



The ORKNEY ISLANDS

by Carolyn Emerick

*Let me take you down,
cause we're goin' to... Skara Brae!*

The Islands of Orkney are a mystical place steeped in history and legend. Like the rest of the British Isles, Orkney is an amalgam of influences. The ancients left their mark from pre-history with their standing stones and neolithic settlements. Then came the Picts, however they remain even more of a mystery as the Picts left very little evidence of their existence in Orkney behind. So scarce is the evidence, in fact, that until recently scholars questioned whether they were there at all. It was the Vikings that left their stamp on Orkney so strongly that their influence can be found in the culture to this day.

The Vikings first began settling Orkney in the late eighth century. From the records available, we can only speculate what happened to the Picts who had been living on the Islands prior to Viking settlement. Due to Pictish tools being found in Viking settlement excavations, it is thought that some Picts remained on the Islands after the Viking conquest.

Whether they intermarried and assimilated, or whether the majority disappeared, while a few remained as slaves, is unknown. Genocide has been suggested. As has abandonment of Orkney by the Picts to join their Scottish mainland cousins. However, some have wondered about the relations between the Picts of Orkney and mainland Picts and Gaels, and if the Vikings were not welcomed by the Picts of Orkney due to conflict with their mainland cousins.

In any case, there is some evidence to suggest that Pictish society was already on the

decline prior to the Viking invasion. Why it was declining is yet another mystery. It would appear that either the Picts required the aid of Vikings, or that their situation left them wide open for a foreign invader to move in.

What is known, is that the Viking settlement of Orkney was so complete that virtually no place names of Pictish origin survive. In the rest of Britain, place names can be used to show the mixed heritage and influence of the various settlers, from Celt to Roman, and especially the Germanic settlers such as the Angles, Saxons, Danes, and so forth.

The Orkney Islands are shown in Red with the Shetland Islands off to the upper right in this wikimedia image credited to user TUBS



However, Orkney, like its neighbor Shetland, was removed from much of the ongoings of

mainland Scotland and the broader Britain, so much so that the main language of its inhabitants for many hundreds of years was not English or Gaelic, but Norn, an old Norse language. This may seem obvious, since it was the language of the Viking settlers. However, in some other areas of Viking settlement, Normandy and Lombardy for example, Vikings assimilated into their new environment and eventually took on the language and customs of the region. Orkney, however, remained a subsidiary of Norway.

Despite such close proximity to Scotland, Orkney did not pass to Scottish dominion until the 15th century.

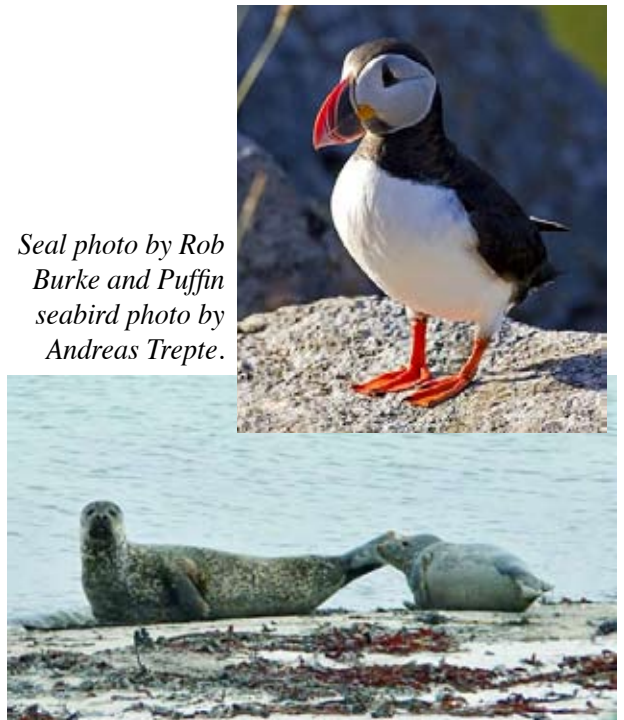
The Islands of Orkney and Shetland both passed to Scotland together. By the 15th century, Norway had become unified with Denmark. The King of Scotland, James III, was to be married to the daughter of King Christian I of Denmark, Princess Margaret. Orkney and Shetland were put up as collateral for the dowry. When the dowry was never paid, both archipelagos passed to the Scottish crown. From that point on, the Scots language found its way into Orkney, while Norn slowly faded away. And today, of course, English is spoken alongside Scots.



If planning a visit to Orkney, there is much to see. The entire archipelago is virtually a natural wonder itself. There are steep cliffs against the ocean side, beautiful seascapes, and wildlife everywhere you look. Along the shores of Orkney, grey and common seals are often seen sunbathing.

Other marine life such as whales, dolphins, and otters make their homes in the surrounding waters. And to be sure, there is an abundance of seabirds, such as the much beloved Puffin.

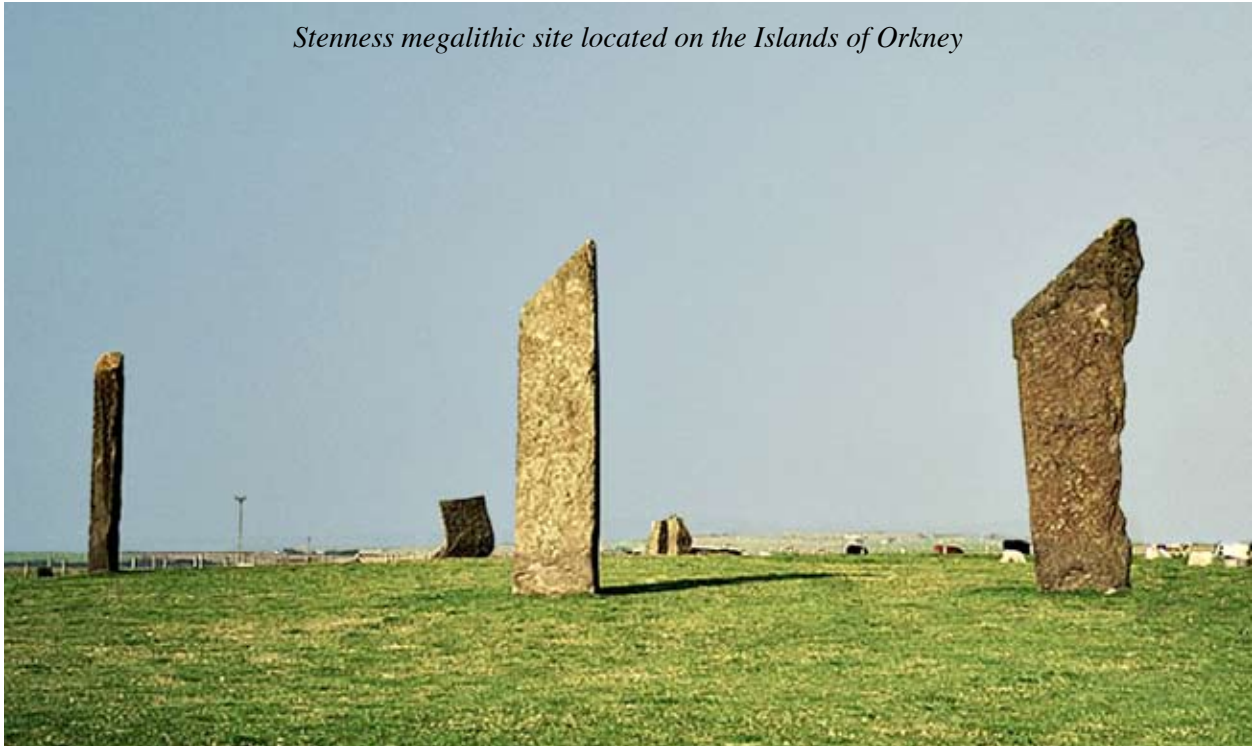
*Seal photo by Rob
Burke and Puffin
seabird photo by
Andreas Trepte.*



Beyond the wildlife, Orkney is home to many treasures of pre-history and the Iron Age. One place of interest is known as the “Heart of Neolithic Orkney.” It is a UNESCO World Heritage site and consists of multiple neolithic monuments found on main island of Orkney. Within this so called “Heart” are four unique sites; Maeshowe, the Standing Stones of Stenness, the Ring of Brodgar, and Skara Brae.

Maeshowe is an ancient chamber tomb, one of the best preserved in Northern Europe. It is over 5,000 years old, and may have a link to the Newgrange tomb in Ireland. Nearby are the Standing Stones of Stenness. Originally an ellipse, only four stones remain in tact.

Stenness megalithic site located on the Islands of Orkney



This site has been referred to as a “Temple of the Moon” in the past, however that title seems to have originated with 19th century Romanticism more than any legitimate historical theories.

Despite this, the Stenness site does give one a sense of romance and magic, as we wonder what its original use would have been.

Due to the Norse settlement of Orkney, the Stenness site began to be affiliated with the Norse pagan gods. Obviously this is a much later attribution, but none the less very real and meaningful to the local people. One stone in particular bore this connection. It was called the Odin Stone, or in the local tongue “Stone o’ Odin.” This stone was highly revered by the local people, and stood for thousands of years. It was a large, imposing stone with a “socket hole”, indicating it may have once been part of a pair. Unfortunately, land surveyors and businessmen from mainland Scotland with more concern for profit than culture moved in to the area and launched assaults on local treasures. Captain W. Mackay is the landowner said to be responsible for the destruction of the Odin Stone as well as other stones on the Stenness site, in 1814.

Ancient drawing of Odin Stone



The Ring of Brodgar (credit to user Chmee2 of Wikimedia commons)



The Ring of Brodgar, however, is more in tact. It was built in a true circle, such as is found at Stonehenge and Avebury. Although the stones are much smaller than the stones found at Stenness, enough of them remain to give a more full impression of the imposing beauty of these ancient neolithic circles.

You will definitely want to reserve a large portion of your day for the world's best preserved Neolithic village, right here on Orkney, at Skara Brae.

The settlement consists of eight houses which have been so remarkably preserved as to be called "The Pompeii of Scotland."



Skara Brae

Ironically, the site was discovered due to a devastating storm. The village was buried in a mound previously called “Skerrabra”, when high winds began to erode some of the covering during the winter of 1850. The site has been an area of local interest ever since.

There is so much to cover on such a tiny island, I wish this article could go on forever! If you enjoyed this little bit of historical background on Orkney, stay tuned for future articles. I plan on spending the entire summer wandering through not only Orkney, but also Shetland. And, if time allows, possibly the Faroe Islands as well! And if all goes as planned, it will be compiled into my debut book. So wish me luck! And if you'll have me, I'd love to continue to be your tour guide through these beautiful and fascinating islands all summer long.

A Web-Bibliography for further reading:

<http://www.orkneyjar.com> - An excellent web site with a wealth of information on Orkney history and heritage

<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/514> - UNESCO's website on the World Heritage site at Orkney

<http://www.historic-scotland.gov.uk> - The Scottish Government's historical body which oversees national historical sites.

<http://orcadianwildlife.co.uk/> - A member of Wild Scotland, dedicated to the wildlife of Orkney

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orkney> - Criticism of Wikipedia be damned! It's an excellent jumping off point, it goes into great detail with Orkney, and provides links for further research.



Both Skara Brae photos credited to Wknight94 of Wikimedia Commons