



In the Orkney Islands of Scotland

By Linda Baker

The evening sky is both red and golden as I stand looking across the channel from the island Mainland of Orkney to the smaller isle of Rousay. The water between the islands is deeply blue and everything around me seems as though it was colored with the brightness of six basic crayons. It's 10:30 at night and the sun is amazingly high and vibrant. The islands are blazing green and burnished yellow with the evening's light. As I watch the flowing rhythm of the water's surface, time seems to dissolve. The very air around me has assumed a silvery, luminescent quality and I breathe in its charged potency.

The Orkney Islands are located off the top of Scotland, where the North Sea and the Atlantic Ocean come together. Reached by ferryboat from Scotland's northern port of Scrabster, the two-hour crossing can dish up some tempestuous weather. Ferry passengers can remain safe and snug inside the cabin area in the comfortable lounges, the dining area, or the bar. Only a few deranged voyagers prefer to stand outside on deck with the salt spray from the whitecaps blasting over the heads of wind-buffed bodies, while the bow of the ship plunges headlong into deep blue valleys and bravely climbs up walls of ocean. It always seems too exciting to miss. Something about this crossing links me with an obscure feeling of some vague seafaring pastlife. I cannot be happily ensconced in luxury when, in my heart of hearts, I know I should be on deck reefing the main.

The Orkneys are made up of 67 islands and countless other smaller peaks of underwater crags. Roughly a third of the islands are populated with people. The largest and central island, called the Mainland, is chock-full with the sites of prehistoric spiritual antiquity from Neolithic times. The Orkneys hold the honor of possessing the greatest sum total of prehistoric sites in all of Europe. Mariners have been coming to the Orkneys for thousands of years plying this same furious body of water, that I now cross, in small boats, navigating by the currents and the stars.

Our ferry disembarks in the harbor town of Stromness, where Scandinavian and Scottish cultures blur. The hearty descendants of ancient settlers and later wayfarers from Ireland and the Norse territories have farmed these islands for scores of centuries.

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Linda is widely read in archaeology, history, and has a loving reverence for spirituality. As an ardent proponent of Pilgrimage, Linda takes great pleasure in connecting kindred spirits with the spirits of place.



Norway, and then Denmark, retained dominion over Orkneys until the islands became part of Scotland in 1468 as part of a unredeemed dowry pledge when the Danish King Christian I sent his daughter, Margaret, to be wed to Scotland's King James III.

The name Orkney is a two-part place name. Pre-Celtic, the first component, 'Orc', means boar, likely a totem animal of one of the early family groups. In the second element, 'ney,' the 'n' is a remnant of the Gaelic term 'innis', and the 'ey' later Scandinavian -- both mean island. In short, Islands of the Boar Clan.

The cultural blend has created an interesting, linguistic challenge for the traveler. For my American ears, the Orcadian lilt is, at times, undecipherable, but the people are genuine and good-hearted, and more than tolerate my need for much repetition. Throughout these low, treeless islands there are roughly 3000 known archaeological sites, with only about a tenth of those excavated. Archaeological speculation has it that thousands of other burial chambers, temples, and inhabitations still lay completely concealed, yet to be discovered. Everywhere I walk, the long-buried remnants of the past may lie just underfoot.

Now, here I stand between these two islands, mesmerized by the light and the water. I am totally alone at the Broch of Gurness, here long after any other visitor. The entry kiosk, attended during the day by the staff of Historic Scotland, is closed. Only the ghosts that shadow these gray stone ruins are aware of my intrusion. Standing by the water's edge, I feel myself at the end of the Earth, lost from time. It's late in the evening of the Summer Solstice, and the sky will not completely darken. The Orkneys are on latitude equal to that of Stockholm in Sweden. At 59° North the days are incredibly long. Far off, in adjoining fields, I hear farmers' faint voices, still at work. The summer days are incredibly long and even as midnight approaches, Orcadian farmers persevere in the old adage of 'making hay while the sun shines'.

The Broch of Gurness, was once an ingenious 40-foot high tower of stone with a single boltable entry, offering protection from marauders of the sea. In this area of the Orkneys along the facing shorelines, fifteen or more brochs, now archaeological ruins, once stood, each providing refuge for those working the nearby land. (Broch is pronounced like rock, unless you're Scottish and roll your Rs.) The brochs were built during the first century BC, after the decline of an epoch of rich abundance. A time when the older concept of communal prosperity was being eclipsed by the kill-and-plunder values of sea-raiders. Prior to the age of trepidation, the people of the Orkneys were co-operatively engaged in temple building and ancestor veneration.



This sweeping shift in values began as climatic changes developed; the temperatures became colder, the growing seasons shorter and scarcity began to fuel conflict. Contemplation of the heavens, veneration of the ancestors, and the underlying fundamentals of the collective good gave way to an instinct for survival. Temples ceased to be built, the communal tombs were sealed, and defense of property became paramount. The deterioration in climate ultimately gave rise to a new concept, that of birthright by physical strength. Building of citadels became necessary to preserve farming communities and their livestock. Fortunately for me, the Broch of Gurness, bathed in the long sunlight of the Solstice, appears peaceful this evening. No plunderers in sight, only seagulls riding the currents. The loudest sound, the tranquil lapping of waves on the rocks.

This was a land of wayfaring mariners. Arriving before 3500 BC, they came on the currents of the Atlantic and the Irish Sea, bringing with them the ancient beliefs of the Mother Goddess of their ancestors. The Goddess was revered as the wise one, life giver, nurturer, creator, and mother. The spiritual inclinations of the ancients centered on these attributes and the good of the entire community was upheld as the ideal. To this end, the massive stone circle monuments and the collective tombs were built.

A number of the temples of these Neolithic stone-age people can be found on the Orcadian Mainland. Three main sanctuaries, Brodgar, Stenness, and Maes Howe, all date from approximately 3000 BC.

The standing stone circle of Brodgar still contains 27 of its original 60 stones. It is an impressive site; the tallest remaining stone is 15 feet high, and the circle, 120 feet in diameter. Around the circle is an unexcavated ditch, known in archaeological terms as a henge. The henge may have signified the spiritual delineation between the heightened sanctity of the interior of the circle and the outer world. The building of Brodgar with its henge deeply cut into solid rock would have taken over 80,000 hours of labor to complete. A fact that underscores the sense of incredible power that still exists at this circle. Couples continue to come to Brodgar to wed in this day.

Nearby, four remaining stones of the circle of Stenness are located. Originally comprised of 12 stones and an encircling henge, Stenness was known as the Temple of the Moon as late as the 18th century, and stood in complement to the Temple of the Sun, the Ring of Brodgar. Close by also, stood the time-honored Stone of Odin, where an exchange of vows was solemnly sealed by clasping one another's hands through the hole in the stone's middle, plighting one's troth.



Felt to be a threat to maintaining Christian authority over the population, these ancient ceremonial sites were subsequently desecrated with impunity. The holed Stone of Odin was zealously destroyed in 1814.

The ritual landscape also contains the beautifully constructed passage grave of Maes Howe. Outwardly, a round, green, grassy knoll, 24 feet high, Maes Howe hides one of the true wonders of the prehistoric world. Entering, I crouch down and bend forward to follow in the footsteps of the magic makers of old. A long walk down a stonewalled passageway leads into a central chamber of warmly colored stone, some 15 feet square. The ancients designed this passage way to align with the sunset of the Winter Solstice, so that the rays of the setting sun dramatically illuminate the back of the chamber on the shortest day of the year. This yearly ritual heralded the culmination of the cycle of death and rebirth, as the last rays of the dying sun of the Winter Solstice, highly significant to the process of continuity, were ingeniously caught up and held within the heart of the temple.

The chamber is now lit by electricity, but, as luck would have it, on the very day of my visit, the electricity in the entire area was shut off for repair. I was able to, I hope, politely shoulder my way ahead of our little group and enter alone as the first person of the day. Through the passage, headed towards the total dark I went saying a small thank you to the spirits of this venerable place. I had only a brief moment alone in the cool, dark air before the others began coming through. Once we were all inside the chamber, our guide displayed the aspects of the interior for us with her flashlight, which by the way, is called a torch in Britain. There is something quiet enchanting in knowing that you are being shown around a place of great antiquity by torchlight, even if it is really just a flashlight.

The chamber is built of large square-shaped stones and long stone slabs. Stacked now for 48 or so centuries Maes Howe contains no mortar and is testament to the engineering genius of the age. By comparison, the temple predates the pyramids of Egypt. The roof is corbelled, so that each consecutive layer of stone slightly overlaps the lower layer, rising up 14 feet and covered by a capstone. In one wall is the Solstice-aligned entrance, in the other three there are small chambers, now empty. In relatively modern times, around the 1100s, Vikings broke in and ransacked the temple. They left behind animal images and graffiti carved in the ancient alphabet of Runic, which copiously brag about their exploits. One of these boasts asserts that they had looted the temple's treasure and it carried away. It's doubtful, however, that this bit of swaggering was completely sincere. The Neolithic people, whose sacred place this was, had nothing in the way of gold, precious gems, or weapons that would delight Vikings. Their treasure would have been in the bones of their Orcadian ancestors and the sanctity of the spirit within.



A bit further away to the west, on the Atlantic Ocean, lies the site of Skara Brae. Uncovered in a freak sandstorm in 1850, it has been preserved as it was abandoned, 3000 years ago. It was then that another sandstorm caused the hurried evacuation of the inhabitants and, much like the volcanic ash of Pompeii, completely covered everything. Here there were no bodies, only possessions hurriedly left behind for later generations to discover. In appearance from ground level, Skara Brae gives the impression of some sort of charmed Putt-Putt golf course with overly large sand traps. In reality, the ruins of the homes are below ground level, and are connected by low passageways. Each would have had driftwood, bracken, and animal hide roofing. The individual homes resemble underground nests with bedsteads, niches for oil-burning lamps, a central rectangular hearth, and an altar or cupboard of stone built into the wall. To look down into an ingenious home-sweet-home from thousands of years ago gives me a feeling of connection to the folks who lived here. And if I were invited to stay for a while, I would definitely accept.

Skara Brae is an engaging place. Originally there was a fresh water lake between the cubbyhole dwellings and the ocean. Over time the dunes between the sea and the lake were worn down and the sea consumed the lake. Stages of erosion continue to threaten the site as the sea slowly wears its way closer. Consequently, the beachfront is now just below the homesteads. Many large slab-like pieces of natural sandstone have been exposed, taking on a purpose of their own. Coming to work in the early morning, the on-site staff at Skara Brae are often amused to find newly constructed, standing stone formations on their beach. These thick slices of stones seem to be the perfect medium for inspiring visitors. Each morning reveals a new configuration of standing stones embedded in the sand. The three to four foot slabs of stone are fairly easy to erect, and as an incoming tide knocks them over, it leaves a fresh canvas awaiting new vision. A super-sized version of Lego, no doubt, in ancient form.

Further down the coast to the south is a breathtakingly beautiful area of sheer cliff drop offs. Multi-layered geological formations, called sea stacks, rise precariously, towering hundreds of feet in the air from the ocean shelf. This is Yesnaby. To reap the entire benefit of this Yesnabean splendor, a walk along the cliff path is a must. Donna and I hiked along, up over a loose shale covered hill that was starkly barren like the surface of some shingle-covered moon. The footing was difficult and above us rain clouds sulked. We pressed forward nonetheless. Upon reaching the top, the clouds passed on without affect and the hill changed its opinion of us. Without warning it spread out before us a lushly blanketed downgrade of tender grass. Instinctively the Sound of Music burst out of us, and we twirled down the hill to the vertical edge of the cliff, where we wisely stopped. A little



cove lay below us. The waves crashed in and slid up on the beach rubble, throwing salt spray into the air. Overhead, seagulls hung on the thermals. Out a little way, on some protruding rocks, a flock of puffins huddled together, all black and white with orange yellow beaks. We descended into to the cove to find a tumbled, rocky beach; pebble-strewn and slippery with purple jellyfish left behind by the tide. Some of the jellyfish were clear with purple centers, and others were purple with clear centers. None were larger than 5 inches across. They were perfectly round without trailing tentacles. I couldn't stop looking at them and wondering how this contrast in opposite coloring evolved.

On the right side of this cove, on a rock shelf, a sea stack towered. Acutely balanced on narrower rock layers, it had the look of possibly crashing over in the next few hours and made me sweaty. The shape of the sea stack looked like a cross between the Tasmanian Devil of Warner Bros. fame, and that dress that Morticia on the Addams Family wears. Narrow at the ankles and chunky at the top, brown, green and gray, with sprouting tufts of vegetation, it was extremely tall, perhaps 90 or so feet high. As we climbed back up out of the cove we picked up the cliff trail again. Back on top, an old barbed wire fence kept grazing livestock from becoming accidentally airborne. In places, the path, which was on the outside of the fence line, was less than a foot away from the edge of the cliff. As we curved around the bay, passing our sea stack, I looked across to its island-like top and then down, far over the cliff, to the rock shelf that was its footing. There, basking in the sun was a single sea lion, which was a surprise because we'd been so close to that area when we were down in the cove. She looked right up at us as if to say, "Yesss, I've been here the whole time," then flopped over and went right on sunning herself.

At one point we lay in the grass with our heads stuck over the edge looking out to sea. The ocean swept in far below us, crashing in the mouth of caves underneath us where we couldn't see. All sorts of birds were in flight, crisscrossing in the skies, like a diorama from an ornithological reference book. Fast flying and leisurely gliding; all types in a rush hour of birdiness. The gulls sailed right by us, in slow motion, riding against the breeze. We must have seemed oddly entertaining. Lining up in flight, they took turns cruising past us at less than a mile an hour. First, one large gull with a beady eye trained on us, another with an amiable, laughing face, a third with a furtive look, and so on, all just four feet away, just off the cliff. We gave them salutations and soothings in American, which I'm almost sure they found pleasing. Off in the distance, out to sea, a rainsquall had formed. We got up to go and bid our birds goodbye. They followed us for awhile, then cartwheeled off to some other curiosity.



Yesnaby has been giving herself back to the sea ever since her volcanic rise some 60 million years ago. The underlying geological layers of Old Red Sandstone that comprise these islands were formed 400 million years ago. It is the bird watcher's nirvana, evoking emotion from all who ramble along its cliffs. The rainsquall caught up with us and, in this place of splendor, it was also splendid. It fell along our path intensifying our discoveries. Unlike rain that sends us scurrying from car to shopping mall, or from front door to car, this rain only made us know that we too were included as part of the grandeur, as integral as the cliffs and as the seagulls. We were here; it was raining. There was nothing to be done but relinquish ourselves to it.

The squall showered down with a purpose as we flipped up the hoods of our raingear. Grass around us reached up to receive the offering. Raindrops clung to the rusted barbs of the fence wire. Little rivulets of water poured across the path spilling into the void. We made our way carefully. The sound of the rain was both strong and soft. We walked on; listening to the way it hit the grass, the rocks, the fence, and our rubber-encased bodies. The top of the sea stack came into view. When we got close enough, I saw that our sea lion had slipped away into the ocean. In the next few minutes the trailing edge of the squall swept past us. The curtain of rain moved on ahead of us, like some magical cape of water being drawn along the landscape. We turned looking back out to sea, along the path and beyond the fields. All was sunlit again, in gleaming revival.