

How old is the Faroese *grannastevna*?

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Writers on Faroese land tenure have commonly assumed that the annual village meeting known as the *grannastevna* is of ancient origin. Thus H. C. S. Finsen in 1883, Daniel Bruun in 1904 and 1929, Erik Bonnevie in 1940, and Poul Petersen in 1968 have all asserted its early origin.¹ E. A. Björk, more cautiously, said in 1956 that the silence of early writers on the Faroese *grannastevna* is not conclusive evidence that in their days it did not exist, even though the earliest reference he himself had discovered was from 1836.²

The basis for this opinion is the undoubted existence of the *grannastevna* from early times in mainland Norway. In VII-30 of the *Landlov* of Magnus Lawmender (1274) stands a provision that the *grannastevna* should be held on St. Halvard's Day (14 May) so that neighbours could see that their fences were in proper condition. This measure passed into Christian IV's Norwegian Law of 1604, and thence into 3-12-17 of Christian V's Norwegian Law of 1687, which last was doubtless why the word appeared in *Sandöens Vedtægt*, signed in 1692.³ My view is, however, that early Faroese occurrences of the word *grannastevna* refer to irregular meetings for a variety of purposes, and that only from about 1840 did the institution become of real significance, and the word itself come into regular use amongst the Faroese villagers. My reasons are: (i) the silence of early writers and legislators; (ii) the use, before about 1840, of other machinery for taking decisions which were later natural to the *grannastevna*; (iii) the nature of the written ref-

erences to the *grannastevna* from 1836 until the regular records begin in the spring of 1843.

The *grannastevna* is not mentioned by Tarnovius (1669), Debes (1673) or Landt (1800). In Svabo's *Indberetninger* the word appears only in his transcription of *Sandöens Vedtægt*. The word is not used in the text of any printed law known to me from before 1857, nor in any printed draft of a law from before 1844. The earliest written use of the word known to me, with certain exceptions I shall refer to later, dates from August 1836.⁴

The two most telling silences of all, in my opinion, are those of Svabo, who does not include the word in his dictionary, and that of *landfúti* J. A. Lunddahl, in *Nogle bemærkninger om de færøske landboforhold*. The latter work was written in 1843, but only printed, and then in an unrevised form, in 1851. Lunddahl often mentions the joint decisions that have to be taken in a Faroese village, but never once does the word *grannastevna* appear, and neither is there any apparent reference to the meeting itself. Of the manuscript sources which fail to mention the *grannastevna* I will instance *amtmand Löbner's Instrux for Sysselmændene paa Færøerne*, dated 1 April 1816, which refers to such land tenure legislation as the *Forordning af 2. April 1698 om Faar og Qvæg*, the *Reskript af 19. August 1757 om Kending-Söid* and the *Reskript af 11. Maj 1775 angaaende Rosse-Brug paa Færøe*, but makes no reference whatever to the *grannastevna*.⁵

It is difficult to assert absolutely that regular *grannastevnur* were not being held before 1836, and indeed there are some — though very few — instances of the use of the word in a Faroese context in documents as early as 1708. It seems to me, however, that the use of the word is probably due to officials with experience of the Danish *grannastevna*. Consideration of these rare instances will illustrate the difference between these early meetings and the *grannastevna* as we know it after 1840.

The first reference known to me is that in *Sandöens Vedtægt* already referred to, which must assuredly have arisen from the

recently-published Law of Christian V. Whether meetings were in fact held on Sandoy or elsewhere in the Faroe Islands on St. Halvard's Day, for the inspection of infield walling is uncertain; I know of no evidence that they were. But even so, a Faroese *grannastevna* in the later sense of the term includes a good deal more than walling inspection.

There are four references to be found in the earliest preserved Faroese *Panteprotokol*, that of 1706—22. Here we have references to *grannastevnur* held in Sumba on 14 February 1708 and 22 January 1709, and in Vágur on 25 January 1709. The business mentioned, however, has nothing to do with joint village resources, and the meetings seem to have been no more than groups of neighbours assembled to witness the signing of land conveyance documents, in advance of their publication at the *Öravík várting*. The word may here be due to the *sorin-skrivari* writing the records, Frederich Severinsen Skougaard, who must often have attended *grannastevnur* in Danish villages in his capacity as *ridefoged* on Gabel's estates, before he came to Faroe.⁶

Professor Arne Nørrevang has informed me that a reference to another Suðuroy *grannastevna* occurs in the *Forligelseskommissions-Protokol for Suderö* for 1803, at which a quarrel with a bearing on joint village resources was discussed in the presence of the *sýslumaður* and at least one *kalsmaður*. While I have not had the opportunity yet of personally examining this record, it seems that this *grannastevna* may also have been a meeting called specially to transact specific business, and not one of a series of regular annual meetings.⁷

A further occurrence of the word *grannastevna* occurs in a letter dated 31 January 1836 from *landfúti* C. Plöyen to the Eysturoy *sýslumaður*, S. J. Weihe, in connection with the settlement of Funningsbotnur. The man wishing to build his home there, Niclas Magnussen, had complained to Plöyen that he was uncertain whether the joint landowners were prepared to give him permission, or not. Plöyen wrote to Weihe, » . . . maa jeg tjensligst anmode Dem om, paa Grannestævne, at indhente

Vedkommendes Erklæring i denne Anledning, samt i Tilfælde af Nægtning, at anføre de Grunde meddelte, paa hvilke der nægtes Samtykke.«⁸. Here there is no evidence in the context to indicate whether Plöyen was thinking of the *grannastevna* as an annual event or not.

In legislation before 1843, we find it laid down that local decisions for the village are to be taken by »*de bedste Mænd*«, i. e. the principal resident landholders. Thus in paragraph 8 of the *Forordning af 2. April 1698*, we read: »Ingen flere Hunde skal holdis end som af Sysselmanden udi det Syssel og de bedste Mænd i Bøjgde-Lavet blive samtykte«. In the first two paragraphs of the *Reskript af 11. Maj 1775*, we see: »1. Hvert Bøjdelag skal forblive ved den ældgamle paasatte Rosse-Skiben, medmindre de fleste af Stedets Beboere ved Overlæg af Sysselmanden skulde finde nödigt samme at forandre. 2. Saadanne paasatte Rosse-Skibener skulle af Sysselmanden optegnes og af nogle af de bedste Mænd i Bøjdelaget underskrives, og saa læses til Tinge, da det siden gælder for dem saa fuldt som en Lov.«⁹

The machinery for settling the disputes that inevitably arose through joint land ownership was, until the first three or four decades of the nineteenth century had passed, either an appeal to the law, or action by the *sýslumaður* and *amtmaður* (until 1816, *løgmaður* and *landfúti*). As an example of the latter, I will mention a dispute at Gjógv, Eysturoy, over the maintenance of the village bull. After village squabbling, Johannes Poulsen of Gjógv on 2 April 1825 sent in a written complaint to *sýslumaður* S. J. Weihe, and the latter referred the matter to the *Amt* in a letter of 20 April (all without any reference to a *grannastevna*). Löbner's reply was as follows:

»For om mueligt paa en mindelig Afgiørelsesmaade, at faae hævet den af Johannes Poulsen i Giov, i hans under 2den dennes hertil indgivne Andragende, paaklagede Uorden, der skal have Sted i bemeldte Bøjgde-laug, med Hensyn til Tyreholdet, og hvorover Hr. Sysselmand i Skrivelse af 20de sidst, har afgivet Deres Betænkning, — troer Amtet det rigtigt, at der af samtlige Beboere i Bøjgden, saaledes som andre Steder er Brug, ved Deres Mellemvirkning, oprettes en Contract, hvori der udtrykkelig

maae fastsættes, hvem der skal holde Tyren og hvor meget der i billig Godtgjørelse for denne skal erlægges: — hvorefter den opsatte Forening, naar den af Böigdelaugets samtlige Koeholdere er underskrevet, bliver til Amtets nærmere Approbation at indsende. —

Færøernes Amtscoutoir den 23. April 1825.

E. Löbner.¹⁰

Such direct action by the *Amt* was by no means uncommon. The *Amt* found cause to intervene in the village affairs of Nólsoy alone no fewer than five times between 1814 and 1841, every time on matters that in later times would have been settled by the *grannastevna*.¹¹

An excellent example of a joint tenure decision being taken through legal action is the 1816 reorganisation of the Nólsoy commons. The *Forordning af 20. Januar 1797 om Forligelses-Indretninger* provided a machinery whereby villagers in dispute could come to a quick and cheap settlement.¹² On 4 March 1816, a boundary dispute between the two Nólsoy *hagapartar* was brought before the *Syd-Strömöe Forligelses-Commision* in Tórshavn. As the non-resident owners were not present, and their tenants had not got their written powers of attorney, the Commission found itself unable to draw up an agreement that day. (No less than 13 marks 12 gylden of the 35 marks of *óðalsjörð* was then owned by non-residents). The case was thus adjourned to 27 May 1816 on Nólsoy, when all the owners were either present or represented. The boundary between Norðara helvt and Sunnara helvt was agreed, as were the peat-cutting right for both *hagar* in Sunnara helvt, and the summer cow pasture for both *hagar* in the *húshagi* of Norðara helvt. (This agreement remains in force to the present day).¹³

The earliest document I have found, apart from the isolated instances mentioned above, in which the word *grannastevna* is used, is dated 16 August 1836. The circumstances were as follows. The *sýslumaður* of Vágur, J. Zachariassen, wrote to the *Amt* in the following terms:

Underdanigst Promemoria.

Ved det under min Omreise i Sysselet i dette Foraar, som sædvanlig passerede Politi-Møde, der holdtes, for, ifølge Sysselmandens Instrux og

Politianordningerne, at inquirere om adskillige mulig forefaldende offentlige derunder henhørende Sager, saavel som, efter Omstændighederne, at bilægge eller paakjende Tvistigheder betræffende Bøigdeskik og Ordensholdelse i Sysselet, udebleve, uden Forfald, flere af de lovlige varslede, meest vedkommende Bønder og Huusmænd i Midvaag; hvisaarsag de der, mulig stedfindende Uordene hverken kunde hemmes eller (især de snarest tænkelige Overtrædelser af Rescripterne af 19de August 1757 — 11te Mai 1775) komme til retsdyldigt Kundskab. — Uagtet det, paa benævnte Gjenstande, blev fortiet, skal der dog efter Rygtet, i det nævnte Bøigdelaug, blandt andet Uskik, holdes altfor mange Heste og Hopper over sammes, ved Det Høje Amts Bevilling af 18. April 1817, bestemt Antal; hvilket, ifølge sidstnævnte Rescripts 4de Post, herved underdaningst indberettes til Amtets høje Opmærksomhed. —

Ligeledes har det ikke sielden været Tilfældet, at vedkommende Bønder og Huusmænd ere udeblevne, naar de om Foraaret efter Loven, have været tilkaldte at give Møde ved Indmarks Gjerdernes Besigtelse; hvilket Møde er aldeles nødvendigt, for at kunne have Kundskab om Enhvers Andele af Gjerderne. Hvorledes Sysselmanden, i lignende Tilfælde har at forholde sig, derom vover jeg herhos at udbede mig Det Høje Amts højgunstige Resolution, til Regel for Fremtiden.

Sandevaag d. 2den Maj 1836.

Underdanigst
J. Zachariassen.¹⁴

Plöyen, then acting *amtmand*, did not send an immediate reply, but waited for the return of F. F. Tillisch from leave. The material portion of the latter's reply was as follows:

Ved Skrivelse af 2den Mai d: A: har Herr Sysselmand forespurgt, hvorledes de have at forholde dem, naar Nogen udebliver fra Grandestevne. . . . Jeg. . . . meddeler Dem til foreløbig Efterretning, Iagttagelse og Bekjendtgjørelse for Vedkommende, at naar nemlig Nogen efter lovlig Tilsigelse og uden lovligt Forfald udebliver fra Grandestevnen, derom har at giøre Indberetning til Amtet, som da vil ikiende de Skyldige en efter Omstændighederne passende Mulct. . . .¹⁵

The same day, 16. August 1836, *amtmand* Tillisch wrote to the *Cancelli* for approval of his action. He remarks:

. . . . Ved at forelægge det høie Collegium disse Spørgsmaal, tillader jeg mig ærbødigst at bemærke, at Sysselmændenes aarlige Omreiser tildeels foretages for ved Grandestævne at inquirere, om nogen Uorden i Sysselet er forefalden eller gaer i Svang, tildeels for at bilægge Tvistigheder angaaende Bøigdeskik og desl.: Jeg skulde derfor være af den ærbødigst Formening, at de Regler, som, med Hensyn til Forpligtelsen at møde ved Gadestevne, indeholden i det høie Collegii Skrivelse af 22

Septbr. 1798 til Amtmanden over Kiöbenhavn Amt, ogsaa her passende kunde anvendes i det omhandlede Tilfælde. —

The Cancelli replied agreeing, in a communication dated 22 November 1836, which the *Amt* received on 11 April 1837, and the following day relayed to the *landfúti*, the *sorinskrivari* and all the *sýslumenn*.¹⁶

It is interesting that for *sýslumaður* Zachariasen the occasion was not a *grannastevna* but »*det sædvanlige passerede Politi-Möde*«. The origin of this meeting thus seems to lie in the annual inquiry of the *sýslumaður* into how the *Reskripter* of 1757 and 1775 were being kept, and his duty under paragraphs 1 and 11 of the *Forordning af 21. Maj 1777 angaaende Agerdyrkningen og Tieneste Folk* to enquire each year into the state of barley cultivation and whether any idle persons needed to be placed in service. The earliest Sandoy *Politi-Protokol* (1777—1838) contains, indeed, little else but entries on these subjects. The name *grannastevna*, as applied particularly to this meeting, we appear to owe to its use in this sense by Tillisch and Plöyen.¹⁷

The view that to the Faroese, the word *grannastevna* was at this time an unfamiliar one, is confirmed by another early use of the word in a *Politi-Protokol* entry by *sýslumaður* Weihe: »Aar 1841 den 2 og 3 Martii under Omreise i Österöe-Sysselet, til Grannastevne blev det oplyst at efterfølgende Huusfædre havde holdt Dandsestue paa den saakaldte Mishelligdage. . . .« This is of course ordinary *politiret* business, and has nothing to do with the *grannastevna* in its usually accepted sense.¹⁸

On 28 February 1842, Weihe reported to the *Amt* that certain householders had absented themselves from the Toftir *grannastevna*. Weihe's phrase for the meeting is now »den sædvanlige grannastevne«, but the obligation on householders to attend seems not to have been generally understood, and their absence was due to a misunderstanding. In the end, Plöyen gave Weihe a mild reprimand for reporting the matter before making a proper investigation. The following year, Weihe records having lectured the Eysturoy *grannastevnur* on what the

meeting meant and what business could be there transacted.¹⁷

Whether, as I believe the available evidence indicates, the *grannastevna* originated with the *Reskripter* of 1757 and 1775 and the name was applied to it during Tillisch's period of office as *amtmand*; or whether, as in the traditional view, the *grannastevna* and its name are of great antiquity in the Faroe Islands, there can still be no question that the importance of this meeting became greatly enhanced during the period 1836—43. The minuting of *grannastevna* business began in response to a letter from *sorinskrivari* G. F. Tillisch, dated 16 July 1842. Tillisch complained that disputes were too commonly arising over what had been decided at *grannastevnur*, and suggested that there should be a special record book. Plöyen, in reply, suggested the use of the *Politi-Protokoller* for this purpose, and issued the necessary orders to the *sysselmænd* on 28 July 1842.²⁰ In consequence, from February 1843, archive references to the *grannastevna* become regular and frequent.

Until the *grannastevna* was regulated by law, every decision had to be unanimous. The story of the Skálavík geese is a striking illustration of this. Geese are a notorious source of discord in Faroese villages. The 1848 Skálavík *grannastevna* resolved that geese should not be kept in the village; but two inhabitants who already had geese declared that they intended to keep them until a legal judgement ordered them to give the geese up. The 1849 *grannastevna* found that four households were keeping geese. Two were willing to give up goose-keeping if all the others did; but the original two evidently remained obstinate, for the 1853 *grannastevna* found it necessary to adopt regulations for the keeping of geese.²¹

The first breach in this unanimity rule came in the *Jagtlov* of 9 February 1854, though in fact neither does this law mention the *grannastevna* by name. Several villages had become aware of the need to conserve the breeding-stocks of sea-birds on their bird-cliffs. In Sandoy syssel alone, by that year, Sandur and Skálavík had fixed limits to the number of puffins to be netted annually, Dalur had forbidden *dráttur* of puffins,

(pulling young puffins out of their breeding-holes by hand or hook) and Skúvoy had worked out an elaborate scheme to give co-owners fair shares in the netting of guillemots and puffins.²² Conventions adopted in 1852 in Hvalbøur and Porkeri severely limited the use of firearms.²³ But the unanimity rule could be a hindrance to action. At the 1847 Nólsoy *grannastevna*, Poul Johannesen proposed that it should be forbidden *at draga lunda*. Most present agreed with this, but as unanimity could not be achieved, no resolution could be adopted. Fortunately, it proved possible to secure unanimity for this prohibition in respect of the principal *lundaland*, Urðin.²⁴ The 1854 *Jagtlov* eased matters by giving regulative powers over sea-fowling and seal-hunting to a simple majority of the owners provided they controlled half the *markatal*.²⁵

On 4 March 1857 came the *Lov om Udskiftning af Fælleshauger paa Færøerne*, which gave specific powers to the *grannastevna* to act by majority. Common ownership was a hindrance to the extension of cultivation of the *hagi*, and sometimes even led to *tráðir* reverting to *hagi*, as on Hestur in 1819 and on Nólsoy in 1829. The new law permitted half the *markatal* or three-quarters of the owners by number to carry an enclosure proposal to the newly-created *Udskiftningskommission* for the *syssel*, who would make the final decision.²⁶

The *Haugelov* of 23 February 1866 gave extensive powers to the Faroese *grannastevna* to regulate by majority vote, the type of majority being different for different purposes. Thus a simple *markatal* majority decided how many sheepdogs might be kept in the village, but at two-thirds majority by *markatal* was required before geese were permitted. To change the flocks from *feli* to *kenning* required the approval of two-thirds of the shareholders in the *hagi* concerned, controlling at least half the *markatal*.²⁷ Finally, the legal position of the *grannastevna* was properly defined in the consolidating legislation of 1 April 1891.²⁸

In this perspective, the formalisation of the *grannastevna* about 1840 can be seen as the first step towards a general devo-

lution of regulative power away from Tórshavn, which took place in stages through the nineteenth century, providing the people with the machinery for settling their own difficulties. The need to provide such local machinery arose from the large increase in the number of *óðalsmenn* (private holders of land) and the decrease in the average size of their holdings. In 1816, 23 *óðalsmenn* shared the 18 marks of *óðalsjörð* in Nólsoy's Norðara helvt; in 1843 there were 42, and in 1900 there were 52. If the resident *óðalsmenn* only are considered, the fragmentation process is even more remarkable; the figures are then respectively about 8, 18 and 48.²⁹ Centralised arbitration of disputes could never have stood up to the strain. Only through a decentralised system was it possible to adapt joint ownership to the fragmentation of *óðal* holdings, and to conserve such resources as the puffins of Nólsoy and the guillemots of Skúvoy. How the *grannastevna* first came into existence may be still an open question; but there can be no doubt about the pressures which turned it into an institution of importance.

Acknowledgement

The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of the Social Science Research Council, State House, High Holborn, London, W.C.1., in making possible the field work and archive study in the Faroe Islands on which this article is based.

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25. Jagtlov af 9. Februar 1854.
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ÚRTAK

Tað hevur verið vanlig hugsan, at *grannastevna* er gamal stovnur í Føroyum. Men høvundurin ivast í, at henda hugsan er bein og skjýtur upp, at grannastevnan í sínum vælkenda líki frá seinna helmingi av 19. øld man vera íkomin í tíðarskeiðinum 1836—42. Millum próvgrundirnar er hin fullkomna tøgningin, ið valdar hjá høvundum sum Lucas Debes, Jørgen Landt, Jens Chr. Svabo og J. A. Lunddahl í hópum, har sum væntandi var, at grannastevna varð nevnd. Í skrivaðum heimildarritum er orðið ógvuliga sjáltsamt fyri 1836, og har sum tað kemur fyri, kann verða víst á danska ávirkan á nýtisluna, og fundir, sum sipað verður til, tykjast ikki hava verið grannastevnur í vanliga kendu merkingini. Bygdasamtýktir, sum seinni vóru sjálvsagdar at gera á grannastevnu, vóru fyri 1843 framdar á annan hátt, og nøkur dømi eru nevnd.

Fram verða fluttar sannanir fyri, at grannastevnan hevur uppruna sín í skylduni, ið lögð varð á sýslumenn eina ferð um árið at ferðast um sýsluna til at hyggja eftir, at *Reskript af 19. August 1757 om Kendings-Söid* og *Reskript af 11. Maj 1775 angaaende Rosse-Brug paa Færøe* vórðu hildin. Orðið tykist vera innflutt av F. F. Tillisch og C. Pløyen um 1836.

Um henda áskoðan fær undirtøku, kemur stovnanin av grannastevnuni á sjálvsagðan stað sum eitt stig í tí neyðuga útflutningi av valdi burtur úr Tórshavn í málum, sum hoyrdu til umsitingina av felags bygdaviðurskiftum; onnur stig vóru lógirnar frá 1854, 1857, 1866 og 1901, og til-elvingin var hin stóri vøksturin á talinum á *óðalsmonnum* í hvørjari bygd.