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CHAPTER 2 I

THE THREATENING WAVE: NORSE POETRY AND THE SCOTTISH ISLES

By JUDITH JESCH

The maritime basis of the economy, culture and identity of the Scottish Isles goes without saying. In an archipelagic environment, and before the advent of air travel in the 20th century, much local communication and all more far-flung communication inevitably happened by sea. In the Viking and medieval periods, the imperative for long-distance communication arose from the political, economic and cultural links the islands had with a wider Norwegian world, and maintaining such links required long and often dangerous sea journeys. Thus, both the establishment and the preservation of a Norse identity, as well as the local identities of the islanders in relation to each other and to neighbouring regions, depended on successful conquest of the sea. What I should like to explore in this paper are the ways in which this conquest was verbalized and conceptualized.

Although sometimes neglected in current theoretical discussions of past identities, language is an important constitutive element of identity and, for at least one linguist, 'identity' is fundamentally 'a linguistic phenomenon' (Joseph 2004, 11–14). Although we no longer have direct access to Viking Age speakers, it is possible to investigate their linguistic behaviour in a number of ways. The specialized linguistic medium of poetry is an important vehicle for the formation of identities and the conceptualization of a Norse world-view, in both the pre-literate and the literate periods. Although much of the surviving poetry in Old Norse is associated with Iceland, it is well known that Orkney was also a centre of literary endeavour in at least the 11th, 12th and early 13th centuries (Jesch 2005; 2013). There has however been little detailed study of the ways in which this literature might express a more localized, rather than a pan-Norse, or North Atlantic, identity or world-view, and little attention has been paid to poetic activity in other parts of Scandinavian Scotland. There is a small, but not negligible, body of poetry that deals, precisely and in some detail, with the perils and joys of sailing in the archipelagic waters of north Britain and thus with the maritime identities of this region. Next to actually building a Viking ship and sailing it, the best way of experiencing such a journey is to read some of the poetry composed by those who did just that.

RQGNVALDR: SAILOR, POET AND EARL

Of course, the sailors of Viking and medieval Scotland did not restrict their movements to north British waters, and the first relevant example is not directly about sailing in Scotland, though it was composed by an Orcadian, Earl Rognvaldr himself. The stanza is preserved in *Orkneyinga saga* which says he spoke it as he sailed through the Mediterranean towards Byzantium (Jesch 2009, 607–608):

Ríðum Ræfils Vakri!
 Rekuma plóg af akri!
 Erjum úrgu barði
 út at Miklagarði!
 Þiggjum þengils mála!
 Þokum framm í gný stála!
 Rjóðum gylðis góma!
 Gerum ríks konungs sóma!

Let's ride the Vagr (horse) of Ræfill (sea-king) [SHIP]! Let's not drive the plough from the field! Let's plough with a drenched prow out to Constantinople! Let's receive the wages of the prince! Let's move forward in {the din of weapons} [BATTLE]! Let's redden the gums of the wolf! Let's create the honour for the powerful king!

This stanza sums up the character of Rognvaldr's poetry, showing its combination of tradition and innovation. It is in the traditional skaldic metre of *dróttkvætt* and largely follows the rules of this form. However, instead of the usual internal rhyme, it has end-rhyme, which is further emphasized by the fact that seven of its eight lines are end-stopped. Its imagery also combines the traditional with the innovative. *Ræfils Vagr* is a traditional type of kenning for 'ship', which relies on the audience knowing that Ræfill is the name of a sea-king and Vagr the name of a legendary horse. The 'sea-king's horse' or 'horse of the sea' is thus a 'ship' and naturally what one does with a horse is to ride it. This image is extremely common in skaldic verse but what is new in Rognvaldr's stanza is the comparison of the bold equestrian/seafarer with the stay-at-home ploughman. Just as the ploughman cuts through the soil with his plough, so the sailor furrows the sea with the prow of his ship.¹ This is a very ancient comparison found in many cultures and literatures but oddly not much in Old Norse poetry, perhaps because Iceland is not a great country for ploughing. But Rognvaldr, born in southern Norway and living in Orkney, would have been more familiar than most Icelanders with the visual juxtaposition of a field being ploughed while a ship furrowed the sea in the distance. The stanza goes on to state the intention that Rognvaldr and his men have of going into battle on behalf of a prince who will pay them. Such a comparison between the bold warrior or sailor and the stay-at-home wimp is common in Norse poetry. What is innovative here is the extension of it to a much more visual comparison of sailing and ploughing which is at the same time both literary and yet derived from personal experience. In this way, a stanza about sailing in the Mediterranean is nevertheless rooted in the poet's own mental imagery of his homeland(s) and home waters.

Such literary *jeux d'esprit* about far-flung journeys are less common in Rognvaldr's poetry about sailing in the waters of the British Isles. Here, a more realistic mode prevails, as in this stanza describing the unfortunate wreck of two ships newly given to Rognvaldr by the king of Norway (Jesch 2009, 585):

Brast, þás bæði lesti
— bauð hrönn skaða mönnum —
— sít fekk veðr it váta
vífum — Hjólþ ok Fífu.
Sék, at sjá mun þykkja
snarlyndra fōr jarla
— sveit gat vás at vísu
vinna — hōfð at minnum.

There was a loud noise when both Hjólþ and Fífa were damaged; the wave caused men harm; the wet weather gave women sorrow. I see that that voyage of bold-hearted jarls will be kept in memory; the crew got drenching work for sure.

This is no joyous triumphal voyage to battle but a rather sorry end on the rocks of Shetland. The stanza is introduced in the prose of the saga by a detailed and visual account of the voyage, giving information about the weather, the visibility and even the days of the week (Guðmundsson 1965, 195; my translation):

Þat var þriðjudagskveld, er jarlar létu í haf, ok sigldu allgóðan byr um náttina. Miðvikudag var stormr mikill, en um náttina urðu þeir við land varir; þá var myrkr mikit; þeir sá boðaslóðir öllum megin hjá sér. Þeir hófðu áðr samfloti haldit. Þá var engi kostur annarr en sigla til brots báðum skipunum, ok svá gerðu þeir. Þar var urð fyrir, en lítit forlendi, en hamrar it efra. Þar heldusk menn allir, en týndu fé miklu; sumt rak upp om náttina.

It was a Tuesday evening when the earls put out to sea, and they sailed through the night with an excellent wind. On Wednesday there was a great storm and during the night they became aware of land nearby; it was very dark then; they saw breakers around them on all sides. They had previously sailed close together. Then there was no choice but to wreck both ships, and they did so. There was a rocky beach ahead, with little foreshore, and cliffs above. All were saved, but much cargo was lost; some of it came ashore during the night.

The poetry and prose together provide a detailed description of the scene and the wreck, with all its noise and drench, that is surely based on direct experience. Subsequent events in the saga suggest it all happened somewhere near Gullberwick in Shetland, and this was confirmed by an interdisciplinary research project in the 1970s which failed to locate the wreck but did establish its rough location with a high degree of plausibility (Collings *et al.* 1974–77; Morrison 1973).

The stanza itself encapsulates an experience of living in the Northern Isles that goes beyond the moment of the shipwreck. There are no kennings in this stanza, no complex literary tricks aimed at a rootless elite. Instead, there is reference to community, memory and the physical environment. At the head of the community are the two earls, Rognvaldr and Haraldr Maddaðarson, returning to Orkney from Norway. Their shipwreck causes sorrow to women — ostensibly the two ships, both of which

have grammatically feminine names, but shipwrecks generally cause sorrow to human women. Although no one died in this particular shipwreck, it cannot have been a pleasant experience for the crews, who also get a mention, with commiseration both for the damage caused to them and for the hard and wet work they endured. The stanza refers to the event as something to be kept in memory, thus alluding to the significant role of poetry in the community, preserving knowledge of past events. In this stanza we also see how maritime events are closely tied to local and regional identities, for although Rǫgnvaldr and Haraldr were on their way to Orkney, Shetland was very much in their dominion and the shipwreck ironically a part of their coming home.

Luckily there were no fatalities in the Shetland shipwreck and much of the rest of Rǫgnvaldr's poetry in this episode is jocular in tone, though still with an undercurrent of danger, as in this stanza in which he bemoans the state of his clothing after the shipwreck (Jesch 2009, 586–587):

Skekk hér skinnfeld hrokkinn;
skrauts mér afar lítit;
stórrs, sás stendr of órum,
stafnvöllr, yfirhǫfnum.
Nærgis enn af úrgum
álvangs mari gǫngum
— brim rak hest við hamra
húns — skrautligar búnir.

I shake out here a wrinkled leather garment; it provides me with very little finery; the prow-field [SEA] which surrounds our outerwear is big. Someday we'll go more finely dressed from a spray-swept horse of the eel-plain [SEA > SHIP]; surf drove the stallion of the mast-head [SHIP] onto cliffs.

This stanza reiterates the message of the previous one that the surf drove the ship onto the rocks and again uses the traditional image of the ship as a horse of the sea. The image of the sea surrounding the sailors (and their garments) picks up on the prose description of the shipwreck, in which the mariners and their ships were surrounded by breakers. The ironic reference to Rǫgnvaldr's damaged clothing and the contrastive anticipation of his future finery alludes to his identity as earl, at the head of the community, and the necessity for such a leader to have appropriate clothes as well as working ships. The shipwreck is a low point, both physically and politically, from which things can only get better.

ICELANDERS IN THE HEBRIDES

While there are a number of other stanzas by Rǫgnvaldr and his associates that describe sailing, they are about sailing in southern waters, on their cruise to and from the Holy Land, and will not be considered here. However, there are further insights into sailing in Scottish waters in the stanzas composed by some very lost Icelanders in AD 1202. In that year the Icelandic bishop-elect Guðmundr Arason invited the physician Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson to join him on his consecration voyage to Norway.

After some difficulties in clearing Iceland, and driven off course towards Ireland, their ship eventually made Scotland at Stour Head in Sutherland. Attempting to round Cape Wrath, they experienced a strong southerly wind and a rogue wave which threatened to swamp them from the rear.² They were miraculously rescued when the bishop's blessing caused the ship to swing around to meet the wave head-on. This event is recorded in a stanza by Grímr Hjaltason (Helgadóttir 1987, 19, 102–103):

Eisandi veðr undan
 uðr, nú er hvasst ór suðr,
 stærir sterkar bárur,
 starf erat smátt fyrir Hvarfi.
 Klökkur verðr kjölr, en rakkan
 kemr hregg í stað seggjum.
 Nu eru fjöll á sjá sollin.
 Súð gengr æ sem prúðast.

The wave goes rushing on; now it blows sharp from the south; strong waves grow big; there is no small labour (for us) off Cape Wrath. The keel becomes yielding; the storm drives men into a steep place — now the mountains on the sea are swollen. The ship goes all the time as finely as can be.

The travellers continued to sail south through the storm until they reached some narrow waters where they could see land, and breakers on both sides, which they recognized as the Hebrides. The bishop asked Hrafn to navigate, which he did after some modest demurring. The saga cites a number of stanzas by three poets describing the voyage as Hrafn successfully navigates them through the islands and skerries at night.

Hrafn eventually piloted them to a safe harbour which the saga calls *Sandey* and is most likely, of all the similarly named islands in Scotland, to have been the small island of Sanday that is attached by a land-spit to Canna in the Small Isles of the Inner Hebrides (Helgadóttir 1987, 76; Power 2005, 41–43). Here, the saga tells how an official of the local ruler (a certain King Óláfr) attempted to collect a landing-tax from them, which they did not wish to pay. When the travellers went to church, the king himself invited the bishop-elect to dine with him and then refused to let him and Hrafn go until they had paid the tax. The ship's crew took up weapons to rescue the hostages, but eventually they agreed to pay a tax, though less than the Hebrideans had demanded, and sailed away for Norway. This was clearly a memorable journey for the Icelanders, both for the difficult sea voyage itself, and for the contrast between their relief at finally arriving at a safe harbour and the rather grasping reception they were given by the local authorities there. Their personal experiences of the voyage are captured in the stanzas cited in the saga.

Some of these stanzas are most likely to have been composed retrospectively. Two stanzas attributed to Guðmundr Svertingsson come from a *drápa*, a long praise-poem that he composed about Hrafn, which was probably posthumous, as is suggested by the fact that the verbs in both stanzas are predominantly in the past tense (Helgadóttir 1987, 20–21, 103–104):³

Farar vanda hygg ek fundusk,
 fyrirsagnir þraut bragna.
 Þjóð var þá við leiði
 þreytin segls at neyta.
 Blátt var um borð at líta:
 brekafall vega alla,
 bræddr þar er bárum ruddi
 barðjór, ok skergarðar.

I think travelling perils were met; men ran out of words of command. People were hard pressed then to make use of the sail in the following wind. Blackness was to be seen over the side: fall of breakers and skerry reefs in all directions, there where the tarred prow-horse [ship] cleared a way through the waves.

Gekk á græðis blakki
 greppr um nótt við ótta,
 Hrafn varð, sem ek get, gumnum
 gagnsmaðr, til leiðsagnar.
 Heggr fekk hváru tveggja
 hauktorgs vita borgit,
 sýlði segl ok bulði
 svöl hrönn, skipi ok mönnum.

The man (Hrafn) undertook the piloting on the sea's horse [SHIP] at night in the face of fear — as I say, Hrafn turned out to be a beneficial man to men. The hawthorn-tree of fire of hawk-place [OF HAND OR WRIST > GOLD > WEALTHY MAN (HRAFN)] succeeded in saving both, ship and men — the sail was stiff with rime and the chill wave boomed.

Hrafns saga preserves 11 stanzas of this poem in all, covering different episodes in its hero's life, and it is therefore unlikely that these two were composed at the time of the voyage. Indeed, the saga introduces them with a formula (*Bessa getr . . .* 'This is told in . . .') which indicates that they are taken from a pre-existing poem with a retrospective account of events. Moreover, there is no indication in the saga-text that Guðmundr actually went on the voyage.

Eyjólfr's half-stanza is also in the past tense (Helgadóttir 1987, 21, 104):

Báru austr frá Íra
 ættlandi skæ branda
 hregg, áðr himna tyggi
 heitbyr frum veitti.

Storms carried the horse of prow-planks [SHIP] eastward from the homeland of the Irish before the lord of the heavens granted men a desired wind.

In this case, however, the saga does not record that it is part of a longer poem, but presents Eyjólfr as declaiming the verse on the spot. Thus, the past tense is presented as the immediate past tense of their difficult voyage rather than a more distant past viewed from a few years later. Eyjólfr appears nowhere else in the saga (unless he is identical to another minor character in the saga with the same common name). This stanza is thus more likely to have been composed and performed in the Hebrides, during the voyage.

Two-and-a-half stanzas by Grímr are by contrast predominantly in the present tense. The first of these has already been presented above, the others follow on from Eyjólfur's (Helgadóttir 1987, 21–22, 104–105):

Sér á sigling vára
suðreysk kona, þuðri
súð gørvask nú nauðir,
námgiðrn, er hryðr stjornum.

The Hebridean woman, curious, watches our sailing, as the stars are cleared (from the sky = as the dawn breaks); hardships are now created for the thin-built ship.

Hér hefir beitt at brattri
Bótólfr skipi fljótu,
áðr fell sær um súðir,
Sandeyju, skæ branda.
Reisti sjálfr, ok sýsti,
snarr félagi harra
hafnarmark, fyrir hrefnis
happsverk gota sterkan.

Bótólfr has tacked the swift ship here to steep Sandey. Earlier the sea fell over the horse of prow-planks [SHIP]'s sides. The active partner of the king himself raised up a harbour-mark and did a good deed for strong-built horse of the ship's strake [CRAFT].

Both of Grímr's full stanzas are presented in the saga-narrative as his spontaneous, *extempore* compositions at the time of the voyage. One could of course question whether Grímr really had the leisure to compose and recite a stanza about the weather when all hands were needed on deck to get the ship safely around Cape Wrath. Even more questionable is whether anyone on board ship would have bothered to listen to him when they had more important things on their minds. It is more convincing to imagine him composing the first stanza at leisure when the ship had reached its safe harbour and the crew were recovering. Together with his other two stanzas (and possibly further ones which no longer survive), it would have made a dramatic performance at an after-dinner entertainment. In this context the present tense could be explained as a stylistic use of the historic present to give immediacy to the story in performance and to help the listeners imagine the recent situation. There is some further evidence for this in Grímr's use of the deictic adverb *hér* 'here' in his third stanza, given added prominence by its initial position. This usage indicates the location of the performance which, in this context, was probably Sandey. It could of course have applied because Grímr composed and performed his poem on the island to an audience of his Icelandic fellow-travellers. However, he also makes reference, in his previous stanza, to a Hebridean woman watching the progress of their sailing; such a reference would have had added meaning if the poem was composed for a wider audience including at least some locals. Moreover, the use of adverbial *áðr* 'previously, earlier' in Grímr's third stanza suggests a performance time-frame not long after the events described. While Eyjólfur's stanza does not have the same immediacy as those by Grímr, it is linked to them in that both poets use the kenning *skær branda* 'horse of prow-planks' for 'ship'. From all this one could speculate that a performance

on Sandey had something of the competitive about it, with several poets giving their versions of the dramatic events, possibly as a form of after-dinner entertainment in the local chieftain's hall.

The saga then goes on to quote one further stanza by Grímr which it claims he recited after their safe arrival in Norway, though this is far from clear from the stanza itself (Helgadóttir 1987, 22–23, 105):

Hér náðum val víðis,
víglundr, með Guðmundi,
sterkr, at stöðva merki
stefna biskupsefni.
Frágum áðr á Eiði
einni nótt fyrir dróttins,
trauðr mun glaum at gœða
grams herr, bana Sverris.

Here, battle-tree [STRONG, WARLIKE MAN], we succeeded in steering the horse of ocean [SHIP] with Bishop-elect Guðmundr to the harbour-mark. Earlier at Eið, one night before the Lord's (night), we learnt of the death of Sverrir; the king's people will be reluctant to make merry.

It is not inconceivable that the Icelanders heard of the Norwegian king's death in the Hebrides, and other aspects of the stanza link to the previous stanzas and their supporting anecdote. Places called *Eið* ('isthmus') abound in the Hebrides as well as in Norway (eg Stahl 2000, 102). It would indeed be a good name for the land-spit that links Canna and Sanday. The stanza also echoes Grímr's previous stanzas in emphasizing the successful steering of the ship and in the reference to a harbour-mark. The reference to the Lord's night also links to their church-going in the anecdote.⁴ Even if the first half-stanza refers to their arrival in Norway, the retrospective second half could still refer to the Hebrides. Neither Grímr nor Eyjólfur play any further part in *Hrafns saga*, making the Sandey anecdote (including Grímr's final stanza, wherever it relates to) self-contained within the narrative.

Overall, the internal evidence of the stanzas by Grímr and Eyjólfur suggests that they were composed during the journey, probably for recitation in the Hebrides, and this is supported by indications in the surrounding prose anecdote. The anecdote itself seems to represent a narrative framework provided for the poems when they were performed subsequently in Iceland, as they undoubtedly were, being a good travellers' tale, though by whom is not clear. This in its turn provided the information that was recycled by Guðmundr Svertingsson in his posthumous poem in praise of Hrafn, and this poem was subsequently extracted into the anecdote when the saga was put together. This postulated history of the poems leads to later 13th-century Iceland, but shows how they originated in an early 13th-century Icelandic confrontation with Hebridean maritime and cultural identities.

THE THREATENING WAVE

If the hypothesis that Grímr's first stanza (along with the others) was in fact composed and performed on Sandey, to a Hebridean-Norse audience, is correct, it

highlights the Icelander's poetical interpretation of local seafaring conditions. Of particular interest is the dramatic description of the wave which nearly swamped the ship and the poet's comparison of it to mountains. In at least one of the manuscripts in which this poem is preserved, a saga about Bishop Guðmundr, the episode has a chapter-heading which refers to this phenomenon as *hafgerðingar* (Karlsson 1983, 141).

According to a 13th-century Norwegian manual of instruction, *hafgerðingar* are a strange maritime phenomenon in the waters of Greenland (Holm-Olsen 1983, 27–28, my normalization; Larson 1917, 137–138):

Nú er þat enn eitt undr í Grœnalandshafi er ek em eigi fróðastr um með hverjum hætti er þat er. Þat kalla menn 'hafgerðingar' en þat er því líkast sem allr hafstormr ok bårur allar þær sem í því hafi eru samnisk saman í þrjá staði ok gerask af því þrjár bårur. Þær þrjár gerða allt haf svá at menn vitu hvergi hlið á vera ok eru þær stórum fjöllum hærrí, líkar brattum gnípum. Ok vitu menn fá dœmi til at þeir menn hafi ór hafum komisk er þar hafa í verit staddir, þá er þessi atburðr hefir orðit. En því munu sǫgur vera af gǫrvar at guð man æ nǫkkura þaðan hafa frjáltsat, þá sem þar hafa verit staddir, ok mun þeira rœða síðan dreifsk hafa ok fluttisk manna í millum. Hvert sem nú er svá fra sagt sem þeir hafa helzt um rœtt eða er nǫkkut þeira rœða aukin eða vanat, ok munu vér firi því varliga um þá hluti rœða at vér hǫfum fá þá hitta nýliga er þaðan hafi komisk ok oss kynni þessi tíðendi at segja.

Now there is still another marvel in the seas of Greenland, the facts of which I do not know precisely. It is called 'sea-hedges' [*hafgerðingar*], and it has the appearance as if all the waves and tempests of the ocean have been collected into three heaps, out of which three billows are formed. These hedge in the entire sea, so that no opening can be seen anywhere; they are higher than lofty mountains and resemble steep, overhanging cliffs. In a few cases only have the men been known to escape who were upon the seas when such a thing occurred. But the stories of these happenings must have arisen from the fact that God has always preserved some of those who have been placed in these perils, and their accounts have afterwards spread abroad, passing from man to man. It may be that the tales are told as the first ones related them, or that stories may have grown larger or shrunk somewhat. Consequently, we have to speak cautiously about this matter, for of late we have met but very few who have escaped this peril and are able to give us tidings about it.

This description has some similarities with Grímr Hjaltason's stanza. Unlike Grímr, the author makes it clear that he knows this phenomenon only from hearsay and so the description must be taken with a pinch of salt; it has been called 'rather improbable' (Benediktsson 1981, 27). The passage has a comparison of waves to mountains and a sense of extreme danger in common with Grímr's stanza and its accompanying anecdote in *Hrafns saga*. Though there are a number of kennings in which waves are compared to mountains of various sizes and shapes (Meissner 1921, 99), the texts considered here go beyond the metaphorical and extend this comparison in a descriptive way.

There is another reference to *hafgerðingar* in *Landnámabók*, the Icelandic Book of Settlements, which mentions an unnamed Christian Hebridean who accompanied

the Greenland settler Herjólfur in the late 10th century. The Hebridean composed a poem called *Hafgerðingadrápa*, from which we deduce that the journey referred to in it is a sea-journey (Benediktsson 1968, 132–134; my translation):

Mínar biðk at munka reyni
meinalausan farar beina;
heiðis haldi hárar foldar
hallar dróttinn yfir mér stalli.

I pray to the faultless tester of monks [GOD] to aid my journey; may the lord of the high hall of the earth [HEAVEN] hold his hawk's rest [ARM/HAND] over me.

It is possible that the fragments by the Hebridean have been misattributed in *Landnámabók* and that *Hafgerðingadrápa* should in fact be associated with the Hebrides rather than Greenland, as already suggested by the fact that the poet is said to have been a Hebridean. *Landnámabók* does not actually link the composition of the poem with Greenland, it merely says that the Christian Hebridean who composed it was on Herjólfur's ship. Furthermore, the poem is in *brynhent*, a metre which otherwise first appears in the mid-11th century, in the poetry of Arnórr jarlaskáld, an Icelandic poet who also worked for the earls of Orkney and spent time in these islands (Whaley 1998, 79–80). For this reason the poem is unlikely to be as early as the 10th century, as implied by *Landnámabók*. The confusion could be explained by the fact that the sailing routes to both Greenland and the Hebrides are dominated by a landmark known to the Norse as *Hvarf* (now Capes Farewell and Wrath). Sailing around Cape Wrath is often a difficult matter, as attested by Grímr's stanza. I would therefore suggest that *Hafgerðingadrápa* is about sailing to the Hebrides, that it dates to at least the mid-11th century or later and also that it be added to the small corpus of poetry about sailing in north British waters.⁵

The stanzas discussed so far are mainly from the 12th and 13th centuries. Unfortunately there is little earlier evidence from skaldic verse for Norse sailings in north British waters, with the exception of a stanza by Arnórr jarlaskáld in the 11th century. Apart from a clear Orcadian connection, this stanza is hard to place in a historical context. The first half (not cited here) refers to the enmity between Rognvaldr Brúsason and his rival Þorfinnr and, as Arnórr composed poems in praise of both, it is unclear who the 'mighty ruler' mentioned in the second half-stanza is. But here again the imagery is that of a large wave threatening to engulf a rather battered ship (Whaley 2009, 251–252):

Sleit fyr eyjar útan
allvaldr bláu tjaldi;
hafði hreggsvöl dúfa
hrími fezk of líma.

The mighty ruler wore to shreds the dark awnings out beyond the islands; the snow-cold billow had fastened itself in frost about the mast.

The 'islands' mentioned here could be any nameless islands, but they are more likely to be the *Eyjar*, a term commonly used for Orkney, or the Northern Isles more generally (though rarely or never for the *Suðreyjar* or Hebrides). In connection with

the term *allvaldr* ‘mighty ruler’, the term suggests the dominions of the earls of Orkney, which they rule and defend through their conquest of the rime-cold sea and its threatening waves.

EPILOGUE

Though it is not the purpose of this paper to explore Norse-Gaelic literary contacts, it is worth noting a few parallels between the poetry discussed here and the Gaelic poem usually known as ‘The MacSween Poem’. This is a set-piece ‘describing the preparations for, and the outcome of, a sea-borne expedition to take possession of Castle Sween’ in Argyll (Meek 1997, 6). As well as identifying the followers of John MacSween as *Lochlannaigh* ‘Norsemen’, the poem contains a number of Norse loan-words, particularly of nautical terms, and some motifs and structural elements for which Meek finds closer analogues in Scandinavian than in Celtic culture. As a result, he would place it in a ‘Norse-Gaelic context of the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century’ (Meek 1997, 27). The poem has some interesting points of contact with the Norse verses discussed here.⁶ Thus, the very first stanza, describing the assembling of the fleet, refers to the ships ‘being cleansed for horsemen who would travel the waves’ (st 1). There are frequent references to turbulent seas rising high against the ships (sts 12, 13, 16) and an explicit comparison with mountains in ‘the wave will test them in an ocean of summits’ (st 15). If the MacSween poem does not show more specific parallels with those discussed here, it is in part because only a minority of its stanzas are actually about sailing. Another factor may have been that its author was attempting to strike a balance between his patrons’ Norse ancestry and conventions, and their Gaelic/Irish pedigree (Meek 1997, 19, and pers comm).

CONCLUSION

The poetry discussed in this paper presents a range of responses to sailing around the northern parts of the British Isles, by poets more or less familiar with these routes but also with Norway and Iceland and, in Rognvaldr’s case, with sea-ways much further afield. These poets use traditional forms and imagery to express the pan-Norse identity of north Britain. At the same time they also give voice to what is distinctive about this region — its communities, its rulers, its language, its landscapes and seascapes, and, most particularly, the special challenges of sailing in these waters. I would go so far as to suggest that there is also a special subgenre of poetry about difficult sailing in British waters, and that this was often conceptualized as a large wave which threatens to overwhelm the ship, as seen in several of the examples cited above. Furthermore, an important task of poetry was to show how the successful rulers of the region conquered this maritime threat. The Norse poetry considered here expresses the specific maritime identities of Scandinavian Scotland, using the cultural frameworks of the broader Viking diaspora, while the MacSween poem hints at some of the ways in which these identities persisted into the late 13th or early 14th century and crossed into a new language.

NOTES

- ¹ This comparison works, I think, both with a mould-board plough, which turns the soil over, and the simpler ard, which just cuts through the soil (I thank Niall Sharples for explaining such basic practical matters to me). Røgnvaldr uses the newer noun *plóg* in the second line, while the verb *erja* in the third line is cognate with the older noun *arðr*. The verb also occurs, again referring to a ship, in the runic inscription on the Djulefors stone (Jesch 2001, 177), a century or so earlier than this stanza.
- ² The episode illustrates the dangers of what sailors call ‘pooping’, when a great wall of water wells up astern and, at worst, comes crashing down on the ship. At best, the ship could ride up sternwards and the sea would pass below. A vessel that was very fine-lined aft would not have the buoyancy to ride upwards, while one whose lines were too sharp forward would not rise to the approaching wave. I thank Donald Meek for explaining this to me.
- ³ In presenting Guðrún P Helgadóttir’s English versions, I have incorporated her explications of kennings into her translations.
- ⁴ Canna had several medieval churches and ecclesiastical sites, see NMRS nos NG20NE 1, 2 and 13, and NG20SW 2 in the CANMORE database of *The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland*.
- ⁵ The poem is similarly dated to the 11th or even 12th century by Jakob Benediktsson (1981), though for very different reasons, and he would still link it to stories about Greenland.
- ⁶ I cite the English translation (Meek 1997, 36–39) by stanza number to facilitate comparison with the Gaelic texts of the 15th-century manuscript and Meek’s (1997, 31–36) proposed restoration.

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