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Mapping Identities: Geography, Cosmology, and the Orcadian Landscape

I took part in the Mapping Identities: Geography and Cosmology workshop on 6th June 2025, held at UHI Orkney campus in Kirkwall. The generous support of the Viking Society allowed me to stay in Orkney beyond the workshop and travel between islands to complete comparative fieldwork for my PhD thesis.

Figure 1: View over the Stronsay Firth from UHI Orkney Conference Room



The workshop itself, funded by an RSE Research Collaboration Grant, forms part of the wider Mapping Identities project which aims to explore the visual depictions of Scotland. It bridges a wide range of disciplines to explore the function of maps and their influence in understanding Scotland's history, future, perception of place, and position in the wider world. The workshop consisted of three interwoven panels, discussing topics including the *orcales* and *scotia* in the medieval mind, the editorial process of mapping, the impact of Paris and Nowell in the detailing of the West Highlands, indicators of Norse identity, and the function of place-names as cosmological markers. My own paper examined the shifting orientation of maps across the early medieval to late medieval period, completing a corpus analysis of the 86 maps dated 1550-1650 on the National Library of Scotland website.

Figure 2: Sample of corpus data for workshop paper

1	Year	Title	Author	Shelfmark	Origin	Size (mm)	Orientation	Focus/Centralisation	Hebrides	Orkney	Shetland	Other Countries	Misc.	Notes
2	1558-1566	Scotia; Regno di Scotia	Paolo Forlani?	EMS. s. 6a	S.I? Unsure abbreviation	253 x 339	North as North	Central Scotland	West and North, very prominent, detailed, dense	North, v prominent, detailed, dense	Not featured, unless Hirtba	Northern England (Bamburgh, cockermouth, Carlisle) but not separated/distinct; Ireland in West	Two islands to north-west: Hirtba and Rona	
3	1572	Scotia	Thomaso Porcaechi	Marischal 1	Venice	160 x 139	West as North	Central Scotland	"North", prominent, detailed, scattered, few names	"South-east", v prominent, v detailed shapes and names of islands	Not featured, unless Hirtba	Cumbria on "west" edge of map but not separated/distinct; Irish sea in "north"	Hirtba in "east", between hebrides and orkney; no Rona	Hirtba is maybe St Kilda (Hirta)
4	1573	Scotiae tabula	Abraham Ortelius	Marischal 2	Antwerp	346 x 467	West as North	Central Scotland	"North", detailed in two layers inner and outer, v detailed shapes, sizes, and names	"south-east", smaller in size (proportional) but extremely detailed in shape, size, and names	Not featured	Ireland in "north west" corner; England in "south west" corner, both lacking in any detail	Rona in "east" off coast, no Hirtba but S. Kylder off "north" from Hebrides.	Map repeated in stronger colour in 1582 THEATRUM [EMW.X.009] in black and white in 1601 [EMS.s.1] in Facsimile in 1983 [MS.s.1], with strong varied colour boundaries and divisions in 1608 [MS.s.5], in colour with boundaries between England and Scotland in 1612 [MS.s.265], and in black and white in 1612 [MS.s.788];
5	1578	Scotiae Regni Antiquissimi Accurata Descriptio	John Leslie	Marischal 4	Rome	183 x 268	West as North	Northern Scotland	"north", very prominent, dense, less detailed. Skye and Lewis in 'east' rather than 'north'	"south-east", very prominent, dense, much less detailed	Scetlandia, 'north' of orkney but very close	England hinted at 'Angliae' below the Tyne; Cumbria * (cockermouth) and Northumbria (Bamburgh, holy island) included but not distinct; Ireland in 'north-west' corner.	Rona and Hirta in 'east'	
6	1579	Scotiae Descriptio	Philippe Galle	Smith.b.09.17	Antwerp	73 x 104	West as North	Central Scotland	Some featured in 'north', appear connected to mainland	Labelled as whole oracles ins. Not individually	Not featured	North of England in 'west', unlabelled but different colour; peek of Ireland but also unlabelled.		Repeated in editions in 1583 [Smith.b.09.08] and 1588 [Marischal 3]
7	1580	Scotia - Schotland - Ecosse	Johann Sequanus	EMS. b. 2.174(27)	Cologne	126 x 175	West as North	Central Scotland	north, very prominent, detailed in shape, size, and names, two layers	south-east, smaller but detailed with shapes and sizes, some names	Not featured	Angliae in 'south-west' corner; Ireland in 'north-west' corner	Rona off coast in 'north east'	
8	1590	Scotiae nova et accurata descriptio	?	EMS. s. 499	S.I? Unsure abbreviation	384 x 523	West as North	Central Scotland	north, very detailed across board, slyke and lewis in correct place	South-east, smaller but much more detailed with shapes, sizes and many names.	Scylandia: insule islandia on very 'east' edge of map. No details and mostly off map	England in south-west corner, different colour; Ireland in north-west corner, mna 'isle of man' on western edge.	Hirtba 'east' of the Hebrides	
9	1592	Scotiae Tabula	Henricus Nagel	EMS. s. 1a	Cologne	179 x 262	West as North	Central Scotland	None	None	None	England in south-west corner, different colour; Ireland in north-west corner labelled <i>Kioh Fergus</i>		Weird shape Relatively modern looking;

The day concluded with a visit to the Orkney Archives, viewing many different maps of Orkney and Scotland from the 1700s onwards. Interestingly, a 1960s map of Kirkwall distracted the medievalists the most with its fantastic details of Egg Packing Stations and Lemonade Factories.

Funding from the Viking Society allowed me to extend my visit to Orkney beyond the workshop date for a full week so that I could visit as many different sites as possible. Earlier in the year, I wrote a blog for the Ragna's Islands project on the possible etymological origins for Egilsay – a site I got to visit for the first time on this trip. The in-situ analysis of spaces, places, and narratives is transformative for

Figure 3: St Magnus Church, Egilsay



their understanding and interpretation. It was both captivating and poignant to revisit

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the St Magnus episodes of *Orkneyinga saga* in the place of his death. Equally as important, I got the opportunity to travel across various islands to get a better grasp on the landscape of Orkney beyond Kirkwall. This understanding of place is highly beneficial to my doctoral thesis, which explores depictions of landscape and landscape interactions in the *Íslendingasögur*. This includes a chapter on the landscapes external to Iceland such as Orkney, Faroe, and Greenland. I got the opportunity to visit many islands including Egilsay, Wyre, Rousay, Burray, South Ronaldsay, and Papa Westray as well as getting an aerial view of Shapinsay, Killi Holm, Westray, and Mainland. Key sites visited across these locations included the Brough of Birsay (thought to be the home of Thorfinn the Mighty), Cubbie Roo's Castle (Wyre), the Knap of Howar (Papa Westray), St Magnus Cathedral (Kirkwall), and St Magnus Church (Egilsay).

Figure 4: Remains of Norse Settlement, Brough of Birsay



I am incredibly grateful to the Viking Society for supporting and funding this extended research. It has been incredibly useful to visit Orkney so quickly after my Icelandic fieldwork, to familiarise myself with the similarities and differences between the two places which prove so central to the medieval northern world, and to get a greater understanding of the landscape variations across the different islands of Orkney.