

# THE SCANDINAVIAN SETTLEMENTS IN THE NORTH AND WEST OF SCOTLAND

DOCUMENTARY AND PLACE-NAME EVIDENCE

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## *Introductory*

One may study the Scandinavian settlement as a broad movement or series of movements from east to west—dealing with such matters as the dates of the movements, where the settlers came from, why they moved and where they settled.

Within this broad framework of knowledge and inference, one may in addition pursue localised studies of the resultant agrarian pattern and way of life in the main areas settled.

The writer is not an archæologist, and this note is essentially concerned with documentary and linguistic (principally place-name) evidence.

## *The broad movement to the west*

The basic documents for the study of the Scandinavian settlement as a broad movement to the west are the Norse histories of the Norwegian kings—two in Latin and the rest in Old Norse, and written in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. To these must be added *Orkneyingasaga*, a history of the Orkney earldom written in Iceland in the early thirteenth century.

Although it was known in Norway and probably also in Iceland that there were Picts and Celtic priests or “Papar” in Shetland and Orkney before the Norwegian settlement, these documents make no specific reference to any movement to the west before the exodus, about 900, of noble families and others from Norway to escape the tyranny of Harald Fair-hair. These accounts, however, are not inconsistent with the modern view, based upon place-name and archæological studies and on the

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evidence of the Irish Annals, that these movements to the west began about the year 800 or possibly earlier.

The main general studies of the broad movement published since 1930 include the following:

- T. D. KENDRICK, *A History of the Vikings*. London 1930.  
A. W. BRØGGER, *Den Norske Rosetningen paa Shetland-Orknøyene*. Oslo 1930.  
J. STORER CLOUSTON, *A History of Orkney*. Kirkwall 1932.  
G. TURVILLE-PETRE, *The Heroic Age of Scandinavia*. London 1951, chs. 9-12.  
H. MARWICK, *Orkney*. London 1951, chs. 1-8.  
J. BRØNDSTED, *The Vikings*. London 1960.  
H. ARBMAN, *The Vikings*. London 1961.

### *The agrarian pattern and way of life*

The documentary sources for a study of the agrarian pattern and way of the life in the Norse settlements in the west include the documents already mentioned, together with such Scottish documents relating to land in the north and west of Scotland as have survived. Of outstanding value are the "rentals" for Orkney and Shetland.

The rentals for the ancient earldom and bishopric of Orkney, 1500-1739, were published by A. Peterkin, Edinburgh 1820. A manuscript copy of an earlier rental of 1492 is in the record room of Kirkwall Public Library.

Making use of the methods of study of Magnus Olsen in his *Farms and Fanes of Ancient Norway* (Oslo 1928), H. Marwick and J. Storer Clouston published a number of studies in the *Proceedings of the Orkney Antiquarian Society* and the *Scottish Historical Review* in which historical, linguistic and fiscal data were combined with their own detailed knowledge of the Orkney scene to throw light on the early agrarian pattern and way of life. Some of the results of these studies will be found in Clouston's *History of Orkney* (1932). The principal place-names studies are:

- H. MARWICK, "Orkney Farm-Name Studies". *Proceedings of the Orkney Antiquarian Society* 9 (1930-31): 25-34.  
H. MARWICK, *Orkney Farm-Names*. Kirkwall 1952, especially Parts II and III.  
A. STEINNES, "The Huseby System in Orkney". *Scottish Historical Review* 38 (1959):36-46.

The Shetland rentals, which extend from *c.* 1507 to *c.* 1832, have not been printed. There is a list of them with bibliographical notes by A. W. Johnston in the *Old Lore Miscellany* of the Viking Society 10, part VI (London 1946) 262-9. The study of Shetland place-names by J. Jakobsen (in *Aarb. for Nord. Oldkyn. og Hist.*, Copenhagen 1901, pp. 56-258) was thus made without the advantage of the name forms and the fiscal information which the rentals contain. Some use was made of the manuscripts by A. C. O'Dell in his *Historical Geography of the Shetland Islands* (Lerwick 1939), but much remains to be done. It is understood that a comprehensive collection of Shetland farm names is now being made by a Shetlander in which rental information will be incorporated.

Caithness place-names have been the subject of study for some years by Professor Per Thorson, University of Bergen, and it is hoped that his findings will be published in the near future.