Orkney’s Maritime Heritage

Khokhloma ware reached Orkney and Shetland as a by-product of the trade in major commodities such as fish and timber. This brings to mind the many other objects which reached the islands by sea from external sources as far back as the Stone Age. Some examples are given below. Orkney’s ‘maritime heritage’ begins around 9,000 years ago when rising sea levels at the end of the Ice Age detached the island from the mainland, making it impossible for the earliest known inhabitants to reach the islands except by sea. This was recognised by Anne Allen in her publication “Orkney’s Maritime Heritage” published by the National Maritime Museum 1995, although at that time knowledge of the prehistory of Orkney only went back to the Neolithic, and there is now evidence for Mesolithic hunter-gatherers reaching Orkney as far back as 7000BC. The mechanisms by which objects may have reached the islands are difficult to reconstruct with any certainty in the absence of written records. Formal trade is only one possibility.

Furthermore, the transport of goods and people, and fish, were not the only resource provided by the sea. Some examples of other important marine commodities are also mentioned below.

Stone Age; Neolithic (4,000 – 2500BC)
Orkney does not have good sources of high-quality flint, and various kinds of stone for knapping, or objects already made from them, were imported from elsewhere. Axes made of particularly good rock were widely distributed all over Neolithic Britain from ‘factories’ at their sources.

1. A prepared core from Barnhouse Neolithic village was made of pitchstone from Arran, SW Scotland. [location Orkney Museum]

2. Neolithic polished axe heads from Powdykes, Westray [present location not known to me], and another from the Tomb of the Eagles [location Tomb of the Eagles] were made of epidotised tuff, a volcanic rock from Neolithic quarries in Cumbria.


Bronze Age (2500 – 800BC)

1. 21 pieces of Baltic amber, Knowes of Trotty. The largest of 12 Bronze Age burial mounds at the Knowes of Trotty was excavated by George Petrie in the mid-19th century. A stone cist contained cremated bone, which has been C14 dated to 2030 – 1770BC. The grave-goods suggested high status. These included 21 pieces of amber, probably from the Baltic but acquired via Wessex. There were also 4 sheet gold/foil discs with concentric circles of decoration; similar circles have been found elsewhere covering conical buttons. This gold comes from a Scottish source, although “technical aspects of the decoration” link them to the Wessex culture (but another source suggests Irish origin). [Location NMS].

REFS. “Scottish Gold, Fruit of the Nation” Neil D.L. Clark with contributions from Alison Sheridan and Donal Bateson 2014 p.49, Glasgow; Wickham-Jones 2015 page 72-4
2. **Burial urn made of steatite, probably of Shetland origin.** A burial urn found in a stone cist containing cremated bone was found at Blows, Deerness in 1929. It was made of steatite or soapstone, a soft stone not found in Orkney. The nearest source is in Shetland. The entry in Orkney Museum Accessions register is as follows: Object number 0260 (no accession number) Steatite urn from Blows, Deerness. Urn from cist burial discovered on the farm of Blows, Deerness, March 1929. Blackened on outside as if by fire. Dolomitic steatite, probably from Shetland. A photograph shows it partially sunk among a 4-5 inch layer of bones at the bottom of a cist. Ref. POAS vol. vii, 1928-9. [location OM]

**REFS.** Orkney Museum Accessions Register.

**Iron Age (800BC – 850AD, including Picts from 297AD)**

1. **Roman amphora neck from the Broch of Gurness:** A Roman amphora fragment was found during excavations in the 1930s, below the final floor level of the broch interior. It dates from the 1st/early 2nd century AD (Robertson 1970 Table II and page 208) when Roman activities in Scotland, for a short period, reached their furthest north. Hedges (1987 p30-31 & fig.2.106.1860) has a good illustration of this fragment from the neck of an amphora. MacKie 2002 identifies it as Haltern 70 type. Halten 70 amphorae were produced in the Spanish province of Baetica. They contained defrutum or olives in defrutum or muria or wine. In Southern England, Roman wine, olive oil, fish sauce and dried fruits were imported into Britain from the Roman empire, and British products exported, as part of a formal regular trade. How the few Roman luxury objects found in the Highlands and Islands got here is uncertain. [location unknown]

Robertson, AS, 1970 “Roman finds from non-Roman sites in Scotland” Britannia vol.1

**Viking & Norse period (850 – 1468AD)**

1. **Arab coins from the Skaill Hoard, 10C.** During the Norse period Orkney lay at the centre of a network of important trade routes between Scandinavia & the Irish Sea, especially Dublin, probably the richest port in Western Britain at that time. It reached into Russia and as far as Constantinople and Jerusalem to the east, Greenland and North America to the west. The Skaill hoard, which weighed 8kg, demonstrates the far-flung connections at this early date. It consisted of over 136 objects, including brooches, arm and neck rings, coins, ingots and pieces of silver, and contained not only hack-silver, but 21 Arabic coins, 3 Anglo-Saxon coins, and Irish “thistle” brooches. The hoard was found in March 1858 in sand dunes near St Peters Kirk at the Bay of Skaill. The dates of the coins suggest that the hoard was buried soon after 950AD. [Location NMS]

**REFS.** Tait 2012, page 113; Wickham-Jones 2015 page 122-3; [https://canmore.org.uk/site/1666/skaill](https://canmore.org.uk/site/1666/skaill)
2. **Boat from the Scar Burial, 9th / 10th century.** A Viking boat burial eroding out of a cliff at Scar, Sanday in 1991 contained the bodies of an adult man, a child aged about 10 years old, and an old woman, buried with rich grave goods including the famous whalebone plaque which probably came from the far north of Norway. The boat was an oak rowing boat 7.15m long; clinker-built; it probably had a pine washrail to which the rowlocks were attached. There were over 300 iron rivets. The chemistry of sand grains trapped in the caulking of the planks suggests that the boat was built in Scandinavia and brought across to Orkney on a cargo ship. [Location OM]

**REFS.** *The Sea Road: A Viking Voyage through Scotland’* Olwyn Owen 1999 Historic Scotland Edinburgh

3. **Cod bones from the Norse middens at Quoygrew, Westray, 11th – 13th century:**

   There is not yet complete agreement on when the “Viking” period ends and the “Norse” or medieval period begins in the Northern Isles, but it seems generally agreed that there was an initial phase of colonisation with a good deal of ‘viking’ or sea-raiding, usually by pagan Scandinavians, followed by a period in with a more peaceful, settled, medieval way of life prevailed under the ultimate rule of Norway for most of the period until the late 15th century. The Norse settlers in Orkney arrived probably during the 9th century. They were converted (forcibly) to Christianity in the 10th century (995AD). In the 11th century, Thorfin II Sigurdarson (“The Mighty”, 1014-c.1064), a close relative of Macbeth brought up at the Scottish court by his grandfather, Malcolm II, presided over a lavish household based in Birsay, and ruled peacefully for many years. He made a pilgrimage to Rome in 1049-50, which resulted in Thorolf being appointed first bishop of Orkney. The 12th century saw the building of many churches including St Magnus cathedral, as well as secular buildings such as the town of Kirkwall, The Earl’s Bu at Orphir, Cubbie Roo’s Castle, the Bishop’s Palace at Birsay etc.

   The archaeological site at Quoygrew on Westray produced several large middens dating to the 11th / 12th / 13th centuries, from which an enormous quantity of fish bones was recovered. Most of those which could be identified were from the cod family, including cod, saithe and ling. Some even showed evidence of butchering patterns. It is possible although not yet conclusively demonstrated, that these fish were being salted and dried for eventual export to Europe or other parts of the Scandinavian trading world as part of the massive trade in stockfish in medieval Europe. [Location Orkney Museum]


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**Hanseatic League (15 - 18th century)**

The Hanseatic League, also known as the Hanse, was a confederation of merchant guilds and their market towns in North Germany and the Baltic, which began in the late 12C. It grew in power and came to dominate Baltic and North Sea trade from the 13C – 15C. Its power peaked in the 15C and after that slowly declined, due to a number of factors, but it did continue into the 17/18Cs. The Hanse operated from overseas trading posts known as Kontors, with privileges such as trade exemptions. The leading city of the Hanseatic League was Lubeck; the major kontors were Novgorod, Bergen, Bruges, Ipswich and London (Steelyard). Other cities in the League included Hamburg, Cologne, Rostock, Munster, Osnabruck, Riga etc. The base of their power was their monopoly of the Baltic trade and their relations with Flanders and England. This monopoly was resented and led to war at times. The three cities which continued to represent the Hanse after the last Hansetag in 1669 (this marks the official end of the Hanse) were Hamburg, Lubeck and Bremen.
Shetland and Orkney were most concerned with the kontor in Bergen, founded in c.1360 and taken over by the Norwegians in the 18C. Not only were the Northern Isles part of Norway until the late 15th century (1468 and 1469), but Bergen was their closest Hanseatic kontor. The distance between Kirkwall and Bergen is 305 miles, whereas the distance between Kirkwall and London is 529 miles. Lerwick to Bergen is 222 miles, while Lerwick to London is over twice that, 599 miles. Furthermore, until the 15th century, although the Hanse controlled much of Norway’s long-range trade, they were legally prevented from doing so directly and had to carry out transactions via Bergen. A map in the Hansemuseum in Lubeck shows Shetland but not Orkney; Shetland was important as a supplier of stockfish, but Orkney’s trade with the Hanse was apparently much less important. An important part of the return trade was timber. There has been a shortage of timber in the isles since prehistoric times, and for centuries it was imported from Scandinavia and elsewhere, e.g. Caithness. The remains of several trading booths associated with Hanseatic merchants survive in Shetland, notably Greenwell’s booth, a 17C warehouse in Unst; and Pier House, Symbister on Whalsay, built in the 16C. The graves of two 16C German merchants from Bremen survive in the churchyard of St Olafs in Unst.

1. **Redwares with and without slipped decoration from Scalloway Castle** in Shetland were submitted for chemical analysis and were identified as coming from N. Europe/Baltic, the area of the Hanse: 11 were from the Wismar area of N. Germany; 4 were from the area of Lubeck; 2 from Amsterdam/Friesland; 1 from the Bremen/Hamburg area and one from New Lodose in Sweden. They are taken to demonstrate Hanseatic trade with Shetland in the 17/18th century. There is also documentary evidence for such trade. *(Derek Hall & Torbjorn Brorrson)* [Location unknown]

2. **German stonewares from Kirkwall:** the 1978 excavation in Kirkwall *(McGavin et al 1982)* produced pottery dating from the 16C to modern times. These included North European earthenwares dating from the 16C onwards, and German stonewares. The 2016 catalogue of the European Hanseatic Museum in Lubeck states that as Siegburg stoneware jugs, made mostly in the Rhineland, are found in many places in different countries where Hanseatic merchants traded, they are now considered part of the Hanseatic culture *(Hanse Museum Catalogue p.101)*, although they need not have arrived in Kirkwall via direct trade with the Hanse. [Location OM]

15 sherds of Langerwehe stoneware, 14 of them identified as 15-16C and one as 14-15C  
4 sherds of 15/16C Siegburg stoneware  
8 sherds of 16C Raeren stoneware,  
4 sherds from a 16/17C Frechen bellarmine  
2 sherds from an 18C Westerwald chamberpot

17/18/19 the centuries
By the late 15th century, the Northern Isles had become part of Scotland, rather than Scandinavia. By the early 18th century, they had become part of “Great Britain”. This was the period in Orkney of the “merchant lairds”, wealthy landowners, usually of Scottish origin, who made fortunes at the expense of the dispossessed Orkney farmers. An important part of this involved various maritime industries such as kelp, whaling, the fur trade etc.

Kelp (18 - 19C)
Fish is not the only harvest the sea offered Orcadians. Orkney is very rich in seaweed thrown up on its many beaches during storms. It was used for fuel since prehistoric times (the ‘cramp’ found on prehistoric sites), and also as fertiliser. In the 18th century an industry was started to dry and burn kelp to produce an alkali rich in potash which was used in the glass and soap-making industries further south in Britain. It was encouraged by the Napoleonic war and the American war of Independence, and by government taxes on imports and became extremely profitable during its peak, which was between 1770 and 1830. The fact that under udal law, the foreshore belonged to the adjacent landowner not the Crown as elsewhere, made fortunes for the local lairds. The demand for kelp collapsed at the end of the war, although it revived in the 1840s to a lesser extent, as a source of iodine. Kelp pits, which are shallow stone lined pits where the kelp was burned, survive in many places, as do the town houses in Kirkwall built by the lairds with their profits.

1. 1977/021 Kelp iron or claut; smiddy-made with wooden handle (replacement); iron 955mm long, rectangular, tapering to right-angled bend, with sheath for handle. Find location Papa Westray. [Location OM]
2. 1977/022 kelp spade; smiddy-made with wooden handle (original). Full length1645mm. Rectangular iron with sheath for handle and small spade head with three holes. Find location Papa Westray. [Location OM]
3. 1977/091 Kelp iron; local, smiddy-made, wooden handle missing, end bent (?through use) into a hook shape; metal square-section tapering socket for handle. Length 1060mm. Mr Hourston, Whitelooms, Papa Westray. [Location OM]

“Clat or Claut: s1 an instrument for raking together dirt or mire; s2 a hoe, as employed in the labours of husbandry…. What is scraped together; often applied to heaps of mire collected on a street.”

REFS Tait 2012, page 156-7; Wickham-Jones 2015 page 174-5; Orkney Museum Accessions Register; “A Dictionary of the Scottish Language: in which the words are explained in their different senses, authorized by the names of the writers by whom they are used, or the titles of the works in which they occur, and derived from their originals.”
www.archive.org/stream/dictionary

Seabirds
Seabirds are known to have been an important resource in Orkney and Shetland from at least the 16th century. They were caught using a variety of devices, nets, looped snares, hooked lines etc, often by men hanging over the cliffs where they nested on the end of a rope, a highly dangerous procedure. Feathers from seabirds, which were used to stuff pillows and mattresses, 72 birds to a pillow and 720 to a mattress (Fenton p510 & 522) were sold, e.g. to Dutch herring fishermen. Quills were also used as pens for writing. The eggs were eaten, or also sometimes sold, and the meat of the birds was eaten. Some people buried it for a week in the earth to get rid of the fishy flavour, and it could be preserved for winter by salting and smoking. Ducks, geese, swans, guillemots, kitiwakes, cormorants, gannets, and many more species were taken, even puffins. Changing legislation in the 19C eventually put an end to the practice.
3. 1979/001 “Handheld ‘grab’ for removing eggs from an inaccessible nest when fowling; two curved sides made of copper, suspended from four cords; overall width 170mm, ht 160mm. From Stromness; origin unknown. Similar to type known to be used in Western Isles (T. Towers)” [Location OM]

REFS. Fenton 1978 pages 510 - 523; Orkney Museum Accessions Register

Whaling on an industrial scale (17 – early 20C)

Whalebone objects found on sites in Orkney from the Neolithic (e.g. the carved bowl and small figurine from Skara Brae; whalebone mace head from Structure 8, Ness of Brodgar) to Norse times (e.g. the Scar plaque) were probably carved from whales which had beached as a result of natural accidents. From at least the 16C, whales were deliberately driven ashore in Orkney and Shetland, and then killed by groups of people using any sharp tool that came to hand; later they were shot. Several hundred whales might be caught at a time. There were strict rules for the division of the profit. The whale oil was used for light, their skin for leather, their offal for manure, and their meat eaten. However the people of the Northern Isles, unlike the Faroese, only ate whale meat in times of famine. Whales were caught in that way up to the 19C.

This domestic form of whaling was different from the Arctic whaling industry which developed later, in the 17C. From the mid-18C seamen from Orkney and Shetland signed on for wages on boats from further south bound for Greenland and the Davis Straights. Stromness was the port in Orkney where the whaling ships called. At one point a ship owned by a group of Kirkwall businessmen, the Ellen, was working in the Davis Straits, and the blubber was processed in Kirkwall in the ‘Oily House’ and storage sheds there. Whale oil, sometimes called train oil, was produced from the blubber; sperm oil from the head cavities of sperm whales which contain a liquid wax. The oil was burnt in lamps and also used to make margarine and soap. Baleen whales, especially the bowhead and right whales, were generally the main source of oil. Baleen, a mesh of bristles made of keratin which the whales used for filtering the minute krill they fed on, was also harvested and used for things like crinoline and corset stiffeners, parasol ribs etc. The Napoleonic Wars caused a temporary slump but the industry continued until the early 20C when overfishing ended it. There was whaling in the Antarctic as well, which ended for the same reason in 1963.

1. 2006/006.1 Whaling lance with wooden handle and sheath; length 2m 400cm [Location OM]
2. 1995/006.1 Lady’s jacket, black with lace trim & whalebone stiffener, made in Stronsay c.1900. Gift from David Grant, Millhouse, Stronsay. [Location OM]
3. OM/0031 “Old silk umbrella with whale bone spokes. Bone handle and brass mountings, said to have belonged to Mrs Logie, wife of Rev. Dr Logie, minister of St Magnus Cathedral” [Location OM]


Fishing on a commercial scale (18C – 21C)
Fishing was an important source of food in Orkney throughout prehistory (e.g. bones of cod and saithe were found at Skara Brae), and it was especially important during the Norse period. In the early modern period, saithe and dogfish were caught locally; wind-dried or smoked saithe were a major staple and the poor often ate little else for weeks if the harvest failed and they ran out of bread. Commercial fishing began in the 17C, initially by boats from Holland. Dutch herring fishermen traded with Orkney families for local produce, and had to pay teinds to the lairds (Fenton p603). In Earl Patrick’s time (late 16/early 17C), some Orkney boats went to Shetland and probably sold their catch to Hanseatic merchants there. The commercial fishery in Orkney really got started in the 18C, encouraged by various schemes, and included cod and herring. It included both fishing in local waters and deep-sea fishing including both Iceland and Greenland waters. Young Orcadians in the 18C and 19C signed on with Icelandic and Greenland fishermen for several months each year. (Fenton pp595-6).

In the early 19C seasonal herring fishing became important. The season usually lasted about 6-8 weeks, starting in late July. As well as the boats, troops of women travelled to the fishing ports to clean and salt the fish; and cooper’s and other trades were needed for the process. Whitehall village in Stronsay was founded in the 19C and became a particularly important base for the herring fishery; over 400 boats called there regularly from as far away as SW Scotland. Burray and St Margaret’s Hope were also very important. Westray and Burray were bases for haaf or deep-sea fishing for white fish although in Orkney as opposed to Shetland cod was less important than herring. Even from the 18C lobsters were exported to London from Scapa Flow and the South Isles.

Shetland relied more heavily than Orkney on fishing rather than agriculture. Fenton (p613) states that in the 19C, herring fishing became the Shetland equivalent of the 19C agricultural improvements in Orkney, largely replacing the other fishing in cod and ling and reducing the amount of time available for agricultural work. The export of fish needed the import of supplies such as salt, fishing lines and hooks, hemp linen for sails. These came from Bergen, Hamburg, Amsterdam and elsewhere (Fenton p572). Timber and boats had been imported from Norway for centuries. Fenton (p552) refers to four small ships which visited Norway in the 16C and returned home with cargoes of timber and boats; and in the 17C at the time of the Protectorate in 1652 it was recorded that Orkney and Shetland had been importing fishing boats “in all times bygone”. The lairds controlled the trade, providing the capital for the equipment in return controlling sales in their own interest. They became wealthy, while the fishermen were perpetually in debt.

1. 1992/012.4 Postcard of Sanday herring station in 1879 by Valentine. Gift from Roddie Hibbert, Norwood, Dundas Crescent, Kirkwall. (Orkney Museum Accessions Register) [Location OM]

2. 1982/219 Unsigned watercolour of St Mary’s Holm, during the herring fishing, 19th century. Source unknown, previously uncatalogued. (Orkney Museum Accessions Register) [Location OM]

3. Khokhloma Ware objects [Location OM and SM]


Hudson’s Bay Company – fur trade
The Hudson’s Bay Company was founded in 1670 to trade with the natives of Northern Canada for furs. Stromness was a convenient place for the company ships to take on supplies of food and water before they crossed the Atlantic, and to recruit local men to work for them as seamen, clerks and in various trades such as blacksmiths, carpenters, tailors, boat builders. Orkney men were accustomed to the harsh conditions, and were so poor that the wages offered were a great inducement. The better educated, such as John Rae, signed on as clerks, doctors, surveyors etc. The trade continued until 1891.

1. **OM/0678 “Bottle containing weed**, said to have been brought back from the Arctic by Dr John Rae” [Location OM]

**REFS** Tait 2012, page296; Wickham-Jones 2015 page 177; Orkney Museum Accession Register

**Lighthouses 18/21C**

The volume of shipping in the seas around Orkney, the low height above sea level of many of the islands which made them hard to see from aboard ships, and the number of dangerous shoals and skerries, led to many shipwrecks. The locals found these a convenient source of goods and materials, but in the 18C the authorities began to build lighthouses to prevent this.

Orkney’s first lighthouse was the ‘Old Beacon’, built in 1789 on North Ronaldsay, one of the oldest lighthouses in Scotland. The highest point of this island is 23km above sea level, but most of it is no higher than 10m above sea level, which caused problems for shipping. The Napoleonic Wars made the North Sea trade routes more attractive than the English Channel, so it was an important innovation. The Old Beacon functioned for 20 years until 1809, and was shut down when the Start Point lighthouse in Sanday was upgraded in 1806 and it was considered redundant. The authorities later changed their minds, and the New Lighthouse on Dennis Head, North Ronaldsay, was built and first lit in 1854. It is still functioning with modern updates (fully automated, with a radio beacon as well as the light and adjacent foghorn). The present Sanday lighthouse was built in 1870 with vertical black and white stripes to distinguish it from the red horizontal stripes of North Ronaldsay’s New Lighthouse. All the lighthouses are now automated.

Other notable lighthouses (this is not an exhaustive list) include the Pentland Skerries lighthouse, erected in 1794. The Pentland Skerries are a group of rocky islands and shoals in the Pentland Firth just south of South Ronaldsay, which constitute a major danger to shipping. This lighthouse had twin towers to distinguish it from the North Ronaldsay one. Sule Skerry, 60 km west of the Brough of Birsay, has another lighthouse with a long history, built in 1895. Cantwick Head lighthouse, South Walls, Hoy, was completed in 1858. It was intended to make the passage into Longhope and Scapa Flow safer. The Hoy High and Hoy Low lighthouses were built on the small island of Graemsay to act as leading lights at the western approaches of Hoy Sound, which leads to Stromness. Noup Head in Westray is a solar-powered lighthouse first completed in 1898. A lighthouse was completed in 1866 on the small island of Auskerry, just off the south-west coast of Stronsay. The lighthouse on Copinsay, a small, now uninhabited island off the east side of Deerness (Mainland) was only complete in 1915 and first lit in 1919.

1. **Mounted photograph of Pentland Skerries Lighthouse, c.1900”** Orkney Museum, 1988/012 [Location OM]

2. **Final edition print by Wm Daniell of Light House on the Start, Isle of Sanday.** Orkney Museum 1980/047 [Location OM]

**REFS** Tait 2012 Orkney
20C/21C
Developments during the last century and the present include North Sea Oil; renewable energy; fish farming; coastguard; lifeboats; naval base in Scapa Flow WWI & II

General References
“The Northern Isles: Orkney and Shetland” Alexander Fenton 1978
“Orkney A Historical Guide” Caroline Wickham-Jones 2015 Edinburgh