

Problems Concerning the Earliest Settlement in the Faroe Islands

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PURPOSE

In recent years it has become more difficult to be a Faroese historian than it was before. Old solutions of difficult and fundamental questions and problems in our history may have been undermined so as to make the historian less self-confident than he was earlier.

However, in my opinion, this has not been a destructive development. On the contrary, this is an indication that there is growth in research in our country, not only in the discipline of history, but also in related sciences, especially in archaeology and natural sciences, in the connection especially botany.

Research in our field is not only going on in our new university, Fróðskaparsetur Føroya, but also in institutions with which we co-operate, especially the National Museum, Føroya Fornminnisavni, the National Archives, Føroya Landsskjalasavn and the Museum of Natural History, Føroya Náttúrugripasavn. Also we are in close co-operation with Danish institutions and scholars.

What I shall try to do in this paper is to give only a broad outline of the research

and discussion of one of the main themes, perhaps the most interesting one, in our history: The problems concerning the earliest settlement in the Faroe Islands, giving first my own presentation of the sources at our disposal, divided up into different (and simplified) categories, the general views of historians, archaeologists and natural scientists, stressing not only different views, but also the different starting-points resulting from different methods of work.

Finally, I shall make a try at a provisional conclusion as to the present state of research in the field, by summing up what to me seems important.

»The Irish Question«

It was only in the Romantic days of the 19th century that the Faroese began to try to find roots that were not Faroese. It was not enough just to be Faroese, members of a small and historically insignificant people, in the midst of their national awakening. They had to find some other and more exotic points of identification. Perhaps everyday life over the centuries had been too tedious – some »grandeur« was necessary!

In or about 825 A. D. an Irish Scholar, learning and teaching at the court school of Charlemagne at Aachen (Aix-la-Chapelle) finished a learned compilation of the most advanced knowledge of geography of his time. *Liber de mensura orbis terrae*. The only new knowledge he had to add was the information of some obscure islands situated in the ocean north of Britain. They had been deserted («deserta») since the beginning of the World. After having described a country that must have been Iceland he relates:

There are many other islands in the ocean north of Britain which can be reached from the northern islands of Britain in a direct voyage of two days and nights with full sails filled with a continuously favourable wind. A devout priest told me that in two summer days and the intervening night he sailed in a two-benched boat and entered one of them.

There is another set of small islands, nearly all separated by narrow stretches of water; in these for nearly a hundred years hermits sailing from our country Scotia (Ireland) have lived. But just as they were always deserted from the beginning of the world, so now because of the Northern pirates («causa latronum Normannorum») they are emptied of anchorites, and filled with countless sheep and very many diverse kinds of sea-birds. I have never found these islands mentioned in [the books of] the authorities («in libris auctorum memoratas»).¹

These are the words of the learned Dicuil who may have come from northern Ireland or from northern Scotland.²

There are, however, other Irish sources that can, if not prove, then make likely, Dicuil's statements. There exist also pre-Dicuilian indications of Irish discoveries in the ocean to the north of Scotland, making at least likely that they had, as the first seamen of the North, discovered the islands which were later to become known

as the Faroe Islands, i.e. the sheep islands.³

I shall try for a while to return to sources and literature to make these indications if not clear, then credible.

In a sensational lecture, at least for his time, presented before a learned audience in 1891, the German professor of Greifswald, Heinrich Zimmer, gave his views »Über die frühesten Berührungen der Iren mit den Nordgermanen«.⁴ What is interesting in his lengthy elucidation is that the contact between »die Germanen«, in our sense the Nordic peoples, with peoples not only of Celtic/Gaelic descent, but also with an amalgamation of peoples of Gaelic and Pictish descent, began much earlier than later historians have imagined. His statements have been severely criticised, first by Finnur Jónsson,⁵ later by F. T. Wainwright as »unsupported speculation«, having confused »several subsequent writers«.⁶

It has been a commonplace in North Atlantic history that the Irish – who otherwise in no way were a seafaring people – nevertheless developed a tradition for sailing. One wonders whether most of the voyages related, many of them totally legendary and far from any believable reality are not invented instruments, necessary to illustrate sinful man's search for Heaven and Paradise. To concrete-thinking Medieval man such Promised Lands must have some geographical location in order to give any meaning. Christian life as a troublesome journey towards eternity survived the Middle Ages.

To what extent this legendary material can be used as historical evidence has to be carefully re-considered, especially in the

context dealt with here. Adamnan and Brendan cannot be used as historical evidence in any real sense, while Dicuil's sober information, without any religious mission, belongs to quite a different category of historical sources.

On the other hand, according to early Medieval historical sources, at least some Irish became seafarers, not pursuing the golden things of this World, but peace and solitude for the adoration of their Lord, conceived as a physically existing phenomenon, and, perhaps also as results of secular sentences, having to leave their native lands and to find some other places to live.⁷

So, was it piety or necessity – or was it banal inquisitiveness – that called the newly-Christianised Irishmen to the sea? I shall give no answer. But at least some of them sailed. Heinrich Zimmer talks of »ein Hang zum Anachoretenthum. Was den egyptischen und syrischen Christen die Wüste war, das wird den Iren die See um Irland«.⁸

Of course, the basic logical assumption for Zimmer's theory of pre-Viking contacts between Norsemen and peoples of Irish origin before the explosion of the Viking expansion can be doubted. The turning-point of his theory is the attack on Eigg and Tory Island is recorded in the Annals of Ulster, and credited to the Christian Picts. To Zimmer the assailants are not likely to have been Picts, who in no way were in possession of a fleet of the size described, and were not unknown to the Irish. In Zimmer's conception, such a »Meerflotte« can hardly have been a Pictish, but rather a Norwegian one, especially as linguistic indications can, or must, be

interpreted that this fleet was »übers Meer gekommen«. To him a Pictish attack could have been no surprise to the Irish, since they had known them since the middle of the 4th century, so that they had become »vollkommen vertraut« to them. Therefore, this shocking attack must have been made by some other, unknown, people, in this case obviously Scandinavians, or rather Norsemen, thus proving, or at least making likely a much earlier date of the beginning of the Norse expansion than was generally believed at his time.

Heinrich Zimmer mentions several incidences from Irish sources which indicate that Irish seafarers, also according to Dicuilus, might have landed in the Faroe Islands.⁹ There can be little doubt that sources which Dicuilus did not know can contribute – even if everything cannot be proved – to a story ranging in time farther back than that of Dicuilus. Adamnan's *Vita Sancti Columbae* from the beginning of the 7th century, mentioned in the great work of the Venerable Bede, may make this assumption likely,¹⁰ although nothing can be proved. And this specific Faroese question is not a unique one in early Medieval history.

On the other hand, all these possibilities can be discussed as far as their historical importance is concerned. Anchorites are not supposed to produce new generations. So, Irishmen, forsaking the pleasures or the evils of this World of sin, cannot be suspected of being the forefathers of the people that eventually became the Faroese nation! Consequently, an eventual Irish settlement in the Faroe Islands can hardly have left any marks upon our history. A recognized Gaelic element in Medieval

culture, especially manifest in the language, must be considered to be of a later date, and without any connection with the »Imrama«, the voyages of devout Christians seeking solitude for contemplation while awaiting a better World in the sense of eternity,¹¹ or, searching for Paradise in its physical, earthly, sense.

The presence in Faroese waters of Basque fishermen or whalers, at this point of time, must left for further research.¹²

Færeyinga Saga

Until recently traditional works on the early history of the Faroe Islands have connected the first Norse settlement with King Harald Fairhair's seizure of power in the last years of the 9th century. The main source for this supposition was *Færeyinga saga*, written in Iceland, probably on the basis of old oral tradition, at about 1220, preserved and handed down to the present as fragments of other sagas.¹³ *Færeyinga saga* relates nothing about any earlier Irish settlement – as do, in the case of Iceland, *Íslendingabók* and *Landnámabók*.¹⁴

The main theme in *Færeyinga saga* is not the question of the Faroese *landnám*, but the efforts made by Norwegian kings to extend their powers also to comprise the Faroe Islands, practicing a talented divide and rule policy among the families of chiefs. But the saga mentions by name the first man who settled in the islands, Grímr Kamban – the first name significantly being of Norse, the second of Scottish-Gaelic origin.¹⁵ The fact that *Landnámabók* counts Grímr's grandson among the first colonists in Iceland spoils the chronology of the saga – and the traditional Icelandic casual relations at large.¹⁶

Recent studies in the saga material have made new interpretations possible and credible, thus eliminating all sure evidence of simultaneous Norwegian settlements in the Faroe Islands and Iceland.¹⁷

It has been pointed out by Dr Ólafur Halldórsson, in his significant new edition of *Færeyinga saga*, that this saga had been preserved for a long time in oral tradition before it was written down.¹⁸ Nevertheless, there are so many correct references, especially geographical terms, to the Faroe Islands, that it must somehow have had a Faroese background. Chronologically it can date the coming of the first Faroese Landnám-man back to about or a little after 800. We are then in good harmony with Dicuil's dating of the coming of the first Norse or Norwegian »invaders. Dr Halldórsson's well-founded choice of the version of *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* instead of that of *Flateyjarbók* as the source about the first settlement has thus eliminated a logical historical vacuum, with allowances to traditional inaccuracies in Medieval historical chronology. So, from the point of a historian, the coming of the Norsemen can still be dated to about 800.

As in most, perhaps all, countries, what might be called archaeological interest in the 19th century began among persons, amateurs, in the Age of Romanticism and awakening nationalism.¹⁹ Perhaps things were done from idealistic and nationalistic inspiration that were better never done.²⁰

Professional Faroese archaeology only started in the early 1940's by the late Sverri Dahl.

By his research, especially at the villages of Kvívík and Tjørnuvík, archaeology mo-

ved from myth to science.²¹ Sverri Dahl was not only an excavator; his humanist intellectual constitution made him also a historian, and a man of culture in the broadest sense of the term. With him Faroese archaeology became professionalised, even if he, in so many senses of the word, was a self-made man. His intuition, his talent, cannot be doubted.

From the beginning Sverri Dahl was influenced by A. W. Brøgger,²² who fully accepted Dicuil's and Zimmer's theories when stating: »There can be no doubt that Irish hermits had been in the Faroe Islands before the Norsemen came.«²³ Also Dr Jakob Jakobsen had already, perhaps under the influence of Sophus and Alexander Bugge,²⁴ taken Zimmer as an unquestionable authority when speaking of »the famous celtologist, Professor Zimmer in Germany«,²⁵ concluding from his philological reflection and by analogy (especially *papa*-words in Shetland and Iceland, and historical sources, Dicuil and Icelandic sagas) that a pre-Viking settlement in the Faroe Islands was more than likely.²⁶

In his dissertation Professor Christian Matras was much more sceptical as to Celtic-Gaelic linguistic influence than he became later.²⁷

Thus, Sverri Dahl had many »authorities« to rely on, and this must make it difficult for him to reject the possibility that cross-slabs showing clear Celtic-Irish influence might be relics of a »Papa« period. He also found some support among archaeologists²⁸ and historians.²⁹

After Sverri Dahl, and after him, others continued the work, only to mention Arne Thorsteinsson, Símun V. Arge, Knud

Krogh, Torben Diklev, Ditlev Mahler and Steffen Stummann Hansen.³⁰

Botany

Until recently natural sciences, such as botany, have not been regarded as historical disciplines. Today, all historians and archaeologists are fully aware of the scientific interaction between the humanities and natural sciences, if only in terms of dating historical relics.

To me the problem is that we are not able to control each other, perhaps the historians and the archaeologists to a certain degree, from our own situation of work. Historians and archaeologists are not capable of being burglars into natural sciences.

From a scientific point of view we are, so far, lookers-on or listeners. Historians and archaeologists. In the last resort, all science is a question of common sense, not of prejudice and fanaticism. So, we must listen to all who can contribute to our understanding of the past, particularity concerning the problems in question. A scholar can never feel too secure. His attitude to his subject must be a humble one.

The Historians

Since the earliest editions of Dicuil's work, the first of them nearly two hundred years ago,³¹ historians have put much confidence in his account of the islands north of Britain. As alluded to earlier, his source of information, the islands of which he gives descriptions related to him by others as »semper deserta« cannot be Shetland, cannot be Iceland (which has a separate description); they can only be the Faroe Islands. Consequently, since Dicuil first be-

come known his work has constituted the basis for historians in the question of the first settlement in the Faroe Islands.

At least to me, as far as Dicuil is concerned, all methodological instruments should give the same result: We are confronted with a reliable historical source.

I am fully convinced that the statements of Dicuil are reliable. His compilation of the highest knowledge of traditional geography, his personal addition about the islands to the north of Britain, especially of those which must be the Faroe Islands, is original information which he, who otherwise only refers to established authorities, has never seen or heard of amidst »authorities«.³²

When we remember that Dicuil wrote his work, far from his native lands, perhaps after 30 years of voluntary physical and intellectual exile,³³ there should be no insuperable discrepancy as to the chronology. It must be important that in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris the oldest preserved version can be dated back to about 845, i.e. not very many years after the death of Dicuil. The fate of other manuscripts are to be found elsewhere.³⁴

The Archaeologists

I have chosen to put Sverri Dahl under this headline, having already presented him to history, because he was as much a historian as an archaeologist.

Sverri Dahl was a devout believer in an early Irish settlement and used the term »Papa Age« (Papatid) in his historical periodisation about the »time« that to him, at least in 1968, preceded the Norse settlement, even if he had never found any concrete evidence of Irish settlement in

the Faroe Islands.³⁵ Nor have his younger successors succeeded. The Icelanders have faced the same problem. We meet here the classical problem of »e silentio« – evidence, not in its historical, but in its archaeological sense.

In his work as an archaeologist Sverri Dahl tried to unite the results of archaeological research with historical evidence and more visionary concepts or beliefs in a pre-Viking Irish settlement.³⁶ This »Holy Historical Trinity« was an intellectual reality to him, even if not objectively proven.

Gravestones with engraved »sun-crosses«, showing Irish features, found at the village of Skúvoy, where, according to *Færeyinga saga*, the first Christian church was built and the first Christians buried; or mystical cornfields (»akrar«) on the island of Mykines (and in some other remote places in the islands), to him offering some resemblance with Irish phenomena, more than indicated to him a pre-Viking Irish settlement, as related by Dicuil. As will be known, the next generation of archaeologists are far from convinced in his optimistic view of historical interpretation. The most cautious and sceptical response so far has been made by Símun V. Arge, stating the archaeological fact that human settlement cannot be proven farther back than the middle of the 10th century, thus being close to old Icelandic tradition,³⁷ and Arne Thorsteinsson in various articles.³⁸

Dicuil may not be a problem for the archaeologists since they have not been able to find any settlement confirming his story. From his excavation of the stately Viking Age farm at Leirvík (Toftanes) Steffen Stummann Hansen has drawn the

preliminary conclusion that he has reached as far back as to 900, or perhaps some years before the turn of the century.³⁹

The »ærgi« (shielings) excavated by Ditlev Mahler at Eiðisvatn have been dated to traditional Viking Age and early Middle Ages.⁴⁰

Knud Krogh's excavation of the six churches of Sandur relates logically to Christian times, and can hardly contribute to the problem: the first settlement in the Faroe Islands, as churches are Christian institutions.⁴¹

So, the archaeologists can, at most, go back to about 900 as to the earliest settlement. They are not able to fill the gap back to Dicuil. Consequently, to them what I have called the »Irish Question« has not yet gained any importance.

The Botanist(s)

The peaceful two-fronted academic war between historians and archaeologists was disturbed some years ago when a third intruder entered the field: The natural scientist, embodied in the botanist. This represents the necessary interaction between disciplines formerly entirely separated, but now interdisciplinarily dependent.

During the 1970's the Faroese botanist Jóhannes Jóhansen carried out his pioneering research in pollen-analyses in the Faroe Islands. In brief his main thesis was that at about 600-650 A.D. oats had been cultivated. As corn-plants cannot grow wild (in other words are cultivated plants) in the islands, this presuppose the existence of human beings. For him it was natural to refer to Dicuil's account, according to which Irish anchorites might have been

in the islands as early as about 700.⁴² Fifty or one hundred years do not spoil any early medieval chronology.

In reality this was a revolutionary theory, disturbing even the old gap between history and archaeology: the vacuum of one hundred, or perhaps two hundred, years.

Dr Jóhannes Jóhansen's dissertation made the scepticism of archaeologists. Also the presumption — in accordance with the Sverri Dahl and P. V. Glob intuitive tradition — that the fields on Mykines might be relics of an Irish pre-Viking settlement were met with scientific resistance among archaeologists as they had found no evidence that confirmed the »methology« of any Irish inhabitation.⁴³

But in this context it must be interesting that Dr Jóhansen in his research in Shetland was able to unite the results of his own studies in vegetational history with accepted archaeological and historical facts.⁴⁴

Still more »alarming« is an article by Dr Jóhansen in the Faroese scientific journal, »Fróðskaparrit« in asserting that his demonstration of the presence of the plant *Plantago lanceolata* in the Faroe Islands as early as about 2300 B.C., according to a generally accepted theory, not only indicates, but rather makes likely the inhabitation of human beings.⁴⁵

It is important to note that Dr Jóhansen is always wary to give historical explanations. He sticks to his own subject, and his hints to history and archaeology are only allusions to the origin of these early pre-Vikings settlers.⁴⁶

Having stated an »Irish« settlement early in the 7th century, he finds some kind

of a change at about 950, reflected in a shift from the cultivation of oats to the cultivation of barley. To him this fact might indicate a shift from Norse-Irish to Norwegian settlement, even if this change may have taken place over a time.⁴⁷

In my opinion, this theory is not quite satisfactory to explain the »gap« between a supposed early Irish and a later Norse settlement – at least only if we accept an idea of two Norse »Landnáms«, one from the south at about 800 and one direct from Norway at about 900, possibly connected with king Harald Hairfair's seizure of power, sustained by the Icelandic tradition and Faroese archaeological research. The »Dicuilian« Norsemen should then have carried on the already existing cultivation of oats, while barley was introduced by their Norwegian kinsmen 100 or 150 years later.⁴⁸ But the question arises: Were two Norse Landnáms possible in this small country? Could there have been space for a massive new colonization more than one hundred years after the first one? Hadn't the first settlers already divided the land among themselves over this span of three or four generations when the effect of inheritance must have been an active social force in the Faroese community?

So, temporarily leaving out of account the possibilities of a Stone Age settlement, it still remains to connect or to disconnect these hypothetical phases of Landnám in the Faroe Islands: one »Irish anchorite« phase, one »Dicuilian« phase and one period of change to permanent Norse settlement.

At least natural science has provoked much interesting and inspiring disturbance in the study of Faroese history.

Philology and Philologists

I have deliberately chosen to put subject and scholars under the same item, finding it necessary not to leave out this field of science, but at the same time stressing that it has not very much to say about the question dealt with here: the dating of the first settlement. But, as a matter of fact, the philologists were the first to touch upon early Irish-Faroese relations.

In his studies Dr Jakob Jakobsen pointed out that several placenames in the Faroe Islands were of Gaelic origin.⁴⁹ Professor Christian Matras continued his Work, widening the spectrum also to language elements other than place-names. On the islands of Mykines he maintained to have found an interesting place-name, »Korkadalur«, meaning the »oats valley«, thus linking together Sverri Dahl's assumption concerning the fields and Dr Johansen's pollen analyses. (The Gaelic origin of the word »korki« and the meaning of the word had already been observed by Dr Jakobsen, but not in Matras' interpretation.⁵⁰) Christian Matras also pointed out that the first part of two place-names, »Papurshálsur« and »Paparøkur« might relate to an early Irish settlement.⁵¹ But that such locations should have been the remote abodes of distressed Irish hermits has been questioned by Símun V. Arge.⁵² And from pure logic it can hardly be possible that invading Norsemen should have adopted place-names from the enemies they had either killed or driven away. Gaelic cultural, also linguistic, influence after the permanent Norse settlement has been proven by irrefutable evidence.

A Modest Attempt at a Conclusion

It this article I have tried to touch upon some of the main problems concerning the earliest settlement in the Faroe Islands. What has been tried, in broad outline, is not to point out solutions, but to present the stage of research today.⁵³ One may ask if there exists any stage at all, or rather a state of confusion, with so many parties involved and with so many gaps in our knowledge. At least, no final synthesis is possible.

But many questions must naturally be asked. For example: How could it be that human beings had been living in Shetland for almost 5000 years before the Faroe Islands were discovered? It must be accepted as a matter of fact that they were known by people in »Scotia« early in the 8th century. Can it be possible that the Norse expansion to the West, beginning shortly before 800 should have been 100 or 150 years »old« when Norse people settled in the islands, considering their geographical position. Only the future can tell us if it will be possible to bridge the gaps, by means of the results of archaeological research, back to Dicuil, and eventually from him to early settlers – not to speak of those still more obscure peoples that might have visited our islands about four thousand years ago.

Some of the answers may be slumbering in the patient earth, and may some day be given a voice – either as a result of research, or by mere accident.

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- 54. Andras Sólstein: Trupulleikar viðvíkjandi tí fyrstu búsetingini í Føroyum. Paper (MS) submitted to Exam. Art. degree in History at Fróðskaparsetur Føroya 1987.
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Samandráttur

Hesi seinnu árinu hefur gróður verið í færøyskum søguvísindum og í vísindagreinum, sum kunnu hava samband við søgu-gransking, so sum fornfrøði, málfrøði og náttúrufrøði, serliga plantufrøði.

Henda framgongd hefur hjálpt til at koma gomlum og nýggjum ivasurningum nærri. Bæði gamalt og nýtt heimildartilfar má metast av nýggjum. Víst verður til heimildir í fótnotunum.

Nýggj granskingarúrslit hava gjørt, at gamlir sannleikar ikki allir eru so tryggir og vissir longur. Komu t.d. menniskju til Føroya um 2300 f. Kr., um 600 e. Kr., um 700, 800, um 900 ella seinni? At koma hesum spurningi nærri er avgerandi fyri at fáa at vita á leið nær søga føroyinga byrjaði.

Greinin, sum upprunaliga í øðrum og styttri líki varð lögð fram á 11. Víkingafundinum í Caithness og Orknoyum í 1989,

er ein roynd at viðgera og samanfata granskingina av hesum grundspurningi í Føroya søgu.

Í hesi grein, sum mest er at rokna sum eitt granskingaryvirlit – tó við sjálvstøðugum niðurstøðum – verður granskingin av spurninginum um Føroya elstu búseting viðgjørd út frá nýggjum sjónarhornum, samstundis sum gjørt verður vart við sjónarmið hesum grundspurningi viðvíkjandi.

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