

Skara

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The First Wave

New life for Neolithic Orkney, vol. I

Andrew Appleby



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None of the characters in this book represent living people.

Sample of Chapter 1

Shala watched from high on the Skara Dune, searching through the misty spume blown from the barrage of tidal waves. Was that a speck of humanity far off on the raging sea? Was this faint vision the core of her quest, approaching from that vast, dangerous distance?

Momentarily, the flashing sandpipers' flights, searching the churning beach at the foot of the great sand bar, distracted her: She was taken inexorably back to her earliest memories.

* * * * *

Shala was late. She always was, even though there was the excitement of the Ancestor Tales. Her northern world had short winter days. When you are a four-year-old girl on a bright afternoon with the sea gently lapping on that vast expanse of sand, you just want to stand and watch. Her bird friends, the redshanks, dabbled in the tiny advancing waves, searching for wee crustaceans, casting long shadows in the low Orcadian sunlight. Her footprints were about the same size as those of her favourite

birds. They had a similar redness of leg, which she now sported: Her little limbs chilling in the sea's zephyr.

Her village was at the head of the bay; she turned to the wispy trails of smoke drifting inland. The main house was closer to the shore than the others. It was big and strong: The stonework sturdy and tight. The wonderful reed thatched roof pointed up to the very skies. A shimmer of warm air venting from its high pitch told her that her home was warm. Shala waved to her redshanks and ran back. At high tide mark she caught her mother's watching eye, making her even more aware of those midwinter stories. Shala's keen eyes flashed over the lines of flotsam. To her right she spotted an amber nugget. Stepping sideways, she garnered it; its yellow and brown rough-hewn shades matched her finely plaited hair perfectly.

She was dressed for the storytelling for seemingly ages. 'Why is it that everyone else takes such a long time?' Shala thought. Her mother beckoned to her, not going down the stone steps to meet her, for she might scuff her new shoes. Shala skipped over the pebbly foreshore to nip up the treads to her mum. She held out a small pair of newly braided booties for her. Shala gripped them with the left hand as she opened her right, exposing the amber.

Gull picked her up. 'Amber,' she said kindly. It will take on your character. It will polish in your hands. If you are rough, it will scratch. If gentle, it'll glint. All its colours, nature and hue will grow as you do. But hurry, dear. We're off to the storytelling.'

Her older brother, Flint, and middle sister, Juniper, were waiting at home. Gull put Shala down on the slab threshold as she called for Jasper, her man. From their door, many neighbours appeared. They stooped slightly as they came from the great house into the flagstone courtyard.

Everybody was so well turned out. Shala was amazed. Gull said, 'This happens every year. So if you fall asleep during the tales, it won't matter, you can catch up next time.' Gull lifted Shala and carried her to the raft on the loch, far up behind the village. Shala watched as her mum's shell earrings glinted blue and pink as they swung on a beaded loop from her pierced lobes.

The raft journey was lovely. So many villagers were on it. The short midwinter day soon turned to evening. The sun dipped as the lochan they crossed began to take on a pinkish shimmer with gilded frills. The poles-men guided it to the stone-paved slope at the far end as they sung their Solstice Songs. The raft nudged the flags, being roped to two stubby standing stones marking the way to the Ancestors' Hall.

Shala was put down on the paving. Everyone leapt to dry land, not wetting their shoes or hems. The women made adjustments to their hair as Gull straightened Jasper's feathered headband and wiped Flint's face. He had chewed a messy drake's wing on the voyage. Juniper, always neat, smoothed her reddened hair back smartly. It was a warm hustle and friendly bustle as they circled left along the cold, shaded path beside the tall mansion. They veered further as the walls lowered to an adult's waist height. The neat masonry stopped abruptly, ending on a standing stone even taller than Shala's father.

Their procession rounded that monolith. A breeze ruffled Shala's feather band. In front of them was a vast hide awning. Inside were neat piles of smouldering ox bones. Resting on the glowing femurs were the largest pots Shala had ever seen. The huge, round-bottomed vessels steamed appetizingly.

The light faded: Behind, low cliffs, then the lapping sea; in front, the cauldrons of simmering meat and fish. Past them, a great arching wall with an imposing central doorway. 'It's like ours, but under a tent roof,' Shala thought. Reflecting the glowing fires, the lintel's polished surface shimmered brilliantly. Through the dark opening was the portal to their past. Within that shadow, Shala's ancestors dwelt.

This was her first time there, though she had heard of it from Flint and Juniper. 'All you could ever wish to scoff,' Flint would say, with dreamy eyes.

'Everyone looks so bonny and happy,' Juniper said, as she twiddled with her blouse.

'It's all true. Everybody in their best paints and splendid hair: A wonderful spread, too,' Shala thought. Folk mingled happily until

it was time to start. They dipped strips of fish on sharp sticks into savoury, simmering water, then pulled them out moments later. 'Here you are, Shala. Yours is in a scallop shell. I'll blow gently to cool it,' Gull said. Juniper and Flint dipped theirs.

'Have some steamed oysters, Gull. They're your favourites,' Jasper said. 'And I think little Shala is ready for some mussels, now.'

'Thank you, Daddy... I love them,' she responded.

The fish pot had limpets in as flavouring, with wild chives; samphire gave body to the bree. A crab or three were seething, and had seethed long enough. They were shared round and others popped in to take their place. The meat was for later. Its wafting steams filled the air, giving a richness that only well-hung auroch produced.

The party evolved. The children played. Little hot drop scones were handed round as the first part of the Solstice celebrations entered the second. The chatter of adults subsided. A small glimmer of light showed from the dark of the ancestors' portal. A huge horn-blast echoed from within. As this subsided, another resounded, then a third. In quicker succession, a fourth and a fifth. Shala jumped, claspng her ears. The trumpet sounded again, even louder, as others from that darkness accompanied it. Auroch, mountain goat, and rams horns were all blown from the innards of that house. Suddenly the blasts stopped; only the reverberating stones retained the frequency of the diminishing blasts. The arching wall echoed, enhancing the effect, enshrouding the partygoers in acoustic thrill.

The crowd hushed; mouths opened in wonder. All stared toward that entrance. As the inner silence of the dark tomb grew, so did theirs. Moments elapsed like aeons as the company began to relax. The flutter of an eyelid, that unconscious movement of someone just thinking of another drop scone, was the signal for an uproarious clatter. Deer antlers, auroch shins and hammerstones were invisibly striking the erect stone slabs in the sepulchre. The resting stalls for those past souls were uttering their annual hammered shriek, calling the New Year forward. The woman who

was intent on the drop scone stood stock-still, mouth agape, shaking.

‘Nobody told me it would be like this,’ Shala whispered.

Biographical Note

Born 1948 in Kent, Andrew Appleby became an independent wanderer from an early age. The youngest of three brothers, he constantly lagged behind – and still does, even now, on a walk – finding clay in banks and around ponds, or searching the ground for ancient artifacts. His natural tendency towards incendiary pursuits helped fire his meagre works from the age of seven, and at eleven he was smitten with the archaeology bug. This led to discovering a Neolithic site with quantities of prehistoric pottery... his yearning to make these pots was born.

He spent most of his secondary school years in the pottery department. His father, James William Appleby, had relayed tales of Orkney in the army intelligence service during World War Two, so Andrew and his brother Malcolm hitch-hiked there from Kent. The archaeology, scenery, atmosphere and colours had a permanent effect and he next moved to the Isles permanently, setting up his pottery in an old chicken house at Fursbreck Farm in Harray. From his first weeks in residence, folk said, 'You must go and see the Harray Potter! He's just magic!', hence its trading name.

Past Chair and Vice-Chair of the Orkney Archaeology Society, Andrew has seen Orkney's archaeology scene blossom. He is currently President of the John Rae Society, the Orcadian Arctic explorer.

Besides pottery, archaeology and exploration, Andrew has a

Biographical Note

strong interest in gathering food and road kill. This has led to appearances in television programmes such as *Scotland's Larder*.

