

THE NAMES OF ISLANDS IN THE OLD NORSE

FAEREYINGA SAGA AND ORKNEYINGA SAGA

Hilda Radzin  
St. John's University

In the Old Norse language the word saga denoted any kind of story or history in prose, whether written or oral. Used in this sense, the word saga applies to a wide range of literary works. Used in a stricter sense, however, the term is confined to legendary and historical fictions, in which the authors present an imaginative reconstruction of the past. Considering the characteristics of the hero as guidelines, the Old Norse sagas can be classified as: (1) kings' sagas, (2) legendary sagas, and (3) sagas of Icelanders. The kings' sagas fall into two groups: (1) contemporary biographies and (2) histories of remoter past. Icelandic and Norwegian authors explored the history of Scandinavia in terms of royal families and rulers. Related to the lives of the kings of Norway are Faereyinga Saga and Orkneyinga Saga. The texts of these sagas are contained in the Flateyjarbok, a codex from the end of the fourteenth century. The sagas of the kings exist in other texts,

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but much of the interpolated matter is not found elsewhere. The Flateyjarbok was written by the priests Jon Pordarson (A.D. 1387) and Magnus Porhallson (c. 1388-1394).

The Faereyinga Saga, written about A.D. 1200, portrays the resistance of Faeroese leaders to the interference of Norwegian kings during the first part of the eleventh century. These Faeroese leaders were descendants of settlers who had come from Norway in the ninth century. There was a man called Grime Kamban. He was the first who settled in the Faeroe Islands in the days of Harald Fairhair. "Madr er nefndr Grime Kamban, hann bygdi fyrst Faereyjar a dogum Haralds hins harfagri."<sup>1</sup> The dates of Harald Fairhair of Norway are uncertain, Icelandic sources suggest A.D. 850-933.

The Orkneyinga Saga<sup>2</sup> was written by an Icelander about A.D. 1201, dealing with the history of the earldom of Orkney Islands from about A.D. 900 to the later years of the twelfth century.

It is generally accepted that the recorded Viking Age began in 793 with the Viking attack on the English cloister at Lindisfarne on the Holy Island off the Northumbrian coast. By 842 a part of Ireland was subject to the Vikings. They first wintered in England in 851. In 865 the Viking armies began to overthrow the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Northumbria, Mercia, and East Anglia.

While the Vikings from Norway and Denmark were raiding and

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settling the British Isles, the Norwegian Vikings were also raiding to the uninhabited or sparsely inhabited islands west of the Scandinavian peninsula. They traveled to the Shetland, Orkney, and Faroe islands. Some of the Shetland islands were inhabited by Picts. They were primitive people who lived in sunken dwellings. In the seventh century, the islanders were converted to christianity by missionaries from Ireland or the west of Scotland. With the Shetland Islands as a base, the Vikings moved on to the Orkney Islands, the Faeroe Islands, and to Iceland. It is told in the fifteenth chapter of the Orkneyinga Saga that Earl Rognvald sailed from Norway to the Orkneys, and landed in Hjaltland ("Shetland"); where he collected men and went to the Orkneys. It is characteristic that the Vikings called the Shetland Islands Hjaltland. In the Old Norse language the word hjalt denoted the sword hilt or cross bar, which protected the warrior's hand. It is significant that from the standpoint of the Vikings, their striking sword lay west of Hjaltland, directed against peoples in British Isles. The homeland, Norway, lay east of Hjaltland. Norsemen ruled Hjaltland until the fifteenth century. They left an imprint on the local place-names, most of which are of Norse origin. The language, Norn, was used down to the eighteenth century. Parts of boats and various sea birds are generally known by Norse names. The modern name "Shetland" is derived from the Old Norse Hjaltland. The Shetland Islands were

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annexed to Scotland, in 1472.

For the Atlantic voyages between Norway, Shetland, Orkneys, and the Faeroes, the first requisite was the Viking's ability to fix his latitude. It is certain, that the Viking's could do it, though there is still doubt as to his method and instruments. With reference to St. Olaf of Norway in the first third of the eleventh century, the Flateyjarbok<sup>3</sup> describes the use of Iceland spar, solarsteinn ("sun-stone"), to make an observation of the sun even when it was hidden from view. The scientific principle of the polarization of light by Iceland spar was formulated by Bartholinus in Denmark in 1669. This led to the invention of the tursmorkékompass ("twilight compass.")

The ability of the Viking to fix his latitude can be seen from the Faereyinga Saga relating to sea voyages and some names of the islands of the Faeroes. The northern island of the Faeroes were called Nordreyjar<sup>4</sup> and a southern island had the name Sudrey<sup>5</sup> in the Old Norse language.

The Viking seamen who found their way northward to the Faeroe Islands, were not the discoverers or the first settlers. In A.D. 825, the Irish monk, Dicuil, wrote in his description of the world, De mensura orbis terrae, that already a hundred years ago, the wish to live a hermit's life brought some Irish monks to the islands in the northern British Sea:

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Illae insulae sunt aliae paruulae, fere cunctae simul angustis distantes fretis; in quibus in centum ferme annis heremita ex nostro Scottia nauigantes habitauerunt. Sed sicut a principio mundi desertae semper fuerunt ita nunc causa latronum Normannorum uacuae anchoritis plenae innumerabilibus ouibus ac diuersis generibus multis nimis marinarum auium. Numquam eas insulas in libris auctorum memoratas inuenimus.<sup>6</sup>

There is another set of small islands. Nearly all of them are separated by narrow stretches of water. For nearly a hundred years, hermits, who sailed from our country, Ireland, have lived there. These islands, as they were always deserted since the beginning of the world, are now abandoned by the hermits as a result of the arrival of the Norsemen, who are pirates. These islands have countless sheep and a great variety of sea-birds. I have never found these islands recorded in the books of authorities.

The Norsemen settled down as cattle- and sheep-raisers, fishermen and bird-catchers. According to Faereyinga Saga, these islands had the name Faereyjar<sup>7</sup>, meaning "sheep islands."

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P.A. Munch, in his Chronicle of Man and the Sudreys<sup>8</sup>, quotes Dicuill as saying that the sheep were brought by the Scoto-Irish monks. A.W. Brogger has suggested that the name Faerey is derived from the Celtic fear an, meaning "the far islands."<sup>9</sup>

There is a brief description of conditions in the Faeroes in an old law made in 1289 by Hertug Haakon, the duke of the Faeroes and Shetlands. The importance of the cultivation of the land seems to have been negligible in comparison with the sheep-rearing.

One of the northern islands of the Faeroes has the present name "Svinoy" and its Old Norse name was Sviney,<sup>10</sup> meaning "swine island." According to an old legend, this was an enchanted floating island. It was told that a sow visited the island. Once the men caught the sow and the island was disenchanted.

A northern Faeroe island had the Old Norse name Fugley, meaning "bird island." The word fugl ("bird") is found in an Old Norse bird-ballad, Fuglakvaedi. The Norsemen especially observed the oyster-catcher, providing protection for the smaller birds by its fearless attacking of predatory birds. The oyster-catcher's spring song proclaimed the end of the winter season.

When the Faeroe Islands were first settled by the Norsemen, the great skua was so abundant that one island, Skufey<sup>11</sup> was named after it. The sea-birds provided one of the most important natural resources of food.

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From Norway, the main route of the Norsemen flowed southward. According to Orkneyinga Saga, the Norsemen arrived in Orkneys in the late eighth century and colonized the islands in the ninth century. It is told in the first chapter of the Orkneyinga Saga that the first Jarl of the Orkney Islands was Sigurdr. "Sigurdr het hinn fyrsti iarl i Orcnaeyjum."<sup>12</sup> Thereafter the Orkneys were ruled by Norway and Denmark. In 1468, the Orkneys were annexed to Scotland.

The Orkneys were the Orcades of the Classical literature. There is some evidence of prehistoric occupation by Picts of various periods: underground houses, standing stones, and earth houses, the earliest remains dating from the Stone and Bronze ages.

Celtic missionaries had arrived in the seventh century. Some proofs of the early Christianization of the Orkneys are the dedications to St. Columba and the designation papa applied to several of the islands, for example, Papey Meiri<sup>13</sup> and Papey Minni.<sup>14</sup> Papar was the Old Norse name for the Irish missionaries.

Among the relics of the Norsemen settlement in the Orkney Islands, the most important are the inscriptions on the great sepulchral cairn of Maeshow, the Orkahaugr<sup>15</sup> of the Orkneyinga Saga.

The topography of Orkney is altogether Norse. Although the influx of Scottish settlers gradually extinguished the Old Norse language, many of the Norse names are still used.

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- <sup>1</sup>Carl Christian Rafn, ed., Faereyinga saga (Kjobenhavn, 1832), p.1.
- <sup>2</sup>Sigurd Nordal, ed., Orkneyinga saga (Kobenhavn, 1913-1916), pp. 1-331.
- <sup>3</sup>Finnur Jonsson, ed., Flateyjarbok (Copenhagen: Levin & Munksgaard, 1930).
- <sup>4</sup>Faereyinga saga, p. 1.
- <sup>5</sup>Ibid, p. 13.
- <sup>6</sup>J.J. Tierney, ed., Dicuii Liber De Mensura Orbis Terrae (Dublin: The Dublin Institute for advanced studies, 1967), p. 76.
- <sup>7</sup>Faereyinga saga. p.1.
- <sup>8</sup>P.A. Munch, ed., Chronica Regvm Manniae et Insvlavn (Christiania,1860).
- <sup>9</sup>A.W. Brogger, Hvussu Foroyar Vordu Bygdar (Torshavn, 1937).
- <sup>10</sup>Faereyinga saga, p.16.
- <sup>11</sup>Ibid, p. 14.
- <sup>12</sup>Jonas Jonaeus, ed., Orkneyinga saga (Hafniae, 1780), sig. A. .
- <sup>13</sup>Sigurd Nordal, ed., Orkneyinga saga, p. 79.
- <sup>14</sup>Orkneyinga saga, pp. 76-77.
- <sup>15</sup>Orkneyinga saga, p. 273.