



Ethnicity and the origins of local identity in Shetland, UK—Part I: Picts, Vikings, Fairies, Finns, and Aryans

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Abstract The population of the North Sea archipelago of Shetland, UK possesses a distinct sense of ethnic identity, which connects the island's present-day community to that of its Old Norse/Viking settlers from Scandinavia. This sense of Viking ethnicity, however, is relatively recent, first arising in the 19th Century. This paper argues that Shetland's cultural identity must be understood in terms of the islands' historical interconnectedness with trends in literature and scholarship in mainland Scotland, Britain, and Europe as a whole. Part I of this two-part paper looks at how works of literature and international academic research into folklore, racial anthropology, archaeology, and philology influenced and were influenced by the Shetland community's conceptions of its own history. Over the course of the 19th Century, a sense of ethnic uniqueness and identification with the Vikings gradually developed in Shetland, linked to ideas concerning Shetland's past inhabitants (Picts and Vikings), past folk belief (Finns, mermaids, and fairies), and the increasing prominence of research into Aryan/Indo-European ethnicity. Despite its geographic isolation, the history of ideas within Shetland is fundamentally one of interchange with the wider world.

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1. Introduction

The increasing consolidation and international recognition of the field of island studies has resulted in growing theoretical sophistication and negotiation. There are currently various

lines of discussion that are moving in dialogue—and occasionally in parallel—to define the ideal aims, scope, perspectives, and subject matter of the field itself. For instance, [Stratford et al. \(2011\)](#) have suggested an archipelagic approach, noting that the dominant understandings of 'the island' as either a singular entity or as a cultural or economic community relative to the mainland have tended to marginalise investigation of island-to-island relations. [Hayward \(2012\)](#), in turn, has stressed the importance of the sea itself in our understanding of islandness, a challenge with which [Fleury \(2013\)](#) has grappled in his analysis of 'the island/sea/territory relationship'. As [Juni'chiro \(2012, p. 13\)](#) has illustrated, even the concepts of 'island' and 'archipelago' are far from fixed, with conceptions of island

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and archipelagic status changing significantly over time in the Japanese context, where “the consciousness of the Japanese state as a *shimaguni* (island nation)” takes on new strengths and connotations as circumstances demand.

One argument that many of these contributions to island studies’ theoretical foundations have in common is that islands can never be regarded in isolation. There are “different *kinds of insularity* as well as [...] different *degrees of insularity*” (Biagini and Hoyle, 1999, p. 6), and though we may be urged to study islands ‘on their own terms’, even their own terms are never theirs alone (Baldacchino, 2008), as their economies remain dependent on imported and exported goods and people, and their cultures are affected by inflows of new ideas. Island communities are fundamentally interconnected with the world around them—the sea, other islands, large landmasses.

The interconnectedness of islands has, in fact, become something of an island studies commonplace: Despite there being little evidence of scholars within the field seeking to argue that islands are closed systems, much time and energy is spent asserting the contrary. This comes, however, with the risk that, in constantly declaiming that islands are not ‘insular’, we lose sight of the very real effect that island status can have on a community’s development. The present two-part paper uses an exploration of the Shetland archipelago’s place in the European history of ideas to illustrate how the interconnectedness of island communities with the outside world does not preclude islands from fostering “unique cultural habitats” (Jennings, 2010, p. 1) precisely by nature of their relative geographic isolation. The story we shall consider here might be one in which an island community plays a small role in a series of much greater cultural movements, but as we shall see, this small role is one that only an island could play: Sufficiently connected to the outside world to exchange ideas with it yet also sufficiently cut off from the outside world to be readily essentialised by both islanders and outsiders. We cannot merely study islands ‘on the own terms’, for islanders themselves frequently conceive of their homes and cultures in opposition to or otherwise with reference to the outside world. To be an islander is, in some ways, to self-identify with difference and with place (Olwig, 2007).

This, then, is a study of conceptions and self-perceptions—in other words, of ideas. Ideas can have real impacts: A failure of cultural imagination within an island community can contribute to political, economic, and social stagnation (Grydehøj and Hayward, 2011) while the shifting cultural values of neighbouring communities can lead to an infinitely changeable island landscape of political, economic, and social power (Grydehøj, 2011b). The ideas and ideals of everyday citizens, parallel to or in interaction with those of the elite, can coalesce into nation-building movements with profound effects (Eriksen, 2012), as the present two-part paper will also indicate.

Shetland (see Fig. 1) is a North Atlantic archipelago that is a subnational jurisdiction of Scotland, which is itself a subnational jurisdiction of the United Kingdom (UK). With a population of around 22,000 and a highly peripheral location, Shetland would not appear to be an obvious site of geopolitical importance. Nevertheless, its Sullom Voe Terminal—one of the largest oil and gas terminals in Europe—has made Shetland significant to the British economy. Now, as the debate over Scotland’s proposed independence from the UK heats up, the potential arises for Shetland to play a pivotal role in the constitutional future of the country as a whole. This is because a con-



Fig. 1 Map of the North Atlantic. Shetland lies to the northeast of Scotland and west of Norway. (Source: adapted from http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Blank_Template_for_Greater_Europe.PNG).

siderable segment of the Shetland population has a heartfelt desire to keep Shetland out of an independent Scotland, which is due to a widespread—though not universal—antipathy toward Scots in general and toward Scottish rule over Shetland in particular. Within Scotland and the UK as a whole, however, there tends to be a lack of understanding as to why many Shetlanders might be wary of being part of an independent Scotland. Even within Shetland itself, it is not immediately obvious why this might be the case—unless, of course, one is willing to beg the question by accepting the prevalent local historical narrative that emphasises Scottish oppression of what had once been a free Scandinavian people (Fig. 1).

So far from begging the question, we will seek to tease out the answer to it by following various strands of Shetland’s cultural history. In the present article, the first part of this two-part paper, we will consider the period from the Iron Age until the start of the 1880s, discussing the historical development of ideas concerning Shetlanders’ ethnic identity as well as contemporary and retrospective historiographic interpretations of folk belief in Shetland. Though this is a history that involves such apparently parochial issues as descriptions of fairies and mermaids, it is, in fact, part of a wider history of the development of European thought and thinking on European identities. It is also a history that is continuing to exert influence in British politics. In this paper’s forthcoming second part, we will consider the cementing of a particular ethnic nationalist historical narrative within Shetland from the 1890s on and will discuss the results this has had both in Shetland and internationally.

2. A brief history of Shetland

The Northern Isles of Orkney and Shetland were first settled by a people from the Scottish mainland (hereafter, *Scotland*) in the Mesolithic or Neolithic period and had developed an agricultural society by around 3000 BCE. A highly complex society arose around 2000 BCE and continued until a few centuries before the start of the first millennium CE, as is evi-

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