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## COMMUNICATING IDENTITY: THE MODERN RUNES OF ORKNEY

### Abstract

This paper explores the role of runes in communal identity formation and self-presentation in the small Scottish island group of Orkney. Its data consists of publically visible runic texts which are produced in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, appearing for example on signage, local products and souvenirs, in logos and public artwork, and on people's own bodies. It is shown that runes in Orkney function as an outward manifestation of island identity, both towards tourists and internally in the community.

**Key words:** Runes, Orkney, modern runes, identity.

**Słowa kluczowe:** runy, Orkney, współczesne runy, tożsamość.

### Introduction

This paper addresses the ways in which runes are used in modern contexts in the Orkney Islands, Scotland. By “modern”, the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries are meant, and the contexts in question include the arts and crafts business sphere, tourist information material, decoration of public buildings, the logos of businesses, clubs and societies and public bodies, and presentation of local produce and products. Texts in various runic alphabets are popular in all of these contexts, either as pure decoration or also sometimes by conveying a meaningful message. The paper surveys some of the output of modern runic writing and discusses what motivates the use of runes in these contexts by means of qualitative feedback from producers of modern runic texts.

## Historical background

Orkney is a group of islands off the north coast of Scotland, located about 16 kilometres away from the Scottish mainland. The islands were formerly held as an earldom under the Viking age/medieval kings of Norway and subsequently by the kingdom of Denmark-Norway. However, the islands were transferred to Scotland as part of a marriage dowry in 1468 when Princess Margrethe of Denmark married James III of Scotland.<sup>1</sup> The princess was the daughter of King Christian I of Denmark, who had run up high debts.<sup>2</sup> In place of cash, Christian pawned Orkney in 1468 and Shetland in 1469 to the Scottish kingdom (op. cit.). In theory, if the cash debt had been paid, Orkney and Shetland could have been returned to Denmark-Norway. However, Thomson<sup>3</sup> suggests that Christian never had any real intention of redeeming the pledge, realising that “transfer to a foreign power which for many years had coveted the islands could not so easily be reversed.” Between 1514 and 1667, there were several attempts by Denmark-Norway to regain the isles, as well as offers by Scotland to return them in exchange for money or military support.<sup>45</sup> However, the Northern Isles remained under Scottish and subsequently British rule.

## Orcadian self-understanding

Naturally, the knowledge that Orkney was once part of Norway (or Denmark-Norway) has made an impression on the people who now live in the islands. Although the Norse past is not the only thing defining Orcadians’ self-understanding, it plays a significant part. In a small survey carried out in Shetland, an island group which has a very similar history to Orkney, Atina Nihtinen<sup>6</sup> found that “[w]hile the Norse heritage and Scandinavian influence form an important part of what is perceived to be collective heritage, seeing oneself as more Scandinavian than Scottish or British was far from being a common experience.” That said, one would perhaps not expect Shetlanders or Orcadians to feel *more* Scandinavian than Scottish or British as long as the fact remains that Orkney and Shetland are part of Scotland and the UK. However, the Norse past undoubtedly does play a prominent role in the islanders’ self-understanding. This is visible

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<sup>1</sup> Esben Albrectsen (2009). «Christian 1: utdypning.» *Norsk biografisk leksikon*. Retrieved 21st October 2013. [http://nbl.snl.no/Christian\\_1/utdypning](http://nbl.snl.no/Christian_1/utdypning).

<sup>2</sup> *Norsk biografisk leksikon*.

<sup>3</sup> W. Thomson, *The New History of Orkney*, 3rd edition, Birlinn Ltd., Edinburgh 2008, p. 200.

<sup>4</sup> S. Murdoch, “Newcastle in Pawn,” *Northern Review*, 2001, vol. 9–10, pp. 19–24.

<sup>5</sup> B. Smith, “When did Orkney and Shetland become part of Scotland? A contribution to the debate,” *New Orkney Antiquarian Journal*, 2011, vol. 5, pp. 45–62.

<sup>6</sup> A. Nihtinen, *Ambivalent Self-Understanding? Change, Language and Boundaries in the Shetland Islands (1970 – Present)*, Åbo Akademi University Press, 2011, p. 162.

for example through the popularity of baby names such as Sigurd, Magnus, Thorfinn, Rognvald, Ingrid and Inga, or in the annual celebration of Norwegian Constitution Day on 17 May, where locals take part as enthusiastically as visiting Norwegians, and indeed in the arts and crafts, on logos and labels, and in product naming practices, where not only the runes – as explored in this paper – but also Viking imagery in general is popular.

One example of a naming practice making reference to the Viking age would be the naming of streets such as Viking Place, Earl Thorfinn Street, Earl Sigurd Street or St. Rognvald's Way. Other street names make references to modern Norway, such as King Haakon Street, Queen Sonja Kloss, King Harald Kloss and Hordaland – albeit mixed in with street names referencing Scottish and British history, such as for instance Dundas Crescent, Cromwell Road, Victoria Street and Albert Street (all cited examples are from Kirkwall, Orkney's central town). Hordaland is named after Orkney's twinning agreement with the Norwegian county of Hordaland, which Lange<sup>7</sup> interprets as “a space wherein Orkney can attach to its immigrant homeland and replenish its (Norse) cultural identity.” The Orkney Brewery<sup>8</sup> produces beers named Skullsplitter and Raven Ale, after a character and an event in the Orkneyinga Saga, and Dragonhead with a picture of a Viking longship on its label. The whisky distillery Highland Park in 2012 launched a new Viking based range of whiskies. Orkney's largest primary school, Papdale School, has a Viking longship as its logo, and consequently all c. 500 pupils are exposed to this Viking imagery every day on the uniforms they all wear.

The general popularity of Norse culture is also very visible in the arts. A good example is literature. Although Norse culture and literature received a general surge of interest from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards in the whole of Britain and elsewhere in Europe, in Orkney this interest was amplified through Orkney's real historical link with Norway. Orkney literature since the 19<sup>th</sup> century has been very much inspired by translated Norse literature such as sagas and skaldic poetry, which became available in English translation at that time<sup>9</sup>. Of particular interest to the Orkney reading (and writing) audience was Shetlander Gilbert Goudie's translation of the *Orkneyinga Saga*<sup>10</sup> (1873), which gave the Orcadians a direct insight into the affairs of Orkney earls and landholders during Norwegian rule before the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Also of local interest was the 1844 translation

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<sup>7</sup> M. Lange, *The Norwegian Scots. An Anthropological Interpretation of Viking-Scottish Identity in the Orkney Islands*, The Edwin Mellen Press, 2007, pp. 83–84.

<sup>8</sup> The Orkney Brewery (N.D.): <http://www.sinclairbreweries.co.uk/home.html>.

<sup>9</sup> S.W. Hall, *The History of Orkney Literature*, John Donald, Edinburgh 2010.

<sup>10</sup> G. Goudie, J. Anderson, J.A. Hjaltalín, *The Orkneyinga Saga*, Edmonston and Douglas, Edinburgh 1873.

of *Heimskringla – The Saga of the Norwegian Kings*, undertaken by the Orkneyman Samuel Laing.<sup>11</sup>

As people's awareness of Orkney's past as a Norse Earldom rose, and the availability of saga literature in English translation improved, Orkney writers were inspired to utilise their islands' history and the newly available texts as background for their own work. Some examples of works inspired by Norse literary texts and the Norse past in Orkney in general are J. Storer Clouston's novel *Vandrad the Viking: or the Feud and the Spell*<sup>12</sup> (1898), Eric Linklater's *The Men of Ness*<sup>13</sup> (1932), George Mackay Brown's *Magnus*<sup>14</sup> (1973) and *Vinland*<sup>15</sup> (1992) and Robert Rendall's poem *Shore Tullye*,<sup>16</sup> which imitates the *dróttkvætt* metre used by Norse Skalds. Sebastian Seibert<sup>17</sup> has shown how the idea of Orkney's Norse past was discovered, constructed and received from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to today, and Julian D'Arcy<sup>18</sup> has shown how Old Norse literature has inspired modern Scottish literature, including Orkney literature. A recently published history of Orkney literature by Simon Hall<sup>19</sup> identifies Norse inspiration as a main theme running through Orkney literature from the Victorian era until today. The strong inspiration Norse literature has provided for early modern and modern Orkney literature led Simon Hall to conclude:

The medieval skalds and sagamen – warrior poets and Icelandic ecclesiastics – are the earliest literary artists associated with Orkney whose work has survived. The over-enthusiastic celebration of these shadowy Norse figures has often “awakened” false feelings of atavistic kinship. Such is the power of their writing – and such is the geographical rootedness of Orkneyinga Saga – that it has inspired generations of imitation and adaption, beginning in the age of [Sir Walter] Scott and continuing into the present, sometimes oblivious to the facts of vast historical and cultural distance.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> S. Laing (trans.), S. Sturluson, *The Heimskringla; Or, Chronicle Of The Kings Of Norway, Translated From The Icelandic Of Snorro Sturleson, With a Preliminary Dissertation By S. Laing*, Longmans, London 1844.

<sup>12</sup> J.S. Clouston, *Vandrad the Viking, or, The Feud and the Spell*, Thomas Nelson and Sons, London, England, Edinburgh, Scotland, New York, USA 1898.

<sup>13</sup> E. Linklater, *The men of Ness; The saga of Thorlief Coalbiter's Sons*, J. Cape, London 1932.

<sup>14</sup> G.M. Brown, *Magnus, A Novel*, Hogarth Press, London 1973.

<sup>15</sup> G.M. Brown, *Vinland*. J. Murray, London 1992.

<sup>16</sup> R. Rendall, *Orkney Variants and Other Poems*, The Kirkwall Press, Kirkwall 1951.

<sup>17</sup> S. Seibert, *Reception and construction of the Norse past in Orkney*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main; Oxford 2008.

<sup>18</sup> J.M. D'Arcy, *Scottish Skalds And Sagamen : Old Norse Influence On Modern Scottish Literature*, Tuckwell Press 1996.

<sup>19</sup> S.W. Hall, *op.cit.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1.

## The place of archaeology, history and art in the Orkney community and economy

Orkney's many-faceted and fascinating history and its many archaeological remains has naturally become a selling point for the islands as well forming part of the islanders' own identity and self-understanding. The Norse past is by no means the only part of Orkney's history which is being used in this way: The attraction of Orkney spans over 5000 years from the Neolithic to World War II and beyond. In a 2011 report on culture development in Orkney, François Matarasso<sup>21</sup> finds that "part of the county's strength is the variety of its heritage, which represents so many ages in its history: the Iron Age Broch at Gurness, the Viking settlement at Birsay, mediaeval castles on Westray and Wyre, renaissance palaces at Kirkwall, the cathedral, churches and kirks, Laird's mansions, industrial and military remains and more."<sup>22</sup>

Tourism plays a large part in the Orkney economy, and naturally, Orkney tries to play to its strengths when attempting to attract tourists. In 2009, 149 000 people visited Orkney, in addition to 45 000 cruise ship tourists, which is about seven visitors per resident<sup>23</sup>. Many of these visitors come in order to experience Orkney's cultural history, with "prehistoric sites/archaeology" being the most important cultural reason to visit Orkney according to the 2009 Visitor Survey<sup>24</sup>.

As part of the "Orkney experience", runes naturally find their place. The chambered tomb of Maeshowe, containing the largest assemblage of runic inscriptions outside of Scandinavia, is among Orkney's most popular attractions. Visitors to Orkney also meet runes through the many products using runes as part of their design, including local jewellery, food and knitwear, as will be shown below.

However, Orkney's output of runic design products is not merely part of its "tourist identity" (to use a term borrowed from Lange<sup>25</sup>). It also has to be viewed in the wider context of local culture. For the size of its population, Orkney is very high achieving in all cultural fields, and there is a great interest in culture and art in the islands. "Orkney has produced a remarkable number of gifted artists, writers, designers and musicians – more, in so far as such comparisons can be made – than most remote places with a few thousand inhabitants"<sup>26</sup>. Among

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<sup>21</sup> F. Matarasso, *Stories & Fables: Reflections on culture development in Orkney. Report for Highlands and Islands Enterprise*, 2011. Retrieved 21/10/2013 from <http://www.hie.co.uk/common/handlers/download-document.ashx?id=59f8baf0-2084-414d-a800-f96555e708e2>.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 18.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 15.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>25</sup> M. Lange, *op.cit.*, p. 224.

<sup>26</sup> F. Matarasso, *op.cit.*, p. 58.

the many outputs from these artists are runic design products, which tell a story of Orkney's remarkable history which the designers themselves and their customers alike access through these products.

### **Data material**

The data collection for this study consisted of two parts: (1) The seeking out and photographing of modern runes visible in the Orkney landscape and streetscape; and (2) the collection of free responses from manufacturers, commissioners and wearers of such runes telling of what runes mean to them.

For phase 1, the criteria for inclusion in the study was that the text must be in some form which is recognisably runic, meaning that viewers of the text will perceive it as runic, although all kinds of runes were accepted – whether it was in the Younger Futhark, Elder Futhark, Anglo-Saxon Runes, a mixture of these, a mixture of runes and Roman characters, or fantastic runes which are unintelligible but nonetheless look like runes.

For phase 2, contact was made with artists and designers who are the creators of some of the products identified in phase 1, as well as a handful of members of the public who were seen to wear or display runes on their person. They were asked what runes mean to them and why they were wearing them, while the artists and designers were asked what runes mean to them and how runes inspire them in their work. I also searched through the artists' and designers' catalogues and websites for their own explanatory texts that present their runic products to their customers.

## **Results**

### *Runes in public places*

Visitors who fly in to Orkney for the first time are greeted by a very visible runic text above the main entrance to Kirkwall airport (see Illustration 1). The text is in the Younger Futhark, long twig type, reading **krimsitir**, representing *Grimsetter*, which is the name of the airport. The runic text here follows conventional Viking Age spelling, by letting a k-rune stand for the sound “g”, and two i-runes represent the two instances of the letter “e”, while a single t-rune represents the double “t” in the place name. The spelling and rune design was advised by Professor Michael Barnes of University College London for the opening of the new terminal building in 2002.



Illustration 1: Main entrance at Kirkwall Airport Grimsetter, Orkney Islands.  
Photo by Ragnhild Ljosland.

Also inside the airport, runes are visible in artwork decorating the public space and on jewellery laid out in display cabinets. The artwork consists of a number of large depictions of Orkney scenes made out of vinyl, including one representing Maeshowe, showing a runic inscription, the Maeshowe Dragon, and the prow of a Viking ship, the (modern) original of which is to be found outside the Orkneyinga Saga Centre in Orphir (see Illustration 2).

Maeshowe's assemblage of runic inscriptions, though not being the only rune finds from Orkney, have proven to be immensely popular in terms of inspiring modern runic texts and art- and design work. Sebastian Seibert finds that the "[r]eception of the Maes Howe runes has heavily influenced the image of the Norse past not only for Orcadians, but for British and Scandinavian scholars in general."<sup>27</sup> Maeshowe is a burial mound far predating the Viking age – it is in fact about 5000 years old. The runes were added later, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, and consist of a total of 33 inscriptions, making it the largest assemblage outside of Scandinavia. The runes were discovered in 1861 when James Farrer<sup>28</sup> conducted an excavation of the burial mound. The runes immediately caused a lot of excitement, they were written about in the local newspapers, and various scholars were contacted who offered diverging and sometimes quite fanciful interpretations of the inscriptions.

<sup>27</sup> S. Seibert, *Reception and Construction of the Norse Past in Orkney*, p. 120.

<sup>28</sup> J. Farrer, *Notice of runic inscriptions discovered during recent excavations in the Orkneys*, privately published, 1862.





Illustration 2: Artwork representing Maeshowe at Kirkwall airport.  
Photo by Ragnhild Ljosland

The Maeshowe picture in the airport (Illustration 2) contains an exact copy of part of Maeshowe inscription number 9 (numbering from Barnes<sup>29</sup>), reading **ingibjorg hin f**. The full inscription, in Michael Barnes' normalisation, reads "Ingibjorg, hin fagra ekkja. Mǫrg kona hefir farit lút inn hér. Mikill ofláti. Erlingr" translating as "Ingibjorg, the fair widow. Many a woman has gone stooping in here. A great show-off. Erlingr."<sup>30</sup> This inscription is perhaps the most famous out of the Maeshowe assemblage. As will be shown below, the Maeshowe inscriptions also feature in locally produced jewellery.

Another public place featuring Maeshowe runes is the Kirkwall central bus station, where several Maeshowe texts decorate the wall space in a similar way to that in the airport (see Illustration 3). The texts include Maeshowe 21: "Ingigerðr er kynæna in vænsta", which is presented by Maeshowe tour guides as "Ingigerðr is the most beautiful of women", but which Barnes<sup>31</sup> prefers to translate as "Ingigerðr is the most beautiful of ..." and leave the word "kynæna" untranslated. Also represented in the bus station is Maeshowe 20: "þessar rúnar reist sá maðr, er rúnstr er fyrir vestan haf, með þeiri øxi, er átti Gaukr Trandilssonr fyrir sunnan land" – these runes were carved by the man most skilled in runes in the West Ocean with the axe that Gaukr Trandilsson owned in the south of the land.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> M. Barnes, *The runic inscriptions of Maeshowe, Orkney*, Uppsala, Sweden: Institutionen för nordiska språk, Uppsala universitet, 1994.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 99.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 152.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 165.





Illustration 3: “meþ þæiri ø...”. Part of a runic decoration featuring Maeshowe 20 in Kirkwall Bus Station. Photo by Ragnhild Ljosland.

### Products with runic designs

Orkney has a large jewellery industry for its size, with designer names such as Ola Gorie, Sheila Fleet and Ortak. These designers take inspiration from Orkney’s history, archaeology and landscape, including runes and the Norse past. Ola Gorie’s shop in Kirkwall is even named The Longship, with a longship as its logo, and selling silver and gold longship design jewellery. Ola Gorie was Orkney’s first modern jewellery designer, and her first design was based on the “Maeshowe Dragon” carving: “Carved by Viking visitors a thousand years ago on the wall of Orkney’s great Neolithic monument, Maeshowe. A perennial favourite, this was Ola Gorie’s first ever jewellery design, launched in 1960. It marks the birth of Orkney’s jewellery industry.”<sup>33</sup> Later Ola Gorie designs feature faithful copies of Maeshowe runic inscriptions, such as Maeshowe 9 and 18. About Maeshowe 9, she writes in her 2011 catalogue: “Ingibjorg is the fairest of maidens’ carved one lovesick Viking, sheltering inside Orkney’s great Maeshowe. His elegant runes captured her beauty forever.”<sup>34</sup> Possibly this explanation confuses Maeshowe 9 and Maeshowe 21. Another design features Maeshowe 18: *Arnfiðr matr reist rúnar þessar*.<sup>35</sup> Ola Gorie writes about this one: “In 1153 Viking adventurers broke into Orkney’s greatest Neolithic tomb, Maeshowe. Stormbound, they passed three nights carving dozens of inscriptions in their twig-like runic alphabet: messages of love, boasts of prowess, and rumours of treasure.”<sup>36</sup> Ola Gorie also produces some more freely inspired runic designs, such as rings and brooches reading “Orkney” and “I love you”, and small jewellery with single runes, as well as designs based on other Viking

<sup>33</sup> Ola Gorie 2011 catalogue.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>35</sup> M. Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe*, p. 137.

<sup>36</sup> Ola Gorie 2011 catalogue, p. 8.

archaeological finds such as a brooch based on a whalebone plaque found in the Scar Boat Burial. Ola Gorie explains that she is fascinated by the runes being like voices from the past: “The Norse people of a thousand years ago recorded their thoughts, poetry, and vows of love in the twig-like runic alphabet. Carved on wood, bone and stone, their voices speak through the ages.”<sup>37</sup>



Illustration 4: Ola Gorie jewellery featuring inscription Maeshowe 18.  
Photo by Ragnhild Ljosland.

Whereas Ola Gorie has generally been very faithful to the appearance of the Maeshowe inscriptions, Orkney jewellery designer Sheila Fleet has taken a more liberal approach. Runes feature on her business logo, and decorate her shop front door in Kirkwall as well as featuring in many of her designs. The runes in Sheila Fleet’s shop front logo are written in a mixture of different futharks, spelling the words “reflecting times past and present” in the English language (see Illustration 5). When I contacted Sheila Fleet to ask what inspires her about runes, she replied: “As a designer I use Runes very much with an artistic approach. I partly use them to convey a sort of hidden message by using the Runes letters in a twig like pattern. It is not until they read my origination card that some people realize it is not just a letter it actually has a hidden message. I definitely use an artistic license and there are many more ways of using Runes in a modern way which reflects our rich past heritage.”<sup>38</sup>

The design seen on the shop front door is also used in a range of Sheila Fleet pieces of jewellery,<sup>39</sup> as well as on a mirror design by Albert Scott. Other Sheila Fleet runic designs read “Orkney” or “Orkney Isles”, “dreams of everlasting love,” “Skaill,” and “real love transcends time”, all in the English language and in mixed runes. The “Skaill” text refers to a Viking silver hoard that was found at Skaill, some miles to the north-west of Maeshowe. The Skaill find is important in the history of the Orcadian reception of the Maeshowe runes because some

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 9.

<sup>38</sup> Sheila Fleet, e-mail interview, 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Sheila Fleet website <http://www.sheilafleet.com/search?searchText=runic>, retrieved 21/10/13.

of the Maeshowe inscriptions mention a treasure which supposedly was carried out of Maeshowe and hidden in the north-west,<sup>40</sup> and an early interpretation was that this in fact referred to the Skaill Hoard. This is now, however, thought to be unlikely – but the excitement over the faint possibility of a link still remains. As can be seen from the interview quote above, Sheila Fleet is inspired by the mysterious air of the runes, triggering the customers to look deeper into what the runes mean. She also feels the runes reflect Orkney’s history and heritage, and their use is therefore a way of connecting with the past.



Illustration 5: Sheila Fleet Jewellery shop front door, Kirkwall, and mirror by Albert Scott inside the Sheila Fleet shop. Both read “Reflecting times past and present”.  
Photos by Ragnhild Ljosland.

Runes decorate not only jewellery, but other Orkney products as well. A design which has proven popular among visitors and islanders alike is the knitted “Orkney” jumper by Judith Glue. The pattern of this design transliterates as **urkniu** in the Younger Futhark, and is a representation of the name Orkney, which is repeated as a knitted pattern. The same runic design also features on other Judith Glue products such as badges, handbags and t-shirts. It was originally designed in 1985 and is still in production. Its use on souvenir badges is interesting because it shows that those who produce and sell it feel that a runic badge is something which is suitable for representing Orkney to the outside world, and the tourists who buy it feel that this is something they would like to take home with them from their visit to Orkney and therefore must represent their experience of Orkney in some way or another.

<sup>40</sup> M. Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Orkney*.

Runes also feature on Orkney produce such as fudge and lollipops, whereas Orkney Smoked Cheese has a picture of a horn-helmeted cartoon Viking and the text “The way Vikings like it.” The Orkney Fudge boxes bear a nonsensical inscription in the Elder Futhark, transliterating as **rRkts.ufelp**. An explanatory text on the back of the box states: “When the Vikings arrived in Orkney during the 8th century, they brought with them a unique form of writing – Runes. The word “Rune” derives from the Old Norse word meaning ‘secret writing’. An example of these Runes feature on the front of this box.” Like with Sheila Fleet’s jewellery, informing the customer that “rune” means “secret writing” or “secret message” adds interest to the product. The runes on the Orkney Fudge box are accompanied by a picture of the Ring of Brodgar in sunset, and the text “the sweet taste of the isles”. In combination, this communicates a sense of the exotic. The isles are remote, their sweetness makes you think of the isles’ natural beauty and tranquillity, while the Ring of Brodgar, being a 5000-year-old stone circle, symbolises age and a connection with the past. The runes also symbolise a connection with the past, in addition to “otherness” – understood as distinctness from the rest of Scotland<sup>41</sup> – and mystery.

### Alphabets, languages and cultures

As the Orkney Fudge box shows, the Orcadian makers of runic designs do not necessarily feel the need to reserve runes exclusively for “Viking” or “Norse” imagery. It apparently works just as well in connection with a picture of the Neolithic Ring of Brodgar. A similar combination appears on the Stenness Community School logo. Situated near the Ring of Brodgar and a second Neolithic stone circle known as the Stones of Stenness, the school logo, in addition to a nonsensical runic text reading **brkhohwkl**, shows an owl and two standing stones which could represent either of the two nearby stone circles.

Another example of this line of thinking appears on the wooden drums produced by the Orkney company Belgarth Bodhrans.<sup>42</sup> These are round drums of the traditional Irish type, which is used in Irish and Scottish folk music. Nonetheless, Norse runes do not seem to clash with Gaelic drums, and the proprietor of Belgarth Bodhrans explained that the runic decoration increases the sales of his product. His web site presents them thus: “Decoration based on the runic inscriptions and carvings inside the ancient burial mound of Maeshowe. These were etched into the walls when the Vikings broke into the tomb in the twelfth century and include sections of runic script and the famous Maeshowe Dragon.”<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup> See: S. Seibert, *Reception and construction of the Norse past in Orkney* and A. Nihtinen, *Ambivalisent Self-Understanding*.

<sup>42</sup> Belgarth Bodhrans (N.D): <http://belgarth.com/runic.htm>, retrieved 21/10/2013.

<sup>43</sup> Belgarth Bodhrans website, subsection “decoration”: <http://www.belgarth.com/finishes.htm>, retrieved 21/10/2013.

It is also common to see texts written in runic letters, but in the English language. Examples include the already mentioned Sheila Fleet range of runic jewellery, and furthermore the Orkney Netball Association's logo<sup>44</sup> which was designed in 2006 and reads "promoting netball in Orkney" in runes, the tour guiding business Discover Orkney's logo which reads "discover Orkney", and the Orkney Kidney Patient Association's logo<sup>45</sup> which reads "OKPA".

Neither does it matter, seemingly, which runic alphabet is used. Except for the faithful reproductions of genuine inscriptions, such as on Ola Gorie's Maeshowe jewellery, the material I have gathered for this project seems to suggest that many Orcadians are happy to use either of the Elder Futhark, the Younger Futhark of the Viking age type, the Younger Futhark of the Medieval type as found in Maeshowe, or Anglo-Saxon runes – or indeed a mixture of these. Anglo-Saxon runes can for instance be seen on tables produced by The Orkney Furniture Maker.<sup>46</sup> I also photographed a man from the Orkney island of Flotta who had tattooed the name "Orkney" on the length of his forearm in Anglo-Saxon runes (see Illustration 6). Mixed runic alphabets can for instance be seen in the logo of Charles Tait Photographic Limited,<sup>47</sup> which transliterates as **wikina prints** in a mixture of Elder Futhark and Younger Futhark long twig runes. Occasionally, letters of the Roman alphabet may be mixed in, as in Sheila Fleet's runic jewellery which uses a Roman letter "v" amongst the runes.

Also occurring are rune-like shapes which are not runic letters, but which imitate the angular and spiky shape of the runes. Curiously, such non-runes decorate the entrance to the Orkneyinga Saga Centre near the archaeological remains of the Earl's Bu and Round Kirk, Orphir where three genuinely medieval runic inscriptions have also been found (now in the Orkney Museum, Kirkwall).

### Runes for outsiders and insiders

As seen above, modern runes play a part in representing Orkney to outsiders visiting the islands. However, just as important is the internal use of runes for Orkney's own population, such as on the Stenness Community School logo, the Orkney Netball Association and the Orkney Kidney Patient Association logos described above. The Flotta man mentioned above, who had tattooed "Orkney" in runes on his arm, is making a very personal statement about his identity. I also had the good fortune to meet one out of a pair of Orcadian sisters, both of whom had runes tattooed on their wrist. The one I met had the text "ney". When I asked her why she had "ney" in runes tattooed on her wrist, she explained that her

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<sup>44</sup> Orkney Netball Association (N.D.): <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Netball-Orkney/125844680770983?v=info>

<sup>45</sup> Orkney Kidney Patient Association (N.D.): <http://www.orkneycommunities.co.uk/OKPA/>

<sup>46</sup> Orkney Furniture Maker (N.D.): <http://www.orkneyfurniture.co.uk/index.htm>

<sup>47</sup> Charles Tait Photographic Limited, <http://www.charles-tait.co.uk/>



sister has the other half of the text: “Ork”. And when a group of primary school pupils from Papdale Primary School in Kirkwall made a tapestry with a picture of their home island for the international Golden Tapestry project, they chose to include the text “Papdale, Kirkwall, Orkney, Scotland” in runes. The tapestry now hangs on display in the school.

Orcadians happily wear Judith Glue’s runic knitted jumpers and t-shirts. One native Orcadian wearer of such a t-shirt explained to me: “It makes a talking point when I’m on holiday outside of Orkney. It gives me a chance to explain about Orkney’s history.” Do we detect a little pride in Orkney’s Norse history?

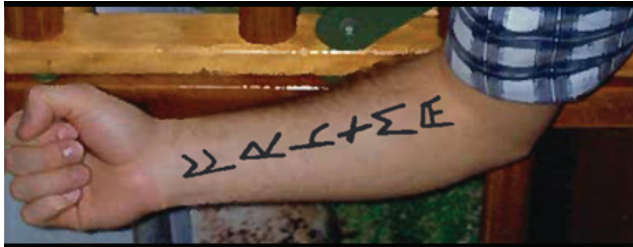


Illustration 6: “Orkney” tattoo. Photo by Ragnhild Ljosland.

In April of 2011 I was approached by a committee member of one of the local branches of the Scottish Women’s Rural Institute. This Orkney woman asked me to design a runic text for a plaque that was to be used as a prize trophy by the club. Presenting her with the finished text, I asked her why the SWRI wanted runes on their plaque. She replied:

“Because Kirkwall airport has runic letters. And I think there is a strong connection between ancient Viking runic writing and modern – I think Sheila Fleet and Ola Gorie have wedding rings with runic writing with a love message. And I know that there are these bracelets and amulets been designed with runic lettering. So there is obviously an appeal for people today, living in Orkney, who want to remember and celebrate their Viking heritage. And jewellery with runic lettering is one way of doing it. Inverness Airport is written in Gaelic, and the fact that Kirkwall Airport is written in runic distinguishes it right away from our western friends. There is a completely different culture and tradition in Orkney and Shetland compared to the Western Isles. They have their Gaelic language which they celebrate and use and increase their profile. So I thought it makes a statement when you go to the airport and see the lettering: This is Orkney and we are different from everybody else.”<sup>48</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Member of Scottish Women’s Rural Institute, Orkney, personal communication, April 2011.



I believe this woman's observation about the statement which the runes at the airport make is accurate. It is interesting to note that she primarily compares Orkney to the Western Isles. In my experience, the Northern and Western Isles are often confused by people who live on the UK mainland. Inhabitants of the Northern Isles (Orkney and Shetland), however, perceive a great cultural difference when comparing themselves to the Western Isles. The Scottish National Party government in 2010 launched a plan to have bilingual road signs in English and Gaelic.<sup>49</sup> As noted by a commentator in *The Guardian*, Gaelic presence "helps the tourist trade by rewarding visitors with the sense of the difference that all tourists seek."<sup>50</sup> However, in Orkney it is not Gaelic but Old Norse and the modern local dialect which fulfil this function, and runes are also used as part of this identity-building and distinctiveness-seeking process.

### Conclusion

This paper has shown a variety of contexts in which modern runes are used in Orkney. One side of the story is that runes are displayed to visitors as part of Orkney's presentation of itself to outsiders, because its Norse past is something that distinguishes Orkney from most other areas of Scotland. "Orkney's identity is based on its history being unique within Scotland."<sup>51</sup> But the sense of difference and uniqueness runs deeper than just the tourist industry. Orkney's many-faceted history – from the Neolithic via the Norse period to the modern day – is deeply engraved into the Orcadian mind, and history matters to people's sense of identity. This sense of connection with the past, combined with Orkney people's remarkable interest and achievements in art and culture, has resulted, among other things, in some brilliant artwork and designer products featuring runes. Runes are as much for the Orcadians themselves as for the tourists. They are a mark of difference, a mark of identification with the Norse past, and a trigger of enquiry for those who encounter them for the first time, sending them on a quest of discovery of the past. Runes are a powerful symbol. As one of Orkney's most famous sons, the poet and novelist George Mackay Brown, put it (and which text now decorates his grave stone): "Carve the runes. Then be content with silence."

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<sup>49</sup> *Daily Record* 9<sup>th</sup> July 2010. <http://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/scottish-news/2010/07/09/scottish-governmet-to-spend-26m-on-translating-road-signs-into-gaelic-86908-22399799/>

<sup>50</sup> Jack, Ian (2010): "Saving a language is one thing, but I'm saddened by Scotland going Gaelic." In: *The Guardian* 11th December 2010, online edition <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/dec/11/ian-jack-saddened-by-scotland-going-gaelic>.

<sup>51</sup> M. Lange, *The Norwegian Scots*, p. 233.

*Ragnhild Ljosland*

## PRZEKAZUJĄC TOŻSAMOŚĆ: WSPÓŁCZESNE RUNY Z ORKNEY

### Streszczenie

Orkney to grupa wysp położonych na północ od wybrzeży Szkocji. Należały one do królestwa Norwegii aż do ich zajęcia przez Szkotów w roku 1468. Od tej chwili Orkney ma poniekąd podwójną tożsamość. W XIX wieku znać dały o sobie norweskie aspiracje narodowe związane z romantyzmem, co stymulowane było odkryciem w 1861 roku 33 inskrypcji runicznych w komnacie grobowej Maeshowe na Orkney. W dniu dzisiejszym runy występują na biżuterii, wyrobach włókienniczych, aż po sery, znaki publiczne i dekoracyjne w miejscach publicznych, jak dworce lub lotnisko w Kirkwall. Niniejszy artykuł pyta, w jaki sposób runiczne znaki używane są na Orkney współcześnie. Autor twierdzi, że współczesne runy służą do podkreślania swojej tożsamości, stawiając poniekąd Orkney poza współczesną Szkocją i Wielką Brytanią, jako terytorium o swojej własnej unikalnej historii i tożsamości. Runy tworzy się jako znaki identyfikacyjne Orkney dla turystów, jak również jako identyfikacja mieszkańców lokalnej społeczności.