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Uttangarðs
Relics in the Faeroe outfield

Introduction

The Faeroe outfield has, so far, only been studied to a relatively limited extent, mainly in connection with agricultural land use and land utilisation, legal and ownership rights (Bjørk 1957). It has not been a subject of interest from a historic-philological perspective until quite late in the 1990s. The outfield has, however, constituted an important setting for place-name research (Matras 1933, 1956). From the 1970s onwards, the outfield has also been included in ethnological and historic settlement studies (Thorsteinsson 1977, 1981, 1982, Baldwin 1984) and studies on the cultural environment (Arge 1998). From an archaeological perspective, the outfield is a relatively new study area (Dahl 1970, Mahler 1990, 1991, 1996, 1998, Arge 1991). Here, I will use the opportunity to draw attention to some conditions and features that characterise the Faeroe outfield. The intention of my paper is to explain the outfield concept, and its importance related to the Post-Reformation, pre-industrial agricultural society on the Faeroes. The physical remains of human activities in the outfield, which are considered to relate to this period, will be characterised.

The new interest in the cultural history of the outfield has illustrated that there are traces and remains which, in regard to function and date, we know very little or nothing at all. In some instances, however, the place name material has contributed to a wider understanding. In this paper, I will try to shed light on some of these incidences, by using selected examples.

Innangarðs – uttangarðs. The infield-outfield system in the traditional pre-industrial agrarian society.

First, I want to give a brief outline of the infield-outfield system in the traditional, pre-industrial agricultural society, with the background of the historical and cultural conditions.

Somewhat simplified, we could say that the history of the islands can be divided into an older prolonged period consisting of an agriculture-farming society,

and a younger period, where the islands primarily can be characterised as a fishing community.

The Faeroes formed an agricultural society from the earliest phase, when the first people settled on the islands during the Viking period. These people, whether they came directly from the east, or from Norse settlements to the south of the Faeroes, brought with them a culture deeply rooted in a Norse *agrarian* culture, which was also the reason they realised the potential of utilising the natural resources particular to the islands. The utilisation of arable land constituted the basis for the plant- and domestic animal production, which gained decisive importance in the Faeroese society. This production was closely integrated in an infield and outfield system.

In this society, the ownership of, and utilisation rights to arable land, the cultivated infield, called the *markatalsjörð*, was decisive for the individual's position and general standing in the community. These rights to the *markatalsjörð*, the infield, did not only include the outfield, but also access to what we may call 'extras'; such as hunting wildfowl, collecting of eggs and the rights to all objects that washed ashore, especially driftwood and stranded whales. Agriculture, sheep- and cattle farming, wildfowl and whale hunting as well as fishing from rowing boats were therefore integrated parts of a common economic system.

The Faeroes continued as an agrarian society right up to the end of the twentieth century, when the acquisition of seagoing fishing vessels started. When the first sloop was bought in 1872, a new era had started, and the Faeroes were transformed into a fishing society resulting in colossal sociological and cultural changes.

A geographical description

The Faeroes consist of eighteen islands, separated by narrow fjords and sounds, seventeen of which are inhabited. The islands comprise approximately fourteen thousand square kilometres. The distance from north to south is one hundred and eighteen kilometres, and east to west seventy-nine kilometres.

The geology of the islands is rather simple and straightforward, consisting of a series of three basalt layers interspersed with volcanic ash and tuff. Together with climatically controlled geomorphologic processes, these basalt series not only represent the basis for the shaping of the soil from which the vegetation springs, but are also decisive for the natural formation and character of the landscape. The form of the landscape determined by the lowest basalt series is characterised by its broad step-like terrain and naked shelves. The middle basalt series is typified by convex, rounded, sloping, vegetated hillsides, devoid of prominent basalt shelves. In the upper basalt series, we find the reappearance of the stepped landscape, with its regular alternating basalt and tuff layering.

In contradiction to the Faeroes limited land mass area, the islands' topographical features are quite varied. This factor has been ultimately decisive in regard to the utilisation of the outfield on the islands. For instance, there are landscapes which can be characterised by steep stony hillsides whilst others are of a more kind and softer

nature. The first type of landscape mentioned could, at first sight, seem less suitable for sheep grazing, but here, the sheep developed into a more heavily built, muscular and meaty animal, in comparison with the sheep grazing on the gentler slopes of the pastures or outfield. It is thereby possible to recognise especially prominent sheep-areas. Furthermore, as the islands are devoid of timber vegetation, a very important factor has been whether the individual settlement's outfield contained bogs and subsequently peat, which could be harvested as an energy resource to replace firewood. If this was not available, it was necessary to establish other means of gaining access to this resource. During bad winters, it was important whether the outfield faced westwards, as airborne briny sea spray could destroy the vegetation (Svabo 1976:220).

Settlements have been dispersed along the coast and fjords in the form of villages, and their locations are quite clearly related to topographical conditions. In the near vicinity of farms, areas were cleared and surrounded by dykes. These areas were used for growing corn and barley, and for hay production. This area is denoted as the infield. The outfield, on the other hand, was used for other purposes, and is the main topic I shall return to in the following.

In the Faeroes, the term *bygd* is synonymous with a district, the so-called *markatalbygd*, is a legislative unit and council on agricultural affairs. The term therefore comprises the settlement, the infield and the outfield. Nevertheless, colloquially the term *bygd* is used for the village.

Uttangarðs – the outfield. Cultural remains from the pre-industrial agrarian society

Even if the Faeroese prehistory appears as rather invisible, evident traces of human exploitation of land through the ages have been recognised in the outfield, where modern development as yet has not destroyed them altogether.

Hagin – the pastureland

In a utilisation context, the pasture land in the outfield – in Faeroese, called the *hagi* – is divided into a lower pasture land area, *undirhagi,* and an upper or mountain/hill pasture land area, *yvirhagi* or *fjallahagi.* The borders defining them varied according to the various grazing conditions. The mountain and hill pastures were mainly used for sheep grazing in summer and early winter, whilst the sheep grazed the lower pastures during winter and spring. During the winter, even the infield should be regarded as a lower pasture land, as the gates were opened after the harvest had been gathered, allowing the sheep to graze freely until May, when the gates of the infield dykes were closed again to protect the growing grass.

When cattle were driven through cattle lanes to the pastures in the outfield for their summer grazing, they were led to the special part of the outfield, known as the *húshagi*, the home-pasture land. This land mainly covered the section of the lower pasture land close to the residential buildings, but also the nearby valleys and gentler

hillsides could be included in this category. Some settlements had common *húshagi* adjacent to and bordering the infield close to the settlement. Others had to have their pastures spread over several locations and, in some instances, so far away that the daily milking became very strenuous. In cases where an outfield could not provide home-pasture land because of its distant location, it was given the right to graze its cattle in another settlement's pasture. The conditions concerning house-pasture land varied greatly from place to place, both in usage and user rights (Bærentsen 1911, Bjørk 1984).

Folds and shelters – provisions for creatures

Characteristic features of the Faeroe outfield are the *sheepfolds* or pens. When the sheep were gathered, they were herded into sheepfolds, constructed of stone and earth, usually located close to the infield. There were often additional, smaller folds or pens in the outfield, used during spring when the wool was sheared. In late autumn and early winter, when most of the sheep were slaughtered, they were herded into folds adjacent to the settlement. The ruins of some of these folds can be seen in the landscape, and several of them are still intact and in use today.

Another prominent feature of the Faeroe outfield which is related to sheep farming, are the sheep-shelters, denoted *ból*, where sheep can seek shelter in bad weather. The *ból,* constructed at certain locations, is usually a horseshoe-shaped structure, about the height of a man, made of stones and earth with no roof, and with an opening facing away from the prevailing wind direction. The latter being especially important regarding protection from snowfall. This provision has been quite significant, in that it allows for the continuing tradition of keeping sheep out in the fields all year round. A *ból* could keep anything from 50 to 100 sheep, and the animals sought refuge there under their own volition.

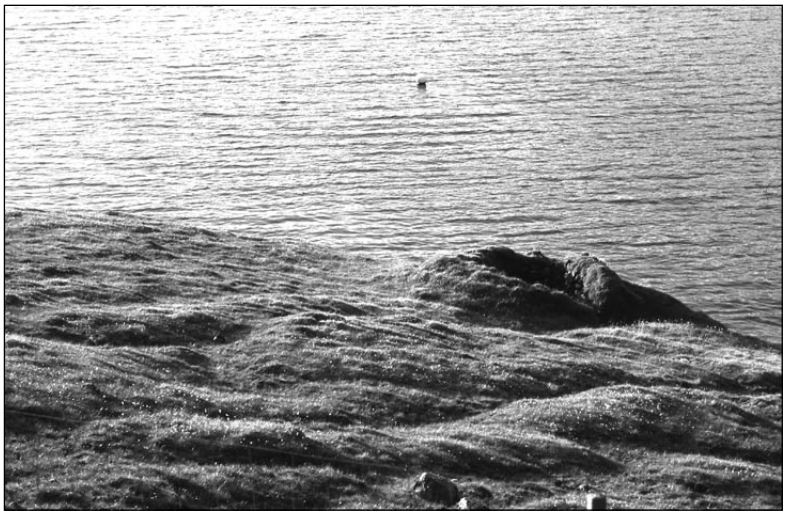

Figure 1. *Ból – sheep shelter in the outfield of Hvalvík, Streymoy. Photo: SVA/Føroya Fornminnissavn*

Peat cutting

Peat has always been used for heating and cooking purposes in the Faeroes. It was usually cut in the outfield close to the settlement, in the settlement's home-pastures.

Wide, open-ranging areas with moss vegetation and bogs can often reveal hundreds of years of activities connected with the usage of peat and the preparation of fuel. This extraction has often marked the landscape, especially where the peat was cut; the so-called *torvgrøv*, turf or peat banks. This activity is also evidenced by the many mounds in the terrain in such areas. The mounds were results of the repeated stacking of peat at the same location, year after year for hundreds of years – the *torvlutir*.

The dried peat was kept in special peat shelters – a *krógv*, erected where the peat was cut. After the peat slices were stacked one on top of another, they were surrounded by a stone enclosure. Finally, the peat was covered by a layer of especially long turf strips, functioning as a roof. As peat was brought home and used through the winter, the structure decreased, until only the bottom layer remained as evidence of the activity, and can be witnessed in the outfield today.

Figure. *2 Krógv – peat store in the outfield of Velbastaður, Streymoy. Photo: SVA/Føroya Fornminnissavn*

Still, both intact and remains of special stone buildings wherein peat was stored can be found at several locations in the outfield.

Gróthús – stone outhouses

When looking carefully, one may still observe ruins of small stone houses, built on small islets in the fjords or sounds between the islands. These islets were used to hide and store meat. The small stone outhouses were built as a precaution to prevent theft of meat. This practice came to an abrupt end after a vessel stranded in 1765. Some of the 'crew members' that managed to come ashore were brown rats. As the rat is a good swimmer, it was easy to reach these islets and eat the hidden food. This incident brought an end to this form of meat storage.

Communication and transport

All transport and communication between settlements went through the outfield – if not by sea. Passage through the outfield was formerly quite restricted – it was forbidden to go alone into the outfield, unless for necessary farming activities, for example when tending or gathering sheep, milking cows or inspecting the peat. This strict prohibition should be seen as a precaution against sheep theft or as protection of sheep farming in general. Anybody who was travelling alone in the outfield would immediately be suspected of sheep stealing! However, there were variations in the law and practice.

However, in recent times, people have had the right to travel along marked footpaths between villages/settlements. These paths are marked by stone cairns, *varðar,* and called *varðagötur,* cairn-paths. The cairns also helped travellers to find their way in poor weather with bad visibility.

Figure. *3 Varðagöta – cairn-marked path in the outfield of Sandur, Sandoy. Photo: SVA/Føroya Fornminnissavn*

On the Faeroes, there are no public commons – almenningar – in the outfield. For hundreds of years, the outfield has been exploited from the shoreline up to the mountaintops. We should, however, make clear that we are not referring to vast distances and outfield areas, as for example in Iceland, Greenland or Scandinavia.

Dykes, and dyke structures

There are many types of dykes and dyke structures to be observed in the outfields – some more apparent, others only visible under special light conditions.

In many cases, these dykes are associated with the animal farming, for instance the many cattle-dykes, the so-called *neytagarðar*. Such dykes could prevent cattle from straying into dangerous terrain, or from falling from cliffs. There are also examples of areas where the animals were intended to stay inside smaller or larger enclosures, a so-called *kvíggj*, which could be closed off by a dyke.

Dykes have also been used as boundaries, either between outfields or between villages, *marknagarður*.

These dykes were made of stone, more or less regular and quite low. They were constructed at a so-called cattle-height, in comparison with a sheep-height dyke, which was somewhat higher. In other places, there are examples of quite low, overgrown ridges in the terrain, which have functioned as dykes. In some instances, the names associated with these dykes, can indicate their function, but in many instances, it is difficult to define their function, or date them.

Super-natural cultural remains

In the outfield, the natural occurrence of pronounced stones or boulders and moraine mounds, is a feature to which people have attached - and some still do - supernatural properties. Supernatural stories tell of *huldufolk, vættrar* and *álvar*, all of them creatures which one did well to treat with the greatest respect.

Other remains in the outfield

The structures presented in the foregoing text have all been associated with the pre-industrial agrarian society. However, we encounter many cultural remains in the outfield whose function or date of origin we are less certain about, and which seemingly cannot be explained from this background. In some instances, we have succeeded in demonstrating that these belong to a more ancient period.

Ærgir

In the 1950s and 1960s, the philologist professor Chr. Matras, undertook several studies of non-Norse words and names in the Faeroes. Among others, Matras pointed out the existence and importance of place names containing the Celtic name element *ærgi*, which he assumed had become integrated into the Norse language during the

ninth century. Furthermore, he assumed that the meaning of the place names must have been something in the direction of: 'summer grazing pastures or shielings' for cattle (Matras 1956). This led the current Faeroe State Antiquarian, Sverri Dahl, to take a closer look at the 18 localities retaining such place names. He was able to ascertain that at several of these localities, there were remains of small ruins. After having conducted an archaeological excavation of one of these localities, *Ergidalur* on the island of Suðuroy, he concluded that this indeed was a summer or seasonal settlement from the Viking period (Dahl 1970:362).

In the northernmost part of the island of Eysturoy, the development of a hydro electric power plant led to the damming of the loch. Føroya Fornminnissavn, the National Museum of the Faeroe Islands, initiated extensive archaeological excavations at the location *Argisbrekka* during the period 1983 to 1987 (Mahler 1990, 1996, 1998, in press).

The locality is in the outfield of the village of Eiði, at an altitude of 130 metres above sea level. It was possible to make a rough division of the archaeological remains on the plain west of Argisbrekka into two areas; a western and an eastern settlement area. In total, 22 buildings were unearthed, 8 in the western and 13 the eastern area. Within these two areas, there were two to three lesser construction areas, which consisted of a residential house and one or two outhouses. Three distinct building types could be distinguished: residential-, working- and storage houses. All were constructed with walls of turf, sand, clay and pebbles. These are all smaller buildings: 7 to 8 metres long and 3 to 4 metres wide, and even smaller. Stratigraphical observations indicate that two shielings have been in operation simultaneously, during the area's last active period in the Viking Age.

The dating indicates that all activity ceased sometime during the middle of the eleventh century. Stratigraphical observations and C^{14} dating indicate a commencement of activities in the eastern area sometime during the ninth century.

When regarding the locations of settlements with such characteristic place names against the background of the Faeroese landscape topography, it is interesting to note that we are dealing with quite different distances between the main farm and the shieling than are present in the Norwegian landscape. The short distances involved, with less variation in the vegetation implies that the Faeroe ærgir is situated much closer to the main farm in comparison with the mountain shielings in Norway. None of the Faeroese ærgi-localities are to be found further than 4 to 5 kilometres away from what has been assumed to have been the main farm. The average altitude over the sea is only approximately 76 metres. Functionally, the Faeroe ærgir are reminiscent of the Norwegian shielings. On the other hand, the distance to the main farm would lead the classification of the Faeroe ærgirs as home-shielings.

We must conclude that, in the Viking period, the ærgi and farm were closely intertwined elements, which together characterise the special operational method, and that the traces of these operations are widely dispersed throughout the Faeroes.

Figure. *4 Ærgi-place names – indicating Viking shielings. SVA/HDM*

The operational method does, however, become adjusted to existing local conditions. In 1298, Duke Håkon Magnusson issued his *réttarbót* as an addition to the older Gulathing Law. It includes a special enactment for the Faeroes, known as *Seyðabrævið* (the Sheep Letter), but there is no mention of ærgir or any similar association. What we are referring to here, is the historically accepted operational method, governing extensive sheep farming. It is noticeable that the sections in the Gulathing Law, which the Sheep Letter replaces, deal with the exact aspect of shielings! The conclusion is that a combination of a greater emphasis upon fishing and extensive sheep farming, has led to the disappearance of the Faeroe ærgir as part of an outdated operational method (Mahler *in press*).

Lambhagi

Another interesting example of the exploitation of the outfield at an early stage in the islands' history, is the custom of sheep milking. Sheep milking has, as far as we know, never been practised in the Faeroes.

In 1977, Arne Thorsteinsson, former State Antiquary, suggests that this custom has certainly not been practised in the Faeroes after the thirteenth century (Thorsteinsson 1977). He returns to this issue in an article in 1982, in which he presents direct evidence that this custom actually has been practised, but in a period prior to the Sheep Letter of 1298. Furthermore, he refers to an archaeological discovery of a so-called *kevl* or *kegl* (a mouthpiece, a short cylinder formed piece of wood) which was placed into the mouth of a lamb to prevent it from sucking the ewe. This was done with the intention of enabling milking of the ewe. Based on the context of the find,

Figure. *5 Lambhaga-place names: indicating ancient sheep-milking. After Thorsteinsson 1982. SVA/HDM*

the artefact has been dated to the late Viking period. Thorsteinsson concludes it is reasonable to believe that this custom was practised by the first people who settled on the islands, as they must have been familiar with this custom, but as mentioned earlier, it did not occur after the thirteenth century (Thorsteinsson 1982).

The basis for Thorsteinsson's conclusion was the place name *Lambhagi*, lamb pasture. This name appears on all the islands in various forms, either in full form or as a name-element, for example *Lambagarður* (i.e. *lamb(haga)garður* = lamb-pasture dyke), *Lambaklettur* (i.e. lamb(haga)klettur = lamb-pasture rock or a protrusion in the landscape). These integrated words are supposed to indicate a *lambhagi* on the spot or close by. *Lambhagar* have been widely distributed throughout the islands, but with only very few on the islands of Sandoy, Eysturoy and Norðurstreymoy. This material is, however, still rather incomplete. The results are preliminary and we are awaiting further studies.

A characteristic trait for the location of the *lambhagi* is the landscape, where elements of the landscape have been used to restrict the *lambhagi*-area. The manmade elements usually only comprise a single, overgrown wall, which closed off the area.

Previously, I have stressed the explanation of the place name element *-byrgi*. At the time, it was partly associated with a place name containing the name element *–ærgi*: *Ærgibyrgi*, in other words, a shieling locality, and partly connected with the name of two small settlements: *Víkarbyrgi* and *Hamrabyrgi*, both located in the southernmost part of the island of Suðuroy (Arge 1991:44-45).

Apart from the fact that this name in recent times has been used in connection with areas added to the old infield, as in the form of *viðurbyrgi*, there are also areas in the outfield bearing this name, either standing alone or linked with other words. In the outfield, this term is used for naming areas which are associated with animal farming and must have functioned as an enclosure at an earlier stage. In some instances, a grass-covered dyke is linked to the place, apparently also having an enclosing role. The name is also seen in combination with the place name element *lambhagi: Lambabyrgi* – a small enclosure on the north-east side of Vágoy. Localities incorporating the byrgi-element have, however, never been studied in detail.

Pig farming

Place names referring to pigs or swine are quite common in the Faeroes. Pig farming as such is not known prior to the pre-industrial Faeroe society. Written sources prove that after the Reformation small numbers of pigs were kept on some farms, more as a curiosity deferring from the usual and of no importance to the economy.

In an article from 1970, E. A. Bjørk has viewed this issue from several angles (Bjørk 1970). Among others, he pursues the trail left by Chr. Matras, who in 1933, based on the collected place name material, concluded that pigs or swine had been kept on the islands from the Viking period up through the Middle Ages (Matras 1933).

These place-names are found both in the infield as well as in the outfield, also in more or less inaccessible places. The names are in some instances related to physical structures in the outfield, in others to natural phenomena. They are widely dispersed, and indicate how and where swine may have been kept, i.e. within buildings, special pens or enclosures and on islets off the coast. Therefore, names such as Svínahús (swine-house), Svínadalur (swine-valley) and Svínagarður (swine-dyke) are found, just to name a few examples. In addition, the name grísur, galtur, súgv and the rarer purk, all denoting pig, occur in the place name material.

Figure. *6 Place names related to possible ancient pig farming. SVA/HDM*

Unfortunately, there have not yet been any archaeological surveys that give us insight into the physical remains which could help cast some light upon pig farming. Pig bones have, however, been found at some of the archaeological excavations. Zoo-

archaeological excavations during the summer of 2003 at the site *Undir Junkarinsfløtti*, just north of the church-site in the village of Sandur, Sandoy (Arge 2001), has given material of relevance to a new evaluation of place names referring to swine and pig farming. During these excavations, a relatively large number of pig bones deriving from the Viking Age and early medieval contexts were revealed. This clearly demonstrates how important it is to investigate and describe such farming practices, which, as a result of the preliminary excavations, appear to have been practised on the Faeroes during the Viking period and the early Middle Age, just as in Iceland and Greenland (McGovern *et al.* 2003, Woollett *et al.* 2003).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have related physical remains to usage and method of implementation. Apart from localities showing traces of activities where place names may indicate a specific function, there are several locations with different structures without place names which explain their functions. In these cases, an interpretation becomes more difficult without a more detailed survey. I could have mentioned several examples. I would, however, like to underline that the islands contain an extensive source material potential, which, even if, in a broader context, it may appear insignificant at first sight, can provide important information on practice and function. They could shed light upon forgotten farm practices and other unknown aspects of the prehistoric society.

Being aware of the lack of systematic surveys of the outfield and the methodological questions of representativity, it is my view that the fossil remains found in the Faeroe outfield give an indication of far more intense and multifaceted exploitation of the outfield compared with that of the later the pre-industrial traditional agrarian society. These remains are of decisive importance since they are often the only existing source material which can reveal the truth. This kind of information might enable us to detect a prehistoric Faeroese society with a much more complex economy than hitherto acknowledged by the prevailing traditional historical record.

Summary

In this paper, I have presented and characterised some of the physical remains of human activity in the outfield during the period of the pre-industrial agrarian society on the Faeroes in a cultural, social and economic context.

In recent years, interest in the cultural history of the outfields has revealed several traces and remains, but we know very little, if anything, about the function and origin of these structures. The place name material may in some cases be helpful, but is still insufficient.

These physical remains may often appear insignificant, but in a wider context, they may become important, illuminating economic and social elements in a period where they constitute the only contributory sources to our knowledge about such matters. Thus, they help to give a far more varied picture of the islands' early history than would otherwise have been possible.

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