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'From the Minch to Man: Norse poetry and the Hebrides'

The Hebrides lie in a culturally very diverse maritime zone, with easy connections by sea to Scandinavian Scotland, Celtic Scotland, Lowland Scotland, Ireland, Wales and England. Their medieval history is particularly obscure, mainly for the lack of contemporary evidence, and the last word has by no means been said on the timescale and process by which the Gaelic language became established there. The evidence of place-names, however, shows that there was a period when the Norse language was dominant and a few runic inscriptions illustrate some of the uses of this Norse language. Recent interdisciplinary work suggests possible social contexts for a thalassocratic Norse culture. In my paper I will explore the extent to which this Norse linguistic culture was also a poetical one, considering whether or not the surviving fragments, and the broader cultural memory of the sagas of medieval Iceland, indicate a distinctive and thriving poetical culture in Norse in the Hebrides.