

Assessment 4: Commentary – By Matthew Cowley



Figure 1: Tom Birkett (photographer), 'The Magnus and Harald Window in Lerwick Town Hall', 2016. <<http://www.worldtreeproject.org/document/625>> [Accessed: 7 December 2020].



Figure 2: Tom Birkett (photographer), 'Harald Hardrada on the Magnus and Harald Window in Lerwick Town Hall', 2016. <<http://www.worldtreeproject.org/document/627>> [Accessed: 7 December 2020].

This stained-glass window from the town hall at Lerwick, the main town of the Shetland Isles, is one of the many windows present in the main hall of the building and depicts the King of Norway, Harald Hardrada, who ruled from 1046 until his death at the Battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066.¹ As well as the reason why this depiction of Hardrada is present on a monument from Shetland, other very interesting aspects of the image include what its content is, who produced or commissioned the window, what materials were used, who was it made for, and when and where it was created? An analysis of all these questions will allow for the significance of visual sources such as this stained-glass window to be understood.

To begin with, it is possible to identify the individual depicted above as Harald Hardrada thanks to the banner situated above his head, which reads 'HARADVS • HARDRADA • REX • NORVEGIÆ', or 'Harald Hardrada King of Norway'.² Although this banner is the clearest form of identification, it is also possible to identify who is being depicted based on clues in the boarder work of the window. For instance, along three quarters of the image there is a continuous pattern comprising of a stylised letter 'h', a crown, and a hollow diamond, each of which are separated by a blue or green square. The meaning of the former two parts of this pattern are clear, as the 'h' represents the initial of the individual, which in this instance is for Harald, while the crown symbolises a title they held, which when combined with the Norwegian coat of arms located at the centre of the bottom panel, indicates that this individual was a ruler of Norway whose name began with 'h'.³ It is subsequently possible to further narrow this down thanks to the sword and shield in their hands, which are both symbols of a warrior.⁴ The most famous warrior King of Norway, whose name began with the beforementioned letter, was Harald Hardrada, who had an illustrious career all over Europe, before his return to Norway and attempted conquest of England in 1066.⁵ As evident, it is possible to identify Hardrada as the individual depicted in this stained-glass window even if the banner did not provide his name.

However, elements of this depiction have clearly taken influence from later periods of history, as only his leg armour in the form of maille chausses dates to the 11th Century.⁶ The scale armour, plate knee armour, and shield all originate from different periods and locations to that of Hardrada, with

¹ Nic Fields, *God's Viking: Harald Hardrada: The Life and Times of the Last Great Viking*. (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2019), pp. xvii & 160 – 200.

² Fields, *God's Viking*, pp. vi – vii.

³ Jan Sjøvik, *Historical Dictionary of Norway*. (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2008), pp. 80 – 81.

⁴ Jim Bradbury, *The Routledge Companion to Medieval Warfare*. (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 259.

⁵ Fields, *God's Viking*, pp. 1 – 300.

⁶ Bradbury, *Companion to Medieval Warfare*, p. 254.

the former being more common in the Eastern rather than Western world.⁷ Likewise, the plate knee armour, or poleyns, only appear in manuscript illustrations and written testimonies in the 13th and 14th Centuries, two to three hundred years after Hardrada's death, while the shield depicted is too small and has too flat a top to be the kite shaped shield prominent in the 11th Century.⁸ As such, all these elements of the depiction should not be included in something that is intended to represent and inform people about the history of Shetland.⁹ However, it is understandable why these additions were made to the depiction of Hardrada, who was considered the last great Viking, as, during the Victorian Era when the windows were made, the Vikings were viewed as brutal and barbaric individuals clad in furs and horned helmets, which would have been a concept that the Shetlander's who commissioned the windows would not have wanted to convey about their heritage.¹⁰ This is likely the reason why Hardrada is depicted in the more knightly apparel of the later 14th Century, rather than equipment that is accurate to the 11th Century.¹¹

Continuing from this, the design of the window also contains references to the more modern history of Shetland, as in the bottom right corner of the window there seems to be a crest that resembles the coat of arms of Scotland.¹² Although this is smaller than the centrally placed Norwegian heraldry, it would not make sense for a depiction of a Norwegian King to have the Scottish heraldry directly under them, and if the coat of arms was supposed to be connected to Hardrada, it would make more sense for the heraldry of England to be included rather than the Scottish one. As such, the inclusion of this heraldry in the corner of the depiction is about the location of Shetland and its modern connection to Scotland rather than the depicted individual.¹³ Furthermore, the cloak that Hardrada is wearing seems to depict, among other types of flowers, a central design that resembles a thistle, the national flower of Scotland, which gained this status, or so it is claimed, after a Norwegian force attempting to ambush a group of sleeping Scotsman sometime around the mid-13th Century were thwarted after one of their own stood on a thistle, alerting the Scots to their presence.¹⁴ The truth behind this story is unclear, but it is a famous tale that would have been known to the inhabitants of

⁷ Timothy Dawson, *Armour Never Wearies: Scale and Lamellar Armour in the West, from the Bronze Age to the 19th Century*. (Stroud: The History Press, 2013), pp. 1 – 100.

⁸ Bradbury, *Companion to Medieval Warfare*, pp. 258 – 259.

⁹ Alastair Hamilton, *Shetland: Island of Opportunity: Lerwick's fine Victorian Town Hall is Reborn* (2018) <<https://www.shetland.org/blog/town-halls-story-retold>> [Accessed: 7 December 2020].

¹⁰ Pat Morgan, *Little Book of Vikings*. (Santa Monica: Demand Media Limited, 2014), pp. 82 – 97.

¹¹ Bradbury, *Companion to Medieval Warfare*, pp. 251 – 260.

¹² J.H. Stevenson, *Heraldry in Scotland: Volumes 1 & 2*. (Sketraw Muirhill: The Armorial Register Ltd., 2016), pp. ix – 407.

¹³ Fields, *God's Viking*, pp. 150 – 220.

¹⁴ Ben Johnson, *Historic UK: The Thistle - National Emblem of Scotland* (2012) <<https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofScotland/The-Thistle-National-Emblem-of-Scotland/>> [Accessed: 10 December 2020].

Shetland at the time the windows were installed, so the fact that the King of Norway is depicted as wearing something that is embroidered with the epitome of Scottish identity, especially one that is possibly at the misfortune of his own kinsmen, it could indicate that the artist is attempting to convey a hidden message of rightful Scottish sovereignty over the Shetland Isles.¹⁵

There are two final elements in the background of the window that are also important to highlight, as Hardrada is depicted standing in front of a richly embroidered curtain, which only adds to the impressive nature of the window, while the curtain itself is situated in front of a fruit tree.¹⁶ The inclusion of the tree adds another intriguing insight into the thoughts of the artist regarding the history of Shetland, as the fruit that the tree bares, possibly oranges based on their colour, or pomegranates, due to the small buds located on each fruit, signify ideas of purity and generosity, in the case of the former, and fertility and the Catholic Church, for the latter.¹⁷ Both possibilities could indicate the artisan's view that Norse rule over the island inhibited its productiveness and kept the Shetlanders from the Catholic faith, as the Norse were initially pagan.¹⁸ However, by the time of Hardrada, Norway, and its King, were devout Christians, so this latter interpretation in favour of this argument is invalid.¹⁹

All of the stained-glassed windows in the main hall were made by either 'Ballantine and Co.' from Edinburgh, or 'Cox, Sons, Buckley, and Co.' from London, both of which were prominent producers in the stained-glass industry during the late 19th Century.²⁰ Glass itself was created by heating silica, which is found in sand, to its melting point, before adding lime and soda to make the glass moisture resistant, and a specific metal, such as gold or copper, to colour it.²¹ Furthermore, the construction of these stained-glass windows began with the artists drawing their designs onto small pieces of paper, so they could experiment with the colours and panel shapes, before proceeding onto a one-to-one copy of their design known as a cartoon. The artists then traced their cartoons onto the respective pieces of coloured glass, before cutting the required shapes out and painting any further detail on the pieces that needed it. The final steps before assembling the window involved baking the painted glass in a kiln, surrounding each piece in lead, and then fusing the frames together in the

¹⁵ Johnson, *The Thistle* (2012) [Accessed: 10 December 2020].

¹⁶ Alastair Hamilton, *Shetland: Island of Opportunity: Exceptional Stained Glass Receives Expert Care* (2017) <<https://www.shetland.org/blog/stained-glass-care>> [Accessed: 7 December 2020].

¹⁷ George Maris, *A Tree and Its Fruits, A Book about Symbolism*. (Morrisville: Lulu Press, Inc., 2004), pp. 46 – 47.

¹⁸ René Chartrand, and others, *The Vikings*. (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2016), pp. 11 – 41.

¹⁹ John Haywood, *The Penguin Historical Atlas of the Vikings*. (London: Penguin Books, 1995), pp. 132 – 133.

²⁰ *Black's Picturesque Tourist of Scotland*. (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1889), p. 523.

²¹ Hugh Arnold, *Stained Glass of the Middle Ages in England and France*. (Glasgow: Good Press, 2019), pp. 1 – 15.

designed pattern. This process left the artists with a single, multi-coloured, and multi-piece design that could be fitted to a window frame and create the intended visual source, such as the above depiction of Hardrada.²² This medium of information is useful, both in a practical and an informative sense, as it firstly provides light to the interior of the building, while simultaneously sharing knowledge in a prominent position through a combination of architecture, decoration, and painting.²³

The town hall itself was initially built in 1883 due to the need for a central administrative building for the island that had been thriving due to its successful fishing industry. As such, an architect from Inverness named Alexander Ross was appointed by a committee of prominent Shetlanders to design the building, with one of their main requirements being for the building to show the history of Shetland.²⁴ This is where Hardrada and the other stained-glass windows come in as they all depict individuals significant to the history of the island from the 9th to the 13th Century, or in other words, from its Norse occupation to the marriage of James III of Scotland and Margaret of Denmark.²⁵ Due to the Shetland Isles being under the jurisdiction of the Norwegian crown during the Medieval period, many of the windows depict Norwegian Kings, including Harald Hardrada, as evident with the image above.²⁶ Additionally, Hardrada is not only present due to his title, but also because of what his death signified, as most scholars accept that his failed conquest of England in 1066 marked the end of the Viking Age, the period of Norse expansion between the late-8th and mid-11th Century that included their subjugation of the various northern isles. As such, the reason why Hardrada is depicted in the decorations of the town hall is because of his significance to the history of Shetland, both through his kingship as well as his demise denoting the end of the period that brought Shetland under Norse influence.²⁷

Finally, as all the depictions, including that of Hardrada, are windows on a central building in the town, it is clear that the intended audience for its decorations were members of the public. This is because the window, due to its very nature, can be viewed from both inside and outside the building, so even if an individual was not attending a meeting or other private event inside the town

²² Richard Spilsbury, *Stained Glass Windows*. (New York: The Rosen Publishing Group, Inc., 2009), pp. 8 – 9.

²³ Virginia Chieffo Raguin, *Stained Glass: Radiant Art*. (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2013), p. 9.

²⁴ Hamilton, *Lerwick's Victorian Hall* (2018) [Accessed: 9 December 2020].

²⁵ Hamilton, *Stained Glass* (2017) [Accessed: 8 December 2020].

²⁶ Haywood, *Historical Atlas of the Vikings*, pp. 76 – 77.

²⁷ Chartrand, and others, *Vikings*, pp. 93 – 126.

hall, they still are able to view the contents of the window.²⁸ As such, these stained-glass windows are intended for the consumption of a public audience. This can subsequently be divided into a local and touristic audience, with the former regarding the inhabitants of Shetland who are, as already mentioned, viewing the windows as a form of education into the island's history. Similarly, the more modern tourism aspect of these windows, which some claim are among the finest examples of stained-glass from a secular context in Britain, have become an important audience since their installation, with many tourists who come to the island visiting the town hall specifically to see these windows first hand.²⁹ Both types of public audiences are reinforced by the presence of small panels providing information on the windows' content and other aspects of the building, while an interactive augmented reality app has been established to offer the information in an alternative format that is specifically designed for tourists.³⁰ As such, the intended audience for this stained-glass window depicting Hardrada is the public.

In conclusion, this stained-glass window depiction of Harald Hardrada from the Lerwick Town Hall on Shetland is significant as a visual source as it achieves its aim of displaying part of the history of the island. As discussed, Hardrada's importance to the history of Shetland is not restricted simply to his kingship of Norway, as there were many other Norwegian kings during the period the windows are portraying, many of which are also included in the hall,³¹ but it is because Hardrada's death signified the end of a monumental era which had a lasting impact on the Northern Isles that is why his inclusion is so significant.³² Likewise, the content of this window also reinforces its significance as it manages to convey an overview of the island's history in a single image, referring to both its Norse and Scottish heritage, even if the latter is only subtly done, and although there is possibly a subconscious message in aspects of the window's design that indicates the opinions of Scottish superiority and rightful ownership over Shetland, elements of this argument have subsequently been proven invalid.³³ Finally, the fact that the public was the intended audience of these windows further reinforces their purpose to present the island's history, so overall, this stained-glass window depicting Harald Hardrada is a significant and informative visual source.³⁴

Word Count: 2,055

²⁸ Hamilton, *Lerwick's Victorian Hall* (2018) [Accessed: 8 December 2020].

²⁹ Hamilton, *Stained Glass* (2017) [Accessed: 8 December 2020].

³⁰ Hamilton, *Lerwick's Victorian Hall* (2018) [Accessed: 8 December 2020].

³¹ *Black's Scotland*, p. 523.

³² Chartrand, and others, *Vikings*, pp. 93 – 126.

³³ Haywood, *Historical Atlas of the Vikings*, pp. 132 – 133.

³⁴ Hamilton, *Lerwick's Victorian Hall* (2018) [Accessed: 13 December 2020].

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