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Pursaker: A Note

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I am an admirer of Arne Kruse's essay on 'Laithlind'.¹ In this note I try to track down another mysterious geographical feature from the Viking Age, albeit a much smaller one.²

In the thirty-second chapter of *Orkneyinga saga*, the compiler, writing 150 years after the event, becomes lyrical about Earl Þorfinnr Sigurðarson. He says that Þorfinnr had been the most powerful of all the Orkney earls, and, ridiculously, that he 'owned nine earldoms in Scotland, and all the Hebrides, and a large realm in Ireland'.³ He then quotes a verse by Arnórr Þórðarson, the so-called 'earls'-poet', which is likely to have been composed soon after Þorfinnr's death in the mid-eleventh century. Folk from *Pursaker* to Dublin, according to Arnórr, were forced to heed the earl:

*Hringstríði varð hlýða
herr frá Pursakerjum
— rétt segik þjóð, hvé þótti
Þórfinnr – til Dyflinnar.*⁴

1. Kruse 2017.

2. I am very grateful to Diana Whaley for advice.

3. *Orkneyinga Saga* (trans. Taylor): 189.

4. *Poetry of Arnórr jarlaskáld* (trans. Whaley): 128.

I tell the people truth, everyone was thought to be
Thorfinn's subject from *Pursasker* to Dublin.

There is no debate about the meaning of the name. *Pursaskerjum* – in later texts *Pussaskerjum* – derives from Old Norse *þurs* ('giant'), and thus translates to 'skerries of the giants'. But where were they? There have been several suggestions. The least unconvincing, in my opinion, is the one given in 1873 by Gilbert Goudie and Jón A. Hjaltalín, the Shetlander and Icelander who were the first translators of the saga into English. They assumed, given what the saga-compiler said, and what Arnórr said, that *Pursasker* was in Ireland. Arnórr's verse, they said, 'seems to have reference only to Þorfinnr's conquests in Ireland. Doubtless the extent of these is considerably exaggerated'. I could not agree more. They suggested that the *Pursasker* was the same as the Tuskar Rock, near Rosslare Harbour, a notorious site for shipwrecks.⁵

It is not a bad idea. George W. Dasent, who translated the saga in 1894, and A.B. Taylor, translating it in 1938, reached the same conclusion.⁶ Dasent adds a question mark; Taylor renders the name 'Tuskar Skerries' in both text and index. Arnórr seems to be writing about Þorfinnr's alleged realm in Ireland. He therefore gave what he thought were the Irish boundaries of it. Others, however, want *Pursasker* to be the northerly extreme of Þorfinnr's supposedly vast dominions.

The Orcadian Samuel Laing, translating *St Olaf's Saga* in the 1840s, where there is a similar version of Arnórr's verse, said that it might have been at Thurso in Caithness.⁷ Carl Richard

5. *Orkneyinga Saga* (ed. Anderson): 44 and note. Irish toponymists have not considered the etymology of the name, but a derivation from *sker* is very likely. I am grateful to Conchubhar Ó Cruaíoch for discussion.

6. *Orkneyingers' Saga* (trans. Dasent): 468; *Orkneyinga Saga* (trans. Taylor): 437.

7. *Heimskringla* (trans. Laing): 145.

Unger, the great Norwegian philologist and historian, thought the same.⁸ Guðbrandur Vigfússon was the first, as far as I can see, to propose that *Þursasker* was in Shetland. He suggested that it might have been the Out Skerries, east of the Shetland mainland.⁹ In 1905, Eiríkr Magnússon came up with a variety of possibilities. He said that *Þursasker* might be in Shetland or off Thurso – ‘but perhaps the Giants’ Causeway in Ireland is meant’.¹⁰

In the past sixty years, the suggestions have become wilder. Nowadays almost all commentators want *Þursasker* to be in Shetland. If you believe that Þorfinnr Sigurðarson had a vast realm, you want it to stretch from Dublin to Unst.

In the early 1960s, Finnbogi Guðmundsson, an Icelander who was editing a new edition of *Orkneyinga Saga*, came to Shetland to look for saga-places. His proposal about *Þursasker* was startling. He made the mysterious claim that it was very likely north of Unst, because there are high skerries there, or east of Whalsay, because there are smaller ones there with access to good harbours. Finnbogi said that he had followed A.B. Taylor in that idea, which (as we have seen) was not the case.¹¹

Eventually Barbara Crawford took up the subject. She is convinced that Arnórr’s verse is ‘a succinct assessment of the [Orkney] earldom thalassocracy at its widest’.¹² So *Þursasker* must be in Shetland. Browsing in Jakob Jakobsen’s work on Shetland place-names, Crawford came upon a fishing-ground called *Da Tussek*. Jakobsen said that it was in North Unst, but he gave no information about its meaning, or its exact locality.¹³

8. *Heimskringla* (ed. Unger): 858.

9. *Orkneyinga Saga and Magnus Saga* (ed. Gudbrand Vigfússon): 409.

10. *Stories of the Kings of Norway* (trans. Eiríkr Magnússon): 251.

11. *Orkneyinga saga* (ed. Finnbogi Guðmundsson): 81–82.

12. Crawford 2013: 162.

13. Jakobsen 1936: 168.

Crawford thought that it was ‘a possible pointer to the former existence of a very similar name for skerries in that locality’. It was ‘exactly the place’, she thought, ‘where outlying rocks (such as the Muckle Flugga group) would be well-known to Norse mariners as the first indication of the islands in the western sea’.¹⁴

Crawford’s navigational suggestion is wrong. No one sailing from Norway to Shetland can see Muckle Flugga en route. But it is worth looking as closely as we can at *Da Tussek*.¹⁵ The termination *-ek* suggests strongly that it is a diminutive. Peder Gammeltoft suggested to me that *Tussek* might be a name related to the Shetland dialect word *tusk*, meaning tangled hair, perhaps referring to seaweed.¹⁶ I then noticed the word *trussibelt* (‘a kind of long-stalked seaweed’) in Jakobsen’s Shetland dictionary. Noting similar seaweed words in Iceland and the Faroes – *þussaskegg* and *tussingur* – Jakobsen derived the first part of the Shetland word from Old Norse *þurs* (‘giant’ or ‘ogre’), the same word that gave rise to *Þursasker*.¹⁷

We shall never know much about *Da Tussek*. We do not even know where it was in the north of Unst. The name is obsolete. But we can guess that it was a little stretch of seaweed, somewhere offshore; not a spectacle for Arnórr or Þorfinnr to get excited about. In any case – this is a complex point – the ‘giant’ content of each of the names (*Þursasker* and *Da Tussek*) must involve skerries or seaweed – not both!

Meanwhile, there is a complication. In *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, the king of Scotland is said to have announced in 1248 that he did not mean to pause

14. Crawford 1987: 75.

15. I am grateful to Peder Gammeltoft for discussion about the name.

16. Jakobsen 1932: 950.

17. Jakobsen 1932: 973.

[...] *fyrir en hann hefði merki sitt sett austr em Þursasker ok undir sik unnit allt Nóregs konungs ríki, þat er hann átti fyrir vestan Sólundarhaf.*¹⁸

[...] before he had set his standard east in Þursasker, and brought under himself all the Norwegian king's dominion that he owned to the west of the Solund Sea.¹⁹

P.A. Munch, perhaps with Arnórr's verse in mind, thought that King Alexander's *Þursasker* 'must have been a rock or skerry eastward either of Orkney or Shetland, the place of which we have not been able to find'.²⁰ But the saga says that 'Alexander was very greedy for the [Norwegian] realm in the Southern Isles' (*Suðreyjar*) – that is, the Hebrides. As a result, the most recent editors of the saga say that this *Þursasker* was west of the Hebrides, and not in the north at all.²¹

Summing up: it seems to me likely that (a) the name *Þursasker*, in *Orkneyinga saga* and *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, refers to different places; (b) both places were in the west, in Ireland and the Hebrides, rather than the north; or even that (c) the term refers to far-flung imaginary places. My last option is perhaps least likely; if it is right, I suspect that the name would appear more frequently in literary sources. I propose that there is more than one *Þursasker*, both in the west.

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18. *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* (ed. Sverrir Jakobsson et al.): 146.

19. The Solund Sea is between Norway and Scotland.

20. *Chronicle of Man* (ed. Munch): 106n.

21. *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* (ed. Sverrir Jakobsson et al.): 337.

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