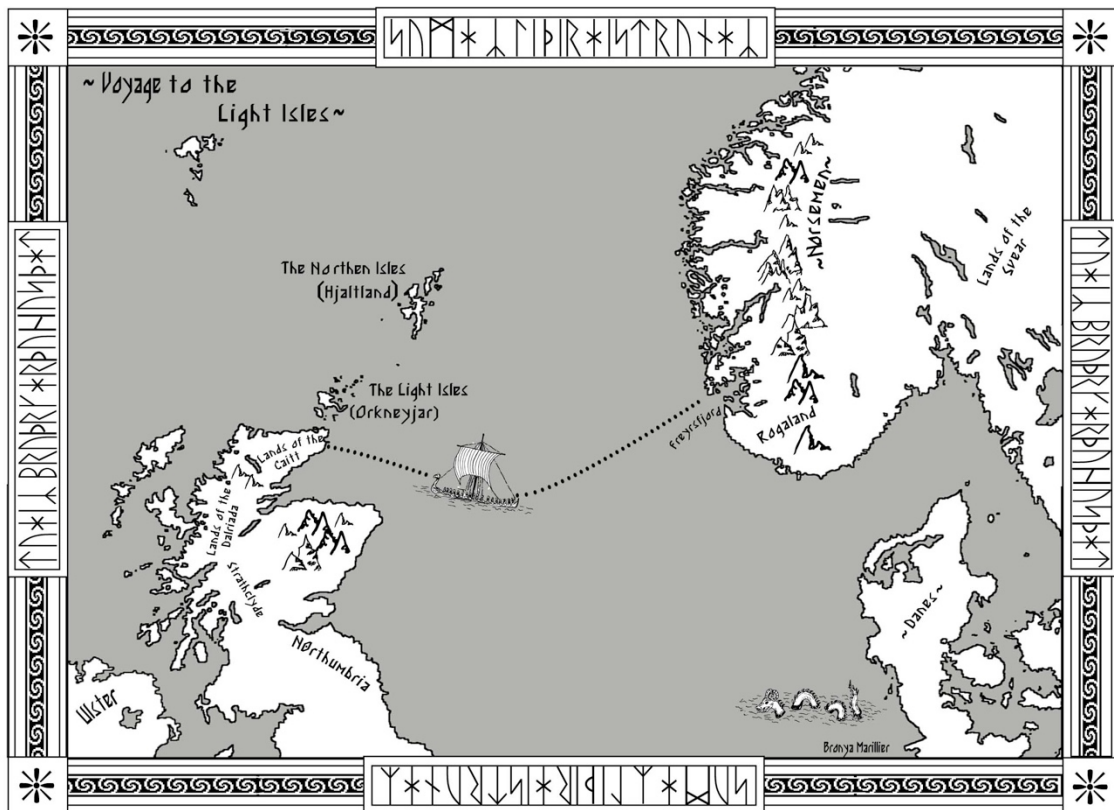


SAGA OF THE LIGHT ISLES

Maps & Historical Notes

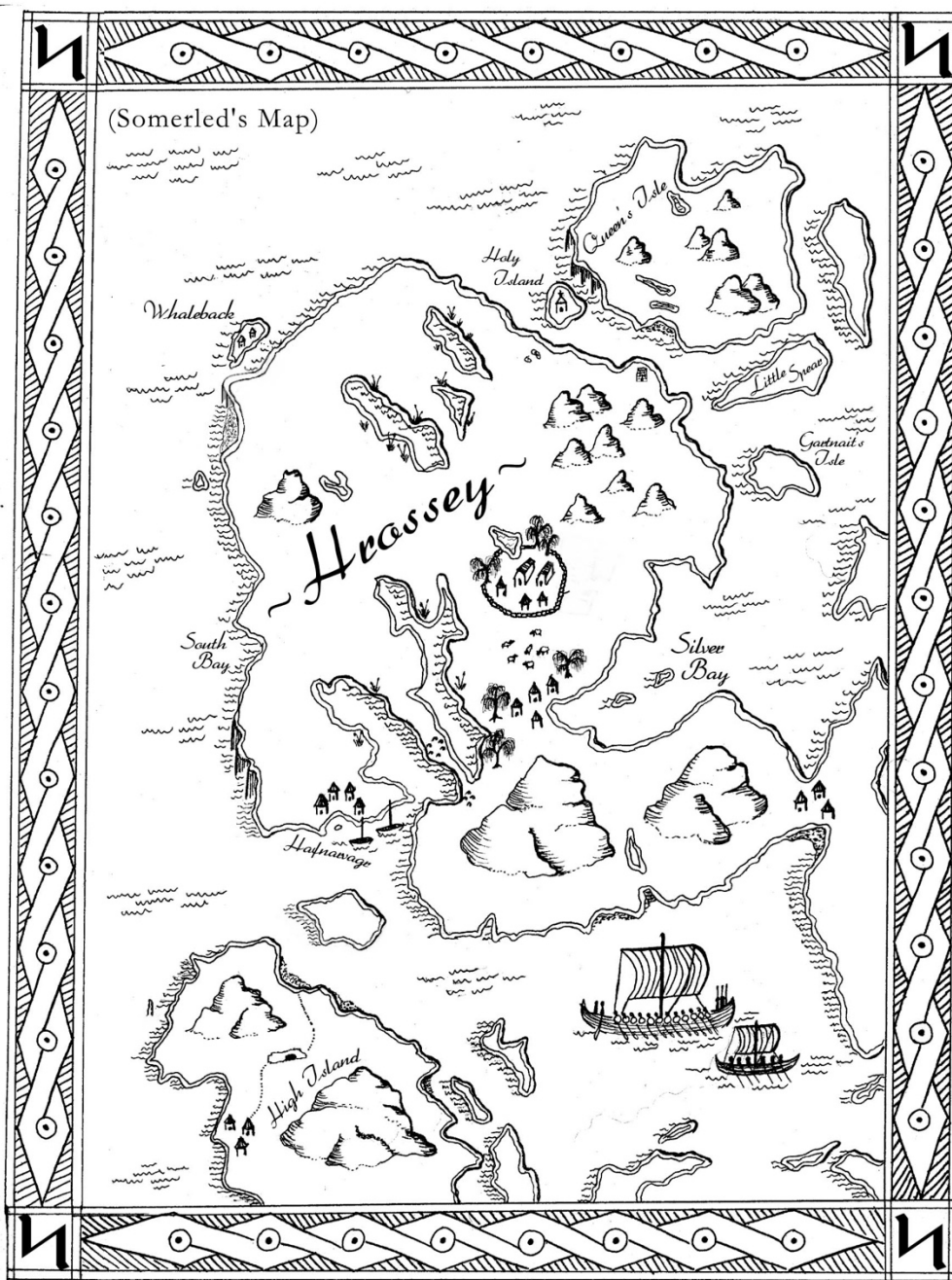
JOURNEY TO THE LIGHT ISLES MAP

MAP BY BRONYA MARILLIER



SOMERLED'S MAP

MAP BY BRONYA MARILLIER



WOLFSKIN HISTORICAL NOTE

Orkney's history exists in the very bone of the islands. Culture overlays culture: Neolithic houses, chambered cairns and stone circles, Bronze Age burial cists, Iron Age brochs lying cheek by jowl with remnants of later settlement by those elusive and independent people, the Picts, whose most stunning legacy is their symbol stones. After them came the Vikings, and with their arrival, the rapid establishment of a Norse culture in the islands. By AD 880 Orkney had become a Norse earldom ruled by Rognvald of More.

The Orkneyinga Saga, written by an Icelandic chronicler in around AD 1200, tells the story of Norse settlement in Orkney. Prior to that, we have only the archaeological remains and passing references from sources of varying reliability. The Saga tells us nothing of the people who lived in the islands prior to the Norse arrival. It is likely they bore the blood of both Iron Age ancestors and more recent Celtic immigrants. The archaeological evidence points to a Pictish-style culture. Their kings owed a token allegiance to the Pictish kings of Caithness, but geographic isolation gave them a certain degree of independence.

So what happened? Did a Viking invasion wipe them out in battle, or did the newcomers arrive gradually, welcoming the opportunity to settle in a place that offered good grazing land and sheltered fishing grounds? The transition to the dominance of Norse blood and Norse ways may have been peaceable, intermarriage eventually causing the absorption of one culture into another. That raises its own set of questions. Can such a change occur without the loss of something precious and irreplaceable: ancestral identity?

Such 'grey areas' in history are an irresistible lure for writers of historical fiction. In *Wolfskin* I have not attempted to re-create the history of the first Norse arrival in Orkney. A great deal of the story, not least its magical and folkloric elements, is imagination. I've simply presented one possible picture of how it might have been when the old inhabitants of the isles first encountered these fearsome strangers from the east with their vastly different culture. What might each have thought? Was it ever possible for them to understand each other? How much did each stand to lose?

The Folk, then, are my own creation, as is their king, Engus. But they are based on what we know of Pictish culture in Orkney. I have allowed them their own names for places and landmarks, since most of the current ones are of Norse derivation. Most of the places in this story can be found on a modern map under other titles. The Whaleback, site of Engus's court, is the Brough of Birsay, which still bears the remains of a substantial Pictish settlement overlaid by Norse buildings. Other places on Somerled's map are given the names his own folk bestowed on them, the old Norse names such as Hrossey and Hafnarvagr. The Kin Stone was indeed shattered by a careless hand at some point in its history. The original can be seen in the Museum of Scotland. The Great Stone of Oaths, known as the Odin Stone, is gone now, victim of an over-zealous farmer. The greater and lesser stone circles still stand, and close by them you may

possibly find the old howe where Eyvind and Nessa sheltered together. You can even walk up to the hollow where they sat and looked out westwards, not far from the highest point of Marwick Head. You can take a ferry across to Hoy (High Island) and walk up to the Dwarfie Stane, the rock-cut tomb which so impressed that perceptive chieftain, Ulf.

The little brothers and their perilous journeys from Ireland were entirely real. Early monastic settlement in Orkney is well documented; Eynhallow (Holy Island) is their home in *Wolfskin*, but in fact they were scattered in many parts of the islands and had a strong influence on Orcadian culture.

Orkney was only half the inspiration for this story. The other half lay with the ultimate warrior of his time, the berserk or berserker. The name almost certainly derives from berserkir, bear shirts. Another title for such warriors was *ulfhednar*, wolfskins. Such apparel marked their special status as the elite strike force of a king or nobleman.

Paddy Griffith's excellent book, *The Viking Art of War* (Greenhill Books, 1995) was responsible for sparking off my interest with its insight into the nature of berserks. The common view that such a soldier was a psychotic, shield-chewing oaf who rushed naked into battle sits poorly with his description in the saga literature, where he is usually highly respected and, like other Vikings, pops off home to do the seeding, gather the harvest or father a child in between his military duties. There are references to bands of berserk brothers hired en masse, and others suggesting that hallucinogenic substances or shamanistic practices may have played a part in the berserk's ability to summon an insane, trance-like courage.

Then there was the spiritual aspect: the berserks were usually followers of Odin, trickiest of gods, and fought in obedience to a vow that would guarantee them glory in the afterlife. In *Wolfskin*, my troop of warriors owes allegiance to Thor, whose straightforward nature seems to me better suited to a soldier's god.

Having fixed on berserk warrior as hero, I then found my tale exploring the theme of loyalty and vows. To a man in Viking times a blood oath was deeply binding, as was a promise to a god. To break such an oath was to betray one's honour; to step far beyond the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. Eyvind faces a dilemma that tests him to the utmost. In such a case, perhaps only a man of transparent goodness can find a solution that is both compassionate and honourable.

*This historical note first appeared in Pan Macmillan's 2002 edition of *Wolfskin*
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FOXMASK HISTORICAL NOTE

In location, geography and terrain, the Lost Isles bear a close resemblance to the Faroes, a group of eighteen islands situated approximately halfway between Norway and Iceland. But Foxmask is not a novel about the Faroes. The setting and characters exist somewhere between history and mythology, and the Lost Isles themselves are part real, part imagined. The place names used in this book include loose translations of the actual names for various parts of the Faroes, and pure inventions. For example, the Isle of Streams (Streymoy) and the Witch's Finger (Trøllkonufingur) reflect the existing Faroese names. I renamed many places in keeping with the story.

You can find the locations of the events in Foxmask on a map of the Faroe Islands, though I have taken some creative liberties with the terrain and distances. The westernmost island of Mykines, which wears a semipermanent shawl of cloud, is the Isle of Clouds, and the inland lake of Sörvágsvatn, with its precipice and waterfall, is Brightwater. Council Fjord is really Sörvágsfjörður, and the town of Sörvágur marks the approximate location of Asgrim's camp. Windswept Vágar has become the Isle of Storms, and Midvágur is Blood Bay. This village is still the scene of some of the bloodiest occurrences of the grindadráp, in which pods of pilot whales are herded to the beach for slaughter.

As for the Fool's Tide, these days a ferry makes the trip between Vágar and Mykines regularly, except in the worst weather. The permanent population of Mykines, where Keeper built his wife a house, is fifteen hardy souls, along with large numbers of puffins, gannets and other birds. The island does indeed have just one rather tricky landing place. The sea crossing is rough, and I did the trip by helicopter, a common form of transport in the Faroes. We passed over layered, rock-crowned peaks that still bore caps of snow in May. The strait between Vágar and Mykines is dangerous for small boats. It features in the old accounts of St Brendan's voyage, and in Tim Severin's tale of its re-enactment, *The Brendan Voyage* (Abacus, 1996), as particularly difficult to navigate. Legends grow up easily around such perilous places; they are coded warnings, designed to keep fishermen out of harm's way.

The first book in this series, *Wolfskin*, dealt with a Viking voyage to Orkney and was in many respects based on real or possible history. Foxmask is a little different. We do know that the Faroe Islands were settled by people from southern Norway and Orkney at around the time this book is set. It is also known that Irish monks made their way to these distant islands, very probably well before the Norse arrivals. It's an inhospitable realm, and was settled by the hardest and most tenacious people. The weather is extreme, the narrow channels between the islands are dangerous, and the land is marginal for farming. The fishing is unsurpassed. Written records of this early settlement are few and far between, with most accounts being set down hundreds of years after the fact.

So, how much of the story of Foxmask is true, or could be true, and how much is pure fantasy? The following are at least possible, or even probable: the existence of isolated hermitages on the islands and the voyages there of intrepid Christians such as Breccan; the presence of settlers like Asgrim and his Long Knife people, scratching a living from the sea and from their tenacious island sheep whose dreadlocked, multicoloured descendants wander those hills today. The voyage of Thorvald, Sam and Creidhe in their fishing boat from Orkney is also possible, though it would have been a testing trip with such a small crew. Still, if St Brendan could do it in a curragh of ox skins from the west coast of Ireland, they could do it in their sturdier craft, provided the weather was on their side.

The people of the Seal Tribe are based on a number of folkloric sources. The existence of such ocean creatures, neither benign nor inimical to man, just profoundly Other, is alluded to in the old tales of many island-dwelling cultures.

As for the Unspoken and their small seer, Foxmask, they spring purely from imagination. History does not tell us whether there were any folk dwelling in the Faroe Islands prior to the coming of the Christians, but there could have been. I created a race in keeping with the highly challenging nature of that environment. Had they existed, I have no doubt their culture and beliefs would have been enmeshed with the forces of nature on which their survival depended.

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