Anthropological and Genetic Studies of the Faroese

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Abstract

An anthropological and genetic survey of the Faroe Islanders was conducted with the aims of defining their characteristics and comparing them with other populations of the North Atlantic region. Variation between subsamples of the population assigned to different regional groups of the islands was also considered. This report presents the preliminary results of a number of investigations. An anthropometric survey involving 17 different measurements on each of 155 young adult males indicates that the Faroese are a tall, mesocephalic population, resembling Icelanders in a number of features. The results provide no evidence of notable differences of physique between subsamples from the different geographical regions of the islands. In contrast the dermatoglyphic study of 297 sets of finger prints indicates considerable regional differences in both males and females in pattern type frequencies and mean total ridge count. Pattern type frequencies are characterized by high arch and loop and low whorl frequencies, similar to but

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more extreme than those of Icelanders. Mean total ridge count is low, particularly so in the females. Skin colour as measured by an EEL reflectance spectrophotometer is extremely pale. Hair colour, as in the Icelanders, includes a higher proportion of darker shades than other Scandinavian populations. Colour vision deficiency was detected in 11 of 148 males and 1 of 126 females. Resemblance between the Faroese and Icelanders suggests a similar ethnic composition, both are descended from predominantly Norse Viking populations which settled first in the Faroes then Iceland in the 9th Century A.D. The results, not yet available, of the analysis of over 600 blood samples will provide more precise information on the relative biological affinities of the Faroese and surrounding populations.

Introduction

During the summer of 1977 an anthropological and genetic survey of the Faroe Islanders was conducted in Klaksvík, Tvøroyri and Vágur with the primary aim of providing background information for a broader survey which included sociopaediatric studies in the Northern region. This paper concerns the results of the anthropological and genetic survey which was the most extensive of its kind to have been carried out in the Faroes. Each individual who took part in the study supplied basic family data which included name, date of birth, place of birth and birth places of parents and grandparents. This information enabled the selection of subjects of 'pure' Faroese ancestry which was essential for a study of this type. The objectives of the survey were to examine the biological relationships between the Faroe Islanders and other populations of North West Europe and secondly to look for possible genetic differences between the people from different regions of the islands. Investigations included anthropometry (the scientific measurement of the human body), dermatoglyphics (the study of finger prints), the measurement of skin colour, the collection of hair samples for the determination of hair colour and tests for colour vision deficiency. It is with the preliminary analysis

	Number	Age (years)	Stature (cm)	Sitting Height (cm)	Head Length (mm)	Head Breadth (mm)	Cephalic Index	Bizygomatic Diameter (mm)	Morphological Face Height (mm)	Nose Height (mm)	Nose Breadth (mm)	Source
FAROES	155	24.7	176.4	93.7	197.3	156.4	79.4	142.9	122.1	54.5	36.4	Present Study
ICELAND (small towns & Reykjavik)	275	34.5	176.7	92.8	198.9	156.4	78.7	142.7	129.2	57.9	35.1	Pálsson & Schwidetzky (1973)
ORKNEY (Deerness & Westray)	112	36.7	174.0	92.2	197.2	158.0	80.1	—	—	—	—	Brothwell (unpublished) Marshall (unpublished)
SCOTLAND	181	21.5	175.9	93.6	195.9	154.1	78.7	137.4	121.6	54.6	34.4	Gardner (unpublished)
NORWAY (Hordaland, Trøndelag & Fjordane)	2183	21.0	172.7	91.8	192.6	154.2	80.1	138.6	122.3	—	—	Bryn & Schreiner (1929)

Table 1. *Mean values of a number of anthropometric variables for various North Atlantic populations.*

of these aspects of the study, the results of which are now available, that the authors have been involved. In addition over 600 blood samples were collected for the determination of serological and biochemical characteristics of the Faroese but their analysis is not as yet complete. A number of interesting findings have emerged so far and the results allow certain conclusions to be drawn about genetic relationsships within the Faroe Islands and between the Faroese and neighbouring populations.

The Anthropometric Survey

A total of 155 young adult men took part in the anthropometric survey which involved 17 different measurements on each individual. The subjects were from the Teachers Training College in Tórshavn, the Navigation Schools in Tórshavn and Klaksvík and from sports clubs in Klaksvík and Tvøroyri. In addition 12 of the fathers of children attending the Peadiatric survey at Klaksvík hospital were measured. Some of the results together with comparative data for other North Atlantic populations are shown in Table 1. In interpreting the Norwegian data it is important to note that the study was performed in 1929. During recent decades the populations of many parts of the world including Scandinavia have been increasing in average height at a rate of about 1 cm per decade. The value given for Norwegian stature is consequently approximately 5 cm less than would be expected for the same population at the present time.

The Faroese are a tall people, similar in stature to the Icelanders. Head dimensions resemble those of Icelanders and Orkney Islanders. The cephalic index (Head Breadth/Head Length x 100) is similar to that for the neighbouring populations quoted. All values lie in the range 76 to 80.9 and indicate neither relatively long nor broad heads, a condition known as mesocephaly. The head and face measurements taken on the Faroese subjects are illustrated in Figure 1.

The bizygomatic diameter indicates that like the Icelanders,

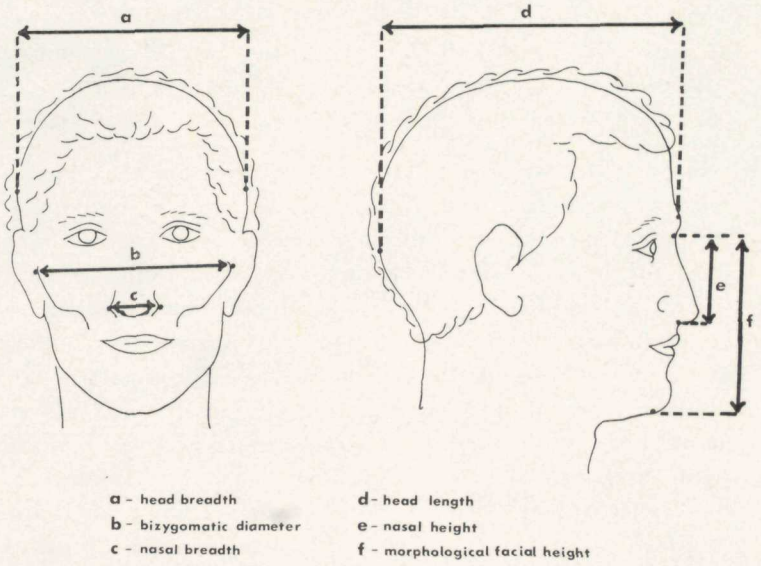

Figure 1. *Head and face measurements taken in the anthropometric survey.*

the Faroese have rather broad faces. However in facial and nasal height the Faroese values are similar to those for Scottish and Norwegian populations and markedly less than the Icelandic values. Overall the results indicate a high degree of similarity between the Faroese and surrounding populations, particularly the Icelanders. This finding is in agreement with the historical and archaeological evidence which attributes the settlement in the 9th Century A. D. of many parts of the North Atlantic region to people predominantly of Norse Viking origin but incorporating a component of Celtic peoples. The assessment of the degree of Celtic admixture in the early Faroese settlers is a topic which will be returned to later.

In order to look for differences within the Faroe Islands, 4 main geographical regions were considered which were defined as follows:

Northern — Fugloy, Svínoy, Viðoy, Borðoy, Kunoy and Kalsoy
Central — Eysturoy, Streymoy, Koltur, Hestur and Nólsoy
Western — Vágar and Mykines
Southern — Sandoy, Skúvoy, Stóra Dímun and Suðuroy.

Rather than assign individuals to a region on the basis of their own birthplace, which would tend to reflect the population movements that have occurred in recent years, the birth places of their grandparents were considered. Subjects were assigned to one of the regions if 3 or all 4 of their grandparents had been born within that region. This procedure accounted for 74 % of those who took part in the anthropometric survey. The remaining 40 individuals (with less than 3 grandparents born within a single region) were placed in a mixed origin category. Earlier studies have found a difference in physical attributes between Northern and Southern Island groups, for instance Hansen (1912) reported the Northern Islanders as being taller than the Southern Islanders. However in the present study no significant differences were found in anthropometric features between the regional subsamples (Table 2). The findings indicate that, so far as anthropometric characteristics are concerned, the Faroese constitute a fairly homogeneous population.

The Dermatoglyphic Survey

The skin on the palms of the hands, the soles of the feet, the fingers and the toes bears fine ridges the purpose of which is to increase the frictional resistance of the skin and heighten tactile sensitivity. The ridges appear on the skin before birth and form patterns which, barring serious injury, remain unchanged thoughout life. There are three main pattern types which occur on the fingers, arches, loops and whorls which are apparently equal in their function of improving grip. Some people have the same pattern on all 10 fingers but it is usual to have a mixture of two or all three types. Examples of arches,

	Number	Age (years)	Stature (cm)	Sitting Height (cm)	Weight (kg)	Head Length (mm)	Head Breadth (mm)	Bizygomatic Diameter (mm)	Morphological Face Height (mm)	Nose Height (mm)	Nose Breadth (mm)
NORTHERN	29	24.2	175.9	94.0	74.2	198.6	157.1	142.4	123.7	54.4	35.9
CENTRAL	48	24.5	175.4	93.5	75.2	196.6	156.9	143.6	121.7	55.1	36.4
WESTERN	11	25.4	176.3	93.7	72.9	198.2	153.7	141.5	120.0	52.5	36.6
SOUTHERN	27	24.5	177.2	93.6	74.4	197.5	156.6	142.7	122.3	54.3	35.9
MIXED ORIGIN	40	25.1	177.5	93.9	74.7	196.9	155.9	143.1	121.3	54.4	36.8

Table 2. *Mean values of a number of anthropometric variables for Faroese men of different regional origins.*

Figure 2. *Finger prints showing the three principal pattern types: arches, loops and whorls.*

loops and whorls are given in Figure 2. There are various subtypes of arches and whorls, and loops are divided into ulnar or radial depending on their orientation (radial loops are those which open towards the thumb; ulnar loops those which open away from the thumb).

Finger prints were collected from 297 Faroese, 156 males and 141 females. Fingers were numbered right (R) and left (L). I (thumb) to V. Analysis revealed that the Faroese resemble other populations in basic dermatoglyphic characteristics. Arches were most commonly found on R II (17.2 % of individuals had an arch on their right index finger) and L II (17.5 %) and there was a similarly high frequency on L III (16.8 %). Whorls were most frequent on R and L I (28.0 % and 18.9 % respectively) and R and L IV (33.0 % and 23.6 % respectively). R and L V bore ulnar loops with a frequency of about 90 % each. In common with other populations, the Faroese women show a higher frequency of arches and lower frequencies of whorls and radial loops than their menfolk. When overall pattern type frequencies are compared to those of other North Atlantic populations the Faroese in the study sample

Population	Number	Arches	Loops	Whorls	Sources
FAROES	297	9.6	73.9	16.5	Present Study
ICELAND	1572	7.5	70.0	22.5	Palsson & Schwidetzky, 1973.
ORKNEY	784	6.8	66.7	26.5	Boyce, Holdsworth & Brothwell, 1973.
SHETLAND	424	6.2	67.2	26.5	Berry & Muir, 1975.
ENGLAND	1000	5.0	68.9	26.1	Holt, 1968.
DENMARK	101511*	5.7	65.0	29.3	Bugge, 1932.
DENMARK	—	4.8	67.8	27.7	Biswas, 1963.
NORWAY	—	7.4	66.9	25.7	Biswas, 1963.

* predominantly males.

Table 3. *Percentage frequencies of dermatoglyphic pattern types for a number of populations.*

show distinctive and interesting values (Table 3). The frequency of whorls is very low and is counterbalanced by high frequencies of loops and, particularly, arches. A similar trend is apparent in the data for Iceland but is less pronounced than in the results for the Faroese. For a more detailed analysis the subjects were again divided, as before, into regional subgroups and a complex but fascinating picture emerged. In both males and females the mixed origin group had strikingly different frequencies of arches from the Northern, Central and Southern groups (there were too few people from the Western region to constitute a group). But whereas in the males the mixed origin group had a considerably higher frequency of arches than the regional groups, in the females the opposite was the case.

In the past partial isolation and intermarriage would have enhanced the variation between regional communities. The difference between the regional groups and the mixed origin groups suggests that the greater genetic heterogeneity presum-

ably present in individuals of more diverse family background, reflects itself in rather different pattern type frequencies. However this hypothesis fails to explain why the difference should be in opposite directions in males and females.

Investigation of another important dermatoglyphic feature, total ridge count, also yielded interesting results. Arches, the simplest pattern type, have no ridge count, but in loops and whorls it is the number of ridges crossed by a straight line joining the pattern centre or 'core' to a point known as the triradius, Figure 3. Triradii occur wherever three opposed ridge systems meet. A loop having one triradius has a single ridge count whereas whorls have two counts. Ridge breadth and therefore number per unit distance varies slightly between individuals but to a large extent ridge count is a measure of pattern size. An individual's total ridge count is the sum of the ridge counts on all ten fingers (in the case of whorls only the larger of the two counts is used). The mean total ridge count was calculated for the samples of Faroese males and females and for the regional and mixed origin sub-samples. The results are given in Table 4. The male mixed origin group, having a considerably lower mean total ridge count, was again distinct from the regional groups. In the females the Northern group had the lowest mean total ridge count whilst the mixed origin group had a value intermediate between those for the Central and Southern groups. Compared to other populations the Faroese values are low, particularly so for the females with a value of 105.8 reflecting their high arch frequencies. Males have in general larger fingers and larger patterns than females and consequntly have a higher mean total ridge count, in the case of the Faroese males 123.7. This is similar to the value of 123.9 given by Berry and Muir (1975) for Shetland but considerably less than the value of 139.7 for Swedish males (Böök 1957), or 145.2 for English males (Holt 1968).

The Pigmentation Survey

The pigmentation of the hair, skin and eyes is one of the

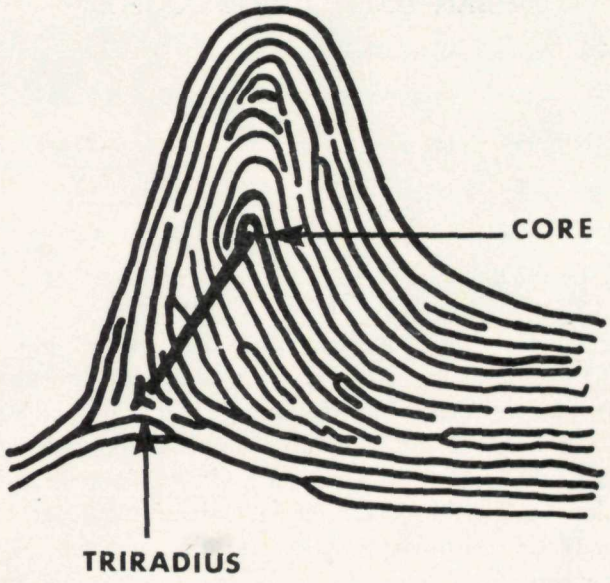

Figure 3. *The ridge count of a pattern is the number of ridges crossed by a straight line joining the pattern core and its triradius.*

most striking anthropological features and in geographical regions where there is conspicuous variation in all three features it is an important characteristic in distinguishing one population from another. Hair colour is a particularly variable feature in European populations, varying not only from one person to another but often also in the same person at different ages. In some individuals the change is considerable and is always towards a darker colour with increasing age (the greying of hair in old age is a separate process). Consequently when studying the hair colour of a population and comparing it to others the age of the individuals examined is particularly important.

MEAN TOTAL RIDGE COUNT

Population	Number	Males	Number	Females	Source
FAROES	155	123.7	141	105.8	Present Study
SHETLAND	194	123.9	214	115.5	Berry & Muir, 1975
SWEDEN	204	139.7	188	120.7	Böök, 1957
ENGLAND	825	145.2	825	127.0	Holt, 1968

Table 4. *Comparative data for mean total ridge count.*

Hair samples were collected from 274 Faroese, 144 males and 130 females, some subjects were adults but the majority (79 %) were children in the age range 4 to 18 years. The mean age of the whole sample was 16.7 years. Comparison of the samples to the *Haarfarbentafel nach Fischer-Saller,* a series of hair colour standards, yielded the following results: Red 2.6 %, Blonde 29.6 %, Brown 40.2 % and Brown-Black 27.7 %. The phenomenon of darkening with age makes comparison of these results with data for various North Atlantic populations difficult because other studies have involved subjects of higher or lower mean age. However, data given by Pálsson and Schwidetzky (1973 and 1975) indicate similarities between the hair colour of Faroese and Icelanders, both populations having rather darker hair than other Scandinavian populations. Celtic populations have darker hair than the Faroese and also a higher proportion of red hair. Interestingly the majority of red hair found in the Faroese belonged to individuals whose grandparents were born mainly in the northern island group.

The scientific measurement of skin colour can be achieved by making use of the general property of coloured surfaces to selectively absorb certain wavelengths of incident light and reflect others. A portable EEL reflectance spectrophotometer was used to measure the skin colour of 132 male and 117 female Faroese. This instrument emits light of a number of known wavelengths and measures the proportion which is reflected back from the skin surface. Two sites were tested, the

inner surface of the upper arm and the forehead, chosen because the former is protected, the latter exposed to the tanning effects of the ultra violet component of sunlight. The majority of subjects were drawn from upper secondary and H F school grades in Klaksvík, Tórshavn, Tvøroyri and Vágur but students from the Navigation Schools in Klaksvík and Tórshavn and Tórshavn teachers training college were included. A small number of adults and 4, 8 and 13 years olds were examined during investigation with the paediatric research group at Klaksvík hospital. Ages ranged from 4 to 38 in the females (mean 16.0 years) and 4 to 48 in the males (mean 17.7 years).

The Faroese males have darker skin than the females, a finding that has been reported for a number of other populations. Unfortunately EEL reflectance values are not available for Scandinavian populations, but compared to values for the Dutch (Rigters-Aris, 1973), Belgians (Leguebe, 1961) and various British populations (eg. Hulse, 1973; Cartwright, 1975) the Faroese are very pale. Protection from tanning is afforded by the low solar intensity and necessity to wear heavy clothing for much of the year, but the paleness of the Faroese skin may well be a genetically determined characteristic of long standing. Analysis of the results by regional subsamples gives no indication of different complexion in different parts of the islands.

The same pigment, melanin, is responsible for the colouration of hair, skin and eyes and there is a tendency for the level of pigmentation in each to be correlated. In the Faroese skin colour is very pale and hair colours include a high proportion of the lighter shades. What then of eye colour? The examination of eye colour was not one of the major investigations in the Faroes but has been assessed from photographs of 80 of the young men who took part in the anthropometric survey. 77.5 % were found to have blue eyes, the remainder generally darker grey/green or brown shades, indicating that in all aspects the Faroese population is lightly pigmented.

Colour Vision Deficiency

There are a number of forms of colour vision deficiency and because of the sex-linked mode of inheritance of the more common forms they are considerably more frequent in males than in females. In the Faroes 148 males and 126 females were examined. There were a few older and younger individuals but the majority of the sample were 14 to 19 year olds. All subjects were initially tested with Ishihara pseudo-isochromatic charts. These so-called 'colour confusion' charts are composed of dots of different colours in which the colour vision deficient person sees a different number or pattern to that seen by a normal person. Subjects who made 5 or more errors on this test were given a second more rigorous test using a Davidson and Hemmendinger colour rule. In this instrument two movable scales of gradually changing colour (at constant brightness) appear through an aperture. The colour on the two scales matches only when they are in certain positions relative to each other. The colour vision deficient person is detected by his or her inability to restrict the number of positions at which the scales appear to match. The two tests together enable a diagnosis of the type and severity of the disorder. Colour vision deficiency was detected in a total of 12 Faroese, 11 males (7.4 %) and 1 female (0.79 %). The value of 7.4 % is intermediate between values of 5.2 % and 10.1 % for Orcadian and Norwegian males respectively (Boyce et al., 1973; Schiotz, 1922). However owing to the small sample size this figure must be viewed with caution. Further investigation is required to determine whether the apparently high frequency of colour vision deficiency in males from the Northern and Central regions relative to the Southern group reflects a genuine difference or is a chance effect due to the small size.

Discussion

The Icelandic Landnámabók or book of the settlement describes the origins of about 5 % of the early settlers of Iceland. It indicates that over 60 % of these were from Norway

and a further 25 % were of British, predominantly Irish, descent. This small group may not have been representative of the ethnic composition of the remainder of the settlers but it is of interest because the description refers mainly to the households of the chieftains who at that time were related to the Faroese chieftains.

In the absense of further historical or archaeological evidence assessment of the relative proportions of Norse Viking and Celtic components in the settlers of the Faroe Islands presents the Anthropologist with certain problems. Firstly the present day population may differ genetically from the initial population and secondly members of the initial population may have been unrepresentative of the 'parent' populations from which they originated. The latter phenomenon is referred to as the Founder Effect and occurs when, by chance, the founding members of a new population differ genetically from the larger population from which they were drawn. For instance the high arch frequencies of the Faroese might be a consequence of the Founder Effect, the small group of original settlers having, purely by chance, a particularly high frequency of this dermatoglyphic feature. Alternatively the founding group may have consisted of typical representatives of their parent populations and differences may have arisen subsequently. Changes in the genetic structure of small isolated populations may occur through the operation of genetic drift. Fundamental to this concept is the fact that a child receives only half of the genetic material carried by each of its parents and which features are inherited and which is not is a random process. Concequently in a small population the genetic endowment of each new generation may differ, by chance, from that of the preceeding generation and result in random fluctuations in genetic characteristics of the population. Over the years the small, relatively isolated communities of the Faroese villages would have offered ideal conditions for the operation of genetic drift which may be responsible for some of the regional differences reported here. As the population grows

and as communication between the islands continues to improve the conditions necessary for genetic drift will be reduced. At the present time the most important influence upon the distribution of genetic characteristics in the Faroe Islands is probably the population movement which is taking place from the more remote regions to the growing urban centres.

In summary, this study has indicated that the Faroese and Icelanders resemble one another anthropometrically and have similar dermatoglyphic features. Both have a higher proportion of dark hair than other Scandinavian populations implying some Celtic admixture in their background. Comparative data for skin reflectance values are unfortunately not available for Scandinavian populations but the Faroese are much paler than United Kingdom populations. In levels of colour vision deficiency the Faroese are intermediate between values for Orkney and Norway but owing to the small Faroese sample size interpretation of this finding must be very tentative. Resemblance between the Faroese and Icelanders implies a similar ethnic composition of the two populations but the relative contributions of Norse Vikings and other peoples remain obscure. However the analysis of the large number of genetic systems which will be carried out on the blood samples will enable a more precise determination of the relative genetic affinities of the Faroese and various neighbouring populations.

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ÚRTAK

Í hesi grein verða framløgd nøkur fyirbilsúrslit av eini kanning av føroyingum, ið gjørd varð í 1977. Eitt miðið við rannsóknini var at vita eftir, hvussu føroyingar eru skyldir lívfrøðiliga við onnur fólk í Atlantshavslondum. Kanningarúrslitini vórðu eisini greind til at fáa skil á, um fólk ymsastaðni í Føroyum hava ólík lívfrøðilig eyðkenni. Gjørd vórðu fleiri sløg av kanningum. 155 ungir menn vórðu vigaðir, og mátaðir til hædd, høvuðlongd, høvuðbreidd o. s. fr., til samans 17 ymsar mátingar á mann. Úrslitini sýna, at føroyingar eru hávaksnir í samanburði við aðrar europear og eru átøkir íslendingum í fleiri likamseyðkennum. Stórur munur er ikki funnin at vera millum landslutir í hesi kanning. Harafturímóti benda nakrar av hinum kanningunum á almiklan mun millum landspartar. Fingramerki vórðu tikin av 297 fólkum. »Ryggirnir« framman á fingrunum falla í trinnanda høvuðsmynstur. Hesi mynstur eru ikki øll líka vanlig. Føroyingar høvdu stak nógv av bogamyndaðum mynstrum, eins og íslendingar. Mynstrini, ið nevnast »hvirlar«, royndust í sama mun óvanlig, serstakliga hjá konufólki í Norðuroyggjum.

Mátingar av andlitsdæmi sýndu, at føroyingar yvirhøvur eru sera bleikdæmdir. Eisini eru teir upp á seg í stórum tali ljóshærdir og jarpir, tó minni enn skandinavar.

Litblindi er altíð sjáldsamt hjá konufólki, men rættiliga vanligt hjá mannfólki. 7,4 % av føroyskum mannfólki royndust litblind, eyðkent fyri tjóð í Europu.

Sum heild sipast føroyingar íslendingum, helst tí at báðar tjóðir eru ættaðar frá landnámsfólki av somu rót. Vónandi fer úrslitið av meir enn 600 blóðroyndum at útvega neyvari upplýsingar um lívfrøðiliga skyldskap føroyinga við grannar sínar.