'LORDS OF NORROWAY'
THE SHETLAND ESTATE OF HERDIS THORVALDSDATTER

Frans-Arne Stylegar & Liv Kjørsvik Schei

The lords of Norroway' are mentioned in several Shetland sources from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These 'lords', aristocratic families based in (Western) Norway, were inheritors of the vast estate that a lady of Shetland origins, Herdis Thorvaldsdatter, had amassed before her death in 1363. The present paper takes a closer look at this estate.

Herdis was the daughter of herra Thorvald Thoresson, the king of Norway’s syslumaðr in Shetland in the 1290s, by his second marriage to Ragndid. Thorvald and Ragndid had two children, a son, Thorvald, and Herdis. The latter was probably born around 1305. Herdis first enters the sources in 1328, when she met with other prominent men and women to assess a dowry (DN II, 165). Thus she must have reached the full legal age of twenty at that time.

Herdis made one, probably two, strategic marriages. Her first, documented marriage was to Svein Sigurdsson, who is mentioned as regional treasurer in Bergen 1328–9. Svein died in 1332. Herdis' second marriage, as suggested by the historian P. A. Munch in 1862, was probably to the Norwegian nobleman, Bjarne Erlingsson, who married an unnamed, prominent woman in 1343. This earned Herdis the title of 'fru' (lady), which is used in the later sources (Øye 2002, 88). Bjarne was the only son of the drottsete Erling Vidkunsson, that is the highest royal official of the time, who also owned the Bjarkøy estate in Northern Norway. Bjarne Erlingsson, who was knighted on his own account, perished in 1349, leaving Herdis a widow for the second time.

Herdis' estate

Herdis died in 1363. According to an Icelandic annal, it happened in Copenhagen, where Lady Herdis was travelling with the Norwegian royal court (Islandske annaler, p. 360), which states also, without any support in other sources, that there was foul play involved. She was
without surviving siblings, children, or siblings’ children (DN II, 375, 1363, also Sollied 1942), a destiny most likely met by many in the years immediately following the Black Death. Taking Norwegian rules of inheritance into account, this means that she must have inherited both from her father and from her brother. Furthermore, she must have received substantial gifts from her two husbands, both of whom were wealthy landowners.

In the case of Svein Sigurdsson, Herdis’s dowry and dower (i.e. the values brought by Herdis into the marriage and the values pledged by Svein in response, respectively) amounted to more than 300 forngilde, Norwegian marks. In addition, Herdis got substantial gifts from Svein (Øye 2002, 87–8). Among the gifts were also properties in Shetland (DN I, 220, 1332). We do not know about the gifts presumably given by Bjarne Erlingsson to Herdis, but they were probably substantial.

In her later years, Herdis also acquired a number of properties in Shetland, thus adding to her fortune. Two property deeds are preserved, one dealing with properties in Walls (Shetland Documents 1195–1579, No. 9, cf. DN III, 284, 1355), and one with properties in Unst (Shetland Documents 1195–1579, No. 11, cf. DN III, 310, 1360). Her Shetland estate seems to have amounted to more than 1300 Shetland marks (see below).

Being without direct heirs, Herdis decided on her deathbed that both her inherited estates and the properties she had bought were to be used for the foundation of a Cistercian monastery. In case the monastery was not built, her estate would pass to the king (Øye 2002, 89). Why this monastery did not come into being, we do not know. Already in her year of death, 1363, the lawman in Bergen enquires into the relationship between the deceased and herra Sigurd Hafthorsson, and it was concluded that the father of the latter, the mighty Hafthor Jonsson of Sudrheim (Sørum) in Eastern Norway, who had been married to Agnes, the daughter of King Hákon V, was the brother of Herdis’ mother, Lady Ragndid. Thus Sigurd Hafthorsson and his brother, Jon, being the closest in kin, were granted Herdis’ estate (DN II, 375, 1363, cf. Øye op. cit.). Her properties thus passed to her mother’s side.

The king’s claim to Herdis’ estate is never mentioned again in the preserved sources. Soon after, Earl Henry Sinclair seems to have set out deliberately to incorporate Shetland within his Orkney earldom, and in 1379 had to promise King Hákon VI that he would not alienate or sell any properties of the earldom away from the king (Crawford and Ballin Smith 1999, 18–19). Some years later, we learn that Malise Sperra, a claimant of the earldom family and most likely also a royal ‘foud’, had