



Ethnicity and the origins of local identity in Shetland, UK – Part II: 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 II of this two-part paper looks at how the rise of nationalism and philological research into race and ethnicity in the 1800s both drew upon and contributed to Shetlanders' understanding of their history and culture. In the 1890s, Edinburgh scholar David MacRitchie promoted a theory to explain European and Asian fairy folklore. This theory was grounded in the history of Orkney and Shetland and eventually made a significant impact in Shetland itself, being used by the author Jessie Saxby to promote a distinctive local identity concept. MacRitchie's work also contributed to later research connected to the development of neopaganism and racist Nazi ideology. The conclusion concerns the role of isolated island communities within flows of cultural development and exchange.

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Introduction

Part I of this paper (Grydehøj, 2013) explored how conceptions of the history of the North Sea archipelago of Shet-

land, UK changed over time (from the Medieval Period to the 1890s) partially as a result of a complex interplay of descriptive, popular historic, fiction, and scholarly writing regarding Shetland. From the early 19th Century, there was a growing tendency for authors and researchers from mainland Scotland, the remainder of the British Isles, and Continental Europe to overlay the landscape and people of Shetland with a heroic Old Norse/Viking past. That such a past could be deemed important in the pursuit of wider cultural and political objectives is a sign of the increasing importance of ethnicity over the course of the 1800s, as philology transformed from an academic discipline concerning linguistic history into a sort of universal discipline that

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served various processes of identity construction across Europe.

Part II of this paper will continue the analysis of how the combination of interaction with *and* isolation from the outside world can make cultural development in a peripheral island community distinctive.

Racism, Aryanism, and the New Philology

Developments in Shetland's local identity cannot be understood without knowledge of how the islands' identity construction interacted with wider European trends, particularly in the field of philological research.

In Europe, racism is a relatively recent phenomenon. Although there were a host of political, religious, and philosophical motivations for 17th- and 18th-Century British writers to champion the Saxons, Celts, Norsemen, or whatever peoples they pleased, these motivations were ethnic (i.e. cultural) rather than racial. Even at the start of the 19th Century, biblically informed scholarly tradition was still emphasising the essential unity of the European peoples and – to some extent – of peoples around the globe (Kidd, 1999). A shift, however, occurred in 1786 when Sir William Jones brought widespread scholarly attention to the similarities between Sanskrit and the European languages, providing linguistic evidence for the existence of a common Indo-European (otherwise known as *Aryan*) culture (Arvidsson, 2006: 41).

Notwithstanding the negative connotations that the term *Aryan* has accrued due to its use by certain racist movements, it is important to recall that the existence of Aryans/Indo-Europeans as a broad cultural-linguistic group is not in dispute: Numerous modern languages (for instance, Czech, English, German, Hindi, Italian, Persian, Romani, Russian, and Scots Gaelic) do indeed possess common roots. Nor can it be debated that the existence of Aryans presupposes non-Aryans. Where modern scholarship diverges from that of the past is in where the lines can be drawn between various cultural-linguistic groups and the extent to which race and genetic relationship can be associated with them.

In the beginning, the emerging theories of Aryanism provided scientific support for the biblically informed notion of European unity for it was clear that the vast majority of European languages possessed a common origin. Over the course of the 19th Century, however, research in the rapidly expanding discipline of philology increasingly identified the non-Aryans relevant to the European experience with the Finno-Ugric or hypothesised Turanian/Uralo-Altaic peoples, and it was theorised that the dominance of Indo-European languages in Europe meant that Aryans at one point conquered the continent's previously dominant peoples. This created a kind of foundation myth for the various European nations, with each nation positing that its ancestors defeated one or more particular non-Aryan peoples (Arvidsson, 2006: 57). In time, as nationalism developed along cultural rather than politico-legal lines, the concept of Aryanism was turned against itself, and competition mounted among scholars of various nations to prove that their own nation was the most pure inheritor of Aryan culture and, in some cases, to prove that competing nations were not Aryan at all. Eventually, as we shall see, even the hypothesised Turanian peoples came to be

conflated with what were regarded as the savage peoples of Africa.

David MacRitchie's euhemerist theory on the origins of fairy belief

A fundamental and as-yet-unresolved problem in the academic study of folk belief is how to explain the existence of belief to begin with. A wide range of theories have been proposed from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Some of these theories assume that the supernatural beings in question (fairies, mermaids, ghosts, etc.) do not themselves exist in any objective sense while other theories seek to identify spiritual or material bases for the beliefs. We do not aim here to promote any one theory but will instead concentrate on considering a theory – a particular version of the so-called euhemerist theory – that was eventually conclusively proved incorrect by archaeology but that has had certain impacts in Shetland and farther afield.

It was within the blossoming of 'the New Philology' that David MacRitchie (1861–1925), an educated accountant and native of Edinburgh, underwent his intellectual development. In his 1890 *Testimony of Tradition*, MacRitchie argues that legends concerning supernatural beings across Europe and Asia could be explained by experiences with races of diminutive people who lived alongside the ancestors of today's Europeans. Though similar versions of this euhemerist theory had been voiced by earlier writers like Sir Walter Scott, Sven Nilsson, and J.F. Campbell, MacRitchie is the first writer to set forth the theory systematically and seek to provide evidence for it. Because MacRitchie's work is so important for the development of Shetland identity, we will consider it in some detail, though we will not attempt to reproduce the entirety of his complex argument.

The evidence at the heart of MacRitchie's theory originates from Orkney and Shetland. MacRitchie takes his point of departure in a theory proposed by Karl Blind in 1881. As we saw in Part I of this paper, Blind – with little or no evidence – conflates Shetland traditions of supernatural merfolk/seal people with those of sea-trows. He then conflates these again with Early Modern descriptions of non-supernatural 'Finns' in Orkney, suggesting that these represent a folk memory of heroic Vikings (Grydehøj, 2013: 46). It is important to recall that Blind is our earliest source for the presence of Finns in Shetland (as opposed to in Orkney alone).¹

MacRitchie takes a different approach to Blind's Early Modern sources, which state that Finns in little boats had been seen off the coast of Orkney near the end of the 17th Century. MacRitchie (1890: 7–8) argues that "the Finns of the

¹ There is toponymic and dialect evidence that the concept of Finns has a long presence in Shetland, but as I have discussed in detail elsewhere (Grydehøj, 2010: 128–134), this is only very uncertain proof that there existed a concept of Finns *per se* in Shetland prior to the late 1800s. The silence of all our earlier sources regarding Finns in Shetland as well as the tendency of our 19th- and 20th-Century sources to borrow concepts from one another (as illustrated in this paper) mean that we cannot take at face value the numerous late references to the Finns. I feel that it is likely that exposure to written sources caused 20th-Century Shetland writers to apply the name of 'Finns' to beings that they would otherwise have called by other names. It should be noted that my opinions here conflict somewhat with those of the highly knowledgeable Northern Isles folk belief scholar Andrew Jennings (2010).

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