THE PIRATE FISHERMEN: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF A MEDIEVAL MARITIME SOCIETY

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Introduction

The earldom of Orkney, a semi-independent principality based in the archipelagos of Orkney and Shetland off northern Scotland, is one of the dark horses of late Viking Age and early medieval history. Although illuminated by Orkneyinga saga and incidental details recorded in skaldic verse and other sources, our knowledge of its history compares unfavourably with Ireland, England, Iceland and (to a lesser degree) also Norway and Scotland. Nevertheless, when Orkney does appear on the historical radar—during Earl Sigurd Hlodvisson’s Irish campaign of 1014 for example (Hudson 2005, 96–98)—it has the appearance of significant wealth and power. In addition to history, archaeology and architecture contribute to this impression. Two well-known examples will suffice to set the scene. The Skaill hoard deposited in Orkney around AD 950 is among the largest known in Scandinavia (Graham-Campbell 1993, 180). Moreover, the twelfth-century phases of St Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall, Orkney, were comparable in ambition to major contemporary building projects in Scandinavia and lowland Scotland (Cambridge 1988, 122–24).

Given these observations, the earldom has often been treated as exceptionally wealthy and powerful—a status typically attributed to its geographical position at the hub of maritime traffic between the North Sea, the Irish Sea and the North Atlantic (Small 1968, 5; Wilson 1976, 110–111; Kaland 1982, 93–4; Morris 1985, 233–34; Graham-Campbell & Batey 1998, 62). It remains to be established, however, exactly how this could have worked. What political economy could turn a small and largely rural community on the edge of medieval Europe into a wealthy and semi-independent society? This is a question which Barbara Crawford and her former students have done much to illuminate (for example Crawford 1987, 134–36; Macgregor & Crawford 1987; Crawford 1995; Williams 2004), and it is hoped that the present paper is thus an appropriate tribute to her scholarship.
To address the issue of the earldom’s political economy it is necessary to ask two fundamental questions. Firstly, was Orkney really as wealthy as is sometimes assumed? Secondly, if so, what were the social and economic bases of this wealth? This paper will attempt to answer these questions, and in so doing implicitly suggest a number of factors which may also prove illuminating in the context of other comparable maritime principalities.

Both historical and archaeological sources must be combined in order to answer the questions posed. The most important of the former is *Orkneyinga saga* itself, which was composed around AD 1200 and updated early in the thirteenth century. Sagas differ widely in their reliability, but this account of the earls of Orkney was clearly written with historical intent (Jesch 1992, 1996). Its treatment of twelfth-century events is considered broadly reliable and some of its eleventh-century details can also be corroborated in contemporary sources such as the Irish annals (see Etchingham 2001; Hudson 2005) and Adam of Bremen’s *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen* (Tschan 2002). A diverse collection of other historical sources will also be considered where relevant. Given the paucity of material directly related to the earldom, however, analogies will sometimes need to be drawn (with caution) from sources beyond the chronological and geographical boundaries of the study.

The archaeological evidence is equally diverse. It includes obvious categories like silver hoards and monumental architecture, but also less tangible sources such as fish bones, cereal grains and the chemistry of human bone. In some instances the material culture corroborates the historical evidence. In other cases, archaeology allows one to document trends that are absent from, poorly represented in, or even misrepresented by the extant text-based sources. It is a particularly important corrective to the temptation to extrapolate ‘traditional’ patterns of the comparatively recent past into the Viking Age and early Middle Ages.

The chronological range of this study is mainly the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the period for which *Orkneyinga saga* can be considered most historical. By the early eleventh century the existence of the earldom is historically unambiguous. Conversely, by the end of the twelfth century Orcadian independence had begun to decline in the

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1 Based on Earl Sigurd Hlodvisson’s presence in Ireland noted above, which is known from the contemporary *Annals of Ulster* (MacAirt & MacNiocaill 1983, 447) in addition to late sources such as *Orkneyinga saga*. 