus (Diodorus Siculus, in the first century) mentions 'Orkas', as the name of a promontory in the north of Scotland, the present 'Duncansby Head'... There must be a connection between the old Pictish *Orc-* ("Orcas") and Shetl. *Orka* as the name of a promontory, and Shetl. (Ork.) *Orka* as a hill-name can hardly be separated from them.⁴¹

Whether or not a system utilising animals as a marker of identity or territory ever existed in ancient times throughout northern Scotland and the northern archipelagos,⁴² let alone survived within place names into the early medieval period and beyond, we simply do not have enough information to confidently separate the cats, bulls and boars.

One of the most vivid early medieval portrayals of the *Orcades* comes from the *Life of St Fintan of Rheinau*. This narrative, in which the protagonist's journey from Leinster to, ultimately, the monastery of Rheinau in present day Switzerland, seems to have been recorded

³⁸ Andrew Jennings, 'Hjaltland Revisited: The Place-name Shetland and its Celtic Origin' *NORNA Rapport* 87 (2011), pp. 132-141, pp. 134-35; Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica: Hymns and Incantations* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1992), p. 610.

³⁹ Plumb, *Picts and Britons in the Early Medieval Irish Church*, p. 111-13.

⁴⁰ Alfred Stückelberger and Gerd Grasshoff (eds.), *Ptolemaios Handbuch der Geographie* (Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 2006), vol. 1. p. 148; Müller (ed.), *Claudii Ptolemaei Geographia*, vol. 1, p. 83; Thomson, *The New History of Orkney*, p. 4.

⁴¹ Jakob Jakobsen, *The Place-Names of Shetland*, trans. by Anna Horsbøl, new edn (Kirkwall: The Orcadian Limited, 1993), pp. 201-202.

⁴² Sally M. Foster, *Picts, Gaels and Scots* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1996), p. 12; Charles Thomas (1961) 'The Animal Art of the Scottish Iron Age and its Origins', *Archaeological Journal*, 118:1, pp. 14-64, p. 40.

by a contemporary who may have been Irish themselves, is argued to have been produced in the late ninth century, with Fintan's adventures as a young man having taken place around the 840s.⁴³ Within the narrative, Fintan is taken into captivity and after being sold several times ends up in the captivity of Norsemen who begin to transport him to their homeland. On route they take shelter in the *Orcades*:

*His ita gestis, ad quasdam venere insulas iuxta Pictorum gentem, quas Orcades vocant.*⁴⁴

After these events, they came to certain islands called *Orcades* next to the people of the Picts.⁴⁵

Fintan evades his captors as they shelter on an uninhabited small island within the *Orcades*. He then entrusts himself to God's care having taken a vow to devote his life to his service, and allows himself to be carried off by the water. He comes ashore on a larger landmass where he wanders for two full days before seeing another person. Ultimately, he ends up in the care of a local bishop, with whom he stays for two years before departing for the continent.⁴⁶ Attempts to identify places within the landscape have perhaps been encouraged by the veneer of plausibility and realism created by the vivid descriptions within the account as well as the mundane nature of its miracles. They have assumed that the place of Fintan's escape was within Orkney. Thomson suggested that the Holm of Papay was a possible location for Fintan's escape, with the larger landmass, and seat of the bishop, being Papa Westray.⁴⁷ Löwe suggests looking further afield for the bishop's seat - suggesting Rosemarkie, Ross-shire.⁴⁸ Any such attempts have had to grapple with which elements of the tale should be considered 'accurate' and which to reject. If the bishop was based on Papa Westray, or any other Orcadian island, then the absence of signs of human habitation until the third day of wandering must be rejected. However, if any location on the Scottish mainland is intended for the seat of the bishop, after an escape from anywhere in Orkney, then we are faced with an extraordinary crossing of the Pentland Firth without a vessel (and the notion that Fintan willingly threw himself into such a crossing). It is most likely that even if the narrative has reached us from someone who heard the tale from Fintan first hand, then something has gone awry in transmission, whether through accident or design. However, this serves to underline the extent to which this narrative does not give us a description which can unambiguously be assumed to depict Orkney. Indeed, if the search was widened to include the north-western coastline of Scotland, a multitude of small islands within plausible swimming distance of the expansive mainland may be found. It is very

⁴³ William P. L. Thomson, 'St Findan and the Pictish-Norse Transition', in R. J. Berry and H. N. Firth (eds.), *The People of Orkney* (Kirkwall: The Orkney Press, 1986), pp. 279- 283.

⁴⁴ O. Holder-Egger (ed.), 'Vita Findani', *Monumenta Germaniae Historica Series Scriptorum* (Hanover: Hahn, 1887), Vol. XV pt. I, pp. 502-06, p. 504.

⁴⁵ Christine J. Omand (trans.), 'The Life of Saint Findan', in *The People of Orkney*, R. J. Berry and H. N. Firth (eds.) (Kirkwall: Orkney, 1986), pp. 284-87, p. 286. Omand's translation has been adjusted following suggestions made by the reviewer.

⁴⁶ Holder-Egger (ed.), 'Vita Findani', Vol. XV pt. I, pp. 502-06; Omand (trans.), 'The Life of Saint Findan', pp. 284-87.

⁴⁷ Thomson, 'St Findan and the Pictish-Norse Transition', pp. 279- 283.

⁴⁸ H. Löwe, 'Findan von Rheinau. Eine irische Peregrinatio im 9. Jahrhundert', *Studi Medievali* 3rd series 26 (1985), pp. 53- 100, pp. 77 and 82; Plumb, *Picts and Britons in the early medieval Irish Church*, pp. 120-121.

unlikely that Fintan's island, if it existed, can ever be identified with certainty. However, one further point needs to be emphasised: if the narrative were to be taken at face value, the identification of the deserted island as belonging to the *Orcades* was by either a transient visitor to the island, or someone at great remove of distance (and perhaps time). It, like most of our sources, tells us very little of local application of the term.

A visual depiction

A striking insular visual depiction of the *Orcades* occurs in the map known as the *Anglo-Saxon mappa mundi* (**Fig. 1**). This map is found in the British Library Cotton MS Tiberius B. v/1, folio 56 v. The content of the manuscript is wide ranging and includes various tracts showing an interest in the wider world: There is a substantial tract on the Wonders of the East, featuring a lavish array of disconcerting illustrations. There is also a copy of Priscian's *Periegesis* - a translation of a Greek text describing the world. Though varied, the contents of this manuscript have been argued by Nicholas Howe to allow it to sit comfortably in a category of miscellanies he describes as 'books of elsewhere' - 'gatherings about place that reveal a sustained engagement with the larger cultural implications of geography'.⁴⁹ Aside from the *mappa mundi*, there is a 'Macrobian zonal map', dividing the earth into five climatic zones. These spartan and highly stylised maps are often associated with Macrobius's *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, but in this case the map does not appear to relate to any particular text in the manuscript. Early catalogues also attest a now lost astronomical map.⁵⁰ There is some amount of uncertainty as to the original ordering of the manuscript and the placement of the map within it.⁵¹ The manuscript is often dated to the second half of the eleventh century, with most of the texts attributed to a single scribe, with some additions by another.⁵² Stylistic links between the *mappa mundi* and other parts of the manuscript include the similarity of turreted structures representing cities to those in the Macrobian map, as well as to illustrations within *The Wonders of the East* and *Cicero's translation of Aratus*.⁵³

The incipit of *Periegesis* in this manuscript alludes to an accompanying world map:

Incipit liber Periegesis, id est de situ terrae Prisciani grammatici urbis Rome Caesariensis doctoris quem de priscorum dictis excerpit ormistarum sed et huic operi de tribus partibus uidelicet Asia

⁴⁹ P. McGurk, 'Palaeography and Illumination' in P. McGurk et. al (eds.), *An eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon illustrated miscellany (British Library Cotton Tiberius B.V. Part I)*, Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile vol. XXI (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1983), pp. 28- 39; Nicholas Howe, *Writing the map of Anglo-Saxon England: Essays in cultural geography* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 154.

⁵⁰ P. McGurk, 'The Macrobian Zonal Map' in McGurk et. al (eds.), *An eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon illustrated miscellany*, pp. 65- 66

⁵¹ Helen Appleton, 'The Northern World of the Anglo-Saxon mappa mundi', *Anglo-Saxon England* 47 (2018), pp. 275-305, pp. 278-79; P. McGurk, 'Introduction: Contents of the Manuscript, in McGurk et. al (eds.), *An eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon illustrated miscellany*, pp. 15-24, p. 15, pp. 25-27; https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=cotton_ms_tiberius_b_v!1_f057r (accessed 26 September 2022)

⁵² Howe, *Writing the map of Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 157.

⁵³ Margaret Tedford, *The Anglo-Saxon Cotton Map in Context*, PhD Thesis, Queen's University Belfast, 2019, p. 58; Cotton MS Tiberius B/V1 ff. 29r, 40v, 56v, 84r- 84v.

*Africa Europa mappam depinxerat aptam in qua nationum promonteriorum fluminum insularum que situs atque monstrorum formatur honeste*⁵⁴

Here begins the book, *Periegesis*, by Priscian, grammarian of the city of Rome, professor of Caesarea (Africa), that is about the situation of the earth, gathered by him from the writings on ancient world maps; and to this work of three parts, that is to say, Asia, Africa, and Europe, there is painted a suitable (*aptam*) map in which the location of nations, mountains, rivers, islands, and also wonders are accurately arranged.⁵⁵

Though the map is neither derived from nor closely associated with Priscian's text, Edson argues that it is not unlikely that the surviving *mappa mundi* was indeed the map originally chosen to supplement *Periegesis*.⁵⁶ The unique nature of the map has led to a variety of theories regarding any exemplars that may have lain behind it. P. D. A. Harvey has argued it to be a copy, drawn in England, of an ancient Roman map.⁵⁷ Helen Appleton argues that a Frankish element within the transmission and preservation of the map's content is likely due to the combination of Roman material, an interest in empires and the inclusion of material from the scriptures. She further points to similarities between the depictions of cities as 'walled and turreted polygonal enclosures' in the *mappa mundi* and Macrobian map in the same manuscript and extant Carolingian examples.⁵⁸ Appleton suggests the reign of Athelstan as a plausible, though far from certain, period in which a large wall map, ancestral to the extant *mappa mundi* and based on Carolingian material, may have emerged in England, citing Athelstan's known interest in the East as well as the use of the term *Britannia* on the map, potentially echoing Athelstan's claim to be *Rex Totius Britanniae*.⁵⁹

The map is, unusually, rectangular in form. This allows space for a strikingly large and detailed British Isles (**Fig. 2**). The shape of Britain seems instantly familiar. In the south a lengthy peninsula extends westward. A significant inlet towards the north-west of the island calls to mind the Solway Firth, though Liverpool Bay is also possible here. However, caution must be shown in assuming more than superficial and to some extent coincidental correlations with modern cartographical understanding. Indeed, Howe describes the island as looking 'far more like a boomerang than its image in a modern atlas'. He suggests it possible that the cartographer was familiar with etymologies such as those of Thietmar of Merseburg which

⁵⁴ Transcription from Appleton, 'The Northern World of the Anglo-Saxon mappa mundi', p. 279; and McGurk, 'Introduction', pp. 23-24; with reference to British Library Cotton MS Tiberius B.V. f. 57.r. https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=cotton_ms_tiberius_b_v!1_f057r (accessed 7 July 2022).

⁵⁵ Translated in Evelyn Edson, *Mapping Time and Space: How medieval mapmakers viewed their world*, The British Library Studies in Map History Volume 1 (London: British Library, 1997, 1999) pp. 75-76.

⁵⁶ Edson, *Mapping Time and Space*, p. 76; P. McGurk, 'The Mappa Mundi' in McGurk et. al (eds.), 'An eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon illustrated miscellany (British Library Cotton Tiberius B.V. Part I), Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile vol. XXI, pp. 79-87, p. 79.

⁵⁷ P.D.A. Harvey, *Medieval Maps* (London: British Library, 1991), p. 21; Peter Barber, 'Medieval Maps of the World', in P.D.A. Harvey (ed.), *The Hereford World Map: Medieval World Maps and their Context* (London: British Library, 2006), p. 4.

⁵⁸ Appleton, 'The Northern World of the Anglo-Saxon mappa mundi', pp. 301-02.

⁵⁹ Appleton, 'The Northern World of the Anglo-Saxon mappa mundi', pp. 302-03.

explained that the Angles were so called ‘because they are located on an angle of this earth’.⁶⁰ The annotations used within Britain give varying levels of clarity, with some labels appearing in unexpected places, and others referring to places which are hard to identify. *Lundona* (London) appears, as might be expected, in the South East. *Wintonia* (Winchester) appears around halfway along the south coast, again as might be expected. *Cantia* (apparently Kent) however, appears further west still, with the text appearing where we might expect to find Devon. If, as seems certainly the case with *Lundona* and *Wintonia*, *Cantia* is associated with the nearest ‘fortress’, symbol, then it might even be said to be situated in Cornwall.⁶¹ The label *Brittannia* is found halfway along the eastern portion of the island in what may be an otherwise unlabelled territorial division.⁶² In the middle western part of the island, the label *Morenpergas* has not been satisfactorily identified.⁶³ The most northerly label in mainland Britain reads *Camri*. Around twenty-three small islands lie off the coast of Britain (and in some cases intrude upon on it). Due to the ambiguities of construction, the precise number can be disputed. Thirteen of the islands contain a single letter, and when read roughly left to right and top to bottom, these together read *orcales insula*. These cover a very large expanse of territory, stretching into the sea spread over an area significantly larger than Ireland and around half the size of Great Britain. The islands, together with a lack of edging around the northernmost part of Great Britain, create an uncharacteristic ambiguity regarding the position of land and sea on this portion of the map. With no solid line demarking the edge of the land, we can only use those areas where the blue-grey wash used for the sea is absent to discern the northernmost bounds of Britain. However, we run into a problem here as some of the *orcales insula* intrude on this area. It is possible that the creator of the map had in their mind Pythias’s image (via Strabo) of northern regions ‘where land properly speaking no longer exists, nor sea nor air, but a mixture of these things, like a “marine lung”’.⁶⁴ However, this might be argued unlikely for a map which seems intent on integrating Britain into the wider world.⁶⁵ Andrew Klein characterises the effect as a ‘half-finished appearance’.⁶⁶ The odd depiction of the coastline and islands of northern Britain has led to speculation that the work has been altered. Peter Barber suggests that ‘evidence of repainting suggests that he had second thoughts about the form and size of the northern part of Scotland.’⁶⁷ Margaret Tedford also argues that there was a deliberate alteration of the north of Scotland, arguing that its form here suggests that the original outline

⁶⁰ Howe, *Writing the map of Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 175; David A. Warner (trans.), *Ottoman Germany. The Chronicle of Thietmar of Merseburg*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 332.

⁶¹ Transcribed lists of labels within the map can be found in McGurk, ‘The Mappa Mundi’, pp. 86-87; and Tedford, *The Anglo-Saxon Cotton Map in Context*, pp. 248-252; discussed in Tedford, *The Anglo-Saxon Cotton Map in Context*, pp. 74- 75.

⁶² It should be noted that rivers and possible territorial boundaries can be hard to differentiate in the map, and so any apparent territorial division’ should be considered with extreme caution.

⁶³ Tedford, *The Anglo-Saxon Cotton Map in Context*, p. 75; McGurk, ‘The Mappa Mundi’, p. 80.

⁶⁴ Strabo II, IV.1. Trans. in R. Chevallier, ‘The Greco-Roman Conception of the North from Pytheas to Tacitus’, *Arctic* 37, no. 4. (December 1984), pp. 341-46, p. 344, n. 23.

⁶⁵ Tedford, *The Anglo-Saxon Cotton Map in Context*, p. 55.

⁶⁶ Andrew W. Klein, ‘Cartographic Imaginings: Mapping Anglo-Scottish Existence in the Late Middle Ages’, *Studies in Iconography*, Vol. 37 (2016), pp. 31-74, p. 35.

⁶⁷ Barber, ‘Medieval Maps of the World’, p. 4.

of the north coast was erased and the islands added on top.⁶⁸ Whatever the reasons for their construction in this way, and the means by which it took place, the effect is a strange one, seeming at the same time both ambiguous and deliberate. It raises the question of whether such an extensive archipelago was initially intended in the planning of the map, or if the size and extent of the *Orcades* was down to later *ad-hoc* adjustment.

An important consideration here is the order in which pigments were applied in the first place. McGurk asserts that the outlines of islands and coasts were added first, with the rivers, boundary divisions and other drawings next, followed by the inscriptions, with the coloured wash done last.⁶⁹ However, Tedford argues that there are occasions where outlines have either been adjusted or added at a later stage.⁷⁰ There are strong grounds to support this more cautious approach. Just outside the western edge of the Mediterranean stand two columns, clearly representative of the Pillars of Hercules (**Fig. 3**). It is notable that only the northern pillar has a dark outline. The southern pillar is discernible only through the absence of the blue-grey sea. Tedford suggests that the presence of the Pillars on both the *mappa mundi* and the Macrobian map help the reader to correlate the locations on the former to the globe as a whole.⁷¹ It would seem unlikely that such an important feature as the second pillar could have been ‘forgotten’ when initially outlined. At the very least, the southern pillar demonstrates that the cartographer was happy to ‘draw’ features simply with the absence of ‘background’ wash. It can also be noted that islands at the edge of the Macrobian map are constructed in a similar fashion - simply as the areas where sea wash is absent (**Fig. 4**).⁷² Multi-spectral images newly produced by the British Library provide useful food for thought regarding the construction of the map, and the British Isles in particular. Infra-red imagery allows the map to be viewed without the iron gall ink of the edging and annotations (**Figs. 5 and 6**).⁷³ The result suggests a very plausible initial image in which the northernmost parts of mainland Britain sits adjacent to a large archipelago of small islands. The archipelago appears no different to any of the others depicted on the map. The suspicion that this is the map as originally laid out is bolstered by the fact that in the finished version, it is very rare for the ocean wash to intrude on the ‘land’ demarcated by the ink. Christina Duffy has observed that it is much easier to be accurate with ink than with pigments or paints, thus if the ink had been initially applied, more intrusion over the lines with the wash might be expected.⁷⁴

What then are we to make of this striking insular visualisation of the *Orcades*? It seems clear that a very large archipelago off the northern parts of Britain, and stretching significantly into the ocean, was a central component of the cartographer’s initial plans. It is likely that this was initially manifested as adjacent to (rather than overlapping with) mainland Britain using the blue-grey wash. However, the decision was deliberately taken to further emphasise the

⁶⁸ Tedford, *The Anglo-Saxon Cotton Map in Context*, pp. 108 and 113-14.

⁶⁹ McGurk, ‘Palaeography and Illumination’, p. 35.

⁷⁰ Tedford, *The Anglo-Saxon Cotton Map in Context*, p. 32.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁷² See f. 29r https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=cotton_ms_tiberius_b_v!1_f029r (last accessed 26 September 2022).

⁷³ Many thanks are due to Christina Duffy at the British Library for invaluable information on the nature of the ink used and their effect on images of different wavelengths.

⁷⁴ Christina Duffy, email correspondence 20 June 2022.

extent and importance of the islands through the application of the iron gall outline to make these intrude on the British mainland. The annotations demonstrate that all these islands were considered to be encompassed by the label *Orcades*. It is possible that some political or literary point was being made here. However, the impossibility of pinning the political landscape of Britain in the map to any period, real or imagined, makes it hard to draw any firm conclusions on this. The absence of a *Pictonia* or *Alba* remains puzzling,⁷⁵ though the possibility remains that they were intended to exist under the label *Camri* as ‘part of a marginal Brythonic world’.⁷⁶ The absence is all the more striking as there would have been space for such a label if the decision had not been taken to make the *Orcades* intrude on the northernmost parts of the island of Great Britain. Whatever the reason for the selective choice of labels used and the odd final depiction of the northern coast, the map underlines the importance afforded the *Orcades*, with the term used by the cartographer to encompass all of the islands off the northern parts of Britain.

Conclusion

There is no ‘smoking gun’ in the examples considered above. However, there is enough to warrant caution in assuming that when *Orcades* is written, Orkney alone is intended. Were these sources to be taken together, we might imagine that to the early medieval insular mind the *Orcades* encompassed a wide range of islands including not only Orkney, but also Shetland and perhaps the Western Isles. However, it cannot be assumed that the creators of any of these examples had the same notion of what constituted the *Orcades* as any of the others. Indeed, fluidity in the application of the term would be consistent with later usage in the Nordic world, where *Orcades* could be used to cover varying amounts of territory. The *Historia Norwegie* is frequently assigned a date of the latter half of the twelfth century.⁷⁷ Ekrem and Mortensen argue that while the author was likely Norwegian, interest in both Orkney and Iceland suggests that they may have spent some amount of time in either of these places.⁷⁸ The use of *Orcades* within this text is notable for its inconsistent application. The first reference seems to be the broadest.

<S>unt ergo quedam insule preiacentes Gulacie, que ab incolis Solunde nominantur, unde Solundicum Mare dictum, quod inter Norwegiam et Iberniam fluit. In quo sunt Orchades insule numero plusquam XXX, a quodam comite Orchano nomine uocate. Que quidem diuersis incolis acculte nunc in duo regna sunt diuise: Sunt enim Merediane Insule regulis sublimate, Brumales uero comitum presidio decorate, qui utrique regibus Norwegie non modica persoluunt tributa.

Certain islands lying close to Gulatingslag are called by their inhabitants the Solund Islands, from which the sea that flows between Norway and Ireland is known as the Solund Sea. In these waters are situated the *Orchades insule*, totalling over thirty and named after a particular Earl Orkan

⁷⁵ For discussion of the use of *Pictonia* for the Pictish kingdom see Oisín Plumb, ‘A Possible Hiberno-Pictish Dispute’, *Notes and Queries*, Volume 65, Issue 4, (1 December 2018), pp. 476–478.

⁷⁶ Klein, ‘Cartographic Imaginings’, p. 35.

⁷⁷ Inger Ekrem and Lars Boje Mortensen (eds.) and Peter Fisher (trans.), *Historia Norwegie* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2006), p. 15.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

[*comite Orchano*]. They are populated by different peoples and now split into two domains; the southern isles have been elevated by petty kings, the northern graced by the protection of earls, both of whom pay no mean tribute to the kings of Norway.⁷⁹

The characterisation of the political system in both domains strongly indicate that *Orchades* here covers not only Orkney and Shetland, but also *Suðreyjar* - the Western Isles and Inner Hebrides. Following this, however, comes an extensive account focused on the *Orchades* in which the focus on the aforementioned earls implies that here only Orkney and Shetland are intended.⁸⁰ Later in the work, in a chapter devoted to the mission of Olav Tryggvason, another reference indicates a meaning restricted only to Orkney:

Sicque factum est, ut infra quinquennium omnes tributarios, id est Hatlendenses, Orchardenses, Fereyingenses ac Tilenses, fide preclaros, spe gaudentes, caritate feruentes redderet Christo.

This was effected in such a way that within five years he had rendered them all tributary to Christ, that is the Shetlanders, the *Orchadenses*, the Faeroes and Iceland, outstanding in faith, rejoicing in hope, fervent in charity.⁸¹

The varied application of the term *Orchades* seems highly unlikely to be down to ignorance on the part of the compiler. The detailed engagement with the term, suggests a wilful application in a range of settings.⁸² When read in the context of the earlier Insular examples, it seems plausible that use of *Orcades* in its larger application was not a new phenomenon emerging to reflect and assert the realities of the Orkney Jarldom, but rather built on centuries of earlier Insular practice.

My aim in this discussion has been to argue for caution in assuming that early medieval Insular references to the *Orcades* should be necessarily considered equivalent to Orkney. While a wider reading of the term brings with it an infuriating vagueness as to where is intended, it does potentially help us to ‘find’ a substantial amount of ‘missing’ territory in our sources - territory which was, if not politically significant, of substantial cosmological importance. Accepting the possibility of a widespread wider application of the term does not diminish the importance of Orkney within the *Orcades*. The number and quality of ‘Pictish’ monumental sculpture in the county is testament to this.⁸³ Our written and drawn examples also tell us very little of local vernacular usage. Whether or not an inhabitant of any of the northern archipelagos would consider an extensive application of the term *Orcades* as ‘correct’, that is equating directly to local application of a vernacular cognate, is perhaps ultimately unknowable. What is clear is that the *Orcades* held a notable place in the worldview of the early medieval Insular scholar.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65 (HN V) [Untranslated italics my insertion].

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 64-69, (HN VI).

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95 (HN XVII, 31). Untranslated italics my insertion. I am grateful to the reviewer for useful adjustments made to this translation.

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 186 & 190-91.

⁸³ Fraser, *The Pictish Symbol Stones of Scotland*, pp. 114-18.

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Acknowledgements

This research was made possible through the kind support of the Scottish Catholic Historical Association Early Career Award. The multi spectral images were produced by Christina Duffy from the British Library, who also provided invaluable help with the images and queries relating to the production of the manuscript. Rachael Plumb assisted with the formatting and editing of the images for this publication. Julian Harrison from the British Library provided a great deal of assistance facilitating my access to the manuscript and providing frequent help and support thereafter. Shane McLeod provided useful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Further useful suggestions were provided by the anonymous reviewer. Christiane Valluri-Nitsch assisted me with German language publications. Alasdair MacLeod provided useful help with the transcription of Greek phrases. Margaret Tedford kindly provided me with an electronic copy of her PhD thesis. I would also like to thank all staff at the National Library of Scotland for their regular support and assistance.

Fig. 1: Whole map, visible colour image. British Library MS Cotton Tiberius b. v/1, f. 56v. Multi-spectral image created by Dr Christina Duffy, British Library 2022. Reproduced by permission of the British Library.

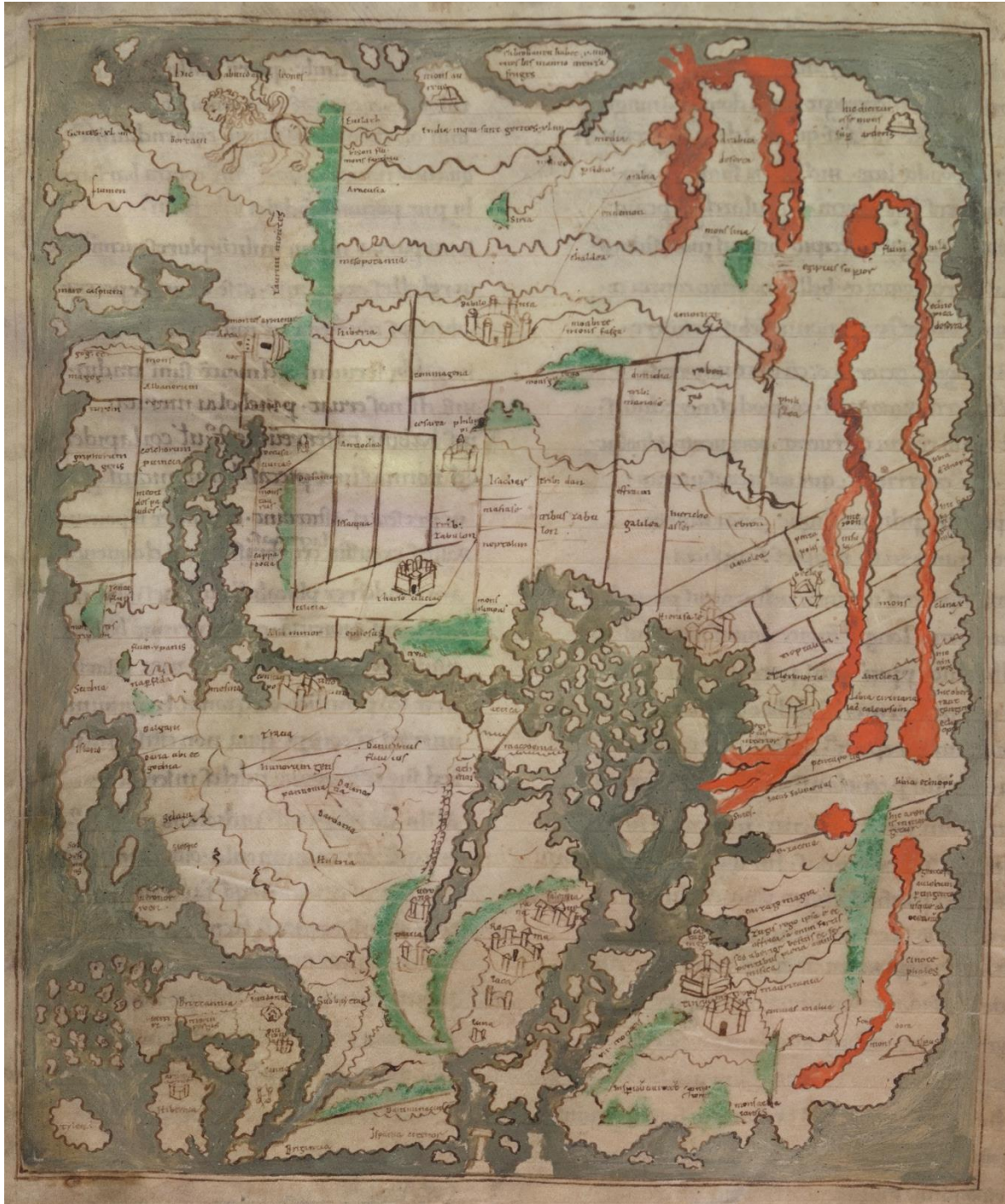


Fig. 2: British Isles, visible colour image. British Library MS Cotton Tiberius b. v/1, f. 56v. Multi-spectral image created by Dr Christina Duffy, British Library 2022. Reproduced by permission of the British Library.



Fig. 3: Pillars of Hercules - visible colour (L) and infrared (R: hides iron gall ink used in edging and annotations). British Library MS Cotton Tiberius b. v/1, f. 56v. Multi-spectral images created by Dr Christina Duffy, British Library 2022. Reproduced by permission of the British Library.

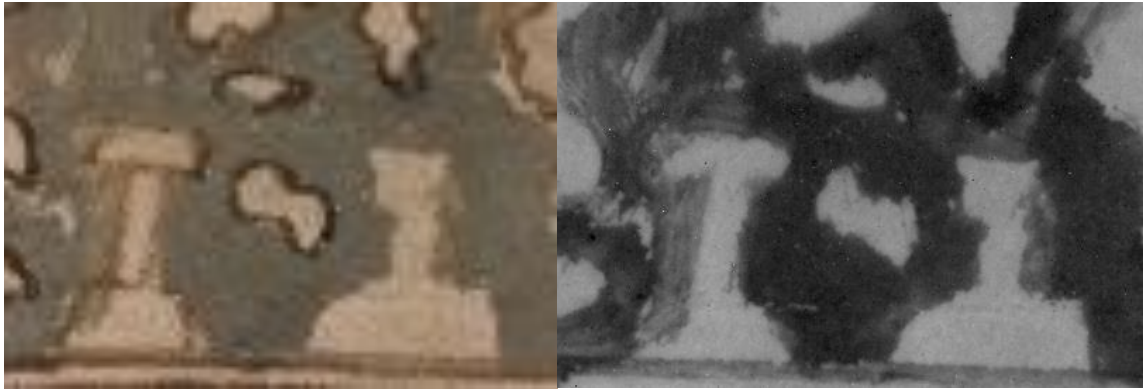


Fig. 4: Detail from edge of Macrobian map, showing islands created by the absence of wash. British Library MS Cotton Tiberius b. v/1, f. 29r. Reproduced by permission of the British Library.



Fig. 5: Whole map, infrared. British Library MS Cotton Tiberius b. v/1, f. 56v. Multi-spectral image created by Dr Christina Duffy, British Library 2022. Reproduced by permission of the British Library.



Fig. 6: British Isles, infrared. British Library MS Cotton Tiberius b. v/1, f. 56v. Multi-spectral image created by Dr Christina Duffy, British Library 2022. Reproduced by permission of the British Library.

