



ORKNEY *LOOKING IN FROM THE EDGE* SHETLAND

**EARLY MODERN TRADE
IN THE NORTHERN ISLES**

Edited by
Bart Holterman & Philipp Grassel

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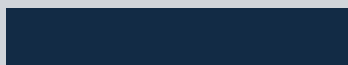
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EARLY MODERN TRADE IN THE NORTHERN ISLES

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PREFACE

The booklet you are holding in your hands right now was written to accompany the exhibition *Looking In From The Edge - The Hanse in the North Atlantic*, which will be shown at the German Maritime Museum (DSM), Leibniz Institute for Maritime History, from 24 March 2023 until Spring 2024. From November 2023, parallel exhibitions will also be held at the Stromness Museum in Orkney, and at the Shetland Museum and Archives. These exhibitions are in turn part of the international and interdisciplinary research project *Looking In From The Edge (LIFTE)*. In addition to the two editors of this volume, researchers from the University of Tübingen – Department of Medieval Archaeology, Lincoln University in England and the Scottish University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI), Orkney College are involved in the project. All chapters included in this book were written by members of the project.

The LIFTE project is concerned with what is nowadays still a remote region on the fringes of Europe: the British Orkney and Shetland Islands. Despite (or perhaps because of) their location on the edge of Europe, these British Northern Isles today attract thousands of tourists each year and constitute anchor points for the oil and offshore industries in the North Sea. But they have been the destination of Hanseatic merchants, English and Scottish traders and herring fishers from Holland in the Middle Ages and the early modern period.

Since 2015 late medieval and early modern trade networks in the North

Atlantic have been the subject of various research projects at the German Maritime Museum. One of these projects named *Between the North Sea and the Norwegian Sea: Interdisciplinary Studies of the Hanse* (2015–2019), which was funded by the Leibniz Association, was concerned with Hanseatic merchants in Iceland and the Faroes as well as Shetland in the 15th and 16th centuries. LIFTE is the follow-up project and is funded between 2020 and 2024 by the German Research Council (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft – DFG) and the British Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). Both projects have an interdisciplinary structure, in which researchers from the disciplines of history, historical archaeology, maritime archaeology, zooarchaeology and archaeobotany cooperate.

The historical and archaeological sources about these small islands on the border between the North Sea and the North Atlantic Ocean are quite rich, and with this volume we would like to illustrate the far-reaching and partly surprising connections between the European and British mainland and the Northern Isles between the 15th and 17th century. The short chapters about various research topics convey an impression of life and trade on the islands in those times. This exhibition booklet is therefore a mirror of the interdisciplinary and international research we have realised with our colleagues in the project.

We hope you will enjoy reading this volume!

Bart Holterman
Philipp Grassel



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INTRODUCTION

In the history of the extension of the European trade routes and the beginnings of globalisation in the late Middle Ages and the early modern period, the major developments and large economic centres are often stressed from a European perspective. This includes, for example, the “discoveries” of European explorers, which connected the most diverse regions of the world, colonialism and the advent of major trade cities such as Sevilla, London or Amsterdam. Similar attitudes surround the Hanse, which is usually seen in public perception as a trading empire that connected the port cities of the North and Baltic Seas through shipping lanes with the four important markets London, Bruges, Bergen and Novgorod. However, these developments not only transformed the major trading centres and the societies overseas which became involved in trade with the Europeans. Marginal societies in Europe themselves also were increasingly involved in these international trade networks and influenced by them. The role of these marginal regions in the international trade networks has been largely neglected so far.

The archipelagoes Orkney and Shetland, located between Scotland and Norway on the border between the North Sea and the North Atlantic, are an example of such a marginal region. Despite their relatively isolated location, the islands were visited by people from all of northern Europe, who came there to trade, fish, fight and live. Fully laden ships sailed back and forth between the isles and Scotland, London, Holland, northern Germany and Norway. Merchants from Bremen and Hamburg sailed to the North Atlantic waters each year, Hollanders fished for herring around the islands, and large cargo ships on their way to southern Europe, America or the Far East sailed past the islands within sighting distance.

Many details about these trade connections have come to us from written sources. Letters were written to file complaints or to exchange messages, ordinances were issued to regulate the cohabitation of various social groups, or wills were compiled to arrange inheritances. Many such documents are kept in the archives of Orkney and Shetland, but also in archives in Hamburg and Bremen, Edinburgh, London and the Netherlands. It is a fascinating exercise to collect and decipher them. Many of these documents have been made publically available online in databases such as hansdoc.dsm.museum. Feel free to have a look.

In the following chapters we will provide you with insights into various aspects of the trade with the Orkney

and Shetland islands from the late 15th until the early 18th century. After a short introductory chapter about the historical development of the trade with the islands in the late Middle Ages and the early modern period, the chapters have been divided thematically into three groups. These can be described with the questions: I. How was trade conducted? II. What was being traded? and III. Who traded? The first topic deals with the infrastructure, the methods and means of trade, as well as ships and shipping routes, trading places and buildings, and the practical process of trade. The second topic focuses on the commodities that were imported and exported. We will also go deeper into certain products that were especially important as traded goods, or which can be attested in the archaeological material very clearly. These include ceramics, tobacco and pipes, grain, butter and fish. Finally, the third topic is concerned with the actors who were involved in the trade, both on the islands itself, and especially also in Bremen and Hamburg. It also shows that doing business in this time was not always a peaceful activity.



CROSSROADS NORTHERN ISLES

The island groups of Orkney and Shetland form the northernmost extensions of the British isles. Especially Shetland is almost as close to Norway as it is to Scotland. It is therefore no coincidence that the islands experienced a strong Scandinavian influence in their history. Although the islands were already settled since the Stone Age, Norse people settled here in the 9th and 10th centuries. As the earldom of Orkney both island groups became part of the overseas dominions of the Norwegian kingdom in the Middle Ages, together with Iceland and the Faroes, among others.

In the following centuries, as the kingdom of Norway was joined with Denmark, the Scandinavian kings gradually lost their interest in their overseas possessions, whereas the influence of Scotland on the isles increased. Since the 13th century the earls of Orkney were of Scottish descent, and Scottish landowners gradually took hold of large parts of the land. The Scottish influence was greatest in Orkney, which is geographically closer to Scotland, but was felt in Shetland as well. Then in 1468 Orkney was pledged to Scotland by the Danish king Christian I, as a security against the payment of the dowry of his daughter Margaret, who married King James III of Scotland. Shetland followed in 1469, and since the dowry was never paid, the islands remain Scottish to this day.

During the Middle Ages, the Norwegian overseas dominions had the special status of tributary lands: the so-called *skattlönd*. This meant that they had to pay tribute to the Norwegian king, who in turn promised to supply them regularly with necessary commodities. The linchpin in this system was the city of Bergen on the western Norwegian coast, which functioned as a central trading hub or staple port for northern Norway and the *skattlönd*. Bergen was also the main hub for Norwegian trade with continental Europe and the British Isles and came to be dominated by German merchants from towns that belonged to the Hanse. The Hanse was an organisation of German towns and merchants with common trade interests. In Bergen they established an outpost (*Kontor*) in the middle of the 14th century and managed to acquire trading privileges from the Norwegian king, which gave them almost a monopoly over the Norwegian trade. Their main interest in Bergen was stockfish, air-dried fish which was in great demand in continental Europe. The stockfish was produced in Northern Norway and on the North Atlantic islands. Under the privileges granted to the German merchants in Bergen, they were strictly forbidden to sail to these regions themselves and trade with the producers directly.

The situation changed in the 15th century, when the English, who had been outcompeted by the Hanseatic merchants in Bergen, started to

Map with the most important trade routes around the Northern Isles.



sail to Iceland directly to fish there. German traders from Hanseatic towns with only minor interests in Bergen, such as Bremen and Hamburg, followed suit. Around the same time as King Christian I pledged Orkney and

Shetland to Scotland, he also allowed direct German trade in Iceland, and resistance to the trade from within the Hanse slowly subsided. Although Iceland was the main commercial interest for the Germans, they also

Murdoch Mackenzie,
South Isles of Orkney (c. 1750).

The map shows the anchorages, trading routes and fishing grounds around the Orkney islands in the mid-18th century. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland.

started to establish trading connections with Shetland, especially merchants from Bremen, who are first attested of trading on an annual basis in Shetland in 1494.

Orkney was probably already trading for a long time directly with Scotland, due to the strong presence of Scottish landowners. An interest of German merchants in Orkney is not visible in the written record, probably because Orkney focused more on growing grain than on fisheries and had closer ties with Scotland. Orkney was less dependent on foreign merchants, and instead developed a merchant class of its own clearly emergent in the 17th century. However, despite the detachment of the Northern Isles from the Bergen staple, Norway remained an important trading partner for both Orkney and Shetland for centuries, especially as a supplier of timber and tar, which was in high demand on the treeless islands.

The 16th century and the early 17th century were the heyday of the regular trade of German merchants with Shetland; most of them came from Bremen. Merchants from Hamburg joined them in the middle of the 16th century, as they experienced increasing difficulties in their trade with Iceland, and were present in Shetland in growing numbers in the 17th century. The German merchants supplied the islanders with all kinds of continental commodities such as grain, beer, clothing, ironwares, fishing lines and tobacco, and in turn

bought dried and salted fish, butter and wool.

During the same period, the Dutch became increasingly prominent in Shetland and Orkney waters. This was mainly because of the many Dutch fishing vessels that caught herring in the waters around the isles. Although some of them are known to have been trading in Shetland, they never became a real competition for the Germans. For the Dutch Republic, Shetland was also important as a waypoint on the route from the Netherlands to the Far East and Americas, as the large merchantmen avoided the route through the English Channel to evade attacks of privateers and sailed around the British Isles instead.

William Daniell:

The Cathedral of St Magnus, Kirkwall, Orkney (1814–25). Kirkwall was the only town on the Northern Isles until the late 17th century. The town's skyline was dominated by the medieval cathedral.

Image: © Tate – CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0 (Unported).





The 17th century was in many ways a dark und unpleasant time in both Orkney and Shetland. There were frequent cycles of exceptionally cold weather and unseasonal storms, which ruined crops and caused frequent famines among the poor. The storminess made journeying across the North Sea in small sailing ships perilous. The political climate was stormy too, with the Reformation in 1560 and the swings of power between King and Parliament leaving Scotland bitterly divided. Scotland's trade suffered from English Navigational Acts that excluded Scottish shipping from English ports, which goes some way to explaining why Orkney merchants looked across the North Sea for their markets.

The Germans in Shetland suffered as well. The English-Scottish crown adopted a policy that was increasingly directed at discouraging foreign trade and fisheries, which resulted in continuously rising customs fees for imports to Scotland from the 1660s onwards. The many naval wars between the European powers posed another problem, raising the risk of violent attacks at sea. The final blow, however, came with the foundation of the United Kingdom in 1707 and the subsequent navigation acts, which forbade the import of salt, a vital ingredient for the production of dried fish in Shetland, on foreign ships to England and Scotland. As a result, the German traders disappeared from Shetland, their roles being taken over by Shetland lairds and Scottish traders.



THE TRADING PROCESS

In late medieval and early modern continental Europe and the British Isles, trade was mostly centered in towns, where trading infrastructure existed in the form of markets, weighing houses, ports with cranes, storage facilities, brokers, banks, and so on. On the Scottish northern isles, there was only one such place: Kirkwall in Orkney. It was elevated to the status of a royal burgh by King James III of Scotland in 1486, which included the right to organise three annual fairs. As the only town-like settlement on the islands, Kirkwall was the centre of trade in Orkney, which was in the hands of a few important local families. During the seventeenth century these families grew into dynasties of merchant lairds, so named because they owned land (lairds) and traded goods. As the merchant families grew wealthier, so did their demand for luxury goods, fashionable clothes and imported foods, for spices, wine and brandy. They organised international exchange with the islands, often via a network of relatives living on estates on the Orkney islands and in towns abroad, and who left their traces in town in the form of lintels with their names inscribed on them and gravestones in the local St Magnus cathedral.

Kirkwall was also the political centre of the Earldom of Orkney and the seat of the bishop of Orkney, and as such the centre for the collection and distribution of the rents that were exacted from the tenants of the bishop, earl and king. Most of Orkney's inhabitants were

small tenant farmers who paid their rents in kind: mainly in grain and butter or oil but also rabbit and otter skins, cow hides, goose quills and feathers and salt fish. Most of these goods were exported, with much going to Leith in Scotland as rent payments to the Crown. Other goods were bought by merchants who exported them to Norway, Scotland, Ireland, and the continent and brought back cargoes of timber, tar, iron and many other goods requested by the landowners.

In Shetland the situation was comparable, although the inhabitants usually paid their rents in butter, fish oil or *wadmal* (a coarse woollen fabric) instead of grain. However, there were also significant differences, the first being that a central trading centre did not exist for a long time. A nucleated settlement only started to develop in the second half of the 17th century under the influence of the large numbers of Dutch herring busses that took shelter in Bressay Sound in bad weather conditions. Although the Dutch predominantly came to Shetland to fish and not to trade, Shetlanders settled on the shore to sell them knitted stockings and services, out of which grew the town of Lerwick with its characteristic line of storehouses (lodberries) at the waterfront. The second difference is the limited involvement of the landowners (lairds) in the trading process. Instead the trade was predominantly organised by foreign merchants such as Scots and Englishmen, but first and foremost the Germans.



The foreign merchants in Shetland did not trade at a central location, but visited a large number of small harbours. Besides the German merchants, there were Scottish and English traders too. This map shows the trading sites of the German merchants that are mentioned in the written sources.

Fair Isle





The German merchants who came to Shetland to buy dried fish operated with a system that has many parallels with the German trade in Iceland in the 16th century. Their activity was not so much centred in a particular place, but spread out over many different trading sites on the islands. Their trade had a strong seasonal character: they would arrive in Shetland in spring and leave again in late summer or autumn. From complaints of Shetlanders about their sheriff Laurence Bruce from 1577, we learn some details about the custom of *coupsetting*, i.e. the official opening of the trading season after the arrival of the Germans, when the customs would be paid to the sheriff, the prices for the most important commodities fixed, and a barrel of *coup beer* would be given to the commoners of the land from each ship. After the trade had been opened, the fishermen would deliver their catches to the merchants regularly. It seems that the merchants were also involved in the drying of the fish themselves, for which they used the stony beaches (*ayres*) near the booths.

Money was scarce on the islands and most payments were made in kind or as barter transactions. As rents and scat (land tax) were collected from the tenants in kind and then sold by the tax collectors (*tacksmen*) or their factors to the foreign merchants, the latter were the primary source for money on the islands. From letters of tacksmen we learn about how they visited the German merchants in their booths and ships and negotiated the price

of butter. In Orkney, the tax collectors cooperated with the local merchant lairds or merchants from Scottish towns for the export of the Orkney rents. The use of credit was widespread in transactions on both sides. In the course of the 17th century, the German merchants in Shetland were increasingly indebted to the officials, often for large sums of money, which is probably related to the rising custom tariffs for the foreign trade, which negatively influenced the trade balance of the foreigners.

The difficult trading situation towards the end of the 17th century also resulted in the growing involvement of



Rhenish guilder,
1434–1439
Inv. no. CUR
2006.68

The Rhenish golden guilder was minted in the Rhineland from the 14th century onwards, but widely circulated as an international currency. This coin was minted in Cologne.



Scottish coin,
1559
Inv. no. CUR
2022.70



Jeton,
Nuremberg,
16th century
Inv. no. CUR
2008.13
Jetons were not used as currency, but to aid calculations. Nuremberg was an important production centre for such objects. This jeton was found in Shetland together with a coin from Hamburg, so it is likely that it was used by merchants from Hamburg.

merchant lairds in Shetland in international trade. Some Scottish merchants settled in the German port cities and became involved in the Shetland fish trade, often in cooperation with their German colleagues, but also in cooperation with local merchants and skippers from Shetland and Orkney. The Scottish merchant Robert Jolly, for example, had settled in Hamburg in the 1680s, and together with his brother Alexander, who was a skipper, took part in the trade with Shetland dried fish. Around 1700 many letters sent between the Scottish merchant Gilbert Spence, who was living in Bremen, the Shetland merchant Arthur Nicolson, who was living in Hamburg at the time, the Edinburgh writer Charles Mitchell of

Uresland and their German trading partners in Bremen and Hamburg give us a detailed look into the organisation of the Shetland trade with Germany at the period. They attest to the changing roles of Scottish and Shetland merchants in trading and the growing importance of international mercantile networks.

Early modern coins from Shetland
Shetland did not have its own currency, and the local economy operated mostly without the use of money. Most money was therefore brought by foreign traders. These German, Dutch and Scottish coins found in excavations and by metal detectorists in Shetland therefore attest to the presence of foreign traders. All coins from the collection of Shetland Museum and Archives.



Duit, Friesland (NL), 1626
Inv. no. CUR 2022.72



Duit, Overijssel, 1628
Inv. no. CUR 814
This coin came from the Dutch province Overijssel. It could point at the presence of Dutch fishermen in Shetland in the 17th century. The coin was probably carried on a chain, which would explain the hole in its centre.



1/48 Taler, Hamburg, 1676
Inv. no. CUR 2008.14



2 Schilling, Schleswig-Holstein-Gottorf, 1693
Inv. no. CUR 2022.81



3 Pfennige, Münster, 1703
Inv. no. CUR 8241 (c)

SHIPS IN THE NORTH ATLANTIC TRADE

In order to get an impression of the ship that sailed to the Northern Isles, it is not sufficient to look at the famous shipwreck known as the Bremen Cog in the German Maritime Museum in Bremerhaven. That ship never sailed to Shetland and Orkney, let alone Iceland, and was presumably still under construction when it sank in the Weser around 1380. We can assume that ships of similar types as the Bremen Cog almost never sailed to the North Atlantic, as they are probably ill-suited for the rough conditions there. Furthermore, a ship from the 14th century does not provide much relevant information about ships from the 16th, 17th and early 18th centuries – the period in which German merchants were active in Shetland.

A plethora of different historical names for ship types are known from the written sources. They are called, for example, hulk, caravel, fluyt, boat, bojer, buss, galiot, smack, and so on, which give us an impression of the great diversity of historical ships. However, it remains very difficult to link the historical data to the archaeological sources. One of the biggest challenges is that the historical sources only rarely offer a concrete picture of the type of construction of the ship. This complicates the attribution of names of ship types to archaeological finds of ship remains. Moreover, the designation of a single ship type in the written sources can encompass a range of variants in size and shape of the vessels, which makes a universal description practically impossible.

Now, what do we know about the ships that sailed to Orkney and Shetland from the 16th century onwards? First, we must distinguish between those ships that sailed to the islands themselves and those that only sailed through the waters around the Northern Isles. The large, long-distance merchantmen, such as for example the wrecks of the Dutch *Lastdraeger* (sunk in 1653) and the *Kennemerland* (sunk in 1664), which were found in Shetland waters, did not have the Northern Isles as their intended destination. These ships sailed the northern route around the British Isles on their way to or from the Far East, in order to evade enemy ships in the English Channel. Quite a few of these vessels got into distress in the North Atlantic and some of them sank there. They cannot be regarded as typical Hanseatic ships trading with Shetland.

A further point is the distinction between trading vessels and warships. The waters around the Northern Isles were and are dangerous for seafaring, not only because of stormy weather, waves, currents, shallow waters and submerged rocks. Merchant ships could encounter pirates, aggressive competitors and enemy warships here as well. The large armed warships that roamed the North Atlantic waters to safeguard or disturb the shipping lanes likewise cannot be regarded as representative of the typical shipping traffic there.

From written sources we know that the German trade with Shetland was mainly conducted with sailing ships of a relatively small size. The ships from



the 16th and 17th century, which sailed for example from Bremen and Hamburg to the islands, had a size of about 20 to 40 lasts on average. The unit of a 'last' indicated the cargo load of a vessel and is usually calculated with a factor of 1:2 to metric tons. Consequently, 20 to 40 lasts corresponds to a tonnage of c. 40 to 80 tonnes for each vessel. If we consider that, for example, ships from Bremen employed in trade with the Baltic Sea could reach a size of over 100 lasts (more than 200 tonnes) in the 16th century, the place of these ships within the range of ship sizes at the time becomes clear. The large Dutch merchantmen of the 17th century were even significantly larger. The aforementioned *Lastdraeger*, for example, is assumed to have had a cargo capacity of over

Art print (late 17th century), presumably after an original by Johannes Porcellis. We can see multiple Dutch herring busses. At least two of them are armed with cannons, which points to the constant threat of foreign ships. Three of the vessels have lowered at least one mast, which indicates that they have put out their nets. The three masts suggest that these busses were quite large (c. 50 to 60 lasts).

Image: DSM, Archive.

300 lasts (more than 600 tonnes). The merchant ships that sailed from Bremen and Hamburg to Shetland can therefore be considered to have been small to mid-size vessels.

What did these ships look like? Ship types such as the bojer were the most probable choice for this trade. From the 16th century onwards, bojers were vessels with one to two masts and an average size

of c. 45 lasts (c. 90 tonnes). They could, however, also be over 100 lasts in size. Other contemporary ship types of varying sizes and with up to three masts are attested, such as boats, fluyts and buses. The crew on ships such as a bojer could vary very much as well, partly in relation to the size of the vessel. Usually there were around five to six mariners on bojers of 50 lasts in the 16th century. Roughly the same number of persons can be added to this figure when we also take into consideration the merchants and their assistants on board. Hence, in total the number of 10 to 15 persons on board is a reliable estimate for a relatively small merchant ship such as a bojer.

Relatively little is known about the practical (un-)loading of ships on the islands. Fixed port structures such as

loading quays, cranes and jetties were mostly absent. Archaeological traces of such structures from the early modern period have not yet been found. It can therefore be assumed that the merchant ships anchored in the bays of the islands and/or were fixed with long ropes to mooring rings on the shore. The loading took place by employing smaller boats, the so-called lighters. These lighters were beached at suitable landing places, such as level beaches. The commodities were subsequently stored in booths, which were usually located in the direct vicinity of the shore.

On average five merchant vessels sailed annually from Bremen to Shetland from the mid-16th century onwards. They were joined by two ships on average from Hamburg. The small annual number of ships suggests that the trade with the Northern Isles occupied only a minor position within the total trade volume of both cities. For the traders involved themselves, however, it was of great importance.

The ships sailed from Bremen and Hamburg either on an eastern route along the coasts of Jutland and southern Norway to Bergen (Norway), where they crossed the North Sea in the direction of Shetland, or they took the western route along the Dutch, English and Scottish coast and reached Shetland via Orkney. Such a journey must have taken two weeks on average and the captains navigated by landmarks on the coasts and with the aid of sailing instructions contained in so-called rutters. Compasses were used by Hanseatic seafarers from the early 15th century

Model of a Bojer.

DSM Inv. no. I/09369/01





Willem Jansz. Blaeu, *Het Licht der Zee-vaert* (Amsterdam, 1620). This book contains sea charts and detailed navigational instructions for the seas of Europe. This page shows a west-oriented chart of the Shetland Islands. In southern Shetland we find indications for the presence of foreign merchants. There is

the name "Hamburger haven ofte Bremer-haven" for an anchorage. Next to it the name "Schotsche ree" indicates that the bay was also frequently used by Scots.

Image: David Rumsey Map Collection, David Rumsey Map Center, Stanford Libraries.

and other navigational instruments such as Jacob's staff and astrolabes emerged in the 16th century. However, the sounding lead remained the principal instrument of navigation for a long time and served both as an instrument for measuring depths and positioning. The rutters became ever more precise and from the middle of the 16th century sea charts were added to them, often

with a high level of detail, showing harbours and anchorages as well as water depths. The practical use of these early charts by captains of small merchant vessels is, however, debatable. Probably the textual sailing instructions accompanying the charts were of higher value in the nautical practice.

BOOTHS AND OTHER BUILDINGS

By the early modern period most international trade in northern Europe was channelled through major towns and well-established ports. Trade in the Scottish Northern Isles was rather different. Even in the only urban centres Kirkwall and Lerwick, the development of a port infrastructure was minimal. Investment was made in buildings when it was necessary to provide secure and dry storage, but little money was spent on the construction of waterfronts. Ships were anchored offshore in sheltered bays. Goods were conveyed from the shore in boats which might be landed on gently sloping beaches. The only evidence for the construction of a landing place for boats is a rock-cut face recorded in excavations in front of the cathedral in Kirkwall. It seems that the volume of trade did not justify the expenditure to facilitate loading and unloading of ships.

The most substantial remains connected with trade are, therefore, not the waterfronts, but the storehouses at which goods were collected before they were loaded. These buildings were constructed to keep the goods dry and well ventilated to ensure that none was spoilt, and were secure from theft. They were built out of stone and had two stories, the upper one for keeping grain which needed to be kept free from mice and rats. Keeping goods dry was a particular challenge in the rainy and humid climate of Orkney and Shetland. Such storehouses required a major investment and must have been some of the largest and most impressive build-

ings on the islands at the time.

The earliest known storehouse is that at Kebister in Shetland. It was an unexpected discovery made during archaeological excavations. The walls survived up to 1.5m in height. A stone originally set over the doorway identified the building as the work of Archdeacon Henry Phankouth (1501–29). The archdeacon was the leading churchman in Shetland. He oversaw the church property in the islands and collected the tithes. Since the most important produce of Shetland was butter and coarse cloth, it was likely that these were the main goods taken in tithe and stored there. Although the building was interpreted as being only one storey high with further storage space in the loft, a re-examination of the structural evidence has allowed a new conclusion. The storehouse must have been a full two stories high with the upper floor constructed to take a heavy load. It had a narrow entrance to the ground floor with, no doubt, a solid door which could be locked. Fragments of glass were found in the excavations, indicating that there were glass windows which allowed the humidity inside the building to be controlled. There must also have been a means for circulating air to prevent condensation. Its position by the sheltered inlet of Dales Voe allowed goods to be shipped from all over Shetland to be received at the store, and other vessels to be loaded for export to Bergen or mainland Scotland where the cargoes were sold. The archdeacon's house was at Tingwall, a distance of about 4km

over land from Kebister, and so convenient for monitoring the movement of goods at the storehouse.

There was another storehouse for tithes and rental payments at the bishop's palace at Kirkwall which served a similar function for Orkney, but this has not survived. Two other storehouses still stand on Orkney, which were built primarily for the storage of grain. The building at St Mary's on the mainland of Orkney has two entrances at the gable end to give access to the ground and first floor respectively. Two other 'doorways' at first floor level had holes for iron bars which would have prevented anyone from entering the building. In fact, they would be opened to allow a through-draught of wind to ventilate

the goods stored there. The windows on the first floor were also protected by iron bars. By contrast, the openings on the ground floor were not secured in the same way. That suggests that the more valuable goods, probably grain, were kept in the drier conditions upstairs. Bulky, but less valuable commodities may have been kept on the ground floor.

The second surviving Orkney storehouse lies on the island of Burray and was similar in design, although the

The storehouse at St Mary's in Orkney. This building, constructed in 1649, stored grain from the Graemeshall estate before it was shipped from the bay which lies to the south.

Photo: Mark Gardiner.

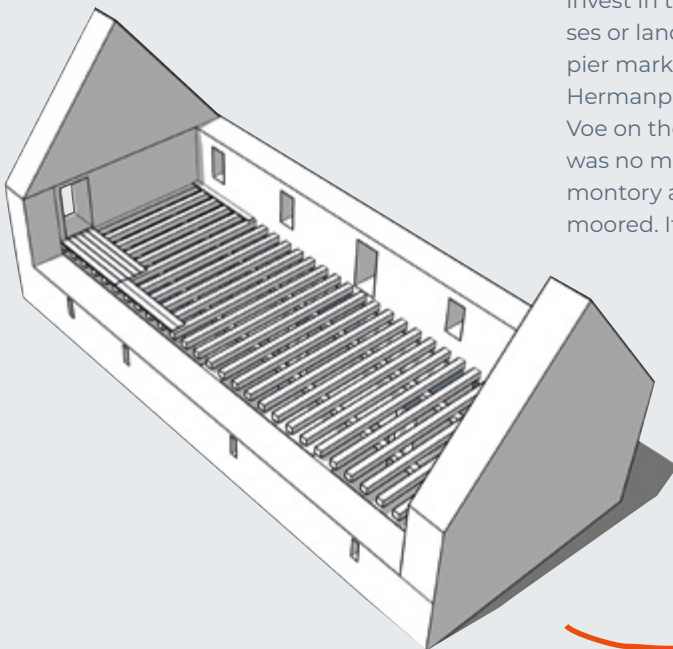


pattern of windows was rather different. The larger windows were on the ground floor; the first floor windows were smaller and were fitted with glass. Again, the first floor seems to have been intended for grain storage. This storehouse also had two opposed doorways with iron bars to allow the space to be ventilated, and the glass allowed the humidity in the interior to be controlled.

The similarity of the two storehouses is perhaps hardly surprising. St Mary's was built in 1649 and that at Burray a few years earlier, in 1645. Moreover, a third girnel or granary for collecting the rents of the king was built in Kirkwall about the same time, but it was replaced by a grain store in the 18th century.

It implies that the 1640s was a period of immense building activity as large land-owners in Orkney saw opportunities to export goods overseas and set about investing in the buildings to do so.

The storehouse at Kebister on Shetland and those on Orkney were large and substantial structures designed for the collection and storage of goods until they were ready to be shipped abroad. A rather different system for handling goods operated in many of the bays in Shetland, where the main commodity to be shipped was dried fish. The supply of fish was not under the control of one laird (large landowner), but was the produce of numerous fishermen who brought their catches to be traded. The fishermen did not invest in the construction of warehouses or landing places. Even the possible pier marked on 19th-century maps as Hermanpea – Herman's pier – at Burra Voe on the island of Yell in Shetland was no more than a natural rocky promontory against which boats could be moored. It may have been named after



Reconstruction of the excavated storehouse at Kebister in Shetland. The upper floor was supported not only by joists, but also by two beams which ran the length of the building. This suggests that it was constructed to take a heavy load on the first floor. Floorboards, of which only a small number are shown, were laid on the joists.

The Pier House in the harbour of Symbister on the island of Whalsay, Shetland. The building is associated by local tradition with merchants from Bremen, but in its current form dates from the 18th century, after the Germans had left.

Photo: Philipp Grassel.



Herman Detken, a German merchant trading in Yell in the early 17th century. Ships moored in the protected bays acted, in effect, as floating warehouses. The supplies of fish were brought to small booths on the shore where they were exchanged for goods brought from Germany or mainland Scotland. The fish could then be taken in boats to the ships and loaded in the hold. Written records attest that some of these booths were constructed by the merchants themselves, others on the expenses of the local lairds and then rented out.

None of the early booths survive, although one existing waterside building, the Pier House at Symbister on the island of Whalsay, is associated by tradition with Bremen merchants. However, it is in fact 18th-century in date and belongs to a period when German

merchants had all but disappeared from Shetland. At least one booth is known archaeologically and has been excavated at Gunnister Voe, though only short lengths of walling remained. The booths were built of stone and provided sleeping quarters for the merchant and the captain. The crew slept on board the ship. The booths were located by gently sloping shores to allow boats to land, but sufficiently above the high-water mark to ensure that they remained dry.

The various trading buildings – storehouses, girnels and booths – provide an insight into the different forms of commerce and the commodities exported from Orkney and Shetland in the 16th and 17th centuries. These buildings tell a story of trading activities which is no less important than the written records.

EXCAVATIONS IN ORKNEY: SKAILL

Skaill is an abandoned farmstead on the west coast of the island of Rousay, Orkney. The site was last inhabited in the 19th century, but has a much longer history. The place name suggests that a Norse high status settlement with a hall predated the ruined 19th-century buildings. The area of Westness, to which Skaill belongs, is mentioned in the late 12th-century *Orkneyinga Saga* as home to a powerful chieftain, Sigurd of Westness. Could it be that his hall was at Skaill? The Archaeology Institute of the University of Highlands and Islands (UHI) has been investigating Skaill since 2015 with geophysical survey, test pitting and excavation. Evidence for a Viking / Norse hall has been found in the lower (i.e. older) layers of the settlement mound, with a

later farm to the east and below the surviving 19th-century farm buildings. This long settlement history makes Skaill an ideal site for studying what Orcadians consumed and produced, bought and sold throughout the centuries.

The settlement mound is substantial, measuring roughly 70m x 50m and up to 2m high, and excavations have there-

Aerial view of the coast of Rousay and the Skaill site, looking north. The farmstead and excavations are visible in the foreground: the ruined 19th-century building and east of it the excavated medieval and post-medieval structures. The Norse hall lies to the west, partly under the other buildings. It was excavated in earlier years, and is therefore not visible here.

Photo: Bobby Friel @ TakeTheHighView.



Excavation of the medieval northern square building during the 2023 excavation season.

Photo: Daniel Lee



fore targeted specific areas. During each excavation season in summer, only parts of the site were opened and excavated, the so-called trenches. The Norse hall has only been partly exposed and is over 14.5m long and 5.5m wide internally. Initial dating from finds (steatite, unglazed coarse pottery, fish bones) suggests that it was in use from the 11th to 13th century. Evidence for Norse middens (waste dumps) and later middens has been found in several test pits around the hall. The Norse hall in Skaill is similar to other Norse longhouses that have been excavated in Orkney, such as at Sandwick, Quooygreu, West-ray and Skaill in Deerness.

Following the latest excavation season in 2023, the UHI team has gained a better understanding of the early farmstead and the sequence of the buildings, along with recovering a range of artefacts (pottery, animal bone, fish bone, metalwork). One of the big questions at Skaill has been whether the Norse Hall, last uncovered in 2019, was replaced by the later farmstead to the east. The later phases of occupation at the hall have been dated to the 11th to early 12th century, but is their continuous occupation at the site extending into the late medieval and post medieval period? Other dates from middens around the farm would suggest so, returning dates from the 13th to 16th century. How these dated middens were related to the buildings was a key question for the excavation activities in 2023.

In the northern end of the excavated area, the remains of an early 19th-cen-

tury corn drying kiln were recorded and removed, revealing more of the large building it was built into. Extension of the trench to the east revealed a large nearly square building with very finely built stone walls as wide as 1m on the north and south sides. Measuring 6.70m x 5.75m externally, with walls surviving at 1m in height, the northern building is the oldest in the trench. There are two doorways, to the south and east, with the southern door blocked with a wall. An examination of the sequence of deposits and surfaces to the east of the building indicates that it is much older than we had previously assumed, and could have been built in the 13th or 14th century or even earlier. This has implications for the range of buildings to the south.

It is unclear what the northern square building was originally used for. Other examples of larger square buildings are known on farms in the post-medieval period, functioning as granaries or barns. But if the Skaill square building is as early as it seems, it could have had a different function. It appears to have been built at a time when houses were changing from longhouses (like the Norse hall at Skaill) to Norwegian *stofa*-type buildings (timber-framed houses), and could represent a medieval house. The northern building at Skaill is similar to the Late Norse stone-built house at Skaill in Deerness, which also has a small kiln-type building outside. It's too soon to confirm the original use of the northern

square building at Skaill and excavations next season will continue inside to investigate the internal floors.

Further excavation is planned on the internal floors of the southern house, which has a central hearth, which could be quite early. The remarkable thing about this range of buildings is that the earliest phases could date back to the medieval period and that they remained in use, after numerous modifications, until they were backfilled

and levelled in the late 18th / early 19th century when the farm was 'modernised' and the domestic house and kiln-barn was built which survive at the site today. An analysis of the ceramics found at Skaill have shown that the imported pottery at Skaill came from all across Europe during the 16th to 18th centuries. This demonstrates that this rural island farmstead in Rousay was linked to these wider European trade and consumption networks.



Spindle whorl from bone, Viking age. The whorl was complemented with a shaft that was put through the hole to make a hand spindle, a simple device for spinning wool.



Fragment of a comb, 13th century

Glasses, 19th century

The wide range of artefacts uncovered from the Skaill site give an impression of what was produced and consumed on an Orkney farmstead throughout the centuries. Some examples are shown here.

Photos: Daniel Lee.

Rhenish stoneware, 16th/17th century



Scottish redware, 16th/17th century



Horse skull, 18th or 19th century



COMMODITIES IN THE WRITTEN SOURCES

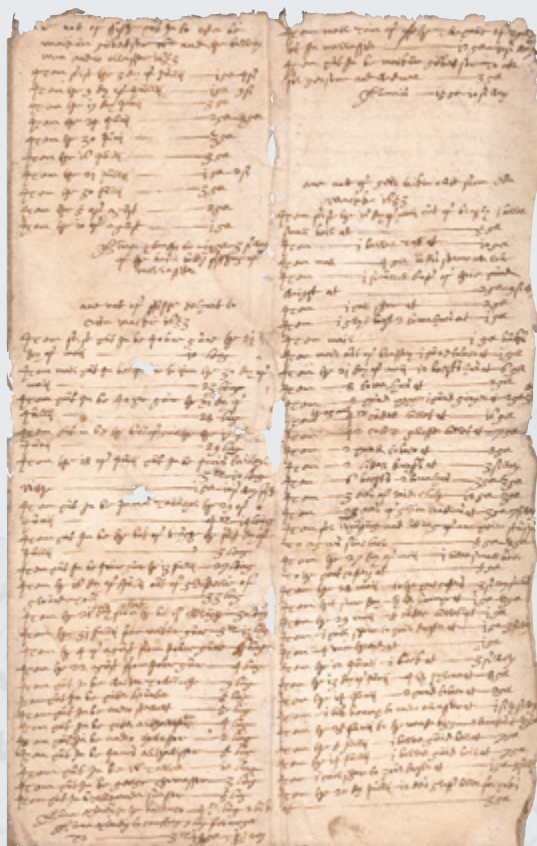
Of all the commodities traded by foreign and local merchants in Orkney and Shetland in the late Middle Ages and the Early Modern period, most were of perishable or organic nature (e.g. foodstuffs and clothing) and therefore unlikely to having left many traces in the archaeological record. For this reason, most of the information we have for traded commodities comes from written sources. Some preserved 17th-century accounts show us a kaleidoscope of different commodities imported to the islands. Examples of these sources are an account of the business of Shetland fishermen in service of Laurence Sinclair of Brugh with the Hamburg merchant Otto Make from 1653, which shows deliveries of fish to Make on one side of the paper, and on the other side the items that he sold in return. Another source that gives a good overview of the different traded commodities are the notebooks of Orkney captain Peter Winchester from the third quarter of the 17th century. Other valuable records that list imports and exports are custom records, both on the islands and of the Scottish and German ports, as customs were usually levied based on the quantity and value of a ship's cargo.

The commodities imported to the islands cover basically any type of good that could not be produced on the islands themselves. Many of these goods came from far away and were acquired on the market in the large European trading centres such as Hamburg and London. They can be roughly divided into five categories:

1. Foodstuffs were the most important produce exported from the islands to the British isles and the European continent: cured fish from Shetland and grain from Orkney. Other products from the islands include the butter and fish oil that were produced by farmers as tax payment and shipped abroad by the tax collectors. Sheep or ox meat is also



This account lists deliveries of fish (mainly ling) of Shetland fishermen to the merchant Otto Make from Hamburg in the summer of 1653. On the back, sales of commodities by Make to the Shetlanders are recorded. They include beer, fishing equipment, clothing, tobacco, and spices. *Shetland Museum and Archives, D12/110/9.*



sometimes mentioned as exported commodity. Shetland did not only import barley and oats from Orkney, but also ryemeal and other cereal products from Germany. However, the most important imports of foodstuffs to the islands consisted of alcoholic beverages, such as beer from northern Germany, wine from southern Europe and the Rhineland, mead and strong liquors. It appears that the German booths in Shetland also served as pubs from time to time. Finally, salt was imported in large quantities and mostly came from the bay of Biscay via the German ports. Most of it was not used for direct consumption, but for salting the fish that was taken back to the European markets.

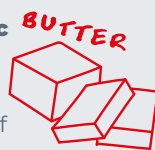
2. Textiles we can find both as raw materials and as ready-made clothing. As plenty of sheep grazed on the islands, the islanders of course produced woollen fabrics themselves. Some of it was collected as a tax in the form of wadmal, a weathertight coarse fabric, until the 17th century. This was a product that was well-known in Scandinavia (such as the Icelandic *vaðmál*) and it was mainly exported to Norway. In the late 17th century, the presence of Dutch herring fishermen also stimulated the knitting of socks and stockings in Shetland, which was one of the activities around which the town of Lerwick developed. Finer continental and English cloth and linen were imported by foreign traders, not only as fabrics but also as ready-made clothing. Items of clothing also include leatherwares such as shoes and belts. This meant that islanders also had access to clothing according to the latest European fashion.

3. The scarcity of **raw materials** on the islands meant that most of them needed to be imported. Especially timber was in high demand as material for building houses and boats, since the Northern Isles were almost treeless, and was mostly imported from Norway. Other imported raw materials were iron, copper, lead, tar and hemp.

4. A large variety of **manufactured goods** were also imported to the islands. This is the category which leaves most traces in the archaeological record. It includes items that can be regarded as luxury products such as tablewares, but also basic necessities such as empty barrels and mass products such as clay pipes for smoking. An interesting feature of the German trade is the large quantities of imported fishing tackle (lines and hooks) that were needed for the Shetland longline cod and ling fisheries. Tools and wapons in the form of knives and guns were also imported. It was custom that the German merchants in Shetland partly paid their tolls in luxuriously decorated guns, which were possibly used to decorate the houses of the lairds.

5. A final category that grew in importance in the 17th century are **exotic and colonial products** – a sign of the growing importance of the colonial trade, which influenced the lifestyles of European communities, including the inhabitants of Orkney and Shetland. These range from spices (ginger, cinnamon, pepper) to sugar and tobacco. Peter Winchester's account books, for example, list a wide range of exotic products such as pepper, cinnamon, cloth dyes, paints, amber, sugar, tobacco and tobacco pipes, next to more local products such as grain, butter, wine, tar, oil, salted hides and salt beef.

Of course the centuries-long patterns of exchange left lasting influences on the insular societies. George Buchanan noted the influence of German trade in Shetland for example when he wrote his *Rerum Scoticarum Historia* in 1582: "[The Shetlanders] dress in German fashion, but for their abilities not indecorously. Their produce is of a unique kind of thick cloth, which they sell to the Norwegians; of oil manufactured from the intestines of fish, of butter, and of fish. [...] They use measures, numbers and weights according to the German custom."



BLUE SMOKE OVER ORKNEY AND SHETLAND

The colonisation of the Americas marks the beginning of the global age. However, it took some time before noticeable consequences of this globalisation also reached the Orkney and Shetland Islands. The clearest indicator of this is the beginning of tobacco use in the Northern Isles, because smoking can be clearly traced archaeologically. Fragments of clay tobacco pipes are found in many excavations, often causing great excitement among archaeologists. This is because the smoking implements not only bear witness to the global spread of smoking, but they are also often very well dated. Moreover, their manufacturer and place of manufacture can very often be reconstructed, which reveals additional information about trade networks.

According to written sources, tobacco as a colonial commodity reached Scotland in the early 17th century. Soon this new vice fell into disrepute. King James VI of Scotland (1566–1625) wrote a famous treatise called “A Counterblaste to Tobacco” in 1604 in which he railed fiercely against the new custom of smoking. The following description of this new custom is famous. Smoking is “a custom loathsome to the eye, hateful to the nose, harmful to the brain, dangerous to the lungs, and in the black, stinking fume thereof, nearest resembling the horrible Stygian smoke of the pit that is bottomless.” A few years later, in 1616, he introduced a ban on tobacco imports.

But the triumph of tobacco was unstoppable. In the same year, the king changed his mind and granted Captain William Murray a monopoly on tobacco imports for a period of 21 years. From then on, the sovereigns in Scotland (as in other European countries) tried to regulate and control smoking and the purchase of tobacco and clay tobacco pipes, and to earn money from smoking by imposing taxes.

When and how did smoking reach Orkney and Shetland? And where did tobacco and clay pipes come from? These questions are not easy to answer. The first written record for the Northern Isles comes from Orkney and dates from the year 1619. George Graham, bishop of Orkney and Shetland, already a fervent smoker, sent a request in a letter for more tobacco and pipes. From this period, however, we do not know any clay pipes found on the islands. The oldest clay pipe fragments, dating from around 1630 to 1650, have been found in the centre of Kirkwall. The oldest clay pipe finds in Shetland date from the same period and were found around Scalloway Castle. They came from Holland, and the tobacco that was smoked



Adriaen van Ostade, *A Man Smoking*, c.1670.
Dulwich Picture Gallery, Image in the public domain.



with them was probably imported to Shetland via Holland. This is not surprising, as in the 17th century many Dutchmen stayed in Shetland waters to fish. The German merchants in Shetland probably also imported their tobacco and pipes from Holland. Around 1650 we find the first references to tobacco in Shetland, as trading commodity of the merchants from Bremen and Hamburg there. Soon it would become a fixed part of their trading goods.

The tobacco that reached Scotland and the Northern Isles in the 17th century probably came almost exclusively from Virginia. Tobacco flourished in the early English colonies on the American east coast and the export of tobacco to Europe promised high profits. The tobacco was packed into barrels in Virginia, loaded onto ships and then shipped to Bristol or London. The tobacco that went to Scotland went up the east coast of Britain from London. This trade was interrupted several times by the so-called Navigation Acts. These regulations stipulated that non-European goods, such as tobacco could only be imported on English ships. This was intended to eliminate Dutch competition. At this time, merchants from Scotland, which was not yet united with England, took supplies of tobacco

delivered to other European ports, such as Gdańsk or Amsterdam. Peter Winchester, a merchant from Orkney, took part in the tobacco trade as well. His friend, the Dutch merchant Jacob Abrahams, sent him tobacco to Kirkwall in Orkney in 1671. In the following years Peter Winchester occasionally sold tobacco, and also clay tobacco pipes; both probably came from Holland.

The trade with tobacco shows that despite their somewhat remote location the Orkney and Shetland Islands became part of the globalised world in the early 17th century.



Remains of clay pipes, found in Shetland.
Shetland Museum and Archives.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CERAMICS IN ARCHAEOLOGY

Among the many different archaeological artefacts that came to us from the Middle Ages and the early modern period on the Northern Isles, ceramic sherds especially stand out. They are normally well preserved in the earth and can be well dated. Moreover, they are a good example of the discrepancy between the knowledge derived from the written sources and that from archaeological finds. Remains of ceramics are often found during archaeological excavations or field surveys, but they are relatively rarely mentioned in the sources as traded commodity. Therefore, ceramic sherds provide the opportunity to nuance, supplement or contrast the history that we know from the written sources.

So what can ceramic sherds tell us? Hardly any ceramic vessels were made in Shetland and Orkney in the Middle Ages and early modern period. All pots, pans, jugs or mugs had to be imported. Remains of simple cooking vessels, such as the so-called pipkins, cooking pots with three feet from ceramic or metal, are therefore found relatively often. Such vessels arrived on ships from northern Germany, the Netherlands, England or Scotland, either directly or via detours and intermediate stations. The production regions are relatively well known and often each region had its own recognisable product groups and pottery forms. The shape of a vessel was subject to certain fashions or temporal developments, so that vessels can be dated relatively well, according to their shapes, decorations and

ceramic types. Accordingly, the origin of ceramic sherds which were, for example, found in excavations in Skail in Rousay, Orkney or Gunnister and Lerwick in Shetland can be traced to the Netherlands, Scotland or Germany.

Basically, we distinguish between two large ceramic groups: earthenware and stoneware. Earthenware in the period from the 15th to the 17th century was mostly manufactured from red-firing clay and is usually glazed on the inside to seal the pottery. Stoneware does not need a glaze. The clay of this type of ceramic can be fired to such a high temperature that the vessel becomes watertight. This is why tableware such as jugs, mugs, pitchers etc., was mostly made of stoneware. The so-called bellarmine or *Bartmann* (German: 'bearded man') jugs are a primary example of stoneware. They acquired their name from the lapidary bearded face with which they were decorated.

There were only a few regions in central and northern Europe that could produce such stoneware. The most important region was the Rhineland. The area around Cologne produced vast quantities of stoneware vessels, which from the 16th century onwards were also traded all over the world. Therefore, for example, a bellarmine jug can tell us where and when it was made. It is possible to find out what it once contained and hence what it was used for. Moreover, it can tell us how it once came to the Northern Isles.





Remains of five so-called bellarmine or Bartmann jugs made of Rhenish stoneware. They were produced in Frechen near Cologne between 1625 and 1675 and were popular transport containers for drinks, such as beer, wine or liquor. They travelled from Cologne via the Rhine to the Netherlands or overland to Bremen and on to the

Northern Isles. These fragments are underwater finds from Shetland that apparently once went overboard during the loading of ships.

Photo: Natascha Mehler.



Pipkin from the 17th century, found in Skaill, Deerness, Orkney.

Photo: Daniel Lee / Orkney Museum.

EXCAVATIONS IN SHETLAND: GUNNISTER AND LERWICK

The aim of many archaeological excavations is to identify the plan of buildings or other areas of activity. However, sometimes the purpose is simply to record the nature of deposits and obtain a sample of the artefacts and environmental evidence. In such cases, it is faster and more appropriate to excavate test-pits which examine smaller samples over a larger area. Test-pitting was used in Shetland for the LIFTE project to examine two sites, one rural and the other urban.

The rural site chosen was the croft of Gunnister. It lies at the head of the voe (inlet) which was used from 1582 to 1602 as a trading place for the Hamburg merchant Simon Harriestede. An earlier excavation had examined the probable site of his merchant's booth, some distance away. The croft at Gunnister sits at the top of a rise which appeared to be a 'farm mound'. Such mounds are known from northern Norway, Iceland and Orkney, which were formed by repeated use of the same sites over a long period. It was expected that a similar mound might underlie the croft at Gunnister, but test-pitting rapidly proved that assumption was incorrect. The croft sits on a natural rocky outcrop and there is only a thin soil on the land beside the farm buildings. Further away, down the slope, the depth of soil was built up during the 19th century and was held in place by stone revetting. This would have provided small plots to cultivate kale and potatoes around the house. Further test-pits

were excavated at the bottom of the slope and showed that the soil dramatically changed on the flatter land. Here, the soil was a deep, rich, humic deposit which had been formed by depositing manure and other waste over many centuries. 'Dutch' redwares – some may have come from northern Germany – dating from the period of the 16th and 17th centuries were found in each of the test-pits excavated in the area at the bottom of the slope. Beyond the manured area no pottery was found in the test-pit excavated there.

There are two significant results established by the work at Gunnister. First, the domestic waste from the croft from the 16th century onwards was not accumulating to form a farm mound, but was being used as manure to improve the fields in the best land at the foot of the slope. It was directed quite specifically to improve the soil in the small area of the infield alone. The only further area manured was one plot below the croft. The manured area was increased in the 19th century when

The excavations at Gunnister, Shetland. The farmhouse sits on top of a rock outcropping in the background, while a series of test pits with regular distances leads down into the manured field.

Photo: Mark Gardiner.





small plots were made on the slopes around the croft. These were walled to retain the soil and exclude livestock. Second, imported redwares were reaching even minor sites, such as Gunnister. No pottery was produced on the island and this imported ware, together with a smaller quantity from Scotland provided the only vessels. Further work has suggested that 'Dutch' redwares appear to be widespread throughout farms on Shetland.

The urban site chosen for test-pitting was in Lerwick, the only town on Shetland. Lerwick emerged as a commercial centre at the beginning of the 17th century when Dutch fishing vessels arrived to catch herring. The Dutch *College van de Grote Visserij* applied regulations which prevented the start of fishing before 24 June each year. The Dutch sailors arriving before that date came ashore at a number of places to drink and trade with the Shetlanders. The Dutch ships could have crews of between thirteen and twenty or more sailors, and many hundreds of vessels made the voyage for the herring fisheries. As a result, there was a huge influx of foreigners into Shetland around mid-summer.

Lerwick emerged as the most important centre for sailors' recreation, because the adjoining haven at Bressay Sound was larger and better protected than others. A decree from 1615 ordered the demolition of the booths which had been built along the harbour to supply the sailors. It was obviously not obser-

ved, because it was repeated ten years later, although with the concession that men might go to sell socks and other knitted items. Women were forbidden, because of the concern that they were acting as prostitutes. By the beginning of the 18th century, the town had grown so quickly that a church, an administrative building and a fort to protect the anchorage had all been constructed. It had a permanent population of two or three hundred people at the time.

Seventeen test-pits were excavated in the back gardens of Lerwick, but not all could be dug to the level of the sub-soil. A few pits encountered modern disturbance, rubble or other impenetrable deposits. The excavated pits were away from the main area of occupation in the early town, which lay along the foreshore. In Lerwick, as in the rural crofts such as Gunnister, it was common practice to dump waste to improve the soil for cultivation. In the town, the land behind the buildings was used. A map of 1783 shows that this area had been divided up into long gardens running up the slope behind the houses. It was this area which was sampled by test-pits. The pits confirmed that thick humic deposits had formed on what had once been thin peaty soils. Pottery in the soils towards the base of the test-pits contained 17th-century imported pottery which had been thrown out with other waste to improve the soil. There was some evidence that suggested that manuring began immediately behind



the houses and in the 18th and 19th centuries a larger area further up the slope was also used.

The bones from the pits still have to be analysed, but these will indicate the diet of the town-dwellers of Lerwick. It is likely that most of these were from livestock brought in and slaughtered in the town for their meat and from fish caught and either consumed locally, or prepared for export. One test-pit discovered a rather different set of bones. These were from a dog and a cat which had been buried together in a basket. The dog had a leather and copper alloy collar of 19th-century type with an attachment for a padlock, which was used to mark ownership. We cannot know the story behind this burial, but it is a reminder that not all animals in Lerwick were kept for their meat.

One of the test pits in the town centre of Lerwick, Shetland.

Photo: Natascha Mehler.

Test-pits have provided an insight into the periods of occupation and cultivation both on the rural site of Gunnister and in the town of Lerwick. They indicate also the character of imports, and indicate that such goods might be obtained even on remote farms in Shetland. The evidence from both sites contribute to an emerging picture of an increasingly commercialised economy which stimulated the growth of Lerwick, and suggests that the goods from this trade reached even remote crofts.

GRAIN

One of the key export products from Orkney were cereal grains and derivatives. The two key cereal crops grown in Orkney during the early modern period were barley and oats. The barley grown in Orkney was a special landrace called *bere* (sometimes *bear*, *beir* or *beer*). This was a hulled, six-row type of barley that evolved to be particularly well suited to growing in Orkney. It was sometimes referred to as 90-day barley as it grew well in the short growing season and long summer days present in Orkney. Bere is a very hardy type of barley and was much more tolerant of cold, wet weather than other varieties of barley; it also could be stored for a long time. Barley has been grown in Orkney since the Stone Age, but archaeological excavations have shown that these early crops were of another variety. It is not known exactly when bere was introduced to Orkney and it may be that it evolved in place. In the past it was thought to be a Viking introduction, but new evidence from studying the detailed shape of barley grains and from DNA analysis suggests that this was not the case. Oats were also commonly grown in Orkney and were capable of growing on poorer soils.

In Orkney during the early modern period the majority of farms were owned either by the Earldom or the Bishopric and the tenant farmers had to pay rent and scat (land tax) to their landlord each year. Bere, malt (malting barley) and oatmeal were frequently used as part of these payments and

were gathered centrally at specially built stores called *girnells*. It was from here that they went on to be sold abroad. Joan Blaeu's Atlas of Scotland from 1654 contains the following description:

"Their production of crops, especially of barley (but oats, of which they do not have such a great supply, they keep at home), is so great that when well cut, cleaned and put into baskets (in the vernacular they call them 'cassies'), that is sacks, skilfully made from straw, they send it abroad for sale."

These gathered grain products were likely Orkney's most valuable export products. We can get some idea of the quantities of the grain grown and grain products traded from a variety of historical documents. For some years we still have very detailed records of the scat and rental payments made to the Bishopric and the Earldom. The historian Hugh Marwick calculated that a single year's payments to the Bishopric and the Earldom was likely equivalent to 730 tons of bere and 50 tons of oatmeal, indicating large quantities of cereal products were available for trading.

Accounts and inventories of ships found in the Orkney archives indicate that bere and malt frequently formed part or even the whole of the cargo of merchant ships. Destinations for these ships included Bergen, Kristiansand and other places in Norway; Holland is also

Bere barley being grown in Orkney today.
Photo: Julia Cussans.



mentioned as a destination. An account from 1664 of Orcadian skipper Peter Winchester indicates that 26 chalders (a chaldar being approximately 3400 litres) of 'Bear' (bere) was loaded onto his ship in Orkney and was originally bound for Holland, but due to 'contrary wind' ended up in Norway. Here the bere was measured as 700 barrels, indicating approximately 27 barrels per chaldar. The bere was then sold in Stavanger and Bergen.

Although the exported grain was surplus to requirements of the Orkney residents for much of the time, there were also times of severe famine. During the 1600s the Little Ice Age put extreme pressure on the islander's ability to grow crops, with harvests failing in successive years and many people dying of starvation. One account from the 1630s indicates that people were dying in the open fields and were forced to eat seaweed and sometimes their dogs in order to survive. These famine years gave the girnell-man a very hard job, as he collected the rent and scat payments made in grain and malt and found it difficult to see Orkney folk go hungry while provisions were present in the stores. Those in most need rarely had money to pay for grain and so bad debts were frequent and often went unpaid, despite prosecutions. Later in the 17th century better provisions were made for the poor with the town council of Kirkwall and the Kirk Sessions (the church) purchasing grain to be distributed to the poor in Orkney.

In Shetland the story of grain is quite different to that of Orkney. Apart from the periods of famine, usually the cereal crops in Orkney grew well and were plentiful. In Shetland however, where the climate and soils were largely less well suited to arable agriculture than those seen in Orkney, it was rare that the Shetlanders could grow sufficient crops for their own consumption. An account from 1633 says:

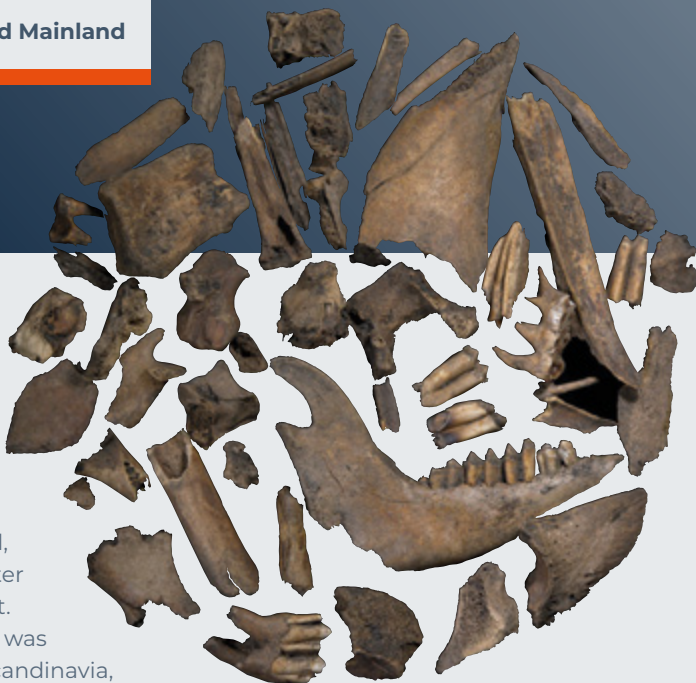
"The Country affords but little Corn, and much of that often shaken by the Violent Winds, or spoiled with the Sea water blewn in upon it, so that they must be supplied from Orkney and the Continent of Scotland."

Some of the cereal products, predominantly ryemeal and malt, were also supplied by German merchants. Shetland was able to produce other products, principally fish, which they were able to trade for grain. However, like Orkney, they also suffered periods of famine.

BUTTER

Tenants in Orkney and Shetland paid their rents and scat (land tax) in kind. In addition to grain in Orkney and fish oil and wadmál (a coarse woollen fabric) in Shetland, most farms produced butter as a means of tax payment. This was a form of tax that was common in premodern Scandinavia, and a similar system existed in regions such as Norway and Iceland.

Butter was produced from the milk of cows, which were kept throughout the islands. In summer they roamed freely grazing on the common lands (*scattald*), but in winter they had to be fed with fodder, typically hay, but in difficult periods were also given heather, boiled seaweed and even boiled fish. Shetland had its own breed of cattle, sometimes called 'black cattle' which were very small animals. Orkney cattle on the other hand resembled more breeds from Caithness, on the mainland of Scotland, but were also very small in stature. Archaeological evidence of cattle bones from Orkney and Shetland confirms that cattle in the 15th to 18th centuries were small, around 80–100cm at shoulder height. The importance of cattle and of cattle products in this period is also shown from the high numbers of cattle bones found during excavations of farming settlements sites such as Skaill in Rousay. Cattle were not only used for their milk, but also provided meat and hides, some of which were salted



Archaeological evidence of animal bones from middens at Skaill, Rousay dating to the 15th to 18th centuries. This kind of evidence shows which animals were being reared in the islands and can be used to track how farming practices changed through time in response to taxation for products such as butter or salt beef.

and exported. Custom accounts of the port of Hamburg for example list small amounts of oxmeat and ox and calf hides imported on ships coming from Shetland. There is some evidence that cheese was also produced in Shetland in the 17th century, but most of the cow's milk was converted into butter. The butter came in two categories: meat butter and grease butter, of which the former was the better quality intended for consumption at home, and the latter the low-quality butter in which taxes were paid. The butter was conserved with salt and/or honey (and later sugar).

As a result of this system, large amounts of butter were produced and amassed by the lairds and tax collectors (*tacksman*) who tried to make money from this resource by exporting the butter abroad. In Orkney most of the butter was taken to Scottish ports such as Leith, whereas the Shetland butter was



mainly sold to the German merchants. The export of butter was therefore of vital importance for the ruling classes, but the value of island butter as a commodity is not well understood, as it seems to have been in low demand in Scotland and on the European continent. For example, salted Orkney butter was sold very cheaply in Scotland as early as 1521. This was probably due to the notoriously bad quality of the island butter, which seems to have been very impure and unfit for human consumption. The historian Gordon Donaldson describes the Shetland butter as being “fit only for greasing wagon-wheels”, although the butter might have found other uses as well. The Shetland merchant Arthur Nicolson wrote in a letter from 1705 that his German trading partners thought that the butter was “usfull to nothing bott soap,” and he consequently tried to sell it to the soap boilers in Hamburg, but without success.

We are quite well informed about the attitudes of the German merchants to the Shetland butter through a number of letters, which show that they were reluctant to take it because it was difficult to sell on the German market. For example, James Omand wrote to his master the Shetland laird Laurence Sinclair of Brugh in 1640 about his difficulties in getting a good price for the tax butter in his negotiations with the German merchants in Unst. Fifteen years later Andro Greig wrote to the

Some of the medieval butter from the Northern Isles was preserved because it was buried in a bog. Here we see an example of an archaeological clump of butter found in Shetland.

Photo: Shetland Museum and Archives / Ian Tait.

same laird that Hamburg merchant Otto Make was not willing to take the butter “be reasone that the buter gave no pryce with tham the last yeir.” That a little pressure was needed to make the German merchants take the Shetland butter is expressed by tacksman David Murray of Clarden, when he wrote to his servant Andro Mowat in 1682, that he had “to use all possible means to cause them [i.e. the Germans] take of the keengs butter ... but by all means to deall civellie with them.” This is not surprising, given that huge amounts of high-quality butter and cheese were imported from the lowlands of the Netherlands and northern Germany, so there was no shortage of butter on the German market.

However, despite their reluctance, the German merchants were important buyers of Shetland butter. The Hamburg custom accounts show that almost all ships from Shetland had quantities of butter on board, and there are many examples of German merchants who were indebted to the Shetland lairds and tacksmen for cargoes of butter and oil they had exported to Germany in the 17th century. It almost seems as if they were doing the tacksmen a favour, so long as they were still allowed to trade with the more profitable dried fish. After the Germans had disappeared from the trade in the early 18th century, it was lamented that the stocked scat butter and oil from Orkney and Shetland was being spoiled, as they were also not transported to Scotland because “there was no mercat here for them at Leith.”

FISH

Being surrounded by water, fish has always played an important role in the livelihoods of the inhabitants of Orkney and Shetland, both for local consumption and as an export product. The waters around the islands would have been teeming with healthy fish stocks in the past, particularly cod and ling,

ped in Norway and Iceland, where English and German merchants and fishermen competed to control the trade. Shetland was very much a part of this development and developed large-scale fisheries which supplied the German merchants and other foreigners with merchandise in the 15th and 16th century. Surprisingly,

Remains of early modern cod bones found in Bremen. The size of the bones, the relatively high number of post-cranial bones, cutting marks and traces of preparation suggest that these came from dried cod imported from the North Atlantic.

Photo: Bart Holterman.



as well as seasonally abundant herring. The growth of urban populations in many European regions, and the arrival of Christian fasting practices including an avoidance of red meat on Fridays and during Lent, led to a high demand for preserved fish such as salted herring and air-dried cod (stockfish) in the Middle Ages and the early modern period. Under the influence of these demands, export-oriented fisheries devel-

oped in Norway and Iceland, where English and German merchants and fishermen competed to control the trade. Shetland was very much a part of this development and developed large-scale fisheries which supplied the German merchants and other foreigners with merchandise in the 15th and 16th century. Surprisingly, it seems that Orkney underwent the opposite development. Zooarchaeological evidence suggests that export-oriented fisheries existed in Orkney in the Middle Ages, but declined in favour of subsistence fisheries from the 14th century onwards. The reasons for this are not well understood, but possible explanations include the Scottish influence on the islands, which resulted in Orkney being economically more linked to Scotland than with

Norway and the German Hanse, or the greater commercial importance of the land-based economy in Orkney. Climate change may have played a role too, as the sea became more stormy and less predictable at this time – but this did not discourage fishers in Shetland.

The commercially most relevant fish species were herring and cod, and the close relatives of cod including ling, haddock, saithe and pollack. Herring was highly relevant as a trade commodity in its salted form but was rarely caught locally. Instead, it was predominantly fishermen from Holland who sailed to the waters around Orkney and

as *sillock* (for first-year fish), *piltock* (for second-year fish in Shetland) or *podlie* (in Orkney). However, the pillars of the Shetland fisheries and the German trade in Shetland whitefish were cod and ling. Other fish were also sometimes caught and exported in small numbers. In the toll registers from Hamburg we find for example imports of haddock or skates from Shetland in the 17th century.

The cod and ling which were caught and prepared for export by the Shetlanders were caught in small, open rowing boats using long lines, not with nets. Due to the shortage of timber in



Remains of cod bones from a specialised fish processing station at Knowe of Skea, Westray, Orkney. These date from the later medieval period and suggest that fish were dried and exported, even though bones from other sites of similar date tend to show that inshore, subsistence-based fishing was more common. Shown with the same type of bone from a large modern cod (in white).

Photo: Jen Harland.

Shetland with large fleets of herring busses to fish there. Juvenile saithe was predominantly caught for local consumption, and was both used for its flesh and its livers, which produced fish oil when boiled. This fish oil was one of the products with which the islanders paid their rents and taxes, together with butter, grain and wadmal. Some of the fish oil was sold to foreign merchants by the tacksmen. Young saithe was known under a number of specific names, such

Shetland, most of the fishing boats were imported from Norway and were called *yoles*, which later became the six-oared *sixerns* or *sixareens*. Due to the small size of the boats, fishing only took place in the vicinity of the coast. Not only the boats, but also the lines and fishing tackle seems to have been imported, as these are often mentioned as items sold to Shetlanders by the German merchants.

Young saithe (*sillocks*) hanging to dry at Corrigan Farm Museum, Orkney. The *cruisie* lamp on the right would have been fueled by the oil derived from the livers of these fish. Photo: Jen Harland.



It is often assumed that the German merchants traded directly with the fishermen themselves, who would fish in summer when the Germans were present and deliver their catches once a week or more often at the door of the trading booths. In the 18th century a system of *haaf fishing* developed, where the fishing industry was organised by the rich landowners (lairds), to whom the fishermen were continuously indebted. However, there are some signs that this system already emerged in the 17th century. For example, an account of fish delivered to the German

merchant Otto Make from 1653 seems to list transactions with single fishermen on a first glance. When we take into account other documents from the period, however, it becomes apparent that the fishermen were all in the service of laird Laurence Sinclair of Brugh.

Fish was a highly perishable good and had to be preserved before it could be transported across long distances. The most common methods to preserve fish were drying or salting it. In Arctic regions such as Iceland and northern Norway, fish can be dried outside, without the addition of salt – the well-known stockfish. In more southerly Shetland, however, the climate was less suitable for drying fish, and in Hanseatic sources

Peter Peterson of Haa drying fish on Foula, Shetland (1902). *National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh, SLA.C.6022.*



we can find many complaints about its inferior quality. In 1494 the Hanseatic Diet decided that fish from Shetland was only allowed to be flattened (*gevlaket*) and not to be sold as *rotscher* (a variety of stockfish). The purpose of this rule was probably to make the Shetland fish visibly distinct from dried fish from other places. It echoes in the Bremen town law from the early 16th century, in which was specified that Shetland fish had to be sold separately from Bergen fish and had to be marked accordingly. The flattened Shetland fish probably refers to a method that was still practised in the early 20th century, where the fish would be laid out flat on the rocky shores to dry. However, despite these rules, we still occasionally find *rotscher* from Shetland as imports to Hamburg in the 17th century.

The addition of salt aided the drying process and made it possible to dry fish in less favourable conditions, such as in summer. Salt was an expensive commodity in the Middle Ages, but in

the 15th century it became gradually cheaper in northern Europe due to the import of large quantities of bay salt (sea salt) from France and the Iberian peninsula. This made the drying of fish in the North Atlantic with the addition of salt increasingly lucrative, and in Shetland it seemed to have become the dominant way of curing whitefish from the 16th century onwards. The German merchants usually imported the salt from Portugal or Spain. Salt was also produced in Scotland, and even in Orkney, but this local coarse salt contained impurities that resulted in poor quality, rotting products when applied to fish. The import of salt was so important for the business model of the German merchants in Shetland, that it was seen as one of the primary reasons for their disappearance from the trade in the early 18th century, after the import of salt on foreign ships to Great Britain was forbidden in 1707.

It is possible to trace the fish trade in the archaeological record when the circumstances are favourable for the preservation of fish bones. These are regularly found in middens, where they inform us about fishing methods, dietary preferences, and fish production or trade. Next to the identification of the fish species, a number of indicators can point to the fish being imported, exported or locally caught and consumed. For example, large cod bones found in Germany probably point at imports of dried fish, as only smaller specimens live in the southern North Sea. Moreover, as the heads were cut off before the fish were dried, a very low percentage of cranial (head) bones can point at imported dried fish. On the other hand, fish production sites on the islands in the Late Norse period often show an over-representation of cranial elements in the archaeological record, indicating that preserved fish were used for export and trade.



ORKNEY TRADING FAMILIES

Given the difficult situation in the 17th century, with political and religious turmoil, cold climate, famine and diseases, the emergence of a distinct merchant class in Orkney is somewhat surprising. Yet the archival records show a burgeoning network of leading merchant families in Orkney who benefited from the challenging circumstances, families such as the Baikies, Traills, Craigies, Buchanans, Moncrieffs amongst others. They formed a closely interconnected community of cousins, in-laws and partners in trading ventures, bound together by blood, marriage alliances and the complex web of Orkney maritime trade. Learning the business of trade was a way to advance in wealth and standing and so families with ambition sent their sons to Edinburgh to be apprenticed as merchants, whilst others became skippers and lawyers.

Peter Winchester is a prime example of this emerging class. Much of his life remains shrouded in mystery, as the archival records mostly shed light on the last twenty years of his life. It seems likely that he came from around Inverness in northern Scotland, where he had a

brother, Robert, who was a merchant, burgess and magistrate. Another brother was in the service of the Marquis of Huntly in Aberdeenshire. Peter arrived in Kirkwall during the Commonwealth in the 1650s, a time when the islands were under oppressive military occupation by Oliver Cromwell's troops. Peter first appears in the documents being owed money by the heirs of Walter Craigie, a member of one of the merchant families of Orkney. Walter's sons, one in Orkney and the other in Shetland, commissioned an Edinburgh merchant to settle the debt, showing the interconnectedness of the two island groups with Scottish merchants. In 1658 Peter married into the Baikie family of wealthy Orkney merchants, and received a marriage settlement of 3000 marks Scots. Peter and his wife Jean lived with her parents, which makes sense as Peter's profession as merchant skipper and privateer meant he was rarely home. He is found trading in Edinburgh, London, Belfast, Shetland, Norway and France and arguing a case in the Court of Session in Edinburgh.

As well as being a skipper involved in trade, Peter was a privateer. Scotland

Timeline of Peter Winchester's trading voyages



Memorial stone of Peter Winchester, his wife Jean and their children from 1674 in St Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall, Orkney. Although the text suggests otherwise, Peter Winchester himself was not actually buried here.

Photo: Chris Andrews, Orkney Museum.



could not afford to maintain a full-time navy and instead commissioned merchant skippers to attack enemy shipping in times of conflict. Peter was commissioned to do this, and thus was entitled to style himself captain, which he did from 1665, the beginning of the second Anglo-Dutch War. At this time he was one of circa 90 Scottish privateers actively capturing enemy ships. Peter not only attacked enemy shipping but also supplied and replenished Kirkwall with ammunition to defend the town from Dutch attacks. While acting as a privateer, Peter's ship, the *Morton*, was captured by a Dutch ship and the crew set ashore in the Highlands of Scotland. Soon thereafter, the *Morton* was recaptured and Peter returned to sea with her.

In peacetime, Peter reverted to trade and his role as ship provisioner. He owned a quarter-share of the frigate *Sound*, which in 1670 transported the renders (taxes paid in kind) raised in Orkney to the Exchequer (royal tax collector) in Edinburgh. In 1674 he entered a partnership with John Davidson in Edinburgh for an equal share in the Anstruther frigate, *Winding*. In 1675 he was repairing the ships *Greyhound* and the *Sound*, both of which were in Kirkwall.

Whilst fragments of documents and letters provide information about Pe-

1665
Orkney,
Shetland

1666
Scotland

1667
England,
Scotland,
Orkney,
Scotland

1668
Norway,
France,
Ireland

1669
Orkney

ter's trading and privateering, his personal life is harder to reconstruct. But there are glimpses. He and his first wife, Jean, were resident in Kirkwall from 1667, where they rented a townhouse. They had nine children that we know of, of which five died in infancy. In an account, Peter pays for the making of two striped petticoats for Margaret and Elizabeth and two white waistcoats for James. One can imagine the children standing together in their fine clothes. Jean died in 1674 shortly after the birth and death of her ninth child.

As was customary, Peter soon remarried into another of the Orkney mercantile family. In 1676 he married Helen Stewart but their marriage was to be short-lived as Peter with his crew was lost off the coast of Scotland, near Fraserburgh. Helen was pregnant at the time, and one month later gave birth to Peter's posthumous child, a daughter Sibilla, who survived for 13 months, dying in January 1679.

There is little doubt that Jean and Helen would have brought useful skills to their marriages. They both grew up in households where fathers,

uncles and brothers were merchants and where trade, shipping, contracts and merchandise were the staples of conversation. They must have acquired considerable mercantile knowledge and business acumen and the fact that women are rarely named in the contracts and accounts does not mean that they did not play significant roles in the family firms. There is ample evidence that the women in Orkney's landed and merchant families took an active part in the running of the family estates and businesses as well as their households, with fathers and husbands so often absent attending to their affairs. After Peter's death, Helen showed herself to be more than capable of managing financial affairs to her own advantage.

Peter died without a will and there are two contradictory inventories and a series of legal documents indicating that his children tried and failed to claim their shares, and accused Helen and her third husband John Traill of diverting Peter's belongings to themselves. John Traill was the son of Patrick, Peter's long-term friend and fellow merchant-skipper, and his and Helen's



Journal of Peter Winchester's ship that was
destined to sail to Holland, but due to
inclement weather diverted to Norway, 1664.
Orkney Archives, D14/2/13.

26th March 1664. Monday. Transferred out of
Norway — 700 barrels of goods at 27 shillings each
Total at Stralsund 1100 barrels at 1 shilling each = 1100 shillings
Total at Bergen 250 barrels at 6 shillings each = 1500 shillings
Total at Bergen 100 barrels at 2 shillings each = 200 shillings
Total 2800 shillings

Despatch: 100 barrels of goods at 12 shillings each = 1200 shillings
100 barrels of goods at 10 shillings each = 1000 shillings
100 barrels of goods at 8 shillings each = 800 shillings
100 barrels of goods at 6 shillings each = 600 shillings
100 barrels of goods at 4 shillings each = 400 shillings
100 barrels of goods at 2 shillings each = 200 shillings
100 barrels of goods at 1 shilling each = 100 shillings
100 barrels of goods at 12 shillings each = 1200 shillings
100 barrels of goods at 10 shillings each = 1000 shillings
100 barrels of goods at 8 shillings each = 800 shillings
100 barrels of goods at 6 shillings each = 600 shillings
100 barrels of goods at 4 shillings each = 400 shillings
100 barrels of goods at 2 shillings each = 200 shillings
100 barrels of goods at 1 shilling each = 100 shillings
Total 2800 shillings

1664 = 1676
1676 = 1688
1688 = 1700
1700 = 1712
1712 = 1724
1724 = 1736
1736 = 1748
1748 = 1760
1760 = 1772
1772 = 1784
1784 = 1796
1796 = 1808
1808 = 1820
1820 = 1832
1832 = 1844
1844 = 1856
1856 = 1868
1868 = 1880
1880 = 1892
1892 = 1904
1904 = 1916
1916 = 1928
1928 = 1940
1940 = 1952
1952 = 1964
1964 = 1976
1976 = 1988
1988 = 2000

Average selling price in 1664 = 1 shilling per barrel
Average selling price in 1664 = 1 shilling per barrel

Account of Peter Winchester's ship that was
destined to sail to Holland, but due to
inclement weather diverted to Norway, 1664.
Orkney Archives, D14/2/13.

like and trust, they enter high-risk investments with him in ships and cargoes, they invite him to stand godfather to their babies, he is part of their close social circles. The Dutch merchant Jacob Abrahams (who seems to have lived for a time in Kirkwall) writes to him as "most loving friend Capten Pieter Wencester". His letters are particularly delightful, mixing trade (tobacco from Holland for "handgloves stockens otter or kunine [rabbit] skins" from Orkney with exchange of gifts ("I much delight your mention of 2 half barrels herring intended for me [...] heir by ye are to receive a good Holland cheese for your own use wt Sume ginger bread for yer good honest wife and

children") and affectionate greetings for "yourself bedfellow and familie". Jacob must have been one of many who mourned when he received the news of the shipwreck off Fraserburgh and the loss of so many lives, including his "most loving friend Capten Pieter Wencester".

sons Patrick and David become successful merchants in the 18th century.

In the 20 years that we find Peter in the archive documents, he had a wide circle of friends and business partners in Orkney, Edinburgh, Ireland, France and Holland. They write to him as someone they esteem and

Orkney
(second
marriage),
Shetland

Orkney,
drowned off
east coast
of Scotland

1676

1677

GERMAN MERCHANTS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Most of the German merchants active in the dried fish trade with Shetland were from Bremen and Hamburg. In these cities communities of merchants developed in the 16th century, who focused almost exclusively on the Shetland business. In many cases the trade with Shetland became a family tradition, so that it is possible to identify Shetland merchants from one family from multiple generations. One of the most prominent of these families was the Detken family from Bremen. The first member of this family known to have been active in the Shetland trade was buried in the now ruinous church of St Olave in Lund on the island Unst. His gravestone is still located within the former church and displays the following text:

"Here lies the worthy Segebad Detken, citizen and merchant of Bremen. He carried on his business in this country for 52 years, and passed away blessed in our Lord in the year 1573 on the 20th August. God rest his soul."

Apart from his gravestone, however, we do not have much information about Segebad Detken. From other sources it is known that most skippers and merchants started working in the business as adolescents. If we assume this was the case with Segebad as well, he must have been born in the early 16th century and died in his late 60s. What we do know, however, is that he started a dynasty of Shetland traders.

We can identify ten more members of the Detken family active in Shetland in the sources until the late 17th century, all of whom were descendents of Segebad, and three of whom had the first name Segebad as well. Most of them were active in the same region where Segebad had been buried, namely the islands Unst and Fetlar, notably in the harbour Uyeasound, which is located only 5 kilometres from his grave in Lund.





Apparently the burial place of their predecessor left a lasting impression and strengthened the relations between the Germans and the local community. In a document from 1661, almost 90 years after Segebad's death, the elders of the church of Lund expressed their support for the merchants Herman and Gerd Detken, who were involved in a conflict about the levying of customs with the local tax collectors at the time. In the testimony, they claimed that both men and their family had always "behaved themselves as [...] good christians, both in lyffe and conversatione, frequenting all publicke ordinances semblable to professors of the gossPELL, and liberall towardh our poore, and also verie carefull in helping us in repairing our ruinous churches, [...] and also have dealt verie honestlie in their trade of merchandise, in buying and selling with poeple of all rancks."

The document also refers explicitly to one of their predecessors, who had traded in Shetland for 52 years. This can only refer to the gravestone of Segebad Detken in the church. Moreover, Segebad Detken is not the only German merchant known to have been buried in Lund: another grave slab on the cemetery marks the burial place of another merchant from Bremen, Hinrick Segelken, from 1585.

Although not as extensive as the Detken family, multiple members of other families were also active in the Shetland trade. We find, for example, the Grasmöller family from Hamburg in Burra, the Hackmans from Bremen in Laxfirth, the Lankenau family from Bremen in Whalsay and Laxfirth, the Makes and Westermans from Hamburg, the latter of whom were mostly active in Hillswick. Although the direct evidence is scarce, it is likely that many of these families were interrelated through marriage. Through marriage, women often played an active role in the business, although they hardly appear in the written sources. Among other things they took care of business while their husbands were away, and often continued the organisation of trade after their husbands had died. There is, however, no evidence that they sailed to Shetland themselves, but instead managed the business from home. It is also often as widows that we get a glimpse of the role of women in the written sources, even if it is often highly fragmentary. The letters from Gilbert Spence, a Scottish merchant living in Bremen, and Shetland

Gravestone of Segebad Detken, 1573. St Olave church, Lund, Unst, Shetland
Photo: Bart Holterman.

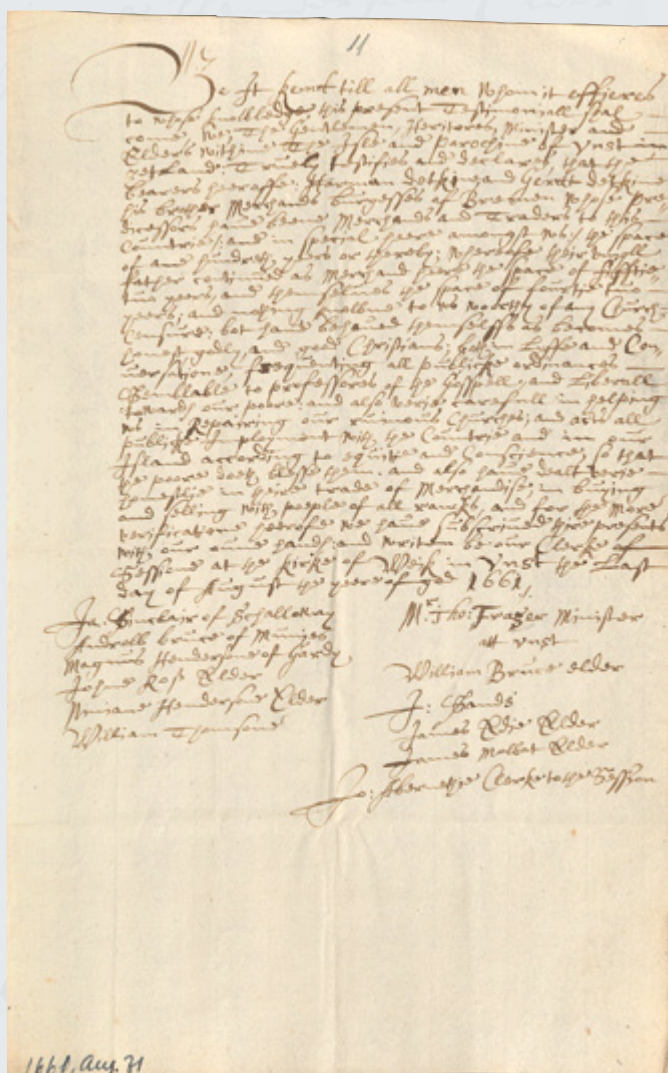
The text of the gravestone reads:
HIR LIGHT DER EHRSAME
SEGEBAD DETKEN BVRGER
VND KAUFFHANDELER ZU
BREMEN [HE] HETT IN DISEN
LANDE SINE HANDELING
GEBRUCKET 52 IAHR
IST [ANNO 1573] DEN
20 AUGUSTI SELIGHT
IN UNSEN HERN ENT
SCHLAPEN DER SEELE
GODT GNEDIGH IST

merchant Arthur Nicolson, who was residing in Hamburg in 1700, refer for example to a court case against the “widow Hackman, now Puntsack.” She was probably the wife of Carsten Hackman, who was a merchant from Bremen trading in Laxfirth and Burravoe

in Shetland in the 1680s. After his death she married Johan Puntsack (who is not known as a merchant in Shetland), but probably still remained liable for her late husband’s deaths. At least the Bremen court registers from 1700 mention a case of Johan Puntsack’s wife against

Robert Tyrie, a merchant from Burravoe, so it is highly likely that the case was about unpaid debts that Hackman still had with Tyrie.

In the German cities the merchants trading with Shetland formed clearly discernable communities, but with ties to the communities of merchants trading elsewhere. In Hamburg the Shetland merchants were part of the Confraternity of St Anne of Iceland merchants, which in turn



Merchants Herman and Gerdt Detken from Bremen were involved in a conflict about customs with the Scottish tax collectors in 1661. With this letter they acquired support of the elders of the church in Lund and other prominent persons of the island Unst in Shetland. Their predecessor Segebad Detken was buried in the same church almost 90 years before. Staatsarchiv Bremen, 2-W.9.b.10.

Probable portrait of Brüning Rulves at the age of c. 70, 1597. By Peter Hardenberg? Retiring from a long career as seaman and skipper, Brüning Rulves was one of the first inhabitants of the *Haus Seefahrt*, a charity organisation for skippers and their families in Bremen. He became known through his memoirs, which provide a rare insight into the life of a seafarer from the 16th century. Among others, he wrote down that he had at least once sailed to Shetland, in 1551.

Focke-Museum, Bremen, Inv. no. 1957-052.



had close relations with the society of England merchants. Due to the extensive registers of the Confraternity of St Anne, which record donations of all persons on board of ships returning to Hamburg from Iceland, Shetland or the Faroes, we can closely follow the activities of single merchants on the Northern Isles. They show us that among others some Hamburg merchants trading in Shetland were trading in Iceland before this was forbidden by the Danish king in 1601.

Most of the persons known to us who were active in the German trade with Shetland were merchants and skippers who actually sailed to the islands. However, what the records usually do not show us are the merchants who operated in the background as financiers and shipowners. Information included in letters, court cases and toll registers allow a few glimpses into these financiers, who were often also involved

in business elsewhere. They owned parts of the trading companies known as *maschup* or *mascope*, or chartered skippers to sail to Shetland for them. In the toll registers from Hamburg from the mid-17th century or the sea passes issued by the Swedish government in Stade for ships sailing from Bremen or Hamburg to Shetland in the early 18th century, we can see that the organisation of trade was quite mixed: some merchants chartered a different skipper each year to sail to Shetland for them while they stayed at home themselves, others chartered skippers but sailed along as well, and some sailed north themselves on their own ships. Some of these figures “behind the scenes” were quite influential. In Bremen we find, for example, burgomasters (mayors) and councillors amongst the persons who owned shares in Shetlandic trading companies.

CONFLICTS AND VIOLENCE

In normal situations, trade in the North Atlantic was peaceful. However, there were many dangers connected to international commerce and seafaring, such as the danger of wreckage and of violence at sea. The late Middle Ages and the early modern period were in many ways a violent period, in which the boundaries between peaceful trade and violent actions were thin and the

of these conflicts are found in written sources, as well as in archaeological remains of ships and buildings.

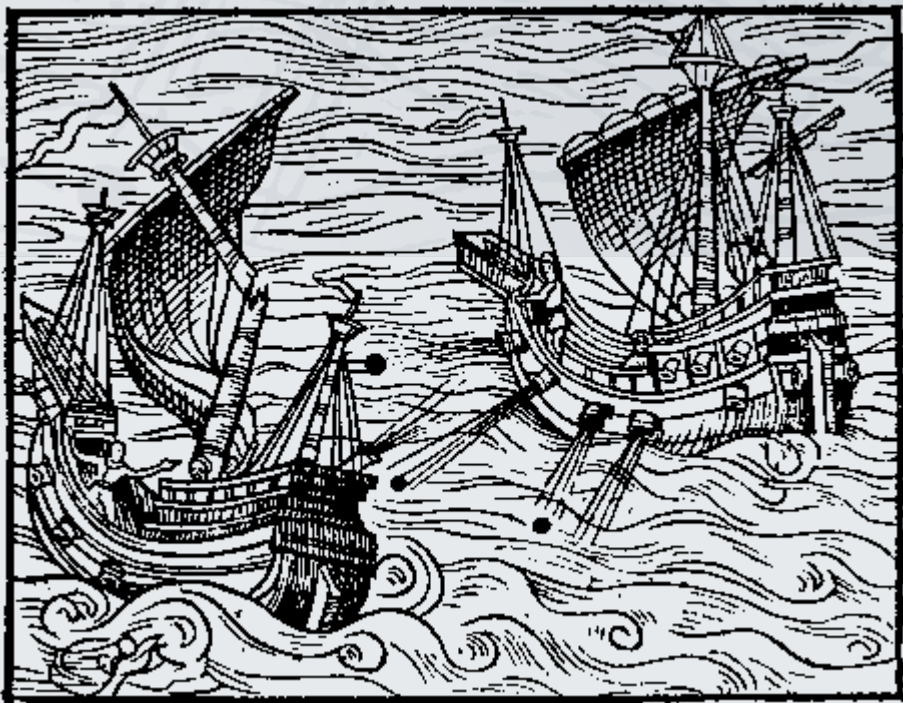
Visible traces of these conflicts are for example fortifications, which were constructed to secure the harbours of Kirkwall (Orkney) and Lerwick (Shetland). The so-called *Cromwell's Fort* in Kirkwall was built as a defensive structure by Oliver Cromwell in the English Civil War in 1650, whereas a predecessor of the current *Fort Charlotte* in Lerwick was first constructed in 1651–1652 during the first Anglo-Dutch naval war.

Breech block of a cannon salvaged from the Gran Grifon wreck at Fair Isle. Shetland Museum and Archives. Photo: Philipp Grassel.



activities often overlapped. The 16th, 17th and early 18th centuries saw many conflicts that also affected the Northern Isles. The Reformation and religious wars, the Dutch revolt against the Habsburg empire, the Anglo-Dutch naval wars, the British Civil Wars, the Nine Year's War and the War of the Spanish Succession all had their repercussions for international seafaring and the situation in Orkney and Shetland. Traces

Another example for conflicts is the attack of the Spanish Armada in 1588. This grand fleet, fitted out by the Spanish King Philipp II, aimed to invade England, but turned into a total failure. The fleet was defeated by the English and subsequently ravaged in storms around the British Islands. Therefore, some of the Spanish ships ended up in



Battle at sea between foreign ships in North Atlantic waters. Illustration from Olaus Magnus, *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* (1555).

the waters of Orkney and Shetland. One of these ships, *Gran Grifon*, originally a merchant ship from German Hanse town Rostock, ran aground the cliffs of Fair Isle between Orkney and Shetland and was wrecked there. Another fleet, under the command of Dutch Admiral Tromp, gathered during the first Anglo-Dutch naval war (1652-1654) near Shetland. Tromp lost at least four armed ships during this operation near the island of Burra, through a strong gale. A further disaster occurred in 1703 during the War of the Spanish Succession. In that year a Dutch fleet of small fishing vessels – some sources say more than 100 ships – were sunk and captured near Fair Isle and Bressay Sound in Shetland, by a French squadron.

The conflicts also affected the trade routes. The struggles between the great powers in Europe made the English Channel especially a dangerous place. As a result, Dutch, English and German

ships on their way to either southern Europe, America or the East Indies sailed north around the British Isles to avoid the Channel, thereby passing Orkney and Shetland. The Dutch Republic even stationed guard ships in Shetland to escort merchant ships returning from the Far East back home. In 1640, four of these Dutch merchant ships were attacked by Spanish-sponsored privateers from Dunkirk and sank in Bressay Sound.

The phenomenon of piracy and later privateering was a real danger, although it is hard to define. In the late Middle Ages, violence was inextricably connected to seafaring, and the boundaries between piracy and legitimate violence at sea were often hard to draw and depended mostly on the perspective of the observer. In later times the system was formalised. Letters of marque were issued to privateers during conflicts, which provided a legal framework that allowed them to attack and capture enemy (trading) vessels. Ships

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Portrait of James Hepburn,
4th Earl of Bothwell, 1566.
Scottish National Portrait Gallery, PG 869.



while they were trading with the locals. In 1567 seven merchants from Bremen complained that they had been attacked by pirates from Orkney and Scotland while they were trading in various harbours in Shetland the year before. The pirates destroyed their booths and ships and stole their cargo. Also in 1567 merchant Gerdt Hemeling from Bremen became involved against his will in the internal political struggles in Scotland when he was trading in a harbour near Sumburgh Head in Shetland. James Hepburn, 4th Earl of Bothwell and the last husband of Mary, Queen of Scots, had to flee Scotland after the lost battle of Carberry Hill against revolting Protestant nobles. While being persued by two Scottish noblemen, he arrived in Shetland, where he forced Hemeling and a merchant from Hamburg to give him their ships. Although a contract was signed in which Bothwell promised to return the ships, a battle at sea damaged one of them and a storm drove him to the Norwegian coast, where he was imprisoned and spent the rest of his life in Danish captivity. Hemeling later sent letters to the Danish king with support of the Bremen city council, asking for compensation of his ship from Bothwell, but without any success.

However, it was not only pirates, privateers or wars that could be a threat to peaceful trading. Conflicts also broke out between merchants and crew

members themselves. The court books of Shetland from the early 17th century regularly list cases of merchants who had to pay fines because they had used violence against each other. A notable story about violence on board is the death of skipper Cordt Hemeling, the brother of the above-mentioned Gerdt, near Whalsay in Shetland in 1557. Cordt was found dead in his cabin on his ship one day. Ten days earlier he had been in a violent argument with the ship's carpenter Gerdt Breker, who had injured Hemeling's hand and was subsequently accused of manslaughter. Breker fled onto the islands, but hunger forced him to sign a confession of guilt, obliging him to pay compensation to Hemeling's family. Back in Bremen, however, Breker tried to annul his confession during a court case before the Bremen city council, rightfully arguing that Hemeling could not have died from a hand injury. The outcome of the case is unknown.



IMPRINT

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Design

Brinkmann Büro für Gestaltung

Drawings

oblik identity design

Print

printworld.com

Financial support

Förderverein Deutsches Schiffahrtsmuseum e.V.

Cover images

Outside:

Sumburgh Head, Shetland.

Photo: Philipp Grassel

Inside:

Joan Blaeu, *Orcadum et Schetlandiæ*, 1654.

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J V S

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SCHETLANDIA

O C E A N V S

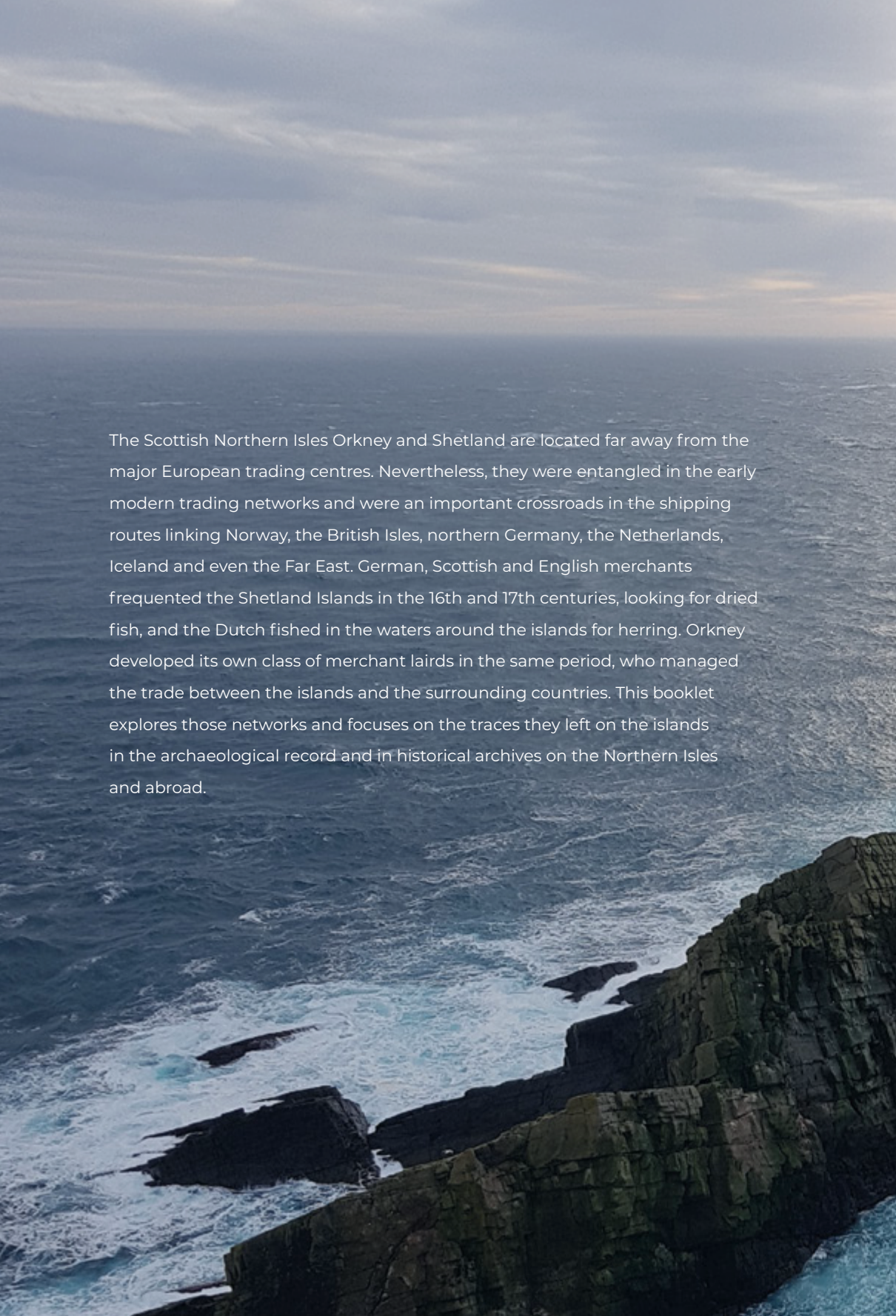
GERMANI  CVS

IN TENEBRIS LVX

Generis Nobilitate.
ac Eruditionis Splendore
Præstantissimo Heroi.
D. IOANNI SCOTT
Baroni de Scottis barret, Equiti
Auræ, et Sec' magnæ Britanniæ
Regis Cantuariæ Diocesis, olimque
a primis creatus, et a filijs, vero
vere hospitalis, et Laboratorum
fostris famulo, Bicari
Guillelmo Blacoe.

*Circa has insulas Hollandi quotannis
magnam halieum copiam piscantur,
et per totam Europam distrabunt.*

The Faire Yle

The background image is a full-page photograph of a coastal scene. In the foreground, dark, craggy rock formations jett out into the sea. The water is a deep blue-grey, with white foam from breaking waves visible near the rocks. The horizon is a straight line in the distance, and the sky above is filled with soft, grey clouds, suggesting an overcast day. The overall mood is somber and historical.

The Scottish Northern Isles Orkney and Shetland are located far away from the major European trading centres. Nevertheless, they were entangled in the early modern trading networks and were an important crossroads in the shipping routes linking Norway, the British Isles, northern Germany, the Netherlands, Iceland and even the Far East. German, Scottish and English merchants frequented the Shetland Islands in the 16th and 17th centuries, looking for dried fish, and the Dutch fished in the waters around the islands for herring. Orkney developed its own class of merchant lairds in the same period, who managed the trade between the islands and the surrounding countries. This booklet explores those networks and focuses on the traces they left on the islands in the archaeological record and in historical archives on the Northern Isles and abroad.