

Resource Pack

Can you complete the Earl Thorfinn quest?

You may need to do a little extra research:

- Visit the SCRAN website www.scran.ac.uk and access the relevant records using the SCRAN ID numbers provided under each resource
- Visit [places of interest](#)
- Do your own research by following [links](#)
- Investigate the CD-ROM *The Scottish People 800-1450 – People of a kingdom*, Learning and Teaching Scotland www.ltscotland.org.uk, email: enquiries@LTScotland.com, tel: Customer Services

Earl Thorfinn of Orkney

- Earl of Orkney from 1014-1065
- One of the most powerful and landed earls of Orkney and the north of Scotland
- Went on a pilgrimage to Rome in 1040
- Responsible for the greatest conversion to Christianity in the Orkneys and northern territories



Artist's representation of a Norseman from the 10th-11th centuries.

Finding Facts

1. Who was Earl Thorfinn's father?
2. In 995, Earl Thorfinn's father was forced to convert to Christianity by which King of Norway?
3. Who was Thorfinn's mother's father?
 - (a) The King of Man
 - (b) The King of Scots
 - (c) The King of Norway

Looking at Evidence

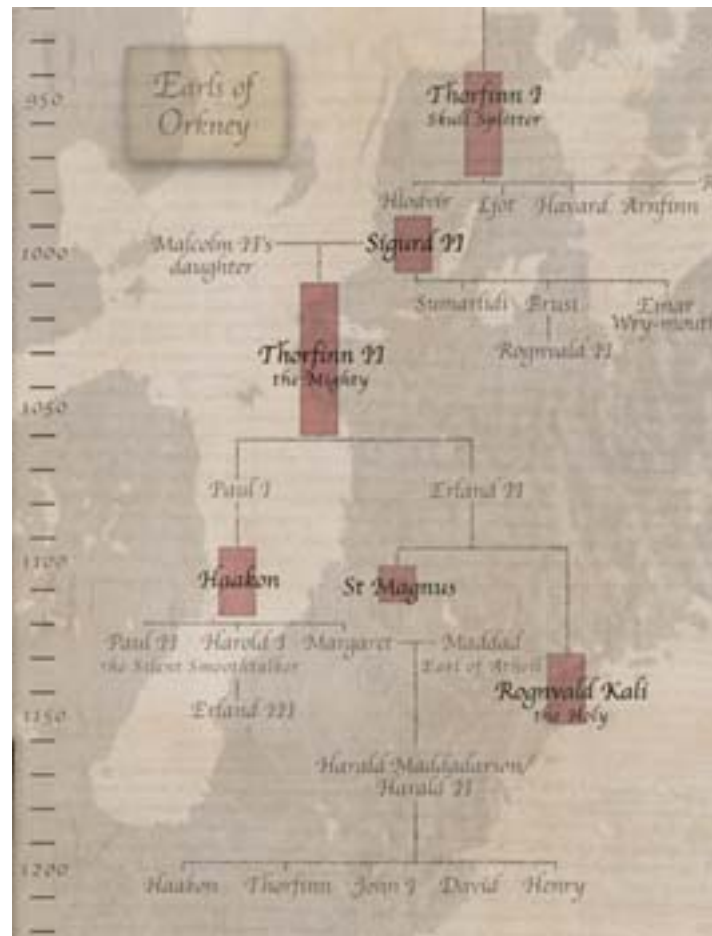
4.

'Earl Thorfinn now became a powerful chief. He was a most martial-looking man, and of great energy; greedy of wealth and of renown; bold and successful in war, and a great strategist. He was five years old when he received the title of Earl and fourteen when he went forth from his own territory on maritime expeditions.'

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*Listen** to this excerpt from the *Orkneyinga Saga* describing Earl Thorfinn. What kind of character can you imagine him being? The *Orkneyinga Saga* was written many years ago. How true do you think his description might be?

5.



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Look at this family tree or ‘bloodlines’ of the earls of Orkney from the 10th to the 13th centuries.

- Name Thorfinn’s 3 brothers and rivals for the title ‘Earl of Orkney’.
- Earl Thorfinn converted to Christianity. What was his son’s name? Is this significant?
- What is the name of Thorfinn’s ambitious nephew who challenged his uncle’s authority in the north?
- How do you think Thorfinn’s mother’s family would have helped him?

6.



(a) The remains of the church at Birsay on Orkney, built by Thorfinn in the 11th century for the first Bishop of Orkney.

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(b) The nave of St Magnus Cathedral in Orkney, founded in the 12th century.

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The conversion of Earl Thorfinn officially brought Christianity to the Orkneys in 11th century. Consider the development from a pagan society, to the building of the first church for the Norse people at Birsay, to the grandiose European style St Magnus Cathedral.

Looking at this evidence, what changes do you think occurred in the religious life on Orkney between the 11th to the 12th centuries?

Interpretation

7. Earl Thorfinn was faced with a number of enemies. Consider why his alliance with MacBeth, Mormaer of Moray, was a clever tactic.

8. Considering Thorfinn's bloodlines, why do you think it may have been quite easy for him to convert to Christianity?

Links

<http://www.nms.ac.uk>

The National Museum of Scotland presents the history of Scotland – its land, its people and their achievements – through its rich collections built up over more than two centuries.

<http://www.scran.ac.uk/>

SCRAN is the award winning history and culture website providing instant access to images, sounds, movies and learning resources. It contains over one million records from museums, galleries and archives.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/scottishhistory/>

On this site you'll find in-depth articles, multimedia (like games, virtual tours and animations) as well as bite-size material like timelines and short biographies of historic figures. All is designed for you to get more out of your interest in History.

<http://www.nts.org.uk/>

This site contains useful information, whether you want to know more about the National Trust for Scotland's vital conservation work or are planning to visit some of the places of interest.

<http://www.ntseducation.org.uk/>

On this site there are sections which are intended to assist teachers with various topics in the school curriculum. They provide useful background material for teachers intending to explore these topics with their students.

<http://www.nationalgalleries.org/>

Education is at the heart of the work of the National Galleries of Scotland. Each of the Galleries provides a rich and lively learning resource. Our inclusive approach offers many different ways of learning to give everyone a chance to become actively engaged with art.

<http://www.historic-scotland.gov.uk>

Historic Scotland safeguards the nation's built heritage and promotes its understanding and enjoyment. You can find information on more than 300 properties and scheduled ancient monuments. We also have resources for schools and details on technical conservation and research.

<http://www.nls.ac.uk>

The National Library of Scotland – Scotland's largest library and the world centre for the study of Scotland and the Scots. A vast reference library, covering all subjects, from art to mountaineering, and from early times to the digital age.

<http://www.nas.gov.uk>

The National Archives of Scotland (or NAS) is the main archive for sources of the history of Scotland as a separate kingdom, her role in the British Isles and the links between Scotland and many other countries over the centuries.

<http://www.ltscotland.org.uk>

Learning and Teaching Scotland is a national public body sponsored by the Scottish Executive Education Department. The Scottish Executive has charged Learning and Teaching Scotland with providing advice, support, resources and staff development that enhance the quality of educational experiences with a view to improving attainment and achievement and promoting lifelong learning.

Email: enquiries@LTScotland.com

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Places of interest

St Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall, Orkney

Remains of the church at the Brough of Birsay, Orkney

Answers

1. Earl Sigurd II of Orkney
2. King Olaf Tryggvesson of Norway
3. (b) The King of Scots

4. Thorfinn is described as a mighty warrior, ambitious and determined to succeed. He is 'greedy of wealth and renown'. The description is just how we would expect a leader of the Norse colonies to be at this time.

The *Orkneyinga Sagas* were written in Iceland in the 13th and 14th centuries. It is likely the stories were passed down in an oral tradition for centuries before they were recorded. The historical facts may not therefore all be accurate, but the sagas do give us a unique insight into the medieval Scandinavian world.

5. (a) Sumarlidi, Brusi and Einar
 - (a) Thorfinn's son's name is Paul. He is the first of the Orkney earls to give his son a Christian name.
 - (b) Rognvald, Brusi's son
 - (c) She was the daughter of King Malcolm II of Scotland. This perhaps would have given Thorfinn a degree of favour within the Scottish court. He had divided allegiances that he could use to his advantage to benefit his ambitions.
6. The church at Birsay is an early example of the conversion of pagan culture to Christianity on the Orkneys. It is a basic, round church style design. By the 12th century, Christianity had spread throughout the north of Scotland and Orkney and St Magnus Cathedral was built. The development from Thorfinn's church at Birsay to St Magnus Cathedral outlines the significant change in the religious scene – Christianity became more widely accepted and moved toward the models that were developing throughout the rest of Scotland and Europe.

7. Macbeth was the son of Findlaech mac Ruaidri, Mormaer of Moray, and had a claim to be King of Scots through his mother. Duncan I was a rival for MacBeth and a threat to Thorfinn's power in the north. MacBeth killed Duncan I in 1040 and went on to become king. When Macbeth became involved in warfare farther south, Thorfinn took the opportunity to expand his own power in the north.

Thorfinn and Macbeth went on pilgrimage to Rome in the same year. Once Macbeth was King of Scots, he relied on Thorfinn's authority in the north to help him rule.

8. Thorfinn's maternal grandfather was King Malcolm II of Scots. As a result he spent a great deal of his childhood exposed to the practises of Christianity at the Scottish court. His father was pagan, but had been forced by his king, Olaf Tryggvesson to convert to Christianity in 995. Thorfinn would have been more than aware of Christian beliefs from both parents.