THE ORKNEY PAPAR-NAMES

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The Papar Project which Barbara Crawford directs has involved an exhaustive and no doubt exhausting study of the places in the Northern and Western Isles which contain the element papar, the name given by the Norse to the clerics of the pre-Norse Church (Papar Project). It is a daunting undertaking, not just because it involves the investigation of thirty or more sites scattered through some 300 miles of stormy seas, but also because it requires the bringing together of a mass of evidence from such diverse disciplines as place-names, history, archaeology, and soil science. Some of this evidence presents such intractable problems that she has recently posed the very basic question: were these clerics a real feature of the Viking Age, or were they a twelfth century myth? (Crawford 2005).

My paper is more limited in its scope but is intended to contribute to this study by looking at some aspects of the eight Orkney places which contain this papar element (Illus. 65).\(^1\) Besides the problem of deciding the proportions of eighth century reality and twelfth century myth there are two further questions which have to be addressed: first, what kind of clerics were they? Were the papar hermits, or monastic, or missionary, or pastoral? Second, what was the relationship of these clerics to Norse settlers? Does the evidence point to extermination or continuity? A confident answer is possible to the first of these questions: the Orkney papar-places were bigger, better and generally more important than people sometimes imagine, so the papar are likely to have been clergy living in places where they were associated with secular communities rather than hermits seeking isolation. The question of continuity is not so easy, but Norse Christians seem to have had little empathy with the Pictish Church and were separated from their

\(^1\) Blaeu’s *Atlas Novus* (1654) shows another Papedale immediately east of Scapa (c.HY4408), but this is a duplication, not an additional site. Another name to discount is the ‘island’ of Papa Groena listed by George Low (Olaf Cuthbert ed. 2001, 12). It is not an island but an underwater shoal northeast of Papa Stronsay (*grunn* = shoal).
Illus. 65  Map of Orkney Papar-sites. Papa Westray, Papa Stronsay, Papdale, Paplay (Holm) and Paplay (South Ronaldsay) are secure sites. Paplayhouse and the Steeven o’Papy are insecure because the name may not derive from ‘papar’ and Papa Tercia because its location is unknown. Papdale is an erroneous name occurring as a duplication on Blaeu’s map, and Papa Groena is a shoal wrongly identified as an island by George Low.