

The fat of the land and the riches of the sea: the power politics of agricultural and marine resource exploitation in Viking and Late Norse Scotland

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From the 10th-15th centuries AD, Orkney was the heart of the powerful Earldom of Orkney which played a pivotal role in the Viking expansion across the British Isles and into the North Atlantic. Power politics in the earldom was underpinned by the development of increasingly intensive fisheries for cod and related species in the Northern Isles, particularly from the 11th century onwards, as has been demonstrated by earlier research. In this paper, we will argue that the wealth and power of the Orkney earls was equally firmly rooted in the land and, moreover, that social negotiation through commensality was as important a regional economic driver as trading networks. Drawing on newly available environmental, stable isotope and other biomolecular evidence from several key sites in Orkney, including the Earl's Bu, Tuquoy and Skail (Rousay), and a recent synthesis of terrestrial and marine faunal data from across Scotland, we demonstrate how farming, fishing and other forms of economic exploitation in Viking and Late Norse Scotland were embedded into local and regional socio-economic networks via ties of friendship, kinship, tenancy, obligation and lordship, and increasingly by trade and taxation. A circulation of animal and arable products can be envisaged on two scales, both regionally for a variety of products and, for preserved fish and grain, further afield towards Scandinavia and continental Europe. The nature of these connections (type, scale, intensity, duration) influenced regional dietary customs and preferences as well as determining modes of animal husbandry and fishing practice and individual sites. Distinctive herding strategies, heavily focused on meat production, are evident at 9-10th century AD high status farms directly associated with the Orkney Earls and their *goðing*. These are interpreted as centres of production for commensality to support 'competitive' feasting for status amongst the Orcadian aristocracy, with feasting acting here as a key driver of economic production, as has been argued for Norse Iceland. Increased evidence for specialisation (wool, dairying, fishing) evident at other, lower status sites during the Late Norse period is equated with the Earls' growing fiscal demands, to finance the developing Earldom and for trade.

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