

# The Norse Settlement of the Faroe Islands<sup>1</sup>

By SVERRI DAHL

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THE Saga of the Faroese, *Føreyinga Saga*, relates that Grímr, with the Celtic nickname *kamban*, was the first Faroese settler, *Hann byggði fyrstr Føreyjar*. It also tells how Auðr the deep-minded, daughter of the chieftain Ketill flatnef in Suðreyjar (Hebrides) and widow of King Ólafr the White of Dublin, went to Iceland after the fall of her son Þørsteinn the Red in Scotland in 875, but called on the way at the Faroe Islands and there married off her grand-daughter Ólof; from this marriage sprang the renowned line of chieftains Götuskeggjar, with whom the whole saga deals. FIG. 21 plots all the place-names mentioned in the saga. Of these, seven are the names of farmsteads, while one, Þórshöfn, was from about 900 the thing-place for the whole country; it is now the capital of the Faroe Islands.

The mere fact that so few place-names or farm names are mentioned in the saga, though we know now that there were more at the time that it was compiled, makes one a little uneasy with regard to its value as a historical source. But from those personal names that it gives, some of which are quoted above, it is clear that a number of the first settlers were related to the same aristocratic family that ruled over the Atlantic islands from the Isle of Man to Shetland and Iceland.

It may be added that the saga tells us that the chieftain Snæúlfr in Sandoy was *sudreyskr maðr* (from the Hebrides), that one Einarr had the nickname *sudreyingr*, and that the wife of the chieftain Brestir was called Cecilia, a name she could not possibly have had if she had not grown up in a Christian milieu, so that she too must have come from the south.

Hence it is clear that settlers came to the Faroe Islands from Norse settlements to the south of the islands. This, of course, does not mean that all settlers came thence, although it is quite likely that the most noble ones and those most important for the saga did; indeed, we know that a number certainly came direct from Norway, from the regions of Sogn, Rogaland, and Agder.

In this paper I do not propose to go any further into the exciting evidence which can be derived from language and place-names; I shall instead concentrate on the archaeological evidence which, though perhaps less spectacular, gives, I hope, more certain results.

As might be expected, the saga does not say when Grímr kamban's settlement occurred. But that the islands must have been settled before the 2nd half of the 9th century is evident, partly from the fact that Auðr on one occasion shortly after 875 met men there. It is also evident from the fact that when Nadoddr, nicknamed

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Mr. David M. Wilson for reading this paper through in manuscript.

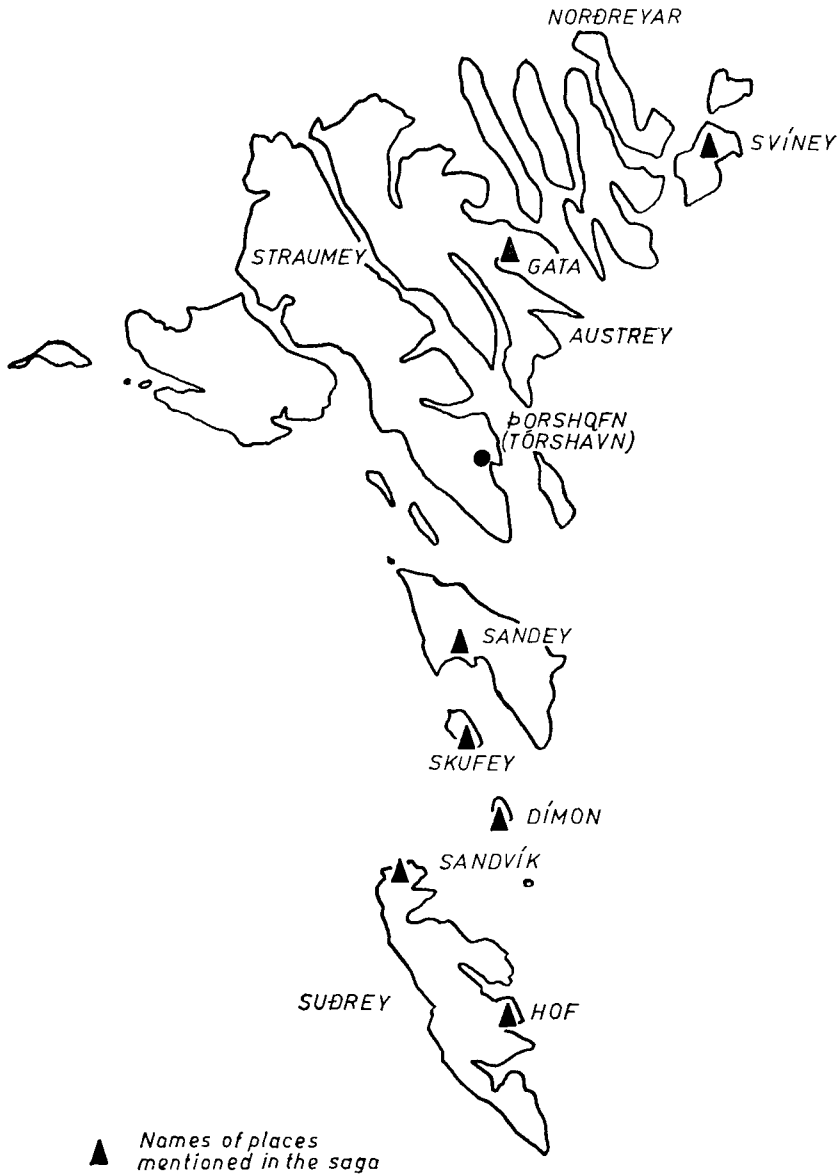


FIG. 21  
 SKETCH-MAP OF FAROE ISLANDS  
 showing situation of places mentioned in *Færeyinga Saga* (p. 60)

*færeyski*, discovered Iceland, he was on his way from Norway to the Faroe Islands *c.* 850, and that Grímr kamban's grandson Þórólfr *smjör* acted as a guide to Hrafna Flóki on his journey to colonize Iceland *c.* 870.

A firmer basis for dating is given by Dicuil in his *De mensura orbis terrae*, written in 825. In a description which is generally agreed to be referring to the Faroe Islands, he writes: 'In Britain's northern sea there are still many islands, which can be reached from the northern British islands in two days' direct sailing and with a fair wind. A trustworthy priest told me that he had sailed for two summer days and one night in a small boat with two thwarts and had gone ashore on one of them. These islands are for the most part small, nearly all separated from each other by small straits. And hermits, who have sailed from our Scotia [Ireland], have been living on them for about one hundred years. Uninhabited from the creation of the world, these islands have, as a result of the invasions of Norse brigands, been deserted by the hermits and taken over by sheep and a great variety of seabirds. We have never found them mentioned by the famous authors.' If we are right in thinking that he is here talking about the Faroe Islands, we can put the earliest Norse settlement at about 800, and we may deduce that this was preceded by a settlement there of Irish hermits.

No certain proof of these Irish hermits having lived on the islands has yet been found. Yet there are some pieces of evidence that seem to point to the presence there of these saintly men, whom the Vikings called *papar*, and I shall take the liberty of touching on these evidences, since they are of special interest in relation to the problem of the early Viking settlement.

As well as place-names like Paparøkur, Papurshálsur, Baglhólmur (names which have Christian implications), and the names of the islands Dímon hin meiri and Dímon hin minni, there are certain significant survivals in a churchyard on the island of Skúvoy. This churchyard, according to tradition, surrounded the church that was built by the chieftain Sigmundur Brestisson, who persuaded the Faroese Althing to accept Christianity at its meeting on Þinganes in Þórshöfn about the year 1000. Here a stone is exhibited, marked with a cross and called Sigmundssteinur, which is said to have been put on his grave. In the same churchyard, at the beginning of the century, slabs were found, some of which were ornamented with carved wheel- or sun-crosses and some with Latin crosses so strikingly similar to corresponding stones in Ireland and the Isle of Man that this cannot be mere chance. P. M. C. Kermodé has dated the Skúvoy stones about 1000. One cannot of course overlook a Celtic influence in the first Norse Christian period in the Faroes, but the possibility that the stones originate from the Irish *papar* should not be excluded. This view is shared by Dr. C. A. R. Radford, who has kindly examined photographs of the stones, and is of the opinion that some of them can very well be dated 8th century.

There are furthermore some areas which were clearly cultivated in early times, and which tradition associates with Frisians and Irishmen, e.g. in Akrabergi, Hovi, Hvalba, and Mykines. These areas can be observed on inaccessible slopes on the headlands which face south and south-west, where they appear as long, narrow strips of fields separated by low parallel ridges of earth. We know from a

trial excavation of a few of these ridges in Mykines that they consist of stones heaped together, presumably tumbled stone fences, which remind one of the stone walls found in Celtic regions.

Back to the Viking era itself. What do we know today from archaeology about the settlement? About its graves and buildings? About the life of its people?

Here it must be answered that it is striking that nearly all the farmsteads named in the saga are in places which are particularly difficult of access by sea; indeed, Dímon and Skúvoy are simply forts, possibly chosen for the purpose of defence. The first inhabitants may, therefore, have been farmers without any real interest in fishing. Very important factors in the choice of settlement-sites were, however, fowling and availability of driftwood and seaweed.

The registration of chance finds, together with serious archaeological investigations, has altered the picture of settlement in the Viking era given by the saga, as will be seen from FIG. 22 where the farmsteads of the saga and those investigated archaeologically are indicated. The archaeological evidence comes from graves, farmstead sites, chance finds and shielings of the Viking Age in the outlying fields of present settlements.

So far there has been a lack of datable finds from the 9th century. A small rune-stone from Kirkjubøur was dated about 850 by Professor Wimmer and was read by him as *uftir Hrua* (to the memory of Rói), but a modern runologist, Marie Simonsen Stoklund, reads it as *vigu(l)fi unni róa* (grant Vigulf peace) and interprets it as a Christian gravestone from early in the 11th century.

Grave-mounds are described in *Færeyinga Saga*, which relates that a number of chieftains were buried according to old custom and occasionally states specifically that they were *heygðir*, i.e. buried in a mound.

All over the islands there are certainly a number of mounds whose names—Risagravir (giants' graves), Gullheyggjar (gold mounds), Álvheyggjar (fairy mounds), Kumlar, Dysjar, etc.—bear witness to how great a role they have played in folk fantasy. Associated with them all are legends and traditions of hidden treasures, giants, fairies, etc. But every time one of these mounds has been investigated it has been found to be a natural formation, though one with a striking similarity in form to the burial-mounds with which people who gave the names and created the legends were familiar in the lands from which they came or had visited.

So far only two mounds that are almost certainly burial-mounds have come to light. One of these is in the parish of Hov. Of one of the main figures in the saga, Havgrímr at Hofi, it is said that he was *blótmaðr mikill* (a great idolater). A mound bearing his name, Havgrímsgrov, on the highest point of the cultivated area around his farmstead was dug into in 1835 by the local farmer. According to the farmer's description, the mound was 7·5 m. by 2·5 m. Outside the grave was a rough circle of beach stones. In the excavation some small pieces of iron, and a fragment of a cranium were found. A closer determination is now of course impossible, but the circumstances of the find and the fact that a part of the mound is preserved point towards the fact that this was a Viking grave, and furthermore a grave of a named chieftain.

The second mound was at Giljanes in Vágar. Here, around 1900, a man

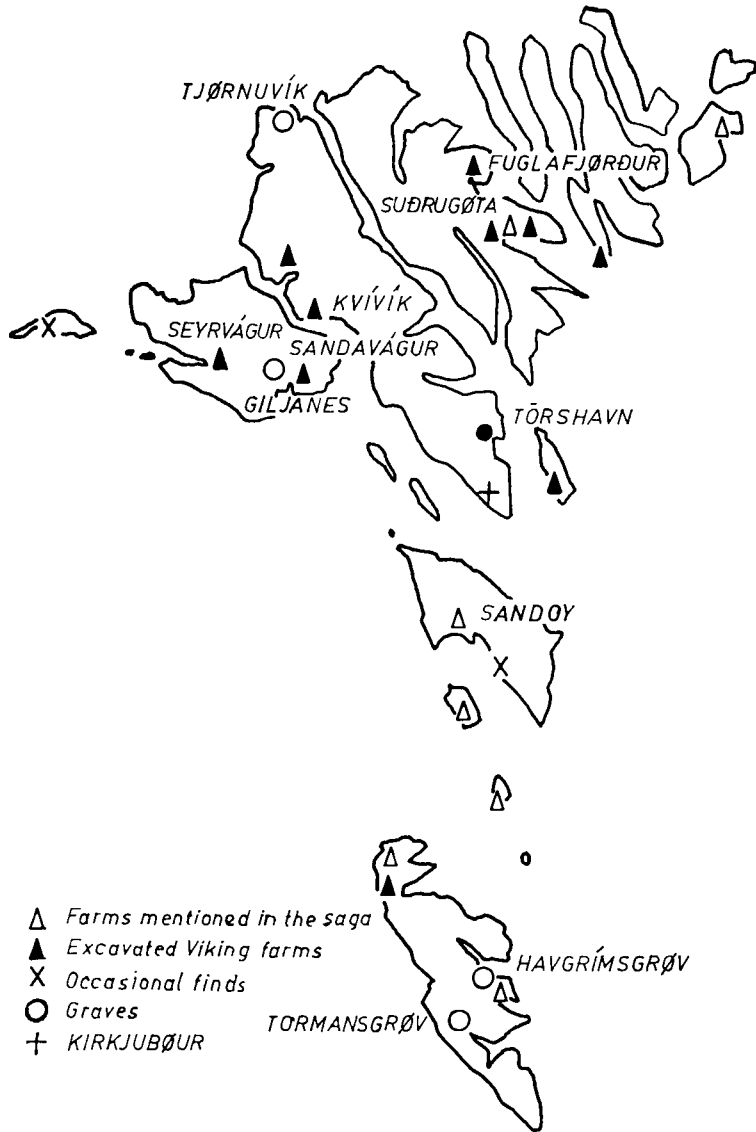


FIG. 22  
 SKETCH-MAP OF FAROE ISLANDS  
 showing sites of the Viking Age (p. 63)

flattened out a mound called Øttisheygur and found a number of bones and disintegrated objects; these have now been lost, but this also was probably a Viking grave.

Grave-goods are, however, rare. Let us consider why so few have been found. Professor A. W. Brøgger came to the conclusion that the settlers who went to the Faroe Islands came mainly from Agder and Rogaland in Norway and brought the burial traditions of their home region with them. Another possibility is that a number of settlers, as already mentioned, came from a Christian milieu in the Atlantic islands and brought Christian burial customs to the Faroe Islands early in the Viking era—burying their dead in churchyards unaccompanied by grave-goods. Furthermore we must assume that most people were buried in flat graves and luck is needed to find such burials. We were lucky. Some bones were discovered by chance in a slope at the village of Tjørnuvík, the northernmost village on Streymoy, and there on 25 May 1956 the first certain discovery of a grave of the Viking Age was made. Continued investigations have shown that twelve people were buried in a sand-dune, which with the passage of time has been completely covered by earth and stones brought down from the surrounding mountains by erosion.

The graves at Tjørnuvík are near the beach and close to an old track which has always led to the neighbouring village. The graves were about 50 cm. below the old ground surface, and they were all more or less covered with stones. Only one was not covered, and this was surrounded by a stone setting of boat-shaped form, 250 cm. long and 150 cm. across at the top. The first grave that was excavated had sides of stone slabs and boulders, and had certainly been covered with stone slabs so as to form a cist about 150 cm. long and 50 cm. across inside; the other stone graves were of irregular form. It is not possible to decide whether the stone covers were visible in the Viking and early middle ages, but in all probability parts of the boat-shaped setting were. There were no traces of wooden coffins or other wooden relics, with the exception of small pieces of charcoal (perhaps from a fire) scattered about the sand-hill. In one case the deceased had been interred in woollen clothes. It is well known that conditions of preservation in sand can be bad, and such proved to be the case here, but it is clear that all the graves were inhumations. Some of the bodies were lying fully extended on their backs, others were lying on their left sides with bent knees, and all had their heads in a northerly direction, some towards the north-east, others towards the north-west. Both graves and grave-goods give an impression of poverty, although much must have been destroyed by water and land-slides.

The grave-goods from Tjørnuvík which can be identified include the remains of a knife, a buckle, and a boat rivet, and, in the first of the graves, a fairly well-preserved ring-headed pin of bronze with an ornamented faceted head. This ring-headed pin (FIG. 23) is of Celtic type, and the occurrence of this type is limited to Scotland and the Viking lands in the west. It may be dated 10th century. Although there is not much to build on, it is reasonable to suppose that this pin gives a hint of communication between the Norse settlements in the west during the first centuries of their colonization.

I have marked another mound on the map (FIG. 22), a small mound—Tormansgrøv in Vágúr—because it is very similar in form to Havgrímsgrøv and because its name implies a function as a burial place. It has not, however, been excavated.

The farmstead sites of the Viking Age and early middle ages which have so far been identified and investigated vary with regard to situation and method of construction. Some lie within areas at present inhabited, some beneath the present villages, some down by the beach or high in the cultivated land around the village; others lie outside the true village areas, some even in the outlying regions.

Let us first of all examine farmsteads down on the beach. Three have so far been investigated, the most important being at Kvívík on Streymoy.

The halls at all these sites were sub-rectangular with curved long walls; the gable walls are curved on the outside and straight inside. Such houses are well known in all the areas inhabited by the west Norse Vikings as far afield as Greenland, where a few years ago the church, built about 1000 by Erik the Red's wife, Þjóðhildr, was discovered. It, too, has curved walls.

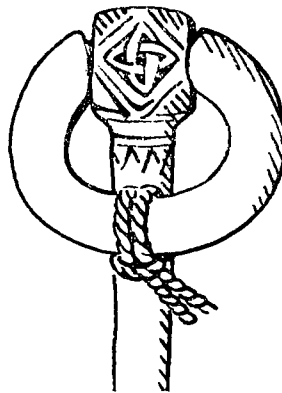


FIG. 23  
TJØRNUVÍK, FAROE ISLANDS  
Head of bronze pin from Norse grave (p. 65).

FIG. 24 is a plan of the Kvívík farmstead. On the right is the hall; the building on the left is half cow-house, half barn, with other barns added later. All the Faroese halls, or *skálar*, stand close to a stream and all are oriented north-south, the southern gable facing the sea. At Kvívík the sea has unfortunately washed away so much of the coast that the southernmost ends of the buildings have disappeared. The erosion is partly due to wave action, partly to a general sinking of the land since the Viking Age.

The walls of the Faroese houses are built from an inner and an outer layer of stones and turf, the space between being filled with earth and small stones. These walls are about 150 cm. thick and are preserved to a height of between 50 and 150 cm. There seems to have been a certain regular ratio between the

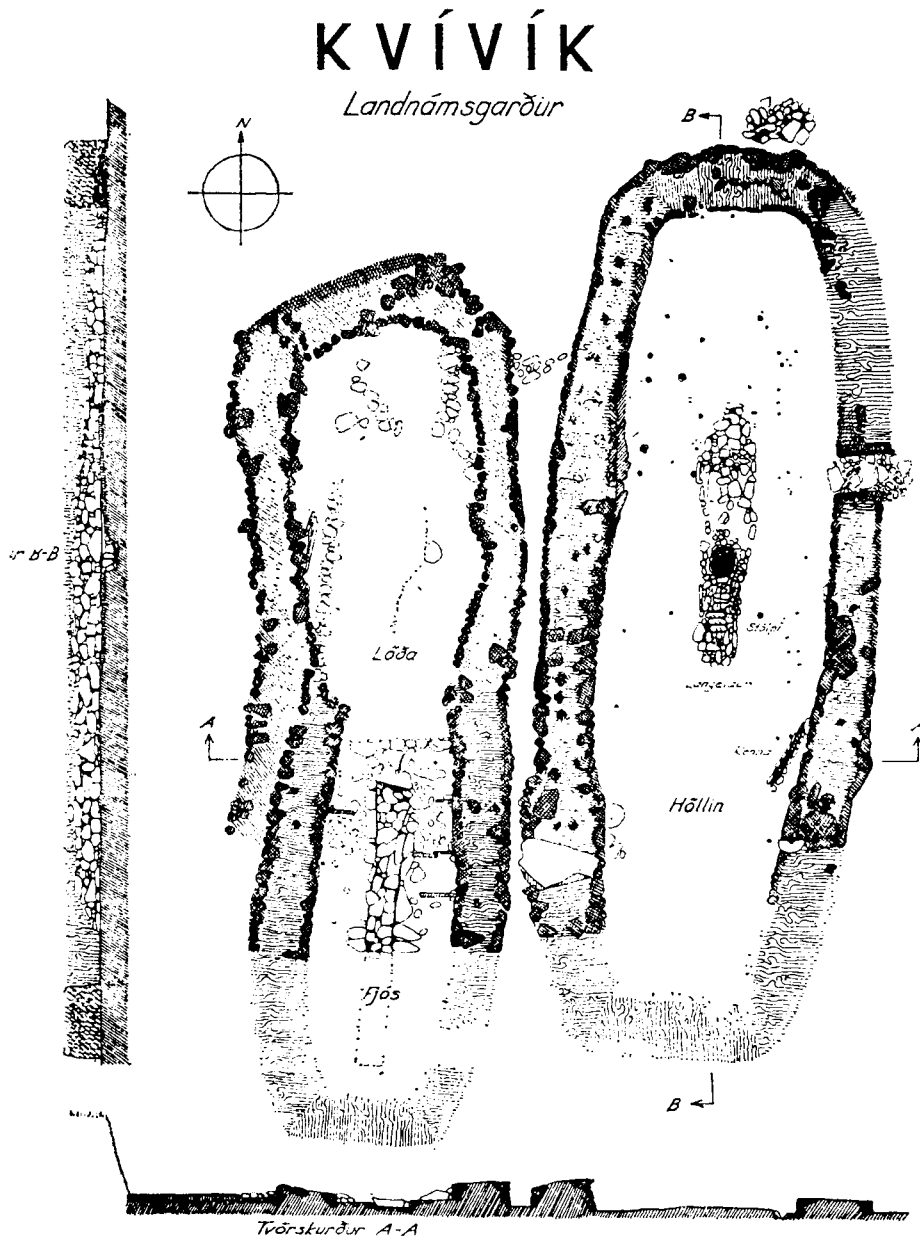


FIG. 24

KVÍVÍK, FAROE ISLANDS

Plan and sections of settlement-site of the Viking Age (pp. 66, 69)



FORNMINNISAVNIÐ

Fuglafirði 1958.

Flatatekning  
av  
húsi VIII.

Sverri Dahl.

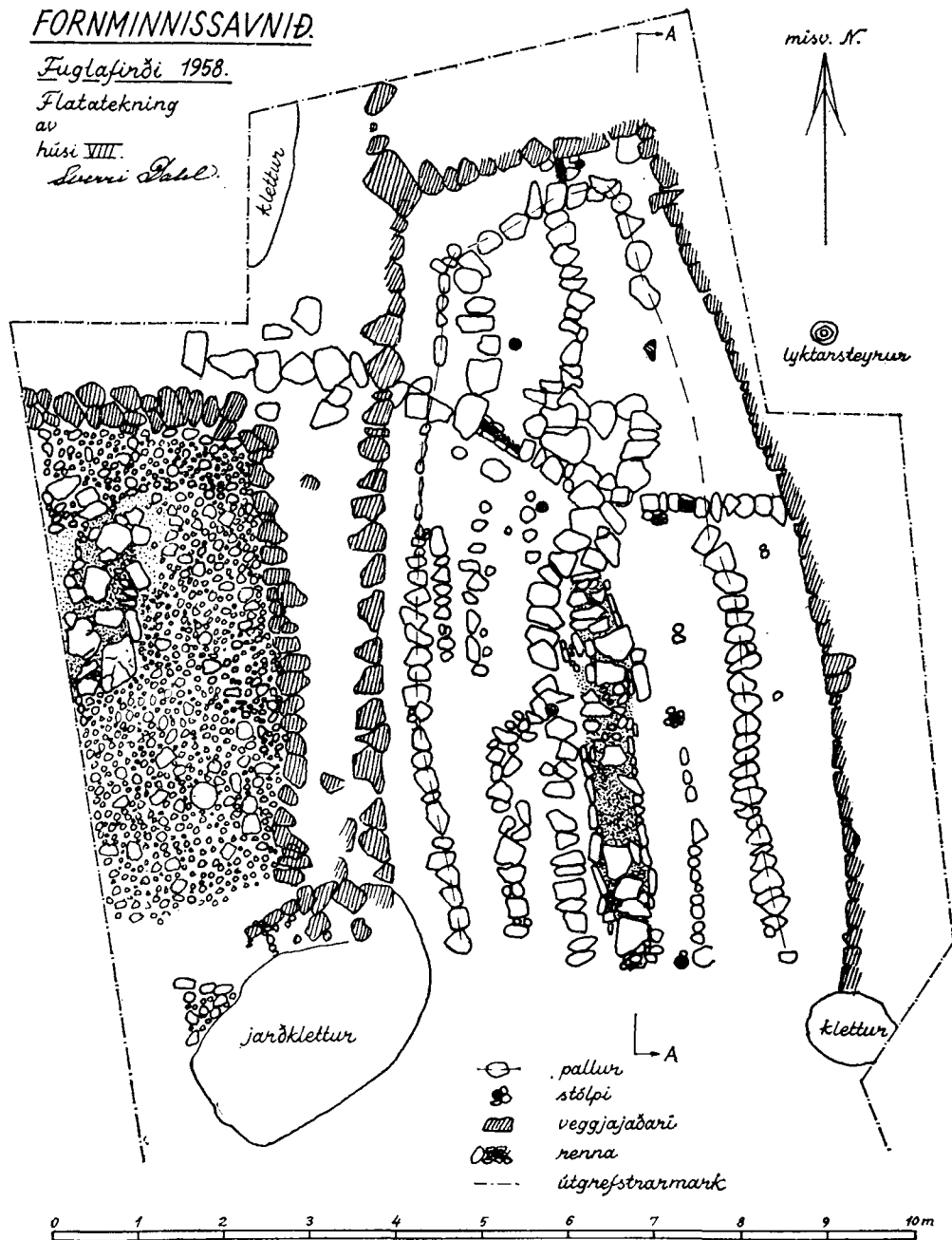


FIG. 25

## FUGLAFJØRÐUR, FAROE ISLANDS

Plan of excavations (p. 69). *Pallur* = line of bench; *stólpi* = post-hole; *veggjafadari* = foundations of walls; *renna* = drain; *útgrefstrarmark* = limit of excavations; *klettur* = bedrock; *jarðklettur* = boulder

length and the breadth of houses; the largest so far discovered—the hall at Kvívík—was 21 or 22 m. by 5·75 m. internally. The one on the beach in Fuglafjørður (FIG. 25) was so damaged by the sea that the width cannot be given, but it must have been about 17 m. long. A hall at Seyrágur (see also below) was about 14 m. long and 4·5 m. wide in the middle. In each the main entrance was in the long wall which faced the stream. Along the inside of the walls were benches, made partly of stone, partly of earth, retained by wooden planks, as is demonstrated by rows of small post-holes. The benches served both as seats and beds. Exactly on the central axis of the hall was the long fireplace, built of flat stones with a roasting pit in the middle. At Kvívík the pit was round, but it was rectangular at Fuglafjørður. The fireplace at Kvívík was 7 m. long and oval, as the hall was oval. The floors were partly paved with stone and always overlaid by a trodden floor of ash, soot, clay and sand.

At Kvívík there were remains of two rows of posts that held up the roof of the hall which was roofed with straw, birch-bark and turf, traces of which survived; this was probably held in place by long cords twined from juniper branches. Train-oil lamps made of stone and pumice have been found, but there were so few that the long fire must have provided most of the light for indoor work. The main indoor occupation, other than cooking, was spinning on spindles with whorls of soapstone, lead or pumice, and weaving on looms with weights particularly of basalt, but also of soapstone. Pumice is found locally but soapstone was imported either from Norway or Shetland, particularly in the form of ready-made bowls with lines below the rim, some of which had convex bases and incurved necks. The Faroese potters modelled their cooking-vessels on these forms.

Part of the diet of those who lived at Kvívík is revealed by finds of the bones of sheep, cows, pigs, seals and pilot whales, guillemots, razor-bills, cormorants, sea-gulls, and, of course, cod. It is uncertain whether they ate horses, but bones tell us that they certainly had them, and we know that they gave toy horses to their children.

Various kinds of wooden vessels had cords of twisted juniper, a material also used for other purposes, e.g. for tying the cows in the stalls and, as already mentioned above, perhaps for keeping roofs in place. As yet the only byre known is that at Kvívík. It has the same curved walls as the hall, and by its size demonstrates that farmsteads of the Viking Age were quite large, at least by Faroese standards. At Kvívík there was room for eight to twelve animals which were stabled in stone-built stalls, 1·6m.-deep, with stone slabs between them. The bones indicate that the animals were of small stature.

Three farmsteads higher up in the cultivated lands away from the beaches have also been investigated. At Seyrvágur a hall of the same type as those found at Kvívík and Fuglafjørður has been excavated (FIG. 26). Unlike the others this house was situated high on steep slopes surrounding the settlement. Nevertheless, it was oriented north-south with the southern gable towards the sea, despite uncomfortably sloping floors.

The farmsteads at Sandavágur and at Syðrugøta are also placed on the highest part of the cultivable area. At Syðrugøta the building was much damaged

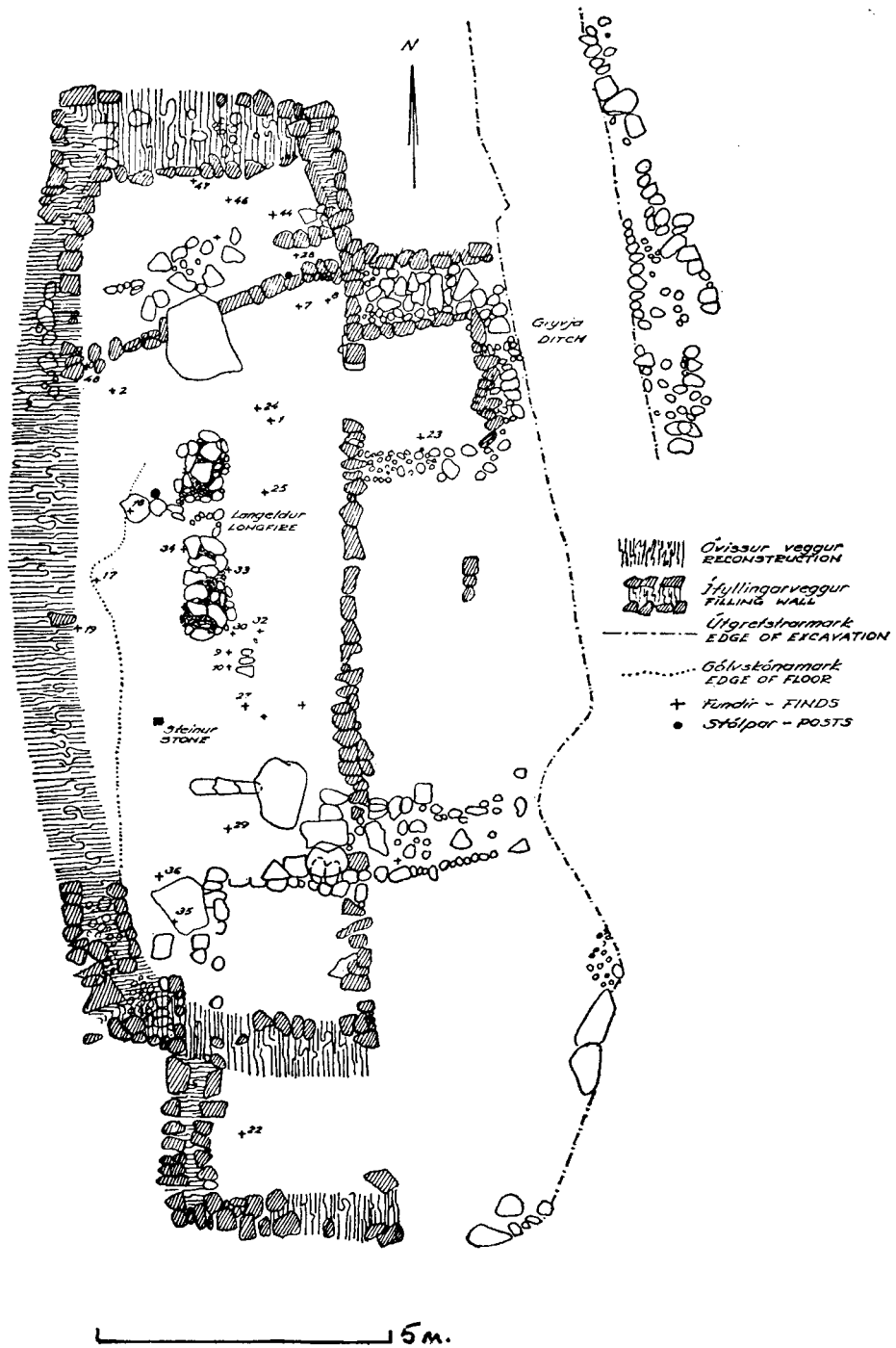


FIG. 26  
SEYRVÁGUR, VÁGUR, FAROE ISLANDS  
Plan of house (p. 69)

by centuries of cultivation, but it was clear that this was an entirely different kind of building from those discussed so far, although certainly of the Viking Age. The inhabited house was undoubtedly originally of considerable size, oriented north-east/south-west with façade and entrance facing the sea. Particularly significant finds were many pottery vessels of Faroese origin. They are of coarse fabric, with flat base, splayed body and incurved neck. A spindle-whorl of red pumice, decorated with concentric circles and zig-zag lines, and two conical spindle-whorls of green pumice, were also found. The difference in size between the building on this site and those previously discussed is striking, but the vessels and the spindle-whorls are so closely similar to material of the Viking Age from Denmark, and to a certain extent from Jarlshof (Shetland), that the age of this farmstead cannot be doubted. The farmer might have come from another milieu, or perhaps he had contacts different from those of the farmers at Kvívík, a theory based on the absence of soapstone at the site.

Ships and boats were a necessity of life, and, although no boat has yet been found, toy boats have been found on sites of the Viking Age, which boys must have played with while their fathers traded over the seas with cloth, with the feathers of seabirds and so on, which they doubtless bartered for such necessities as corn, soapstone and timber, and for such luxury goods as glass, amber beads and hazel nuts. One gets the impression that the Faroese farmers were quite prosperous and appreciated pretty things, and that their trading contacts extended both to Norway and the British Isles. As proof of this we may quote the hoard from Sandoy; this included, in addition to ornaments, ninety-eight coins, which ranged in date from the middle of the 10th century to about 1070, and had been struck in Norway, Denmark, Germany, Hungary, England and Ireland.

Until recently we knew nothing of *sæter* like those of Norway and Sweden, but now Professor C. Matras has demonstrated that a number of place-names include a Gaelic element which can be interpreted as *sæter* or *shieling*. It was used around 900 by Norsemen in the regions they inhabited, from Chester to the Faroe Islands, but is not found in Iceland. In Old Faroese it had the form *Ærgi*; in modern Faroese it is (on the northern islands) *Argi* and *Ergi* on Suðuroy, e.g. Argir, Argisá, Argisfossur, Ergibyrgi, Ergidalur. In Irish Gaelic the word is used of a herd of cows or a cow-pen; in Scottish Gaelic it means a pasture with huts, where the men who looked after the cows in the summer lived. All Faroese *ærgi* (FIG. 27) are situated rather far from the supposed oldest farms or from the villages to which they belonged or still belong; some are high up in the mountains.

One of these places has been investigated. It is Ergidalur (FIG. 27), 200 m. above sea-level, inland in Suðuroy, and belonging to the Viking settlement at *Hofi* (Hof on FIG. 21). Here there was a stone building, 5·5 m. by 3·5 m., with a fireplace built of flat stones above floor level. In this fireplace and in the floor, sherds of large bowl-shaped pottery vessels were found, which point to the house having been used in the Viking Age. Some definite *ærgi* plotted on the map (FIG. 27) correspond to farmsteads named in the saga, and a few to farms which have now been examined. We can therefore safely assume that the others also indicate farmsteads of the Viking Age.



FIG. 27  
SKETCH-MAP OF FAROE ISLANDS  
showing sites of shielings (p. 71)

At the beginning of this paper it was stated that only seven farmsteads are named in the saga. It is particularly striking that the farmstead at Kirkjubøur is not mentioned. Tradition relates that a rich farmer, Þórhallr, lived here in Viking times, but so far we have no firm evidence of this in spite of extensive investigations. We must, however, assume that Kirkjubøur was in any case a large farm at the time of the introduction of Christianity, otherwise the Church would hardly have chosen it for the residence of the bishop of the islands. Throughout the whole middle ages it was the administrative and spiritual centre with the impressive bishop's farm and no less than three stone churches, of which the cathedral, which was consecrated, but never completed, is dedicated to Magnus, the patron saint of the Orkneys.

#### NOTE ON PUBLISHED SOURCES

Much of this material was originally published in Faroese. A full bibliography of Faroese archaeology is included in J. P. Trap, *Danmark*, XIII (5 ed., Copenhagen, 1968), 222-3. Since this appeared a paper on the *ærgi* problem has been published in the *Festschrift* to Chr. Matras: S. Dahl, 'Um ærgistaðir og ærgitofir', *Fróðskaparrit*, XVIII (1970), 361-8. In the edition of Trap cited above, which is written in Danish, Mr. Dahl provides the best introduction to the material in a more normal western language at pp. 188-98, while attention may also be drawn to A. Small, 'The distribution of settlement in Shetland and Faroe in Viking times', *Saga Book Viking Soc. Northern Res.*, XVII (1967-8), 145-55. Reports on current Faroese archaeological investigations will appear in *Fróðskaparrit* and, in English, in the forthcoming proceedings of the sixth Viking congress (Uppsala). D.M.W.

#### NOTE

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