Viking Faroes: Settlement, Paleoeconomy, and Chronology

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Viking Faroes: Settlement, Paleoeconomy, and Chronology

Símun V. Arge*

Abstract - The paper presents a synopsis of the current evidence for the settlement chronology and Viking Age to Early Medieval paleoeconomy of the Faroe Islands. Special emphasis is placed on the recent interdisciplinary research carried out in the village of Sandur, on the island of Sandoy, as part of the Heart of the Atlantic project. A particularly important outcome of this recent work has been the wide application of scientific dating methods to the early settlement remains. Recent AMS radiocarbon dates push the earliest settlement of the islands further back in time than traditionally thought, results that are of great importance because the Faroes were the first stepping-stone for the Viking diaspora west across the North Atlantic.

Introduction

The Faroe Islands are a group of some 18 islands located in the North Atlantic almost midway between Norway, Iceland, and Scotland. The islands, separated by narrow fjords and sounds, together have an area of ~1400 km^2. When the first Viking settlers arrived, they encountered a landscape characterized by grasses, sedges, and ericaceous shrubs. Woodlands—small groups of juniper and birch—seem to have been of minor importance. In other words, the landscape was rather similar to what we see today (Bradshaw et al. 2010, Lawson et al. 2005). The rugged topography of the islands restricted the settlements mainly to the coastal strips along the sounds and the fjords.

Whether these settlers came directly from the east—from a Norwegian homeland—or from the south—via northern Scotland and Ireland, as indicated by archaeological and recent genetic evidence (Als et al. 2006)—they brought with them a Norse or Hiberno-Norse culture, which was subsequently adapted to local conditions in the North Atlantic.

Settlement and Architecture

The first proper archaeological excavation in the Faroes took place in 1941 at the site of "Niðri á Toft", located in the village of Kvívík on the island of Streymoy (Fig. 1). Through the excavation of this site, which was carried out over several seasons in the 1940s and 1950s, archaeological remains from the islands' early history were brought to light for the very first time. This site has since been regarded as the classic example of a Faroese Viking farm (Dahl 1951). However, more recent re-analysis of the excavation has modified this interpretation to some extent (Matras 2005).

Methodologically, I believe most of the attention in the excavations at "Niðri á Toft" was focused on the oldest phases at the site, those dating to the Viking period, rather than the later Medieval deposits. The excavation method employed did not follow stratigraphic sequence, and consequently Medieval artifacts were mixed with those from the Viking period during recovery.

Research on settlement-development histories in the Faroes has revealed a settlement pattern characterized by a long continuity. In general, the locations of settlements in existence today appear to be the same places settled during the Viking landnám (first settlement) period. Therefore settlements at the so-called *heimrust*—the proper settlement area in the village—in some instances have been traced archaeologically from the present back into the Viking Period, and the Viking farm in Kvívík is an excellent example of one such site (Arge 2005).

Where conditions have been favorable, this continuity of settlement has led to the creation of farm-mounds, a phenomenon also known from other regions of the Norse and Viking world (Arge 2005). In the decades since the excavations in Kvívík were carried out, other Viking settlement remains have been mapped and investigated around the Faroe Islands, both within the infields and in the outfields as well (Arge et al. 2005). I turn now to a brief summary of some of these.

Overview of Recent Archaeological Research

Toftanes

It was not until the excavation of the site of "Á Toftanesi" in the village of Leirvík, during the period of 1982–1987, that a Viking Age farm was investigated which provided a clearer picture of the layout and function of a Viking Age settlement compared to the site at "Niðri á Toft" in Kvívík (Fig. 2; Hansen 2013).

The farm consisted of four buildings. The dwelling, a longhouse, measured some 20 m in length,

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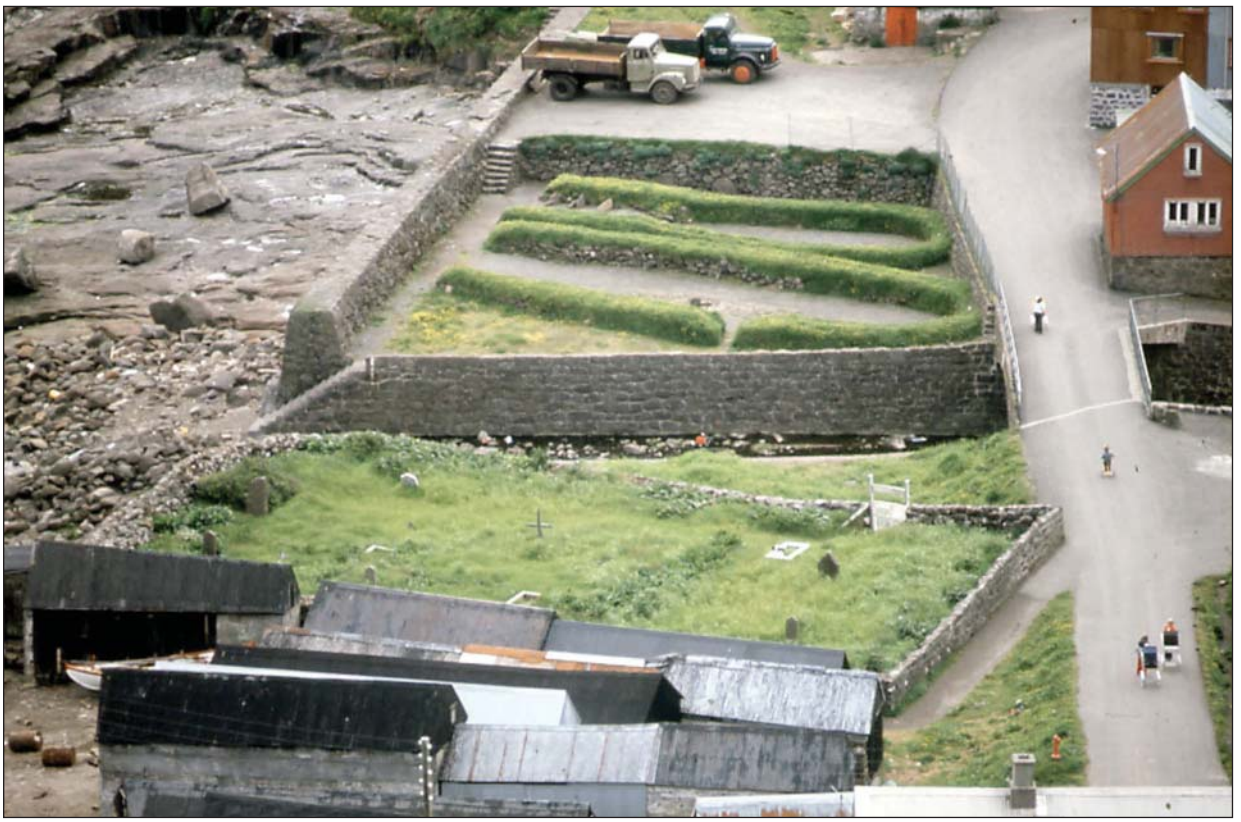

Figure 1. The Viking farm at "Niðri á Toft" in Kvívík. Photograph © S.V. Arge.

Figure 2. The Viking farm at Toftanes, Leirvík, seen from north. Photograph © S.S. Hansen.

with an internal width of 5 m. The curved walls were 1 m thick and were made of outer and inner dry-stone walling infilled with turf to provide a more windproof structure. The middle of the western half of the building had a fireplace almost 5 m long, while the eastern end may have contained a byre. Added to the southern wall of the longhouse was a small structure with a floor space of ~12 m². The wall of the western gable was probably wooden. On the northern side of the longhouse was another building, measuring 13 m long and 4 m wide. Its walls were constructed of only a single course of dry-stone walling without turf, and its function has preliminary been interpreted as an outhouse, perhaps for use in craft and/or food-production activities. A small building, 5 m long and 3 m wide, was located close to the northern side of the longhouse. The side walls of this structure were constructed in the same manner as those of the dwelling; while the west gable wall was probably wooden, the eastern end was missing, due to erosion by a stream. The floor was paved with flat stones and covered with thick layers of ashes and charcoal, and there was a small stone-built ember pit in the eastern end. This structure has been interpreted as a firehouse (Hansen 1991, 2013).

As is the case with other farmsteads known from this period, the buildings at Toftanes were primarily constructed of wood, though with thick insulating outer walls of stone and earth. Even though building timber was scarce in the Faroes—or was at least not a widely available local natural resource—the Norwegian/Scandinavian tradition of wooden stave-building was employed, albeit with modifications to suit local natural conditions—it was part of a widespread tradition throughout the so-called Viking World (Hansen 1999, Stoklund 1984, Thorsteinsson 1982).

The artifacts recovered at Toftanes are of particular interest. These include schist querns and a large number of steatite objects, such as fragments of bowls and saucepans, spindle whorls and line- or net-sinkers for fishing, and whetstones. As steatite is not locally available, these objects must have been imported, presumably from Norway (Hansen 2013). Only a few artifacts made of local stone (e.g., basalt and tufa) were found. Also recovered were very large numbers of well-preserved wooden objects, such as bowls, spoons, and barrel staves. A large amount of the wooden objects consisted of cords of twined juniper branches, several meters long, which no doubt were used as handles for barrels and as ropes for roof stones (Larsen 1991). While most of the stone artifacts may have been imported from Norway, the quernstone material seems to originate from the British Isles (Hansen 2013). The site's artifact assemblage also includes imported goods and jewellery originating from the Irish Sea region, most notably two ringed pins of Hiberno-Norse type and a jet bracelet (Hansen 1993, 2013). The settlement at Toftanes, which is the best-known example of a Viking Period farm in the Faroes, has been dated to the 9th–10th centuries (Vickers et al. 2005, Edwards and Schofield 2013)). Contrary to the following case, Toftanes represents an example of a permanent settlement located within the infields.

Argisbrekka

From early on, philologists paid special attention to the existence of place-names containing the Celtic name element "ærgi" or "argi", which may have entered the Norse language during the 9th century (Matras 1933, 1956). It was assumed that this place-name referred to something like shielings, small dwellings located in the highlands summer grazing pastures. Archaeological surveys of the 18 localities retaining such place names in the Faroes—all but one situated in the outfields—found small ruins at several of these localities. Archaeological excavation at one of these sites, Ergidalur, in the outfield of the village of Hovi on the island of Suðuroy, revealed that it was a Viking-period summer or seasonal settlement (Dahl 1970:362).

Prompted by the planned damming of Lake Eiðisvatn in the northernmost part of the island of Eysturoy, extensive archaeological excavations were conducted at the site Argisbrekka from 1983 to 1987 (Mahler 1991, 1998, 2007). The site is located in the outfield of the present village of Eiði, at an altitude of 130 m above sea level (Fig. 3). The archaeological features can be grouped into roughly two settlement areas, with the remains of 8 and 13 buildings unearthed in the two areas, respectively. Within these two areas, there were two to three places containing lesser constructions, each consisting of a residential house and one or two outhouses, interpreted as working and storage structures. All were constructed with walls of turf, sand, clay, and pebbles and all were relatively small, measuring around 7 to 8 m long and 3 to 4 m wide or smaller. Stratigraphic evidence indicates that two of the shielings were in operation simultaneously, during the area's last active period in the Viking Age (Mahler 2007). Functionally, the Faroese ærgir are reminiscent of the Norwegian fulltime shielings.

Stratigraphic and radiocarbon evidence indicate a commencement of activities in the eastern area of the site sometime during the 9th century, with a

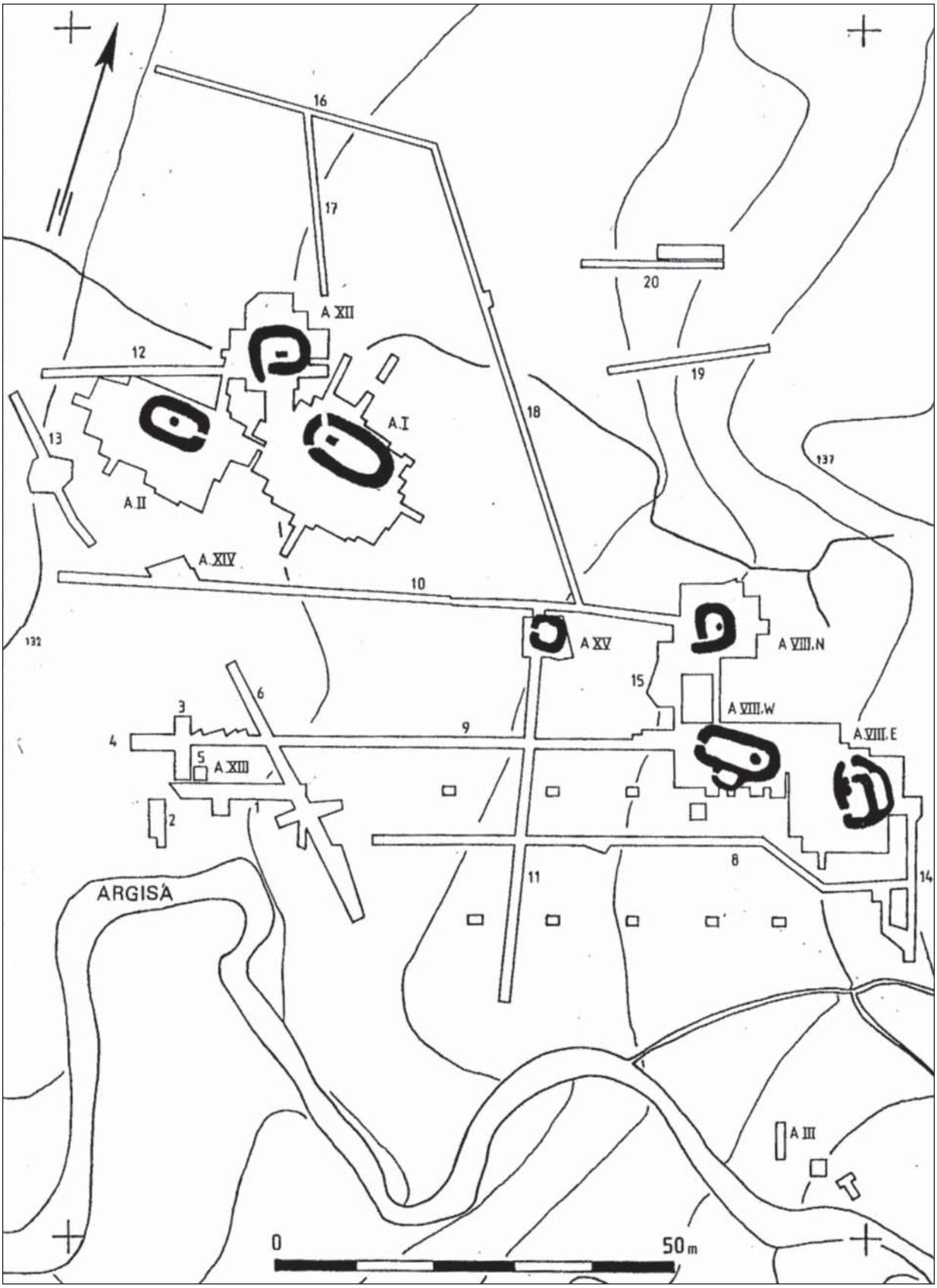

Figure 3. The Viking shieling at Argisbrekka, Eysturoy. Map showing the primary investigation area. The shaded house structures show the latest structural remains in each of the two settlement areas. From Mahler (2007).

cessation of all activity in this area sometime during the middle of the 11th century (Mahler 2007). Interestingly, with the exception of the presence of local ceramics, the Argisbrekka assemblage does not differ significantly from that recovered at the contemporary primary (non-shieling) farm site at Toftanes. The local ceramics are a unique category of artifact in Faroese archaeology, documented from the late 10th into the 19th centuries (Arge 1991, 1997; Mahler 2008).

We must conclude that in the Viking period the ærgi and the permanent farm were closely linked elements of the domestic economy, traces of which are widely distributed throughout the Faroes. The operational method was, however, adjusted to local conditions, as was the case with regard to sheep-milking methods (Thorsteinsson 1977). Shielings are not mentioned in the Sheep Letter of 1298, a special enactment for the Faroes that dealt primarily with the legislation of sheep farming. It therefore seems safe to conclude that a combination of a greater emphasis on fishing and extensive sheep farming led to the disappearance of the ærgir as part of an outdated agricultural practice in the Faroes (Mahler 2007).

"Við Kirkjugarð" in Sandur, Sandoy

The village of Sandur is one of the largest and wealthiest agricultural communities in the Faroes, and has likely been a prominent community since the first farming settlers arrived in the Viking period (Fig. 4; Arge 2001). Until the first half of the 20th century, the local church site was rather isolated from the rest of the village (Krogh 1983), a situation which is uncommon in the Faroes. However, ever since the discovery of an 11th-century coin hoard (the only one of its kind yet found in the islands) in

Figure 4. Sandur. The church site is central in the photo. The investigated site Junkarinsfløttur is located in the eroding cliff edge along the green fields between the church site and the beach. Photograph © S.V. Arge.

the churchyard in 1863, there had long been speculation that the site would yield further archaeological remains (Steen Jensen 2004).

When the first archaeological excavation in Sandur took place in 1969/1970, efforts were focused within the actual church (Krogh 1975, 1983). The results were quite interesting and rather unexpected, with the remains of five successive churches discovered below the present one, which was built in 1839. The oldest, a small single-aisled stave church, was dated to the 11th century. Shortly after this initial excavation, plans to extend the churchyard led to the archaeological excavation of test trenches in the ~3000-m^2 extension area, revealing extensive Viking-period remains. Since then, Føroya Fornminnissavn (the Faroe National Museum) has periodically undertaken archaeological excavations in the churchyard to allow for the release of additional burial plots. In 1972, a small-scale excavation in the old churchyard revealed the eastern gable and well-preserved stone-paved floor of a structure. These remains were interpreted as part of a boat-shaped longhouse, potentially the dwelling of a farm. It is very likely the coin hoard was placed below the paved floor of this building by the end of the 11th century, based on the description of the hoard's discovery, indicating that the building was in use during the 11th century at least (Krogh 1975, 1983).

In 1989, 11 graves were uncovered in the churchyard, 7 of which were excavated (Arge and Hartmann 1992). Prior to this discovery, the only known Viking-period burial site in the Faroes was at "Yviri í Trøð" in the village of Tjørnuvík. Excavated in 1956, the site has been dated to the 10th century, based on both archaeologically and radiocarbon evidence (Arge 2001:11, Dahl and Rasmussen 1956). The graveyard at Sandur appears to be well-regulated, with a series of burials placed end-to-end in a number of more-or-less parallel rows. All of the graves are aligned almost east–west, and all of the excavated skeletons lay with their skulls pointing west. Though the state of preservation of the osseous material was very poor, dental enamel was found preserved in all of the excavated graves. The artifacts recovered from these graves can be classified as personal belongings, and include, for example, silver and bronze finger rings, bone beads, glass and amber objects, and iron knives. Two of the individuals had each been buried with an iron knife, the handle of which was entwined with thin silver threads; one of these individuals, a young man, also had a pouch, possibly woven, containing a leather purse with 7 plain lead weights. Other notable finds from this grave included a bronze strap-end ornamented with an animal head, a bronze fragment decorated with an interlaced motif of Irish origin, and some small silver fragments. Additionally, one of the graves contained a clipped Cufic (Arabic) coin, the only such coin found in the Faroes thus far; this find has been identified as a late 9th-century imitation of an Abbasid-style dirhem, and it may be suggestive of burial in Sandur during the mid-10th century (Blackburn 2005, Graham-Campbell 2005). Compared to Viking-period burials in both Scotland and Iceland, it is remarkable that 3 of the 7 graves contained silver and/or silver-ornamented artifacts, including the silver coin fragment. These burials clearly indicate the presence of a high-status settlement at the site.

In contrast to sites such as Toftanes, the archaeological remains uncovered in the Sandur churchyard—the site of "Við Kirkjugarð"—reflect a variety of features and structures which, together with the waste and midden deposits (including ash, slag, and large deposits of fire-cracked stones), appear to document activities more characteristic of an industrial zone than domestic space (Arge 2001). For example, the best preserved building, a 5 m x 5 m structure excavated in 2008–2009, contained thick layers of burnt material, including large pieces of charcoal and significant amounts of charred barley, and was clearly associated with some kind of barley processing. AMS radiocarbon assays of 2 charred barley samples produced very early dates (Arge and Friel 2009; Arge et al., forthcoming), which I shall return to later in this paper.

"Á Sondum" in Sandur, Sandoy

On the northern shore of the bay of Sandsvágur lies the farm site of "Á Sondum", an excellent example of a settlement-period farm mound. Referenced in written records in 1412, "Á Sondum" is the only farm site in the Faroes mentioned by name in a medieval document (Thorsteinsson 1979). The site was first archaeologically assessed in 1994 with a small-scale excavation of the eroding cliff face, conducted as part of a Nordic amateur archaeologist camp and overseen by myself and a Danish colleague (Jensen 1995). In 2006–2007, the Heart of the Atlantic project provided an opportunity to re-investigate the site. These excavations revealed a 3-m-deep multi-period sequence of midden and structural remains, from 19th-century midden deposits at the top of the eroding section to a large, truncated, Norse rectilinear structure—a Viking longhouse—towards the base (Church et al. 2013). The longhouse featured a 2-m-wide external wall, a large central hearth, floor surfaces, and internal features, including a barrel pit. Four radiocarbon dates on carbonized barley grains from the central hearth and an external midden dated the longhouse occupation to the initial Viking

Figure 5. "Á Sondum," Sandur. Remains of the southern wall of a Viking longhouse at the bottom of the eroding cliff. Photograph © S.V. Arge.

colonization of the 9th century (Fig. 5; Church et al. 2013).

Environmental Archaeology and Viking Faroese Paleoeconomy

"Undir Junkarinsfløtti" in Sandur, Sandoy

In 1989, a phosphate survey of a long-cultivated field north of the church in Sandur suggested the presence of a large settlement area (Arge 2001). In the summer of 2000, erosion of the cliff face just below these fields exposed deep cultural deposits. This discovery spurred the launch of an interdisciplinary, international collaboration at the site—the Heart of the Atlantic project—beginning in 2003 as part of the Leverhulme Trust-funded Landscapes Circum-Landnám project. This work has been a North Atlantic Biocultural Organization (NABO) cooperative effort, involving the Faroe National Museum as lead institution, together with institutions such as the City University of New York, University of Bradford, Durham University, and University of Stirling (Arge et al. 2010).

Excavations at the site of "Undir Junkarinsfløtti" were focused not only on the multiple phases of structural remains represented but also on the ~3 m of stratified midden deposits preserved in the sandy matrix (Arge et al. 2010). Similar (though far less well-preserved) midden deposits were recovered at the site of "Á Sondum" across the bay, and these two sites must be characterized as Viking- to Medieval-period settlement mounds (Arge 2001, Arge et al. 2010, Church et al. 2005). The reports on the archaeofauna from these two sites are the first substantial published zooarchaeology from the Faroes (Brewington 2006, 2010, 2011). The excavated deposits at "Undir Junkarinsfløtti" have been divided into five phases dating from the 9th century to the Late- or Post-Medieval period. The exceptional preservation conditions at "Undir Junkarinsfløtti" have produced a massive archaeofaunal assemblage; to date, nearly 60,000 bone and shell fragments have been analyzed. The preliminary analysis of material presents a diverse range of economic practices employed by the Norse settlers at a key time and geographical position in their expansion across the North Atlantic. Characteristic of the archaeofauna is the large proportions of wild resources, particularly seabirds, fish, and molluscs (Fig. 6). There is a relatively small percentage of domestic mammals in the total number of specimens identifiable to species level in all three phases. Thus, the economic strategy

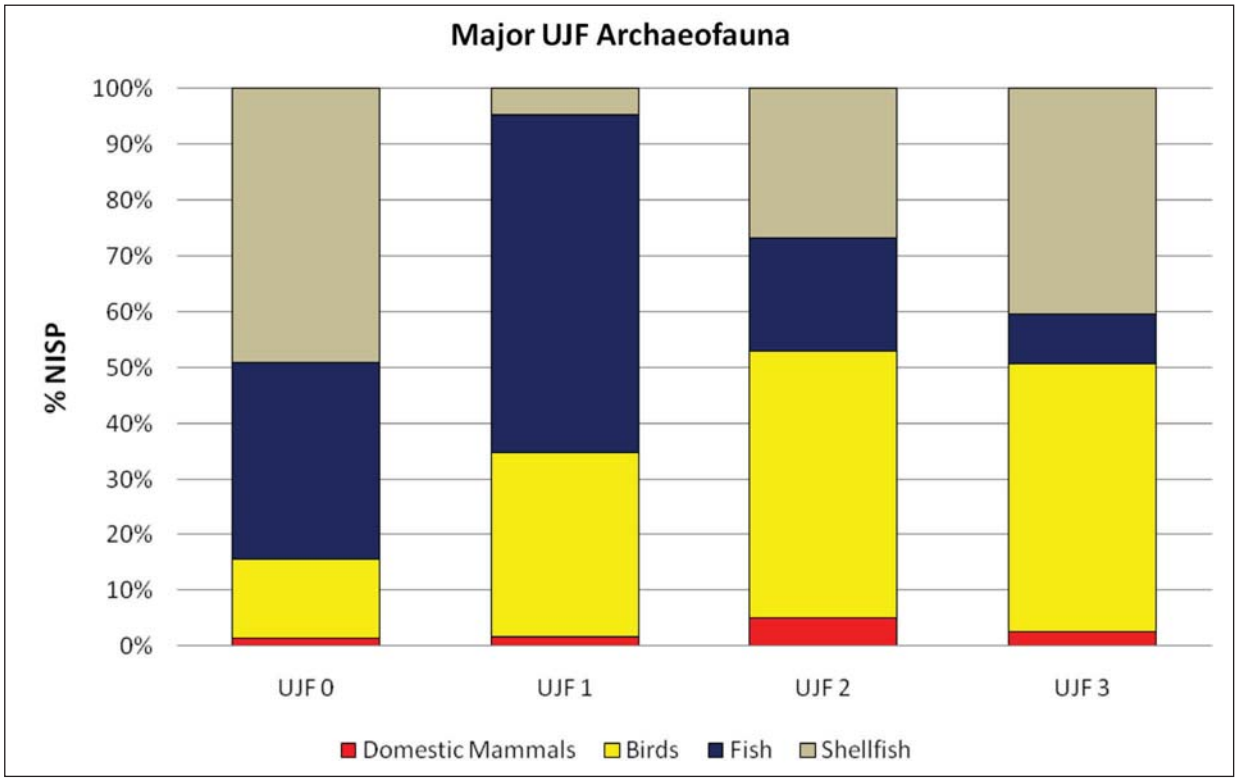

Figure 6. "Undir Junkarinsfløtti," Sandur. Major Archaeofauna. The phase UJF 0 represents the earliest, ephemeral deposits; UJF 1 is dated to 9th–12th centuries cal AD; UJF 2 to 11th–12th centuries cal AD, and UJF 3 to 11th–13th centuries cal AD. From Brewington (2011).

at the site appears to have relied heavily upon the exploitation of a broad spectrum of the local wild resources to supplement a mixed agricultural base of animal husbandry and cereal cultivation.

Domestic mammals recovered included sheep, cows, and pigs, with single bones of goat and dog (Fig. 7). Significant numbers of pig bones were recovered throughout the sequence, indicating sustained pig keeping up to and beyond the 13th century, a situation unique compared to Iceland and Greenland (Brewington 2011). Pig-herding is not known in post-Reformation traditional Faroese agriculture (Arge et al. 2009). Seabirds also comprised a large proportion of the archaeofauna. The settlers at the site of "Undir Junkarinsfløtti" remained dependent upon seabirds, especially puffins, far longer and to a much greater degree than any of the other Viking Age settlers of the North Atlantic islands (Brewington and McGovern 2008). A wide range of marine resources, particularly Atlantic cod, were also recovered, further emphasizing the key role of wild resources in the Faroese paleoeconomy.

Recent isotopic analyses of Faroese human and animal bones indicate that 20–40% of the dietary protein was of marine origin, a level somewhat higher than that for contemporary Icelanders but less than that of the Norse Greenlanders (Arneborg et al. 2008). Both the Icelanders and the Faroese seem to have had a stable diet from the landnám up into the Middle Ages, in contrast to Greenland where the diet shifted from a relatively terrestrial to a predominantly marine base (Arneborg et al. 2008).

Paleobotanical remains were also retrieved from at "Undir Junkarinsfløtti" and at "Á Sondum," providing evidence of plant use at the sites. A major consideration for the Norse in the Faroes would have been the procurement of wood; the islands never sustained extensive woodland, and heather and juniper were the only wood resource available at settlement (Church et al. 2005). However, fragments of various coniferous species would have arrived as driftwood and could have been collected from the shore. Wood charcoal was very rare in the archaeological assemblage in Sandur, and consisted of locally derived roundwood, coniferous driftwood, and imported oak (Church et al. 2005). Rather, peat and turf were the main fuel sources in the treeless Faroese landscape. A hulled six-row barley monoculture appears to have been in place, with small-scale yet intensive cultivation undertaken. Cereal cultivation seems to have played a lesser role in the economy than in other areas of the eastern North Atlantic, however, and some of the barley may have been imported (Church et al. 2005).

"Undir Junkarinsfløtti" represents a key site for investigating the early Faroese paleoeconomy. To

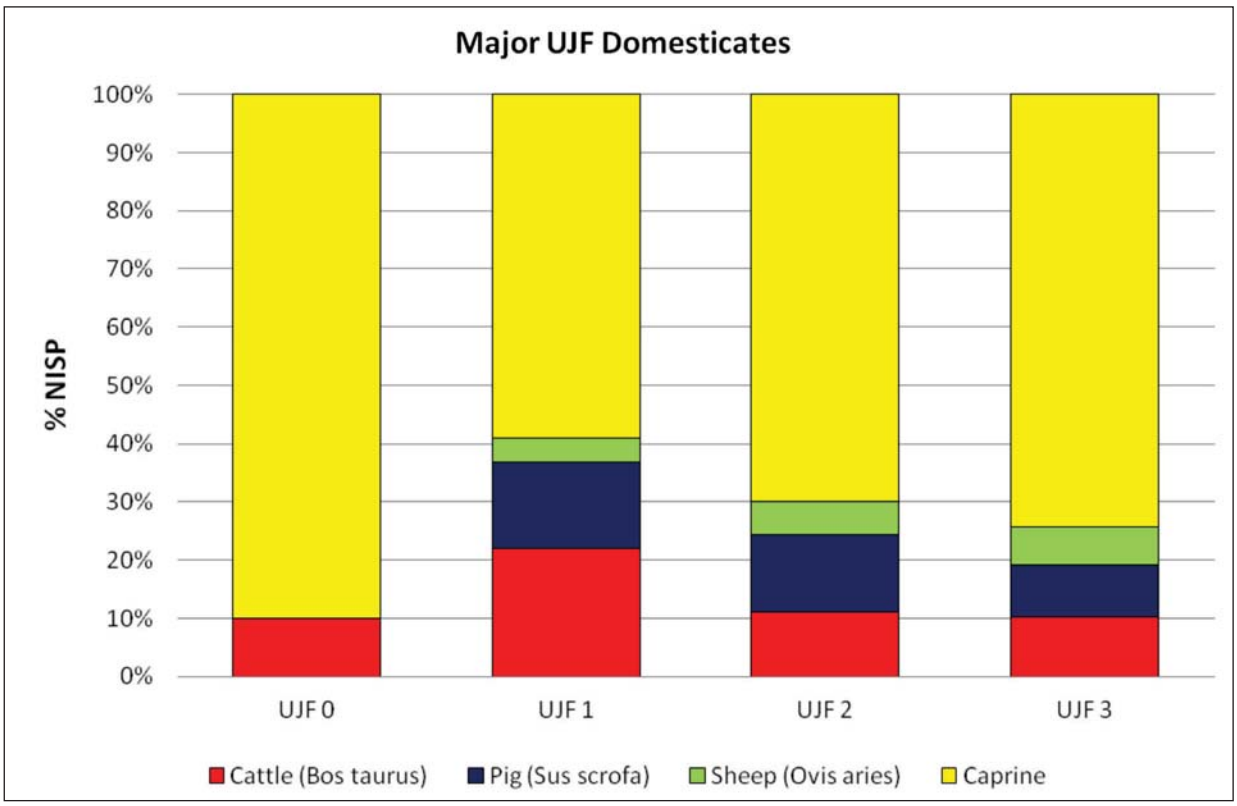

Figure 7. "Undir Junkarinsfløtti," Sandur. Major Domesticates. From Brewington 2011.

understand this archaeological evidence, we must assume that this site is part of an extensive settlement area, which includes the previously mentioned church site, "Við Kirkjugarð". The archaeological record from the area leaves us with an impression of a high-status Faroese community with strong links to the outside world.

Settlement Chronology

A recurring issue in the debate regarding the earliest settlement (landnám) of the Faroes has been the related questions of when did the first settlers arrive and where did they come from. This was also the subject of my master's thesis in medieval archaeology in 1986 (Arge 1990). At that time, I had to conclude that, based on the available evidence, it was not possible to trace the oldest settlement of the Faroes any further back than about the year 1000, or in broad terms to the Late Viking/Early Medieval period (Arge 1991:114, 1991:fig. 5). However, referring to the lack of sufficient analyses of the archaeological data at the time, I suggested that one or two of the sites treated in the thesis—"Niðri á Toft" in Kvívík, for example—might be dated somewhat earlier. Even so, evidence for earlier (pre-1000) occupation was lacking, despite the presence of (limited) radiocarbon data (Arge 1991:table 1). Until recently, radiocarbon dating in the Faroes has been used to support traditional typological dating. Despite the fact that a few of these radiocarbon dates turned out to be a bit "too old", most were consistent with the established archaeological chronology.

This approach has begun to change in recent years, however, with several interesting studies making more prominent use of radiocarbon dating in their analyses. There have historically been two different "camps" of researchers using radiocarbon dating to investigate the timing of the earliest settlement of the Faroes: the archaeological one, using radiocarbon to supplement traditional archaeological dating methods, and the paleobotanical one, using radiocarbon to date the onset of human impacts on vegetation. Interestingly enough, these two camps have been very divided over the years, largely failing to communicate effectively with each other. For instance, radiocarbon dates from the paleobotanical investigations of so-called "ancient" or "Celtic" fields indicated pre-Viking settlement activity in the 6^{th}–8^{th} centuries (Jóhansen 1971, 1979). These dates are controversial, however, contrasting sharply with the archaeological evidence (Edwards and Borthwick 2010a). Radiocarbon dates from archaeological investigations, on the other hand, have usually supported the traditionally accepted archaeological chronology for the Viking-period settlement of the islands. One quite obvious reason for these differing outcomes between the two camps has been the absence of research aimed at the sampling of paleobotanic remains from archaeological contexts. However, recent years have seen a renewed emphasis on the dating of human-induced landscape and vegetational change (e.g., Hannon 1999). Most recently, the topic has been addressed as part of the aforementioned Landscapes Circum-Landám project, leading to a more complete picture of the vegetational history of the islands (Lawson et al. 2005).

It has gradually become more common to incorporate a range of archaeological science methods into research projects in the Faroes. The Heart of the Atlantic project in Sandur exemplifies this new approach, with 36 AMS radiocarbon dates having been obtained from the deeply-stratified (~3 m) sites of "Undir Junkarinsfløtti" and "Á Sondum" (Church et al. 2005). At "Undir Junkarinsfløtti," 24 radiocarbon assays were taken in an effort to establish an absolute chronology for the site. Five phases identified in the midden deposits: the earliest was dated to the 9th–12th centuries A.D. and the latest, representing the amended soil and topsoil, to the late- and post-Medieval periods. Additionally, previously sampled material from the site at Toftanes has now been re-dated under the Landscapes Circum-Landám project, and the results from these three sites show contemporary early-Viking period activities (Church et al. 2005, Edwards and Borthwick 2010b, Vickers et al. 2005).

One early archaeological investigation that has been particularly intriguing for quite some time was carried out in 1952 at the site of "Undir Keisarafløtti," in the village of Norðragøta, Eysturoy. Structural remains had been exposed on the beach at the site by severe storms during the 1940s (Arge 1990:80) (Fig. 8). The small-scale excavation in 1952 revealed stone-lined drains and the remains of a stone wall that had been erected on a turf layer. This turf layer was situated some 60 cm below the surface at high tide, and geological analysis suggested that the land had sunk about 2 m since the formation of the turf layer. The finds recovered from the site included twined juniper ropes. Conventional radiocarbon analysis of a sample of the ropes taken a number of years ago produced relatively early dates (A.D. 670–860 [K-6120], see Fig. 9;); though these pre-date the traditionally-accepted settlement of the Faroes, they do fall in line with other early dates recently obtained from other sites in the islands. The most recently acquired of these early dates come from

the previously-mentioned excavations in the church yard in Sandur, "Við Kirkjugarð" (Fig. 10; Arge and Friel 2009). Two radiocarbon dates obtained from a semi-circular black/burnt pit feature within the 5 x 5 m structure suggest that the material within the pit was deposited at some point between the end of the 7th century and the end of the 9th century (see Fig. 9; Arge et al., forthcoming).

The employment of more intensive radiocarbon dating strategies in modern excavations in the Faroes has gradually pushed the dates for the initial Viking settlement back in time, as clearly illustrated in Table 1. These recent data, together with the results of past palynological and paleobotanical studies, force us to reconsider the traditional landám chronology for the Faroes. Furthermore, these dates might be considered in light of some radiocarbon dates obtained in recent investigations at the cemetery at Norwick, Unst, as well as at the site of Old Scatness, Dunrossness, in Shetland, likely indicating early Viking settlement starting sometime between the 7th and 9th centuries (Ballin Smith 2007:294, 2013:229–230).

I will end this paper by referring to yet another set of dates which resulted from the 2006–2007 excavations at the site of "Á Sondum". As mentioned earlier, the excavations investigated the remains of a Viking longhouse, one of the earliest-dated Viking longhouses yet investigated in the Faroes. This longhouse and associated external midden deposits were found to truncate an extensive wind-blown sand deposit, which contained patches of burnt peat ash of anthropogenic origin. Carbonized barley grains from two of these ash deposits provided four radiocarbon dates. These dates strongly suggest two separate episodes of settlement at the site—one within the 4th–6th centuries and a second one within the 6th–8th centuries AD. The majority of this settlement was likely subsequently destroyed by the construction of the later Viking longhouse (Fig. 11;

Figure 8. "Undir Keisarafløtti," Norðragøta. Investigation of Viking remains on the beach 1952. Photograph © J. Rasmussen.

Church et al. 2013). These early dates pose new questions regarding the early history of the Faroes. Neither structures nor artifacts were associated with the early dated deposits. Nevertheless, the traditional fuel-procurement method as well as the processing of barley clearly indicate human activity at the site, including some form of settlement—not necessarily permanent. A few pieces of charred

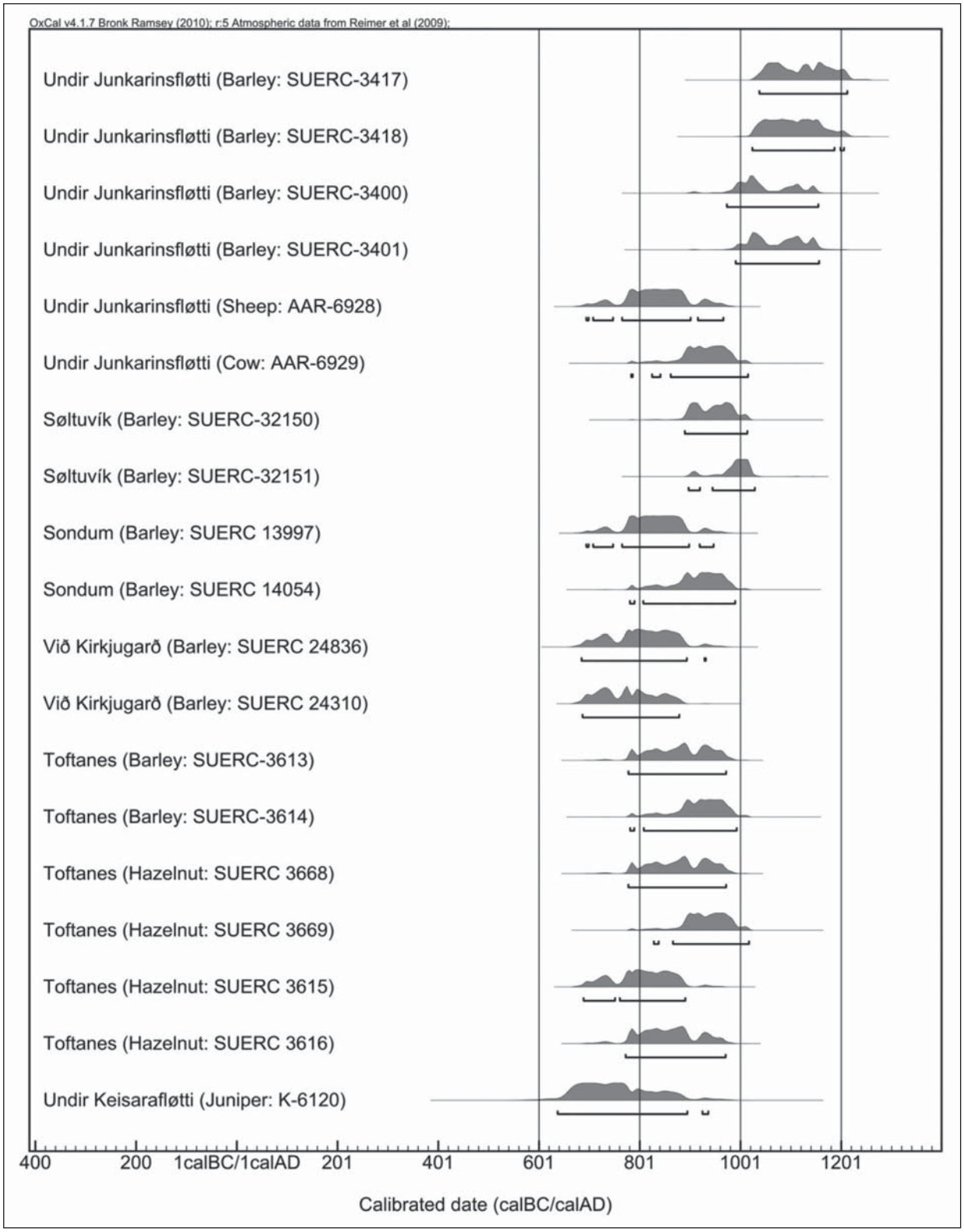

Figure 9. Radiocarbon dates from recent excavations in the Faroes.

Figure 10. The church site in Sandur, "Við Kirkjugarð." In the foreground, the excavated early Viking structural remains in the extended churchyard; in the background, across the bay, the early settlement site of "Á Sondum". Photograph © R. Friel.

barley do not tell us anything about the ethnicity of those who left these traces, however, nor where these people came from; these are questions for further research. Despite a clear lack of existing corroborating archaeological evidence in the Faroes, we must be open to re-evaluating the archaeological record. Also necessary will be the retrieval of additional samples from other archaeological sites in the islands.

The Faroes were the first stepping-stone for the Viking diaspora across the North Atlantic, a process that culminated in the first European discovery of continental North America in the 11th century A.D. The main settlement event in the Faroes has hitherto been believed to be the arrival of the Vikings in the 9th century, as represented by extensive archaeological evidence. Our new data radically alter the timeline for this colonization!

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