

#### IV.

#### ON CERTAIN BELIEFS AND PHRASES OF SHETLAND FISHERMEN. By ARTHUR LAURENSEN, Esq., Lerwick.

The native population of the Shetland Islands is Norse in blood and origin. There is not, nor has there been, any appreciable Celtic element in it. To this day the Norse physiognomy of the people is distinctly marked; nowhere do you find the Celtic type. The language, now rapidly merging into English, has for the last three hundred years been departing from the old Norse which was once the tongue of the islands; but still the traces of the ancient speech are clearly manifest. An hundred years ago they were yet more so; at that period, in the remoter islands, old people might still be found who could repeat some corrupt Norse which tradition had preserved. Now, however, the relics of the old tongue consist of isolated words and phrases of Norse derivation still in daily use, of the substitution of the singular personal pronoun for the English plural form in all conversation, and of some peculiar modes of expression more Norse or German in idiom than English.

The fishermen retain more of the old words than any other class in the islands. Perhaps from boats and all pertaining to them having been in

use in the days of the Norse occupation, and so having then been named, and that use continuing uninterruptedly, and without the influence of strangers who might have imported their own nomenclature with them, the ancient terms have come down to our days with scarcely any alteration. For it may be observed that of all Scotch immigrants into the islands during the present period of Scotch and English occupation, hardly any devote themselves to fishing or to maritime pursuits. These employments have always been in the hands of the native population, and the words and phrases peculiar to the sea and fishing were thus especially protected from foreign alterations.

But another cause has contributed to this end. Fishermen of all countries are peculiarly superstitious—given to standing on the ancient ways—averse to innovations. Those of the northern isles are no exception to the rule. From of old they put faith in omens, charms, visions, ancient rites and customs, almost all of which are heathen in origin—survivals of the pagan period. These things forbidden by the church, and denounced by the priest of the Christian faith as arts of devils and evil spirits, were nevertheless at no time abandoned by the people nominally Christianised. They were merely practised in secret, and treated with all reserve. The doctrine of the church on the subject was never openly denied—on the contrary, would have been apparently acquiesced in—but the same man or woman who would not have risked the safety of his soul by the omission of a sacrament, would the next day have participated in a pagan ceremony wholly contradictory of the Christian creed. At this day (nine hundred years since that creed was adopted in the north) rites and ceremonies pagan in character are still practised. Still the Beltane fires are kindled, and the “children passed through the fire to Moloch;” still people are charmed for fairy and troll influences; still magic spells are wrought on men and women; still cattle are bewitched by envious neighbours, and have to be re-charmed into health; and it is a curious and suggestive fact, that while the Roman Catholic faith has passed away utterly from memory or tradition, leaving not the faintest traces behind it in the islands, save the hardly distinguishable ruins of its numerous chapels, that the heathenism which it supplanted, and which it vainly boasted to have overcome, now survives it, and in many corners of the land still flourishes a living thing, after a thousand

years have come and gone since it was said to have passed from among men.

It is, however, always difficult to ascertain the extent of this pagan survival. As a general rule, it is useless to inquire of the people about it. You will obtain hardly any information if you are suspected to be asking in a sceptical way, or out of idle curiosity. The subject is evaded, or ignorance of the matter declared. And one powerful obstacle to getting any information from people who believe in such things, is their conviction that it is forbidden to speak openly of these dark matters, and that to do so is to expose yourself to the displeasure of the unseen powers. Thus, there is much more superstitious belief extant than is generally imagined, because it is exceedingly difficult to explore the subject.

The fisherman, brought into constant and close contact with the wild powers of that Nature from which he with hardship wrings a bare subsistence, has a blinder faith in the ancient ways than other men. It is evident that all distinctively Christian teaching has been lost upon him. So deeply imbued is his nature with the hereditary faith of his pagan forefathers, that in the present day he holds to it—the notions of the ninth century have been carried down unaltered into the nineteenth.

For example, two things may be mentioned which are to this day believed in and acted on by living men. At any rate, within living memory they have in numerous cases been known as certainly as anything can be. One of these is the belief that it is "unlucky," or more correctly, "forbidden," to save a person from drowning. The real grounds on which this belief rests are difficult to ascertain. Sir Walter Scott and some others account for it by the explanation, that it was imagined that the rescued would afterwards injure his rescuer, and that he was fated to do so. But from what I have with difficulty learned, I rather believe the notion is that the man who prevents another from drowning will himself perish instead—that the sea will have its prey, and if a man deprives it of its victim, he himself must supply the victim's place. This is clearly a pagan belief pure and simple. The evil spirit—or the god of the sea, good or evil—must have his sacrifice; if you hinder him, you awake his anger, which another victim alone can appease. It is told how a man not only declined to put off his boat to rescue another drowning

close inshore, but took the oars out so as to prevent it being used for this purpose; how three men stood and looked at their neighbour drowning before their eyes, and then turned around and walked homewards; how another pulled past a floating woman, and paid no heed. These things have happened within forty years, and many other similar cases in every district of the country.

The other peculiarity in fishermen's observances is their custom of proscribing certain words and names of persons or things as forbidden to be uttered while at sea. Prominently among these are the ordinary terms relating to the church, the minister, or his abode; and from this the inference may be drawn that at an early period it was believed that the mention of the new faith and its priests was hateful to the sea-god, and likely to bring his displeasure on those who named it. Later, when the English tongue was displacing the Norse of the islands, the old words were employed instead of the new when it was necessary to mention those forbidden or unlucky things, and thus, as in a dead language, these fishermen's words and phrases were preserved and handed down to the present day. Regarded latterly by the people who used them as an unknown tongue, and by the post-Reformation clergy—all Scotchmen ignorant of the speech and traditions of the islands—as unmeaning gibberish, many of them yet survive, more or less corrupted, as evidence of an older faith and a vanished language. They are all, however, old Norse. Here may be given some of them:—*baldung*, a turbot; *virtick*, fire; *banie*, a dog; *bænibider*, a dog (this is bone biter); *büankoos*, *banehoos*, the church; *clivin*, the tongs; *kirser*, a cat; *keedin*, the cheek; *damp*, a rope's end; *finnie* or *funa*, the fire; *fistin*, the chimney crook; *fitting*, the cat; *hanlicks*, mittens; *matratla-stilhad*, minister's house; *mudveeties*, swine; *ringrody* or *ringlody*, a kettle; *suntags*, eyes; *skiinie*, a knife; *venga*, a cat; *yunsie*, a hen; *yera*, the ear; *upstanda*, the minister; *faigr*, the sun; *farr*, a boat; *foodin*, a cat; *glouriks*, the eyes; *heckla*, the dog-fish; *hemma*, a wife; *hoydeen*, the minister; *kirkasucken*, the buried dead in churchyards; *koy*, a bed; *kunie*, a wife; *pirraina*, a girl; *prestingolva*, the minister; *rems*, *remmaks*, the oars; *riv*, the dawn; *runk*, an old woman; *soolen*, the sun; *soyndick*, the eye; *steng*, the mast; *taand*, a fire-brand; *tevrdir*, thunder; *trulla-scud*, a witch; *ungadrenqur*, a young man; *vamm*, to bewitch; *voaler*, a cat; *yink*, a lover. From this short

list it will be observed that the cat is more frequently spoken of by different names than anything else. Always regarded as more particularly "unlucky" than any other animal, the fisherman had a special horror of it; but it does not appear why he should have been at such pains to name it in so many various ways.

That these terms, and others used by the Shetland fishermen at the present day, are of very great antiquity can be easily shown. As an illustration, let us take two or three of the most ordinary words, and trace them back at least one thousand years.

I. *Humlabund*, *i.e.*, the thong—sometimes of hide, sometimes of rope (in old times always of hide)—which secures the oar of the Shetland boat near the wooden "kabe" against which it is pulled. This thong is rove through a hole in the gunwale, and forms a bight in which the oar is thrust, and so retained in its place. The present modern Norse word in use in the north of Norway is *hamulan* or *humelan*. In Freeman's "History of the Norman Conquest," vol. i. 570, the following occurs:—"We now learn incidentally that the standing navy of England, both under Cnut and under Harold, had consisted of 16 ships, and 8 marks were paid seemingly yearly, either to each rower singly or to some group of rowers." To this is appended the note:—

"Chron. Petrib., 1040.—'On his [Harold's] dagum man geald xvi. scipan cet celcere hamulan [hamelan in Chron. Ab.] viii. marcan.' On the word *hamulan*, Mr Earle (p. 343) remarks, 'This being a dative feminine, the nom. must be *hamule*, *hamele*—at first, perhaps, signifying a rowlock strap, and so symbolising some division of the crew. There is not money enough to give eight marks to every rower. The *hamule*, then, would be analogous to the "lance" in mediæval armies. But Florence clearly took it to mean a single rower, 'octo marcas unicuique suæ classis remigi.'"

II. In the "Hymisquidha," one of the lays of the Elder Edda, and evidently one of the oldest of the cycle, is an account of Thor going a-fishing with the giant Hymir. Stanza 21 may be translated thus:—

"Then on his line	The strong Hymir
Drew two whales	Out of the sea,
Which in the stern	Odin's son,
Veorr, craftily	With rope secured."

The Norse phrase, "aptr i skutt," given here in English "in the stern," would be more correctly and literally translated by the Shetlander of the present day, "aft in the shot." This "shot" meaning the aftermost division of a fishing-boat, into which usually fish are thrown.

In verse 26, when the expedition is over, and the god and the giant have brought their boat to land, Thor, like any every-day fisherman, proposes to his comrade to halve the work remaining of securing the boat and carrying home the fish :—

"Thou must halve	The work with me—
Either the whale	Bear to the house,
Or make fast	With me the boat."

Thor makes quick work of his share of the labour. In verse 27

"The Hardhitter went,	Gripped the stem,
Tossed up the ship	With the water in her—
With the oars	And the auskerry,
He bore to the house	The Jotun's fish,
And fared down	To the earth cavern."

The third line of this verse in the original is,

einn med árom	ok austkotr (austskoto).
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The Shetland fisher word for oar is "ar," pronounced as the English "ere." The "auskerry" is the boat scoop for baling out water. The word is in regular use. Note, too, that the Norse word here translated "gripped" is "greip."

It is a curious fact that almost the only trace left in the language of the people of the long supremacy in the islands of the Catholic Church, is the remembrance of certain holidays and saint's days, now of course no longer celebrated, although not forgotten. Besides the well-known festivals still recognised, and the legal term days of Christmas, Candlemas, Lammas, Whitsunday, Martinmas, Pasch-Sunday, and St John's Day (December 27), there are still dated Laurence Mass (August 23), Korsmas (3d May and 14th September), Fastern Eve (before Lent), Catherinemass (22d December) Boo Helly (fifth day before Christmas), Bainer Sunday (first before Christmas), Antinmas (twenty-fourth day after Christmas), or Uphellia Day, Solomon's Even (3d November), Sow-day (17th December), Martinbullimas (St Swithin's Day), Johnsmass (24th June).