

Reading Material Culture in the North Atlantic: Traditional Wooden Boxes as Intercultural Objects

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Abstract - This article explores intercultural links between the coastal communities of the North Atlantic region by discussing the cultural and social history of Norwegian objects displayed in regional heritage collections in Orkney and Shetland. The relationship between Norway and the Northern Isles of Scotland during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially trading links, is considered using the bentwood box as a way of accessing both tangible and intangible knowledge. Different types of traditional wooden boxes from Shetland, Orkney, Norway, and Iceland are compared using a microhistorical approach, which enables us to consider Norway and Scotland both as individual “ethno-territories” and as part of continuously changing networks of social and cultural contact across the North Atlantic.

Introduction

Intercultural contacts between Scandinavian and Scottish coastal communities have a long history, ranging from contemporary economic and technological links through global oil and fisheries activities, to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century trading, fishing, and smuggling connections. The Northern Isles of Scotland were part of a “Nordic kingdom” until the fifteenth century. The political transfer of the islands of Orkney and Shetland from the Norwegian to the Scottish Crown took place in 1468 and 1469, respectively, as part of a marriage treaty between James III of Scotland and Christian I of Denmark and Norway, with the Scottish parliament formally annexing the earldom to the crown in 1472 (Crawford 1983:47). When the shared cultural heritage that connects Norway and Scotland is considered, Shetland and Orkney stand out as particularly evident areas of intercultural influences. Archaeological, historical, and cultural evidence suggest the regional communities were not isolated by their geographical position, but instead connected via maritime links across the North Atlantic, the Nordic world, and beyond.

Both historical texts and material culture provide opportunities to interpret and illuminate cultural production from various perspectives. When the history of material culture of the North Atlantic region is considered, a general emphasis on the Norse or Viking Age, together with emerging individual national historiographies during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, has left us with few comparative studies of the post-medieval period. The present article addresses this lack of interdisciplinary comparative research by comparing everyday objects such as the bentwood box (Fig. 1) and other traditional wooden boxes, using a microhistorical approach.

By focusing on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century everyday material culture, shared aspects of cultural and social history, such as regional uses and narratives embedded in ethnological and historical contexts, can be compared and integrated into wider micro- and macrohistories. The article concludes by relating the results of research into these specific intercultural contexts, as embodied in material culture, to the wider arena of intercultural dialogue (Blasco 2004) and the organization of Northern European cultural spaces (Jönsson et al. 2007).

Methodology: Microhistory

Microhistorians suggest that traditional methodologies of the social sciences offer generalizations “that do not hold up when tested against the concrete reality of the small-scale life they claim to explain” (Iggers 1997:108). The Icelandic microhistorian Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon discusses three main forms of microhistory (Magnússon 2006a): “history from



Figure 1. Norway Bost. Photo no. SL04852. © Shetland Museum Collection, CON. 81197. (Shetland Museum and Archives 2011).

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below”, practiced in the English-speaking world; its German counterpart “*Alltagsgeschichte*” (history of everyday life); and “*microstoria*” or microhistory, originating in Italy. He argues that where macrohistory fails “to provide any satisfactory account of the many, varied contradictions that characterize the lives of all individuals and their struggles with themselves and their environment” (Magnusson 2006b), microhistory reduces “the scale of observation”, opening up opportunities to distinguish elements in people’s lives and society that might otherwise pass unnoticed:

One of the most interesting and innovative approaches to particularly cultural and social history is microhistory. [...] By reducing the scale of observation, microhistorians argued that they are more likely to reveal the complicated function of individual relationships within each and every social setting and they stressed its difference from larger norms (Magnusson 2006b).

Contemporary microhistory studies communities, villages, and people belonging to a small area, using local historical sources, oral history, and surveys. By focusing on material culture from a small region, especially on an object that has not been documented in great detail, the methodology for this article can be extended to include both tangible and intangible cultural heritage, as well as the role of historiography itself. After considering the macrocontext for the research, this article reduces the radius of research to a single object, the bentwood box, using it as a microhistorical prism through which the intercultural links between communities and cultures across the North Atlantic region can be rediscovered. Museum artifacts from collections in the Northern Isles of Scotland are compared with examples from Norway and Iceland, and surveyed with the help of associated historical and literary sources, as well as analysis of etymologies via dictionary descriptions and examples from historical text collections.

The Macro-context: Organizing the North Atlantic

There are a number of familiar concepts that have historically been used to organize the North Atlantic region, with maritime transport, trading, and colonization being some of the main vehicles by which communities have interacted. The authors of *Organizing European Space* identify

three “networks” (Jönsson et al. 2007) central to the process of relating various European areas to each other: physical, institutional, and socio-cultural. These operate within a “territorial field of tension” (Jönsson et al. 2007:51), with societies integrating with each other (for example in a political union or a governing state), but also transforming integrative structures into regions or networks that oppose or transcend the homogenous territories on offer (Fig. 2). Transportation networks are just one of the dynamics in what Jönsson et al. (2007:51) define as a “trialogue” between space, identity, and organization. On the one hand, historical spaces such as the Norse cultural region of the eighth to twelfth centuries point towards an element of shared group identities across the North Atlantic. On the other hand, socio-political organizations or organizing networks, such as regional or national boundaries, organize both space and identity into an “ethno-territory” (Jönsson et al. 2007:46) that identifies specific cultural identities bound to specific territories.

During the eighteenth century, in particular, European perceptions changed from thinking about medieval regional boundaries or provinces to the now naturalized concepts of the nation and state (often merged into one homogenous idea).¹ This shift is evident in cartography and the modern disciplines of historical and political geography. It is particularly relevant to the Northern Isles, which, after Scandinavian settlement, experienced a “Scotto-Norse” period of governance, which lasted from the fifteenth century to the beginning of the eighteenth century (B. Smith 1990, H. Smith 1978). Modern historians on both sides of the North Sea have argued that the Northern Isles then experienced a period of rapid cultural change, with direct links to Scandinavia, particularly Norway, diminishing. This period is said to have begun after the islands were transferred to the Scottish kingdom in 1469 or, due to increased acculturation or “Scottification” (Marwick 2000:15), even before then.

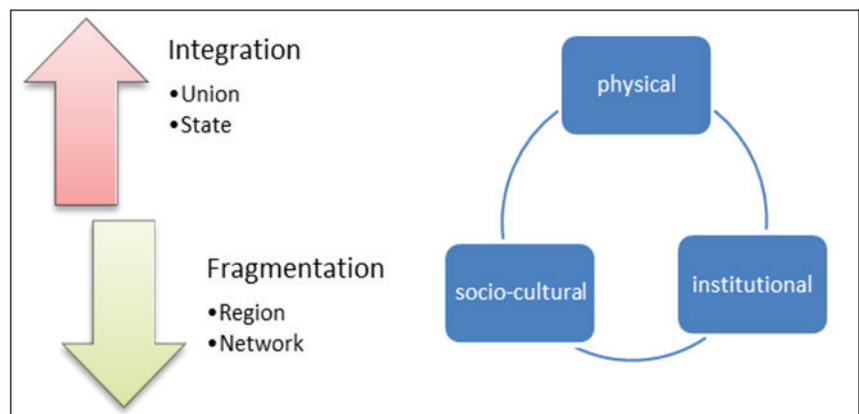


Figure 2. The territorial field of tension. Adapted from Jönsson et al. (2007:20).

As a consequence, both Scandinavian and British national histories generally take the view that the Northern Isles of Scotland, although retaining some remnants of Nordic culture, were essentially incorporated into a different cultural “ethno-territory” (Jönsson et al. 2007:46). This perspective has led to an insular approach to the study of the Scottish Northern Isles that delegates them to the peripheries of Northern Europe:

In the area of cultural contacts, scholars have too often viewed the Viking Age through the distorting lens of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century imperial conquest and colonialism. [...] in the area of nationhood, scholars have often reduced locally variable communities of the North into monolithic ethnic units (“nations”), dramatically oversimplifying archaeological evidence and textual evidence and often extending the national boundaries of the present day backward problematically into the realms of the mediaeval era (DuBois 1999:11).

In order to consider material culture within this historiographical context, it is therefore necessary to re-focus our attention on the trans-national nature of cultural history, but also recognize the influence of several national and regional historiographies.

A useful collection of essays on modern cross-cultural contacts between the Nordic world and the United Kingdom was published as *Anglo-Scandinavian Cross-Currents* (Ewbank et al. 1999). It analyses the cultural connections between nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literatures and historiographies from Scandinavia and the United Kingdom. In the introduction to the volume, Inga-Stina Ewbank draws attention to the difference in viewpoints that have perhaps characterized the different national paradigms and, in both teaching and research, still continue today:

Viewed from the centre of the British Empire, boundaries between different Scandinavian countries often blur or vanish altogether. [...] Viewed the other way—from the margins of Europe and in relation to English culture—differences are also sometimes elided, in favour of a unitary Scandinavianness (Ewbank 1999:12).

The time frame for *Anglo-Scandinavian Cross-Currents* is 1850–1914, when the whole concept of “Northernness” itself took on a more romantic, but also political, flavor in that it was used to construct various national narratives in Scandinavia and Northern Europe. The time frame for the present article is the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,

which for both Norway and Scotland is a complex historical period characterized by significant internal and external conflict. Norway was part of the Danish realm (Kingdom of Denmark–Norway) until 1814, and from 1814 to 1905 in a union with Sweden, whereas Scotland became part of an Anglo-Scottish kingdom from 1707 onwards. This political context meant that cross-cultural contact often occurred within a bigger administrative unit. A series of wars affected all of Europe during that time, starting with the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648) and continuing with the Great Northern War (1700–1721), the Seven Years’ War (1756–1763), the French Revolutionary Wars (1792–1802), and the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815). These conflicts defined economic and political contact between Northern Europeans, with existing links between cultures and ways of life both disrupted and transformed.

Intercultural Objects and Historical Spaces

Hance Smith (1978:25) notes a “relatively high degree of continuity of material culture [...]” between Shetland and Scandinavia during the modern period, with wooden goods purchased from several small ports south of Bergen. He points to the lively trade in Norwegian-made kit-boats and timber up until the late nineteenth century, which, in islands without large woodland resources, showed “requirements of this material culture for items made from wood—especially boats—which was the chief means of maintaining contact with Norway for over a century and a half after 1710” (H. Smith 1978:25).

An interesting example of this cultural continuity can be found in the Shetland Museum collection of wooden farmhouse containers. It is described as a “Norwa Bøst”, a bentwood container or storage box, and dated from around the eighteenth century. The box has been decorated with pokerwork on the sides,



Figure 3. Norwa Bøst. Photo no. 00960, Shetland Museum Collection, 2003. Description: Imported goods. [container] Delting, 1740s, donated by Seymour Tait, Scalloway, CON 65188. (Shetland Museum and Archives 2011).

and the initials “RG” have been carved into the lid (Fig. 3).

With several versions of this type of container on display at both the Shetland Museum and other smaller museums around Shetland and Orkney, this particular example is useful, as ownership and thus age and associated historical details can be traced. The box belonged to Robert Gifford, son of the landowner Thomas Gifford of Busta in the northwestern part of the Shetland Mainland. Thomas Gifford was the author of *An Historical Description of the Zetland Islands* (1786), describing Shetland in 1733. His son, Robert, died young in a drowning accident in 1746. The family forms part of what are locally referred to as the lairds, landowners “with Scottish and other non-Scandinavian European links” (H. Smith 1978:25).

Thomas and Robert Gifford certainly imported and owned Scandinavian objects and resources. For example, Mr. Vanderfield, Gifford’s merchant in Goysound, Norway, was instructed in June 1751 (Gifford 1751) to purchase four- and six-oared boats, masts, ploughs, twelve hand staves, and wooden planks. An earlier “account of our Cargo taken in at Goysound aboard of the ‘Douglas’ for accompt. of Mr. Thomas Gifford of Busta” (Gifford 1748) from Capt. Kuhass for cargo transported from “Norway” in 1748 lists bark, wood, hazel cuts, and stockfish amongst the items purchased alongside small boats for coastal fishing.

Common throughout Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, bentwood containers date back to the traditional wooden farm objects and tools of the Middle Ages. Depending on size, the boxes were used to store food, tools, or fishing tackle. The “Norwa Bøst” has a distinctive lid, and is made with a technique known in Scandinavia as *svep*, which is when wood is bent around an oval shape, and then fastened on one side by



Figure 4. *Tine*, Sogn Folkemuseum, West Norway. Available online at www.digitalarchiv.se. Accessed July 2011.

stitching the two overlapping sides together. An almost identical box can be seen in the collections of farmhouse containers in the West Norwegian Folk Museum of Sogn (Fig. 4) and other regional Scandinavian museums, where they are referred to as *tiner* or *svepasker*.

There are different locking mechanisms, which attach the lid to the box. One is based on the one side-handle being rounded and fastened in two loops to make it possible to turn to hold or to loosen the lid on that side (Figs. 4, 5, and 6). Another opens the container by pulling the two wooden side-handles apart (which is possible, as the box is flexible) (Figs. 3, 7, and 8). This design means the lid stays tightly attached, making the box watertight, or even airtight, which, together with its comparatively light weight, makes it a useful container to carry on an open boat or for travelling overland.

The Dictionary of the Scots Language lists the use of the term “bøst” for bentwood box in Shetland as first documented in the nineteenth century in Edmonston and Saxby’s *The Home of a Naturalist* (1888:39), which describes the “Büest” as “an oval box, prettily carved and stitched (as it were) together by withes. ... In it our mother kept her baby-gear” (DSL 2005). The use of the Scots word “Buist” (modern Scots) or “Boist” (Older Scottish Tongue, which developed from the twelfth to seventeenth century) is said to have originated from the Old



Figure 5. Author with Ditty Box, Corrigal Farm Museum, Orkney. Photograph © S. Reeploeg.

French *boiste*, which refers to a small container or box. There are various entries for the word “Buist” or “Büest” with “bøst”, a term from Insular Scots, referring to:

“A box or chest” (Sc. 1808 Jam.); “a small box” (Ork. 1845 *Stat. Acc.*² XV. 95; Ork., Sh. 1866 Edm. *Gl.*: Abd.², Ags.¹ 1937, obs.) (DSL 2005).

Within mainland Scotland, the “buist” is “an open box containing a very varied collection of tools”

(DSL 2005). The word itself thus documents some of the changing aspects of the language contact of the Northern Isles, as part of Scotland, both before and after the eighteenth century. Interestingly the DSL lists a whole host of “bosts”, “buists”, and “boiste”, most certainly not all referring to this particular make of box. A poem of 1819 by Richard Gall from Dunbar, for example, mentions the material that a traditional type of “buist” box would be made of in Scotland, a “willow buist” (DSL 2005), which



Figure 6. Norway boxes, Unst Boat Haven, Shetland. Photograph © S. Reeploeg.



Figure 7. *Tine*, Sunnfjord Museum, Norway. Available online at www.digitalarchiv.se. Accessed 15 September 2011.



Figure 8. *Askja*, National Museum of Iceland. Photograph © Colin MacConnachie.

indicates wickerwork, rather than bentwood. Nevertheless, the use of “boist” suggests the owners were speaking an older variant of Scots.

The Corrigan Farm Museum collection just outside Kirkwall contains a similar wooden bentwood box to the “Norwa bøst”, although described as a “ditty box”, a naval term for a box or sea chest carried by sailors to keep valuables (Fig. 5). As noted above, the DSL (2005) still has an entry for Orkney Insular Scots in 1845 for the word “bøst”, referring to a “small box”. This record points to interesting socio-linguistic differences between the island groups in terms of dialect contact (McColl-Millar 2008).

In Shetland, the term still appears in several dictionaries of recognized Shetland dialect words:

Büst, “A wooden box of peculiar make” (Angus 1914:30).

Böst, “a small, oval, wooden carrying-box.” or “a small box used for containing ointment, spices, etc.” (Graham 1999:7).

Böst, “a small, oval, wooden carrying-box.” (Christie 2010:8).



Figure 9. Box used for carrying food by Faroe Fishermen, The Old Haa Heritage Centre, Yell, Shetland. Photograph © S. Reeploeg.

Most examples of these boxes are associated with fishing, with one box from the Old Haa Museum in Yell (Fig. 9) described as “used for carrying food by Faroe fishermen”² (MS description on label) and another, from the island of Unst (Fig. 6) simply as “boxes from Norway” (printed description above the box).

Cultural History and Ethnological Context: Scandinavia

Due to the revival of traditional folk customs and traditions associated with the establishment of a national narrative for Norway during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, bentwood boxes, known as *tiner*, are nowadays treasured family heirlooms, which are often decorated with traditional flower motives (*rosemaling*) (Fig. 7).

Some of the first recorded examples of these Scandinavian types of wooden containers can be found in the collection of wooden objects from the Oseberg ship burial dating from the eighth century, and now displayed at the Viking Ship Museum in Oslo. With staves of vertical pieces of wood bent into a round shape, two of the boxes have the same locking mechanism whereby the two longest staves on the sides keep the lid in place (Fig. 10). While the two larger staved containers clearly form the basis for later coopering techniques, the smallest container in the photograph shows a very thin piece of wood, possibly bark, bent into a cup-shape. This technique of bending bark or thin wood into baskets or boxes forms the basis of the bentwood or *svept* technique.

Based on the work of John Granlund (1940), Helena Åberg (2008) provides a short historical survey of the bentwood or *svepteknik* box tradition



Figure 10. Cf24828, Kitchen utensils from Oseberg, Jarlsberg Hovedgård, Tønsberg, Vestfold, Norway. Period: Viking Age. Photograph © Eirik Irgens Johnsen, Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo (2011).

in Scandinavia and Central Europe. Small bentwood boxes were found in Bronze Age Austria, ninth-century England and Germany, and fifteenth-century Italy. She divides bentwood boxes into five types: the lockless *svepask*; lid-locked *svepäskor*; larger *svepskrin* chests that contain a metal lock; lighter, open *svepkorg* baskets with a handle across; and *svepta málkärl*, which have a handle on each side. The lid-locked *svepäskor* are the most similar to the Norwegian *tiner*. This broad-based collection of bentwood boxes indicates a shared cultural heritage, although regional cultural difference means that each geographical area has distinctive ways of both assembling and decorating the box (Åberg 2008:29). Åberg notes that both Swedish and Norwegian bentwood boxes are often engraved, with boxes made before 1700 decorated with plant and nature motives using pokerwork, and most common in the areas of Norrbotten, Lapland, and Finland.

Thomas Bankes (1788:604), in a section on “Persons, Dispositions, Longevity [...] Language, &c. of the Natives of Lapland” also mentions one of the Sami techniques of making wooden boxes:

[They] make boxes of their birch planks, which they neatly inlay with the horns of reindeer; and they are very dextrous at making baskets of the roots of trees, slit in long thin pieces, and twisted together. Some of these are made so neat that they will hold water; and they are particularly admired by the Swedes.

As in other areas of Scandinavia, remnants of both bark- and stave-built wooden containers were found during excavations in Shetland of a late-Norse farm at Biggins, Papa Stour (B.B. Smith 1999:193). Bentwood boxes thus provide interesting examples of intercultural contact through material culture, as each develops regional aspects. Similar boxes are present in Iceland, where they are known as *askja* (*öskju*, *öskjur*), meaning box or case (Fig. 8) (Hólmarsson 1989). A variant of the bentwood box is used to store linen or the traditional headgear of Icelandic women (Fig. 11) and is known as a:

traf-askja. KVK.trafa-öskjur KVK FT. traf-
öskjur KVK FT [*trafa* (plural) referring to the
fringes of the material (Árnason 2002)].

The historical script collection at the University of Iceland (*Ritmálssafn Orðabókar Háskólans* n.d.) contains the following examples, indicating the kind of uses and appearance that *traföskjur* boxes would have had in the past:

lætur hún gullið í traföskjur sínar og setur á
hillu yfir rúmi sínu
[“she put the gold in her box and put it on a
shelf above her bed”, my translation].
Undir borðinu stóðu traföskjur, útskornar
með fögrum rósum
[“Under the table stood the trafoaskja box,
carved with beautiful roses”, my translation].

Traföskjur vary in size and make, with one example, dating from 1677 and containing pieces of an altar



Figure 11. *Trafaskja*, Museum of East Iceland. Photograph © Elfa Hlín Pétursdóttir.

and a bible, being auctioned by Galleri Fold in Reykjavik in 2005 (Greinsafn 2005).

Conclusion

What seems at first simply an imported piece of material culture is clearly part of a collection of cross-cultural objects and practices of historical and social significance. The traditional wooden boxes examined in this article provide an opportunity for intercultural interpretation that rediscovers links between communities and cultures across the North Atlantic region and Northern Europe. The objects tell us about the flows of objects and people, but also about linguistic and cultural contacts, and social and cultural practices within the different social and historical contexts of Scotland and the Nordic world. Material culture thus embodies an everyday intercultural context; it links eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fishermen and landowners with craftsmen and traders across the sea, although taking on a very specific role within modern Norwegian and Icelandic regional and national traditions. Further research may establish the regional uses, customs, and possible traditions connected with the “buist” during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the Northern Isles and mainland Scotland, and whether the “Norwa bost” was simply an imported storage box or if locally made adaptations exist. Some later examples were most certainly presents brought from Norway, both by islanders themselves and visitors (hence the descriptive term “Norway box”).

In terms of using material culture to consider the European “trialogue” (Jönsson et al. 2007) between space, identity, and organization, the above microhistorical case study points to the necessity of considering the intercultural aspects of both Nordic and Scottish cultural regions. By recognizing that some areas, such as the Northern Isles, have a strong connection between people and territory that might be cross-national and cross-cultural rather than insular or peripheral, it becomes possible to make an intercultural interpretation of material cultures and histories previously studied exclusively from a national point of view. The combination of an interdisciplinary perspective with both macro- and micro-historical approaches thus enriches our knowledge and understanding of shared and divergent cultural histories. It presents an opportunity to widen our understanding of regional complexity in the North Atlantic region, and to integrate it into our own national and regional historiographies and cultural histories.

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Endnotes

¹Post-reformation European movements such as the Enlightenment firmly established the idea of a nation based on reason and ethno-territories, rather than religion or rule by a sole sovereign.

²This quote refers to Shetland fishermen line-fishing near the Faroe Banks during the early- to mid-nineteenth century, not fishermen from the Faroe Islands, which means the boxes were imported, and still in use then. I am grateful to John Goodlad for pointing this out (Lerwick, Shetland Islands, Scotland, 30 September 2011 pers. comm.).