

UBAS

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Nordic Middle Ages – Artefacts, Landscapes and Society.
Essays in Honour of Ingvild Øye on her 70th Birthday

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UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN

8
2015

UBAS – University of Bergen Archaeological Series 8

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NO-5020 Bergen
NORWAY

ISBN: 978-82-90273-89-2 UBAS 8
UBAS: ISSN 089-6058

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Cover: Arkikon, www.arkikon.no

Print

07 Media as
Peter Møllers vei 8
Postboks 178 Økern
0509 Oslo

Paper: 130 g Galerie Art Silk H
Typography: Adobe Garamond Pro and Myriad Pro



Two Seals from Orkney: The 15th Century Community Seal and a Seal Matrix Dating to c. AD 1300

Medieval Orkney is not well supplied with historical sources of evidence. Following the demise of saga literature, in particular the Orkneyinga Saga which was written c. 1200, there is a dearth of written sources providing any information about the population and culture of the islands. Some sparse records of the earldom family and of the ecclesiastical hierarchy have survived, with a few charters concerning land transactions in the late 13th and early 14th centuries (Crawford 2013, 58-60). In looking for supplementary sources of evidence, it is important to extract as much information as possible from the medieval seals which were used in the islands in the period, and this contribution will focus on two secular seals. One is the well-known seal of the community of Orkney of which fragments survive on three fifteenth-century letters (Crawford 2013, 77). It existed in 1357, as recorded in a letter of the community of Orkney to King Magnus Eriksson and his son Håkon Magnusson, which is said to have been written under the common seal (DN II, no. 337). The other is a quite new, and unstudied, broken seal matrix found recently at Quoys, Deerness, East Mainland of Orkney which shows the seal owner, probably a woman, kneeling in the lower half of the oval (or vesica-shaped) seal (Crawford 2013, 79) (Figs. 1 and 4).

These two seals are material evidence of two diverse aspects of the medieval society of the Orkney Islands. The community seal is an emblem of the corporate identity of the class of men who ran the political and economic life of the islands, and who dominated that life alongside the earls and the royal officials. The half seal matrix from Deerness gives us a glimpse of a very different component of Norse society and one which is not well represented in the historical sources: a woman who belonged to the aristocracy, either the earldom circle or the Norwegian elite, c. 1300. It is a personal emblem and reflects the wider culture of medieval European society.

There are unfortunately severe limitations to a proper understanding of both seals, rendering interpretation in some respects very uncertain. The community seal is now known only from a reconstruction drawing made from the fragments of two of the fifteenth-century wax impressions by the Danish historian and heraldic artist Anders Thiset (Clouston 1932, 276, 375). The half seal matrix from Deerness is probably deliberately broken, and the metal severely degraded due to the length of time it was in the soil. The figure of the owner is badly worn and the inscription only partial, and therefore difficult to interpret. Nonetheless, these fragmentary pieces of evidence, if cautiously interpreted, deserve close examination for

what they reveal about different sectors of medieval Orkney society. The following tentative interpretations are offered for Ingvild's festschrift as a contribution which touches on aspects of her own professional expertise in medieval culture, particularly clothing and the place of women in society; hopefully, it will illuminate Orkney's place in the Norwegian kingdom at a time when links across the North Sea were still strong. Such links continue to flourish, and have been fostered by Ingvild's own researches into medieval Norwegian society.

Orkney Community Seal and comparison with the seal of Jemtland

The Orkney community seal was round and measured 55.3 mm in diameter. It depicted the royal Norwegian lion (a lion rampant, crowned and holding an axe in its right paw) on a shield which is supported by two bearers. The inscription around the rim is clearly inscribed, in Lombardic lettering, and reads SIGILLUM: COMUNITATIS: ORCADIE, 'seal of the community of Orkney' (Fig. 1). One other Norwegian local province was granted the privilege of having a community seal with the royal arms: Jemtland, which lies on the eastern border with Sweden. Both Orkney and Jemtland were skattlands, that is they were under the



Figure 1. Drawing of the seal of the 'community of Orkney' (*sigillum comunitas Orcadie*) based on the remnants of the seal from letters to the Norwegian-Danish authorities in 1424, 1425 and 1460 (copied from Clouston 1932, facing p. 276).

authority of the Norwegian crown and paid tribute (Norw.: skatt) in acknowledgement of that position, but they were not part of Norway proper. Both these provinces had been granted the privilege of having a communal seal, with the prestigious symbol of the royal lion, which is an indication that their position under royal Norwegian sovereign authority was considered to be significant. Their seals also tell us something about the strong community identity which existed in both provinces.

A comparison of the two community seals is of some interest. The Jemtland seal is slightly larger than the Orkney one and also depicts a shield with the royal Norwegian lion being held by two bearers (Fig. 2), although the two bearers are of different character

from the Orkney examples. The shield also takes up more space than that on the Orkney seal, and the two bearers seem to be staggering under the weight of the shield which appears to be larger than they are. It also has an image of the royal lion holding an axe in both paws, and has a border with 21 clover leaves or nails (Trættemberg 1981, 187). In addition, there are two small archers behind the supporters, depicted leaning back and pointing their bow up into a tree above them, apparently aiming to shoot squirrels which are prancing about in the

branches (Trætterberg 1981, 188). The inscription around the rim is quite similar in style of lettering and content to the Orkney example. It reads SIGILLUM COMMUNITATIS: DE: IEMTHALANDIA, 'seal of the community of Jemtland'.

It is worth contrasting these two seals with the Lawthing seal of the Frostathing law district (centred on Trøndelag). It is round (diam. 70 mm) and shows a king sitting on his throne, his feet on a lion, with a sceptre in his hand and surrounded by the lawman (on the left) and the *lagretten* or council of judges sitting on a bench on the right (Fig. 3). The king is handing a book to the lawman, and this has been interpreted as the scene in summer 1274 when King Magnus Lagabøte promulgated his new Landlaw, which was a revised and amalgamated version of the previous lawcodes of the different law districts. The composition of the scene is modeled on the wider image of the medieval king as lawgiver, sitting in majesty, a familiar figure throughout Europe. What is quite unusual is the representation of a given event in time, and it suggests that the king may have wished to record this event and that the scene was devised according to royal direction (Trætterberg 1981, 186). However, it has also been suggested that the royal figure represents King Olaf, Norway's royal saint who was regarded as the original lawgiver and protector of the people's laws (Dybdahl 1999, 46-52). Whether the king is Olaf or Magnus, the seal



Figure 2. Coloured reproduction of the community seal of Jemtland. From *Le geographie Blavianen contenant le iii, iv, v, vi and vii livre d'Europe*. Amsterdam, Blauue, MDCLXVII. With acknowledgements to Steinar Imsen and Bo Oscarsson.



Figure 3. The seal of the community of Frostathing (drawing: H. Trætterberg (1981, 185)).

represents a solemn legal scene, except for the peculiar addition of two small figures at the base of the seal who appear to be archers aiming their bows at squirrels in trees above, just as on the Jemtland seal. This must be intended to represent an important occupation of the men of the Frostathing community. As regards the Jemtlanders, it is certainly interpreted as referring to their fur-hunting and the fur tax which was the Norwegian king's main source of revenue from Jemtland (Imsen 2013, 37). This occupation and the revenue from it must also have been considered important enough for it to be represented similarly on the Frostathing seal. It is rather striking that the squirrel-hunting occupation is depicted on these seals, especially on the seal connected with a solemn legal event in the history of the Frostathing law district.

If the Frostathing seal was granted to the Trøndelag community in 1274 or soon thereafter, it was probably the first of the legal community seals, of which eleven are known to have existed, four of them from the skattlands of Jemtland, Faeroes, Orkney and Shetland. Turning again to the Jemtland and Orkney seals, it is remarkable, as noted above, that these two skattlands were given seals with the emblem of royal authority, such as the heraldic shield with the royal lion, so prominently displayed. It is hard to escape the conclusion that this was a deliberate signal which was intended to convey the message that these two legal provinces were under royal authority and were part of *Norgesveldet* (the Norwegian world) (Clouston 1930-1931, 58; Trætterberg 1981, 188). It is not easy to be exact about the date of the granting of these seals, but they must be later than the Frostathing seal. In the case of Jemtland, and perhaps also Orkney, they may date from the 1280s although the Orkney seal could have been granted by Håkon V Magnusson who provided the people of Ragunda in eastern Jemtland with a seal in 1305 (Trætterberg 1981, 188; Njåstad 2003, 153). It was during this period that the Norwegian crown was extending its legal authority and tightening its administrative control over the skattlands (Njåstad 2003, 157; Wærdahl 2011, 120-121, 160-161; Imsen 2013, 32-37).

The bearers

On both the Orkney and Jemtland seals, the royal shield was supported by two bearers. Such symmetrical, inward-facing bearers are known on shields in many countries at this period (Trætterberg 1981, 188) so a familiar model has been adopted by the king and his advisers. They are not, however, very common on Scandinavian seals. The appearance of the bearers is particularly interesting, and must be considered appropriate for the province concerned, just as the lawman and group of members of the lagretten were chosen for the Frostathing seal. The royal shield on the Jemtland seal is supported by two Jemtlanders, dressed in long loose-fitting coats, which can be regarded as appropriate dress for leading men of the province. The bearers of the somewhat smaller shield on the Orkney community seal are dressed in entirely different garb which is described by Halvard Trætterberg as consisting of short coats with mail leggings (1981, 188). However, the drawing by Thiset suggests that this is not military accoutrement, but civil clothing, of a very particular kind.

In 1931, the Lord Lyon (Scotland's chief heraldic authority) described the supporters as 'udallers, habited of the fifteenth century' although adding that this description left room for 'further investigation' (Crawford 1978). The name 'udaller' or 'odaller' is the Orkney term for the farmers who held their estates by odal right (Norse: óðals-réttr), inalienable rights over family lands. It is more likely that these figures are specifically representing the 'best men' or 'good men' who are referred to in documents of the 14th and 15th centuries

(Clouston 1924-1925; Thomson 1987 [2001], 184). The dress which these two supporters are wearing presumably represents the formal outfit of a wealthy Orcadian, although one wonders who decided on their appearance, and whether the royal seal-makers would have been aware of any regional difference in dress. It is certainly different from the Jemtlanders' dress which is surely significant. The Jemtlanders are shown wearing long coats or tunics, whereas the Orkney supporters are wearing thigh-length tunics or jerkins and breeches, with 'characteristic embroidery' (so described when the Orkney Arms were matriculated in 1931). This embroidery, or decoration, is depicted around the neck and the cuffs, at the bottom of the jerkin (which has a belt at the waist), and at the bottom of the breeches. The breeches hang below the knees and the figures are shown wearing leggings, which themselves appear to be decorated. In the formal record drawn at the time of matriculation, this decoration has the appearance of thonging (see drawing in Urquhart 1973, 54), although as noted above they have been described as 'mail leggings'. This is unlikely for there is no appearance of any other protective armour accoutrement, and to have only mail leggings makes no military sense.

My initial interpretation was that these were boots made of skin, with a possibility that they are representing decorated or embroidered sealskin boots. Sealskin was a valuable product of the Atlantic islands, where the off-shore rocky skerries harboured great communities of seals, and these locations (Norse: *siel-wede*, 'seal-waith' or hunting-ground for seals) are sometimes mentioned in grants of land (Smith 1995). However, another drawing of the Orkney seal from the turn of the twentieth century has recently emerged in the Norwegian archives (Rigsarkivet) (pers. info. Steinar Imsen, 2014), which indicates that the leggings or trouser hose were of woven fabric 'arranged on the bias and sewn together to be close-fitting' (pers. info. Carol Christensen, 2014). The drawing also indicates that the shoes may have been 'rivlins', the soft leather footwear worn in the north of Scotland, possibly shown tied at the ankle.

Another uncertainty is the head covering, which appears in Thiset's drawing to be some sort of hood, although it is not delineated at all clearly. It can hardly be a helmet as the appearance of the clothing does not suggest any form of armour, and there are no weapons in sight. Trætteberg seems to think that the supporters are shown bare-headed, as on the Frostathing and Jemtland seals (1981, 187) and that is how they are represented in the 1931 drawing at the time of matriculation, although in 1975, the one surviving supporter is shown with a hood (Crawford 1979).

A reasonable conclusion is that the clothing of the bearers is intended to represent civilian dress of a distinctive kind and with a significant amount of decorative detail. It emanates from the world of the 'provincial commune' (as designated by Imsen 1999, 57), which was ruled by Orkney's social elite. We know something of this class of prominent Orkneymen from the Complaint against David Menzies, which was drawn up by them in the early 1420s and presented to Queen Philippa (Imsen 2012). Several are named in this long document and historian Steinar Imsen has assessed their native or Scottish character from the names themselves. He concludes, however, that despite the Scottish nature of many of the surnames, these men were Orcadians first and foremost with a strong regional identity (Imsen 2012, 20). This regional identity must be reflected in the distinctive nature of the dress which is being worn by the bearers of the royal arms on the community seal. Indeed, it may be the case that the proud bearers are more specifically representing the elite of the elite, those 'good men' who had undergone the ceremony of joining the king's 'hird', and were called *håndgangne*

men (those who had ‘gone to the king’s hand’ and taken an oath of loyalty). They were royal liegemen and royal ombudsmen, and were organized as a brotherhood or guild with the king as patron (Imsen 2000, 35-42; Thomson 1987 [2001], 185). It seems likely that the great privilege of being granted a community seal by the king would necessitate depicting as bearers those members of the Orkney elite who were most closely associated with the crown, the hirdmen. If so, this would be a unique representation of this royal servant at the height of the hird’s power as an administrative organization in the late 13th or early 14th centuries, when the seal was most probably granted. It is unlikely that any alteration would have been made to the design of the seal during the following century, before the first surviving impression of the community seal in the early 15th century. Indeed, these embroidered jerkins and thonged leggings or trouser hose may have been considered rather outmoded and old-fashioned by that time. Unfortunately, we have no other indication from heraldry or tomb sculpture of the type of dress worn by Orkneymen in the Late Middle Ages. The evidence of the expensive garments which comes from Sir David Sinclair’s will of 1506 is from a different era (Crawford 2013, 382), and from the wardrobe of a powerful political figure in the Scottish and Danish administration who would have been most unlikely to wear typical regional dress of a previous period even though he was based in Shetland.

Deerness half seal matrix

Turning next to the broken seal matrix which was found in Orkney by a metal detectorist in 2012, we have another problematical item which is frustratingly difficult to analyse. The place where the seal matrix was discovered at Quoys in Deerness (East Mainland) does not provide any particular guidance as to the owner’s family connections (see later).

If the owner of the seal could be identified we might learn something about an individual who probably visited Orkney, or may have lived there and perhaps even died there, in a period when historical information is very sparse indeed. It is, however, not absolutely certain if the person depicted in the lower half of the seal was a woman or a man, and the inscription is so partial that it leaves us in the dark about the owner’s name. Yet, finding a seal matrix is in itself a very unusual and precious discovery as few have survived in Norway, and even fewer in Orkney.¹ This is particularly the case if the seal owner was a woman, for our knowledge of any women at this period of Orkney’s history is limited to the name of one of the earl’s wives, the widowed Countess Katherine who sold lands in South Ronaldsay to Erling Vidkunsson in 1329 (DN, II, no.168; Crawford 2013, 59). The survival of this broken seal matrix is dramatic evidence for the existence of another woman of the highest rank in Orkney at a similar date. Its survival provides us with the image of such an individual in a way that no written source can represent. The personal private seal is historical evidence of a unique and dramatic kind (Bedos-Rezak 2011).

This broken lower half of a seal matrix, of vesica (pointed oval) shape and made of copper alloy, measures c. 19 mm in height, c. 29 mm in maximum width, and c. 3 mm thick (Fig. 4). At least half of the evidence is therefore missing but what has survived is the figure presumably of the seal owner, who is kneeling with hands held together in supplication; a saint or religious emblem would have been depicted in the missing upper half. First impressions suggest that it

¹ The most notable example is the seal matrix of the chapter of the cathedral of St Magnus, Kirkwall, dated c. 1300-1320 (Glenn 2003, 121)



Figure 4. *The broken seal matrix found at Quoys, Deerness, Orkney (Orkney Islands Council).*

is a woman, elegantly attired in a gown which divides at the knees into two panels and flows behind over her lower legs and feet. She is wearing a hat, or a form of headgear, with streamers flowing out behind her head, and there appear to be traces of a cheek strap which held the hat in place, coming down the side of her face and under her chin.

This figure is kneeling under an arch of early Gothic ecclesiastical architectural design, with two

quatrefoils in the spandrels of the trefoil arch. The shape of the arch helps to date the design of the seal to c. 1300 or earlier (pers. info. Professor Sandy Heslop, 2012). Some further element of architectural design is visible above the left spandrel, suggesting that it had continued into the upper half of the matrix. The inscription runs down the oval sides of the matrix and there is a decorative border between it and the figure; this border presumably ran right round the whole seal. Before we attempt to read the inscription it is important to decide whether the shape of the seal may indicate if the owner was likely to be a man or a woman.

The pointed oval seal is the normal shape of seals used by clerics in the 13th and 14th centuries (Trætterberg 1968, 64). However, that can also be the form of women's seals, and in Denmark and Sweden, women's seals could follow the clerical model with the image of Mary or a saint and with the seal-owner sometimes shown in an attitude of supplication on her knees (Scheffer 1964, 577). Older Swedish seals belonging to a woman could be vesica-shaped (spetsovala form), as could, more seldom, Danish ones. It does not appear that Norwegian women used the pointed oval seal, for all the surviving ones are round (Nissen 2006), although it should be noted that these are mostly the seals of royal women and there are only five of them.

Inscription

The inscription, or legend, could help decide whether the seal-owner was a cleric or a woman. Unfortunately, the owner's name is not preserved in the inscription on the Orkney seal, which would probably have been the first word in the inscription, engraved on the upper half. The two words which do survive are difficult to read, although they are inscribed in normal Lombardic letters of 13th and 14th century date. Attempts to interpret them suggest that the letters facing the kneeling figure on the right read ELLING[I], and this can be understood to be the 'Latinised genitive of the Norse male name Erlingr/Ellingr' (pers. info. Dr. Halvor Kjellberg, 2013). From its place in the legend this is likely to be the seal-owner's patronymic, or father's name, or possibly the name of her husband. This form of latinised genitive is fairly common in seals of this period. The opposite letters on the left, behind the back of the

kneeling figure read MILITI[S], (with some uncertainty about the M), the apparent genitive of MILES ('knight'). It is assumed that this is describing the status of the individual called Erling, in which case we are looking for a 'Sir' or 'Herra' Erling as the father, or husband, of the seal-owner. The latinised inscriptions on the seals of some Norwegian women (who were not queens or duchesses) describe them as FILIE WILHELM[MI], 'daughter of William', or C[ECILIE] HAQ[VINI] 'Cecilia (daughter of) Håkon', or ÞURIDE PHILIPÍ 'Thurid (daughter of) Philip' (Nissen 2006, 114). In all these cases, the personal name was preceded by S' (shortened from Latin *sigillum* = 'seal'). So it would be according to normal convention if the name of the seal-owner's father were included on the Deerness seal matrix following her own name.

Identification

If that is the case, we can try and identify the Erling who appears to be the seal-owner's father, although it is a fairly common name among powerful Norwegian families c. 1300. First, we can recognize the significance of the knightly title MILITI[S] in the inscription which he appears to have been accorded. In 1276, the ranks of baron and knight were established by King Magnus Lagabøte (Helle 1972, 170; Imsen 2000, 24). Both carried the honorable title of Sir (Norse: Herra) which was translated into Latin as 'miles'. This gives us a *terminus post quem* for the appearance of the title on the seal matrix. In the last decades of the 13th century, the most powerful member of the royal administration who bore the name Erling was Erling Amundssen, one of the skilled administrators in the service aristocracy around King Erik in Bergen in the 1290s. He acted as sysselmann (sheriff) and possibly fehirsdlen (treasurer) in Bergen in the earlier part of the reign of Håkon V, and most significantly he is recorded as using the title of *Herra* ('miles') in his public function throughout the whole reign of this king (Helle 1972, 597).

There were other powerful Norwegian officials called Erling, either earlier in the 13th century (Erling Alvsson, Erling Ivarsson and Erling Ljodhorn) or later, in the 14th century; Erling Vidkunsson was made *drottsete* (Regent) in 1323, during the minority of young Håkon VI Eriksson. It is possible that he might be identified as the Erling of the seal matrix, but if so it would push its date well into the 14th century, which may not accord so well with the architectural design on the matrix. Erling did, however, have Orkney connections, and is recorded as having sold land to the widowed countess of Orkney in 1329 as mentioned above. His wife, Elin Toresdatter, had inherited lands in S. Ronaldsay, Orkney, along with her sisters. Erling certainly had daughters and the names of four of them are known: Ingebjorg, Gyrid, Gertrude and Sigrid (Munch 1863, 389-390).

If we are looking for an Erling of a slightly earlier period, who was a powerful member of the royal council, who is known to have used the title of Herra, and who was based in Bergen, then Erling Amundssen is the most appropriate candidate. As sysselman in charge of the royal finances in Bergen (Norw.: skattmester) his authority would have covered the earldom of Orkney, and most particularly at a time when the earldom was in abeyance during the minority of Earl Magnus V (c. 1302-1310).

This uncertainty about the identification of the father of the seal-owner makes identification of the seal-owner herself problematical. It seems most probable that the woman depicted was Erling's daughter, and the headgear is a type of female head-dress which is well-known



Figure 5. A gemstone seal found at Wootton, Bedfordshire, dated to the early 14th century (Henig 2008, fig.10).

from images of this period, which sat flat on the top of the head, covering the crown and secured with straps of material held down the cheeks and tied under the chin (Fig. 5, from Henig 2008, dating to the early 14th century, and said to be ‘contemporary style’). The Orkney seal-owner’s hat has distinctive ribbons or streamers floating out from the back of the head-dress, unless these are hair tresses, although this seems less likely.

Despite this feminine-looking image, it is not impossible that our seal-owner was a male cleric. The majority of surviving seals from medieval Norway were owned by clerics of different ranks, and the most common representation of them is kneeling in prayer or supplication in the lower half of the seal, as with the Orkney seal-owner (Fjordholm et al. 2012, passim). However, it would seem more likely that the inclusion of the patronymic of a powerful *lendman* in the inscription was helping to give authority to a female seal-owner. On balance, therefore, it is probable that this is an image of a woman, and one from the very highest level of the Norwegian nobility.

Another possibility is that the seal-owner was herself a member of a religious order. If she was a nun then could the head-covering be representing a nun’s head-dress? The illustrated text of the romance ‘Willhelm von Orlens’ by Rudolf von Ems (Fig. 6) has many scenes showing the abbess Sabine with a head-covering not dissimilar to



Figure 6. A scene from the German romance *Wilhelm von Orlens* by Rodulf of Ems, showing the abbess Savine and her nuns with flat-topped head dress, tied under the chin and with flowing ribbons (Cgm 63 fol. 91v, Bavarian state Library, copied from Bandlien 2012, 95)

our seal-owner's. A flat cap on the top of her head is secured with straps down each cheek and fastened under her chin. Moreover, there are long streamers or ribbons coming out of the crown of the hat and hanging down below both shoulders. If the Orkney seal-owner was indeed a nun then she is represented in a rather secular fashion, although of course kneeling in a very prayerful manner. If she were, we do not know whether her membership of a religious order may have been recorded in the part of the inscription which is missing. There is a faint possibility that the kneeling figure is depicted holding a cup to her mouth, but this tentative suggestion needs further investigation.

If this discussion of the identity of the seal owner remains inconclusive, it is hoped that it will help to further a more conclusive identification. Such identification would add to our knowledge of the elite social structure of the Orkney earldom, which was closely integrated with the powerful sector of Norwegian society at this time. Countess Katherine's purchase of lands in 1329 from Erling Vidkunnsen, who was married to a daughter of Tore Håkonsson, has been mentioned. Another indication from slightly earlier is the record of the betrothal of Earl John to the infant daughter of King Erik and Isabella Bruce in 1300, although Earl John died shortly afterwards (pre 1303) (Crawford 2013, 312).

The location of its discovery

Deerness is rather far from the urban medieval centre of Kirkwall and has no known association with the earldom family. Deerness is a peninsula and almost entirely detached from the rest of the East Mainland, with which it is connected by a narrow isthmus. It is, however, an area of good arable land, some of which is known to have been in the possession of the rich and 'well-to-do' man Amundi, father of Thorkell *fostri* in the early 11th century (OS 1938, 151). His estate was called '*Hlaupandanes* in Sandwick' where Earl Einar Sigurdsson was killed when visiting Thorkell in 1020 (Crawford 2013, 131). By the time of the late medieval Rentals, there was an unusually big church presence in the parish and Quoys was on the margin of a big block of prestigious territory which had been bishopric estate but we do not know when it had been gifted to the church (pers. info. William Thomson, 2014).

Although a marginal place in one sense, there is archaeological evidence suggesting that Quoys may have been near the location of a residence of status. When a cottage was demolished there in 1974, some impressive finds from the Norse period came to light including spindle whorls, whetstone, a piece of steatite vessel, lead weight, and a perforated bone disc. Also a Nuremberg 'jetton' has been found nearby to this farm of Quoys (pers. info. archaeologist Julie Gibson, 2014). Along with the half seal matrix, a folded lead strip with some runic lettering was also metal-detected which is unfortunately not very intelligible (Barnes 2011, 7). It is generally thought that seal matrices were broken, or otherwise defaced, on the death of the owner, so as to be rendered useless. They are usually found in graves (Andersen 2002, 72), although more and more of them are being found as stray finds because of their discovery by metal detectors, as with the Deerness seal matrix. Thirty seal matrices in Denmark have been found at castles and castle mounds, all personal, and giving a strong indication of the association of the seal owner with a powerful family residing at the castle and a known provenance adds great historical value to a seal matrix (Andersen 2002, 72). Unfortunately, the location of the provenance of the Quoys seal matrix does not provide any helpful historical value, as it is not known which powerful family resided there, and a lack of historical evidence means there is no further information. The location of Quoys is about 1 km from the bay of Newark,

where an eroding medieval cemetery has been excavated (Gibbon 2006, 445-447). It is not impossible that the original place of deposition of the broken matrix had been in its owner's grave which was later disturbed due to erosion, or even to excavation. Alternatively, it may have been discarded on the owner's death and consigned to a midden or rubbish deposit near the farm of Quoys.

Wider cultural implications

The seal matrix fragment gives us evidence for the integration of the aristocratic element of Norwegian society in the wider European cultural world. Seals are a notable feature of medieval European society and private seals in particular demonstrate how customs of sealing and the possession of these personal markers had penetrated aristocratic society below the level of the royal administration. Indeed, it is noteworthy that the use of personal seals in Norway, and in Orkney, became customary at more ordinary levels of the wider social spectrum. This seal matrix fragment is a sophisticated artifact, professionally manufactured and designed in accordance with the norms of sealing in other parts of north Europe. It is a vivid demonstration of how aristocratic members of Orcadian or Norwegian society of the late 13th century or early 14th century were adopting the mores of north European culture with which they were familiar through social connections.

This is the period which provides evidence of the influence of literature from France and Germany, such as Chretien de Troyes' *Yvain ou Le Chevalier au lion*, *Hertug Frederik of Normandie* and *Flores et Blanzefleur* (Bergqvist 2012, 132; Eriksen 2012, 159-60). King Håkon V's queen, Eufemia, was instrumental in commissioning translations of the above verse romances into Swedish, called *Eufemiavisene*. Didrik of Bern's saga was translated from German into Norwegian in Bergen in the 13th century (Solberg 2012, 184-185). Queen Isabella Bruce, wife of King Erik Magnusson, possessed a translation in French of William of Tyre's *History of the Crusades* (Bandlien 2012, 109-111). This abundant literary evidence gives a vivid impression of the courtly culture which permeated the world of elite families in Norway at the very period when the half seal matrix from Orkney was in use and provides another facet of the europeanisation of Norwegian society in this high medieval period.

Conclusion

The two seals discussed here are very different and represent very different aspects of Orcadian medieval society. It is hardly possible to categorise them as representing Orkney's Norse past, which is the main interest of literary and historical researchers in Icelandic saga material. The community seal may perhaps represent a democratic element in Orkney's social structure, which could be seen as a survival of the non-feudal society of the Norse world. However, it emanated from the Norwegian kings' wish to tie the local hierarchy closely in to the Norwegian central administration, and from their policy of stamping this powerful instrument of independent action with the image of the royal lion. This is clearly the intention which lay behind the granting of such a symbol of Orkney's communal existence, or the existence of an elite in the islands. Moreover, the two members of that elite who are represented supporting the shield with the image of the royal lion may, as suggested above, be members of the hird who were personally associated with the king and who were bound to represent his interests in

the islands. Nothing could be further from the Norse past or indeed further from the earldom, which had its origins in the Norse past, but which had suffered deliberate attempts by the Norwegian kings to curb its independence in the late 12th and throughout the 13th centuries (Wærdahl 2011, *passim*; Crawford 2013, chap. 6). The supporters in their embroidered jerkins and leggings signify a class structure in the islands which had developed a ‘medieval’ character with little resemblance to the society of the saga days, and evidently more closely linked with royal authority than with the earldom family.

The half seal matrix on the other hand provides a glimpse of the world of the earls and their relatives or associates in Norway. Although we have as yet been unable to determine the exact identity of the seal-owner and her father, there is little doubt that they were members of the aristocratic elite which flourished in the late 13th and 14th centuries, and which modelled itself on the wider European ‘high society’. If it belonged to a woman, she must have been very proud of this seal; the number of women with their own seal was probably rather low, for their independence of action in sealing documents on their own account was strictly limited. If she was not a member of the earldom family- and her patronymic name Erling is only used once by that family- then she must have been a member of one of the powerful Norwegian families of the period: as discussed there were some individuals called Erling in the late 13th and early 14th centuries who might well have been her father. Why she was in Orkney, and why she left behind her seal matrix is completely unknown, and never will be known. The most plausible explanation for the existence of this half seal matrix is that she died in Orkney and her seal was broken on her death there, as was customarily done.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Professor Sandy Heslop, University of East Anglia; Professor Steinar Imsen, University of Trondheim; Professor Elisabeth Okasha, University of Cork; Dr. Halvor Kjellberg, Oslo; Dr. Carol Christensen, Shetland museum; Julie Gibson, Orkney archaeologist; Mr. William Thomson, Orkney; Dr. Gale R.Owen Crocker, Manchester, for help and advice on different aspects of the seals discussed.

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