

For Viking Descendants, it's a Providential Miracle we were ever Procreated, considering the High-Risk Lifestyles of our Viking Forefathers and Foremothers.

To illustrate, consider this brief review of the related lives of Sigurd the Mighty, Maelbrigte Deadly-Tooth, Aud the Deep-minded, Ketil Flat-nose, Thorstein the Red, Thorfinn Skull-splitter, Groa, and a few others.

Yes, for those of us who are descended from the Vikings of Scandinavia, it's a providential miracle that we ever got procreated! Consider the high-risk lifestyles of our Viking ancestors, and then consider how family histories could have been a lot different, resulting in you or me never being born!

During the late 800s (A.D.), many Norwegians emigrated from Norway, for various reasons, depending on a person's concept of "opportunity". Among those migrating south and/or west were Norse Vikings Ketil, Ketil's daughter Aud, and Sigurd. Those Norwegian emigrants' lives would later interact with a Norwegian emigrant named Olaf, and also with a Scot named Maelbrigte the Deadly-toothed, eventually impacting a ruler of Orkney, Thorfinn Skullsplitter. (*The names themselves show this is great family history!*)



Most of the action (that we are concerned with) **occurred in "Orkney"**. Under Harald Fairhair, the kingdom of Norway asserted itself as a super-power in the North Atlantic world, actively trading (and raiding) all over the Baltic Sea shorelands, as well as in the islands of the North Atlantic.

One such island dominion was the archipelago ORKNEY. The term "Orkney" once referred to the island today known as the "Orkney Islands" plus the neighboring islands now known as the "Shetland Islands". During A.D. 874, when Harald Fair-hair was king of Norway, these islands became the possession of a Norwegian nobleman named Ragnvald ("the Wise") of More, but Ragnvald did not want to rule those islands. So, Ragnvald gave those islands to his brother, Sigurd "the Mighty". (Sigurd, we shall see, had an ally, Thorstein, son of Aud the Deep-Minded.)



ORKNEY ISLANDS



Sigurd I “the Mighty”, Norwegian Earl of Orkney, aggressively set out to conquer (i.e., to “harry” first, to gain political control, removing all pre-existing competition and other local resistance, then impose tax-producing administration second) northern Scotland, using pirate tactics to acquire desired resources. Sigurd took control of Orkney in about A.D. 874, and ruled there till his death in 892. Sigurd, with the help of a close ally, **Thorstein the Red Olafsson** (son of Aud and of her husband, Dublin’s king Olaf the White, who acted at times as an ally to Ragnvald of More), conquered much of northern Scotland, including Pictland’s Caithness, Sutherland, and parts of Ross and Moray. The most colorful episode in Sigurd’s career is recounted in the *Orkneyinga Saga*, in its *chapter 5*.

Sigurd challenged a regional *mormaer* (Gaelic equivalent of “earl”) of Moray, **Maelbrigte**, for control of Moray (in Scotland), the eastern “bulge” region

which includes the land around Aberdeen and the Moray Firth coastal area). A meeting was arranged, with an agreement that each would bring 40 horsemen as bodyguards (to keep the negotiations “honest”). Sigurd decided to deceive Maelbrigte, so his 40 horses each carried two men! The “negotiations” quickly turned into a battle, and Maelbrigte was killed. To “shock and awe” the people of Moray, Sigurd decided to ride throughout the countryside with *mormaer* Maelbrigte’s severed head hanging at Sigurd’s saddle, to signify the intended fate of all who challenge Sigurd’s rule over northern Scotland, and had his men to do likewise with other Scottish heads.



The saga recounts: “There was a fierce fight, but it wasn’t long before Maelbrigte and his men were dead. Sigurd had their heads strapped to the victors’ saddles to make a show of his triumph, and with that they began riding back home, flushed with their success. On the way, as Sigurd went to spur his horse, he struck his calf [i.e., his bare lower leg]

against a tooth sticking out of Maelbrigte's mouth[,] and it gave him a scratch. The wound began to swell and ache, and it was this [blood-poisoning infection] that led to the death of Sigurd the Powerful. He lies buried in a mound on the bank of the River Oykel" [which flows into the Dornoch Firth, just north of Moray Firth]. *Quoting* pages 27–28 of Orkneyinga Saga: the History of the Earls of Orkney (Penguin Books, 1981), as translated by H. Palsson & P. Edwards.

Although this is not where the expression “taking a bite out of crime” began, it does seem like Maelbrigte got his just revenge! Sigurd's son Guthorm succeeded him as Orkney's earl, but he died childless within a year, so the earldom reverted back to Ragnvald the Wise of More.



Now the spotlight turns to Aud the Deep-Minded (a/k/a “Unn”), daughter of Ketil Flat-Nose.

Aud was the wife of Olaf “the White” Gothfrithsson, Norwegian king of Dublin (already mentioned as an ally of Ragnvald of More), until Olaf divorced Aud (after falling out with Ketil, her father). Having geographical roots from the same Norwegian province (More) of Earl Ragnvald, it is unsurprising that Ketil's family interacted with Ragnvald's family, and also with Ragnvald's allies (including Olaf the White).

What caused Olaf to divorce Aud? Ketil allied himself with Dublin's Norwegian king Olaf the White, and gave Aud to him for a wife (but she was not to be the only wife Olaf ever had). Thus, for a time, Aud the Deep-Minded was a queen of Norwegian Dublin, on the east coast of Ireland. Aud's husband (Olaf) delegated a task to her father (Ketil), to “clean up” and subjugate the islands just west of Scotland, the “*Sudreys*” (today called the Hebrides – a place where Leif Eriksson would later father a son). This was an awkward arrangement, because Ketil, the father-in-law, was taking orders from King Olaf, his own son-in-law. Ketil so enjoyed conquering the Hebrides that he styled himself as “king of the Hebrides”, an honor not previously “authorized” by Olaf. The strife which resulted triggered Olaf divorcing Aud, although Ketil remained in control of the Hebrides. However, before their “royal” divorce, Aud had given birth – many years before – to Olaf's son, Thorstein “the Red” Olafsson, who would make a famous Viking reputation, for himself, in the region in and around northern



Scotland. (Aud herself would become famous in Iceland, as a devoted Christian known for her prayer habits, and as a matriarch of Iceland's Laxdale region, i.e., the Salmon River Valley, recounted in the *Laxdaela Saga*, etc.)

Thorstein “the Red”, Aud’s son, as head-of-household, led the affairs of Aud’s extended family, including their dozens of household “thralls” (slaves), as well as Thorstein’s own children (i.e., Aud’s grandchildren). Thorstein had married **Thorida**, granddaughter of king **Cerball** of Ossory (in Ireland), an old ally of Thorstein’s father (Olaf the White). The clan lived in northern Scotland.

Thorstein was a famous Viking himself, often allied with **Sigurd the Mighty** (the Earl of Orkney who died from **Maelbrigte**’s tooth-wound), governing much of Caithness and Sutherland from about 875 to about 900.

But when Thorstein was killed, Aud knew her prospects in northern Scotland were **bad** (because her family had accumulated many enemies over the years). So, Aud, who was already a grandmother of at least two marriageable granddaughters at that time, secretly had a great Viking ship built in the forest, then sailed north, toward Iceland, where two of her brothers lived after they emigrated from Norway). [Dr. Bill Cooper has doubts that Aud’s old homestead was really called “*Dunraidin*”.]



En route to Iceland, however, Aud’s group stopped in the Orkneys. While there, with Aud’s encouragement, **Groa**, one of Thorstein’s daughters, married **Duncan** (also “**Dungad**”), a *mormaer* from Caithness; Groa, in time, gave birth to **Grelod**, who eventually grew up to marry a later Earl of Orkney, **Thorfinn I “Skull-splitter”** (Earl of Orkney from about A.D. 947 to 977), who himself was Ragnvald the Wise’s grandson (i.e., a son of Ragnvald’s illegitimate son **Turf-Einar**, who had succeeded to Guthrom’s earldom when Guthorm died childless around 893). So, the marriage of Earl **Thorfinn “Skull-splitter”** (grandson of Ragnvald “the Wise”) and **Grelod** (great-granddaughter of Aud “the Deep-Minded”) fatefully joined the “*House of the Wise*” with the “*House of the Deep-Minded*”.

Before reaching Iceland, Aud stopped briefly in the **Faeroe Islands**, and a second granddaughter (Thorstein’s daughter Olof) stayed there, marrying one of the Faeroese

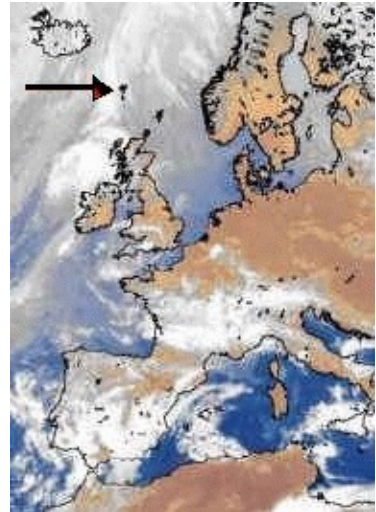
men. Their descendants include the household of the Gotuskeggjar.

Imagine how human history is irrevocably impacted by the providential flight of Aud the Deep-Minded, to Iceland, and by her interlocutory stops *en route* (in Orkney, and the Faeroes). The earls of the Orkney Islands, for example, would bear Aud's genes for generations, as would also the Faeroese House of Gotuskeggjar.



This biogenetic history is documented in the *Orkneyinga Saga* (Penguin Classics 1981 ed., trans. by Hermann Palsson & Paul

Edwards), at page 225, showing Earl **Thorfinn** Skull-splitter's son (via **Grelod**, Aud's great-granddaughter) **Hlodvir** as Orkney's earl, plus Hlodvir's son **Sigurd** as earl, then Sigurd's son **Thorfinn** ("II") the Black as Orkney's first Christian earl, then his son **Paul** as earl, then his son **Hakon** as earl, etc.



Furthermore, other historic sources record an **Ingibjorg** as a daughter of Orkney's Earl Hakon Paulsson. In time, Ingibjorg (wife of Manx king Olaf the Red) became the mother of **Ragnhild** Olafsdottir, who in turn (upon marrying **Somerled**, another Manx king) became the royal mother of **Ragnald** Somerledsson (another Manx king), — and their family line continues on, dozens of generations later, even unto today, including this article's author, thanks be to God's providence!



In other words, despite all of the danger and death of the violent Viking generations, God providentially preserved many family lineages, one of which (Aud the Deep-minded's lineage through Grelod, her great-granddaughter who married Thorfinn Skull-splitter) facilitated the authoring of these very words you are now reading.

Can you even imagine the terrible possibility of you never being born? What if you had never been conceived inside your mother? (Surely you would not be reading this sentence, much less thinking about the answer to that question!) And yet, much more was

necessary, biologically speaking, than just your own two parents biologically conceiving you, — because both of them had to themselves be conceived, biologically speaking, with the exact biogenetic identities that each of them had, — and the same is true for each of your four biological grandparents, and also for each of your eight biological great-grandparents, and also for each of your sixteen biological great–great–grandparents, and so on!

Although in many cases, our ancestors lived at



great distances from one another (in Ireland, Norway, Scotland, Orkney, the Faeroes, Iceland, or wherever!), yet God providentially brought them together, physically (and socially), so that they could and would together procreate someone who is one of your ancestors, and thus is biologically part of why you are exactly you. In the history of human biogenesis, there are no “superfluous” ancestors — they all “count” or else the next generation (of that genetic lineage) never comes into being!

So, due to dangerous lifestyles, it was, time after time, conception after conception, one providential miracle after another, that many of your (and my) ancestors lived long enough to procreate a critical part of your family lineage (and/or mine). Yet here



we are, by God’s providence, existing as human beings — created as a direct result, biologically speaking, of many, many, many generations of fore-fathers and fore-mothers, most of whom we don’t even know the names of — and yet, without them we would not even exist !

Reprinted, with revisions, from James J. S. Johnson’s “Maelbrigte’s Revenge, Aud the Deep-Minded, and other Highlights from Norse Viking History: How the House of the Wise Joined the House of the Deep-Minded; or, Families that

Harry Together, Marry Together”, Viking History & Heritage Review (March 2005), © 2005 James J. S. Johnson. Photo of the author and his wife while visiting Iceland, in summer of A.D. 2002.