



**Ian Peter Grohse.** *Frontiers for Peace in the Medieval North: The Norwegian-Scottish Frontier c. 1260-1470.* Northern World Series. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2017. 300 pp. \$121.00, cloth, ISBN 978-90-04-34253-8.

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*Frontiers for Peace in the Medieval North* deals with the Isles of Orkney between the 1266 Treaty of Perth, in which the Norwegian king ceded the Hebrides and the Isle of Man to Scotland, and 1468, when Orkney was itself pledged to the Scottish crown. Its central thesis is that this period was a time of relative peace that did not witness Orcadians and Norwegians struggling against encroaching Scots.

The book begins by arguing that the Norwegian and Scottish kings promoted mobility between Orkney and mainland Scotland. According to Ian Peter Grohse, they saw Orkney as a convenient site for diplomacy between the two countries. The Orcadian earls, administrators, and bishops were employed by the Norwegian kings as agents of this diplomacy. Especially the earls of Orkney played a pivotal role, as they held the earldoms of Orkney and Caithness in tandem, and were therefore vassals of both the Norwegian and Scottish kings. Many of Orkney's earls and administrators were Scottish in origin, which, Grohse emphasizes, shows that the Norwegian rulers were not led by anti-Scottish sentiments in appointing their frontier officials. Military precautions were taken to defend Orkney, but the Scottish crown never attacked the islands. In previous literature, the intrusion of Scottish law was per-

ceived as a real threat to Orkney's law and custom. Grohse refutes this and shows a continuity of Norwegian law well beyond the period under investigation. The last chapter is an application of the concept of "nativism" to the Orcadians' outlook on foreigners and immigrants.

In arguing its case, *Frontiers for Peace* does not answer a question so much as it posits the thesis of a peaceful frontier and presents the reader the evidence for it in the sources. At times, this choice results in a lack of explicit analysis, which could have enlightened the reader about how Grohse interprets the same sources differently from other authors, and what the consequences of these interpretations are. While Grohse posits some interesting new perspectives on the transition of Orkney, his analysis remains too superficial to drive his points home. For the claim that Orkney was a site of diplomacy, for instance, and that its earls and administrators had a diplomatic task, the evidence supplied to the reader permits other interpretations, and the claim is not substantiated sufficiently to rule them out.

Similarly, no definitions are given for some of the more important concepts in the book. Formal definitions are by no means a prerequisite in the historical discipline, but they could have more clearly circumscribed the concepts treated in

*Frontiers for Peace*. How the author sees peace and conflict is not discussed, for example, and as a result some of his characterizations of conflict and disturbances of the peace can be confusing. Grohse sees the 1312 attacks on Orkney by bands of Highlanders as piracy rather than military confrontation, and therefore excludes them from the discussion of conflicts. Furthermore, Grohse emphasizes that whatever conflict there was, it was not endorsed or instigated by the Scottish crown. His definition of conflict then seems to be outright war between the Scottish and Norwegian crowns, and his definition of peace the absence of it, not so much the safety of the Orcadian population or the absence of armed conflict on the islands. Nonetheless, “policing” is included as a means of maintaining peace.

More important, while the thesis of a peaceful frontier is novel, it does not provide a satisfactory alternative theory for the incorporation of Orkney into the Scottish sphere of influence and ultimately into Scottish territory. The book does not go into why and how the earldom of Orkney was ceded to Scotland. Grohse distances himself from the political struggles for power suggested by previous scholarship, and instead proposes a frontier without disagreement, outspoken identities, or noteworthy conflict. This theory unfortunately has less explanatory value than existing ones.

While *Frontiers for Peace* is firmly embedded in the literature of Orkney’s history, the views it is positioned against are rather old. This makes it difficult to assess the contribution of the book. The authors treated most prominently, P. A. Munch and J. S. Clouston, published their works on Orkney in the mid-nineteenth century and the 1920s and ’30s respectively. Whereas Grohse states that their national take on Orkney’s transition is still to be found in recent literature, he gives only few examples of this. A discussion of how the national interpretation of the events on Orkney differed over time and from author to author is wanting. Furthermore, the book lacks a

thorough discussion of recent literature, which makes it difficult to appraise the author’s revisions.

Two more recent strands of literature that could be relevant to the book are New Diplomatic History and the literature on dispute settlement and conflict resolution. The first four chapters of *Frontiers for Peace* fit neatly into New Diplomatic History, a field that moves away from defining diplomacy solely as the product of permanent representation and interstate discussion. In doing so, New Diplomatic History includes various forms of cross-border contact as diplomacy, and a range of agents engaged in such contact as diplomats. A notable difference is that Grohse sees diplomacy primarily as a means for establishing and maintaining peace on the Scottish-Norwegian frontier, whereas New Diplomatic History also focuses on the potential of diplomacy for bellicose purposes.[1]

Chapters 5, “Military and Defense,” and 6, “Law and Communal Identity,” fit in more with legal history and literature on dispute settlement. At least from the 1970s onward, historians have nurtured an increasing interest in conflict, disputes, and violence, seeing them no longer merely as destructive symptoms of unordered societies. This literature mostly focuses on understanding the societies under investigation, often working from an ethnographical perspective or applying anthropological insights in the investigation of the underlying reasons for conflict, the rationale behind it, and the mechanisms to resolve it.[2] *Frontiers for Peace* seems to move in this direction, stating that when the social and political impact of armed conflicts on the frontier are studied, “the question is whether, and how, leaders managed to neutralize those conflicts, restore public order and discourage further hostilities” (p. 168). Unfortunately, this question is not answered in the book.

The book is thematically structured, and the discussion of some events is divided over several

chapters. Based on this layout and the fact that there is no general overview of the author's take on Orkney's history in this period, *Frontiers for Peace* appears to be written for an audience profoundly familiar with Orkney's medieval history. I believe the book could have benefited from a chronological order, perhaps followed by two or three thematic chapters to treat key aspects relevant to its central thesis in detail. This format could have given the same amount of information in fewer pages, and would have enhanced the clarity of the argument, thereby making the book accessible for a wider audience.

That being said, Grohse has conducted his research thoroughly, delving into the primary sources in Latin, Middle Norse, and Scots English. He presents his sources in very readable, pleasantly worded translations throughout the book. Grohse is at his best when giving an interesting interpretation of the term "Wild Scots." Analogous to lowland sources, the term is used by Orcadians to describe Gaelic-speaking Highlanders, who were apparently deemed more wild than their Anglophone, lowland counterparts. The distinction was no coincidence, as the language of the Orcadian community, which started out as Norse exclusively, increasingly came to include Scots English. Grohse interprets this as a consequence of the islands' orientation toward lowland Scotland.

All in all, *Frontiers for Peace* brings a novel perspective to the Scottish-Norwegian frontier, but it lacks the focus and argumentation to establish this view within the existing literature. The book is best read by students of Orkney's medieval history, whose familiarity with the sources and historiography bypasses the need for explicit analysis and discussion of the most recent literature on the subject.

#### Notes

[1]. Jeremy Black, *A History of Diplomacy* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 11-13; and John Watkins, "Toward a New Diplomatic History of

Medieval and Early Modern Europe," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 38, no. 1 (2008): 1-14.

[2]. For a seminal work on dispute settlement, see Wendy Davies and Paul Fouracre, *The Settlement of Disputes in Early Medieval Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). A recent publication that focuses on disputes in medieval Scandinavia is Kim Esmark, Lars Hermanson, Hans Jacob Orning, and Helle Vogt, eds., *Disputing Strategies in Medieval Scandinavia* (Leiden: Brill, 2013). An example of the anthropological approach to peacemaking can be found in the Icelandic feuding context. See William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

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