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# Changes of the rural landscape on the Faroe Islands in the Middle Ages

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The purpose of this article is to collate and estimate the information given by different sources on the traces of cultivation in what today is regarded as outfield (*hagi*) on the Faroe Islands. We will also attempt to undertake a classification and an estimation of the value and function of these cultivation traces in the ancient agricultural system.

On going through air photographs from the Faroes we became aware of many clear traces of cultivation in various places in the outfield (fig. 1).

Although some of these traces were mentioned in literature, the majority were not. After a detailed examination of the photographic material, we succeeded in demarcating in all 18 areas with such cultivation traces, apart from quite a few areas with more dubious traces.

Most of these areas show up on air photographs as pale, narrow, parallel stripes following the slope of the terrain. During subsequent field work, the stripes turned out to be low, overgrown, stony ridges. In several places they are demarcated upwards by a crag and downwards by a steep coastal cliff, so as to stand out as naturally isolated areas in the landscape.

On the basis of these air photograph studies, together with some preliminary investigations and surveys in the field, we will attempt to draw up a classification of these agricultural traces.

Type 1a. "Reinavelta". A couple of the finds have turned out to be of newer date and of the same type as the ordinary Faroe *reinavelta* (fig. 2).

This is the case with the traces on the southern point of Kunoy, which are referred to by J. Chr. Svabo in 1782 (Svabo, 1959) and S. Dahl (1968), and which are called *Bóndasto-*

*va*. Of the same type are *Víkar* on Vágur's north side and *Tindhólmur*, as well as other settlements discontinued in recent times, *Skaró* on Kunoy, *Blankskáli* on Kalsoy, *Skálaroftir* on Borðoy.

Type 1b. At *Hósmøl* on Nólsoy there are very clear traces which we have examined. They are not mentioned in literature but must presumably be quite young, possibly from this century. In this case the field sections are not separated by ridges but by ditches c. 30 cms. deep, which still have relatively well-defined sides, indicating their lack of age. There are 4 part-sections in the area with fields in various directions.

Type 2a. The most exiting type can be found both on Suðuroy, Vágur and on Mykines.

On the southern point of Suðuroy, at the settlement of Sumba, lies a c. 40° steep and quite even slope with sure signs of earlier cultivation. The 8-10 meter wide fields are separated by 10-40 cm. high, upright, and parallel earth ridges with a faint tendency towards asymmetry, due to the clearly pronounced appearance of their north facing sides. As can be seen from the profile on fig. 3 and fig. 4-5, the fields are demarcated upwards by a crag, whilst they extend downwards to a vertical coastal cliff, clearly eroded by the sea.

The steepness of the fields initially comes as a surprise, although actually no greater than can be found on many of the highest-lying parts of the presently cultivated land. The place is called *Akraberg* and, according to oral tradition, should have been inhabited by Frisians before Viking times (Joensen, 1963). Other occurrences of ancient fields have similar legends about the Frisians and the Irish attached to them. Partly due to

this, Sverri Dahl, in his description of Faro historical monuments in "Trap Danmark", has discussed the field patterns in the outfield in connection to the very oldest times (Dahl, 1968). That the cultivation of grain crops actually should have taken place at this time is also backed up by J. Johansen's paleobotanical investigations which date such a cultivation to the year 600 (Johansen, 1971). This should support the theory that the field patterns in the outfield are of Celtic origin.

On the other hand, the legends from Akraberg also say that the settlement around Akraberg was not discontinued until after "the Black Death", in other words after c. 1350. The settlement should, by all accounts, have been washed into the sea, together with the lower parts of a cultivated area, in the course of the following centuries. Although these legends are of uncertain value, there is no doubt that the area has been subjected to a very powerful erosion, brought on by a clearly documented isostatic downwarping.

The agricultural pattern from Akraberg can be recognized quite clearly in several other places, e.g. on the steep hillside south-east of the Mykines settlement (fig. 6). Where only 4 field ridges can be traced at Akraberg, we find c. 10 ridges on the south-facing hillside east of *Helliggjógv*, c. 18 at *Uldalís* a few indistinct traces at *Iralís*, and c. 7 on the south-east side of *Heimaranes*. As at Akraberg, the ridges are placed at c. 10-meter intervals. The geographical position, as can be seen from the profile in fig. 6, corresponds exactly to that of Akraberg. No historical sources or legends exist about the fields on Mykines; but where the legend, as mentioned before, connects the Akraberg fields with a lower-lying infield of which the fields should constitute the upper part, the Mykines' fields suggest the deliberate laying-out of fields off the beaten track, in order that the sheep should not be able to get at them.

On the south side of Vágur are to be found 2 areas with clear indications of agriculture. In the eastern part of *Kýrberg* can be found an area with c. 9 ridges. Today there is a "bóll" (sheep shelter) there, which somewhat disturbs the picture. This area is demarcated on the landward side by a deep gorge which cuts its way into the land, as well as high crags. At *Selberg*, which lies 2 km. further west, there are also five or more ridges, although they are rather less distinct than at *Kýrberg*. An attempt at photo-

graphing the area from the seaward side did not improve matters appreciably. The name *Selberg* is interesting in this connection, in that *Matras* (1933) connects the first syllable *sel-* with transhumance.

Type 2b. Other agricultural traces resemble the above mentioned type as regards the shape and interval of ridges but differ by lying much lower and close to existing settlements without being naturally isolated. This type can be seen west of *Hov* and in *Hvalba* and is mentioned by S. Dahl (1968).

In the infields of *Sumba*, distinct traces of ancient agriculture can be found "underlying" the present fields. Locally they are known under the name "deildir" (Thorsteinsson, 1979) and can be taken as a sign of a certain discontinuity in the cultivation here (fig. 3).

South-east of the Sandur settlement on Sandoy lies a c. 30° steep south-westward slope strongly marked by larger and smaller fallen rocks and boulders, as well as a pronounced gorge formation (fig. 7 and 8). On an area 3-500 m. long can be seen 15-20 distinct traces of former field ridges. A few of these are regular in character, bearing resemblance to the earlier mentioned fields, while the majority are irregularly constructed. Like the other fields referred to, these are also sharply demarcated both upward and downward. The fields at Sandur are particularly remarkable because they are the only ones of which there is any historical evidence. In a recently published article by Arne Thorsteinsson (1979) it is certified that these are the fields referred to in a source from 1412 as being church property.

Type 3. *Lambi*, Mykines (fig. 9). This collection of fields differs from the foregoing in that the ridges cross a small valley, consequently at this point appearing like terraces at right angles to the gradient, although, like type 2a, they are not naturally isolated by crags and cliffs. They are situated as shown in fig. 6. There are large colonies of puffins (*Fratercula Arctica*), whose nest-constructions have erased the traces, particularly the upper parts, of the fields. The north-east part of the area constitutes 11 fields situated on the southward slope of the valley, separated by upright and relatively high ridges, partly formed as cliffs; especially the innermost fields show a clear tendency towards "terracing". The interval between the ridges is slightly smaller than that of the other areas, approximately 8 metres. A litt-

le to the south-west of this area ridges can be traced, the intervals between which being only 4-7 metres and the course of which being remarkably irregular.

Using C14 - analyses of pollen as a foundation, these fields have recently been dated to the year 600 (J. Johansen, 1979).

In the lowest part of the valley, which ends in a coastal cliff marked by erosion, can be found a nearly rectangular pattern of c. 8 x 30 metres bounded by a bank of up to 2 metres in height. This appears to continue up through the valley (the remains of a road?). Immediately to the east of the rectangle lies a site from a c. 4 x 4 m. stone house, bounded by a bank.

A portion of the fields described here, which appear only faintly on the air photographs used (inter alia Sandur), are easily identifiable in the landscape (see also fig. 8), and in some places it has been possible to find traces in the landscape by going over place-name combinations with Akra- or Høy- (field and hay), without anything being visible on the air photos. At Høyberg on Streymoy traces can clearly be seen, most probably type 2a, when approaching from the sea.

In the literature (Dahl, 1968, Ditlev, 1978) a number of places are referred to - such as *Skálafjørður*, *Funningsfjørður*, *Skopun*, *Sandvík* - as being populated in the last century, where traces have been established of earlier cultivation and settlement. Such new settlements will obviously destroy surface elements of older settlements, and at the mentioned places the older agricultural traces cannot with certainty be identified from the air photo studies.

Neither have attempts at using air photographs proved particularly rewarding in investigating remains of various buildings situated in the present outfield. Research into place-names has, aided by archaeology, pointed out several localities thought to have been populated in Viking times, either as summer pasture-lands or possibly as permanent settlements (Dahl, 1970). It is characteristic that several of these settlements lie inland and not, as the above mentioned fields, on coastal slopes.

Dahl concludes, "As a main result of the hitherto accomplished investigations, it can be said that certain things indicate a more scattered population in the earlier centuries than in the later, when people moved together by the beach" (1968).

How should we interpret this change? And how

should we interpret the many indications of earlier cultivation in the outfield?

The theory of the Celtic fields should still not be repudiated. One of the probably most fruitful ways of following up this theory is to carry out systematic coastal morphological investigations. Apart from a few places (Mykines-hólmur and the most northerly part of the Faroes), an isostatic downwarping, together with a comprehensive erosion of all the coastlines, is taking place. There is much to indicate that the lower-lying cultivated areas on the Faroes have been considerably more extensive in earlier times than they are today.

The climatic conditions for raising grain have also been different, a province, however, which is far more difficult to throw light on (Brandt & Guttesen, 1978).

There is also much to indicate, as shown, the existence of scattered settlements and cultivation of the present outfield at least until the beginning of the 15th century. Here also, the development in landscape and climate must be taken into account but just as conclusive is an estimation of the theory about the transhumance system.

There could be several reasons for this system:

1. In order to overcome more easily the large distances between the parts used in the geographical milieu.
2. In the society in question a greater importance was attached to raising grain and probably also to cattle and their grazing in the outfield.
3. It facilitated other forms of husbandry, such as pig-breeding, which was widespread on the Faroe Islands in the Middle Ages. Pigs were, for instance, kept in certain isolated parts of the outfield where they needed daily care. Pig-breeding disappeared around the 17th century (Bjørk, 1970).

The transhumance system could be interpreted as a more intensive method of utilization than the infield-outfield system known from more recent times. Could this be explained by the possible pressure of a larger population, possibly prior to the Black Death? A passage in the oldest recorded source from the Faroe Islands, Seydabrevid (the sheep letter) from 1298 says that "from now on, no man who owns less than three cows is to set up (a house) of his own" (Seydabrevid, 1971). This could be interpreted as a restrictive measure against growth in the population but should rather be explained as a way for the landowners to secure working-power at a time when

the bondsmen (thralls) had just been set free. The wording of this law probably indicates a shortage of labour together with the fact, that there was material basis for a growth in the population; and as said earlier, several things indicate that settlements were more scattered and coupled with cultivation of the outfield even after the Black Death.

It is still, however, an open question whether the transhumance system and cultivation of secluded parts of the outfield can be directly coupled to the thesis of a more scattered settlement. In fact, precisely the transhumance system can be seen in relation to a more concentrated permanent settlement structure (such as had probably been the case in the "thrall-based" society current at the time of the Viking settlement). There does not necessarily have to be any discrepancy, therefore, between Dahl's assertion of a more scattered settlement during the first centuries and Høgnesen's assertion that only half of the settlements were established 13-1400 (Høgnesen, 1971. See also Thorsteinsson, 1978).

Finally we put forward the hypothesis that at least a part of the above mentioned agricultural traces, especially type 2b, are areas that have been part of an earlier system of tillage on the Faroes in which there were 3 categories of areas - a system known in large parts of north-west Europe (see for instance Uhlig, 1961) where in certain places, such as the Outer Hebrides (see A. Reenberg, 1979) it is still in use. The 3 area categories must be infield, corresponding to "bøur", outfield, which today is without a collective name in the Faroese language, and "muir", moor or heath corresponding to the Faroese "hagi". Thorsteinsson's (1979) article confirms this assumption in his treatment of the written sources in connection with the asserted fields which lie outside the present infield belonging to the Sandur settlement. He says that these areas (*ruddstaðirnir*) were extremely well suited to the cultivation of grain, due to the particular conditions of insulation. He adds, however, "that it is hard to comprehend how these fields were manured. In the old method of cultivation all the manure was spread on "bøin" (the infield), and it was common to cultivate and manure about a seventh part per year - larger quantities of manure were not at disposal" (p. 21). If these outfields were used as grazing land and hay-fields, and only to a lesser degree for raising grain, the problem of manuring need not have been so overwhelming. The greater

amount of fodder would allow for a larger herd of cattle, which in turn would increase the production of manure, which could be used for a more intensive production of grain-crops. This outfield category of area may have been flattened away in connection with a rise in wool prices which occurred during the 16th century. Wool, as an export product of the ruling class, was a decisive condition for the import and must have given rise to intensified sheep-farming at the expense of other - more labour demanding - forms of production. In this lies an explanation of a possible decrease in population - together with the laying waste of a number of buildings on the Faroes in the Middle Ages.

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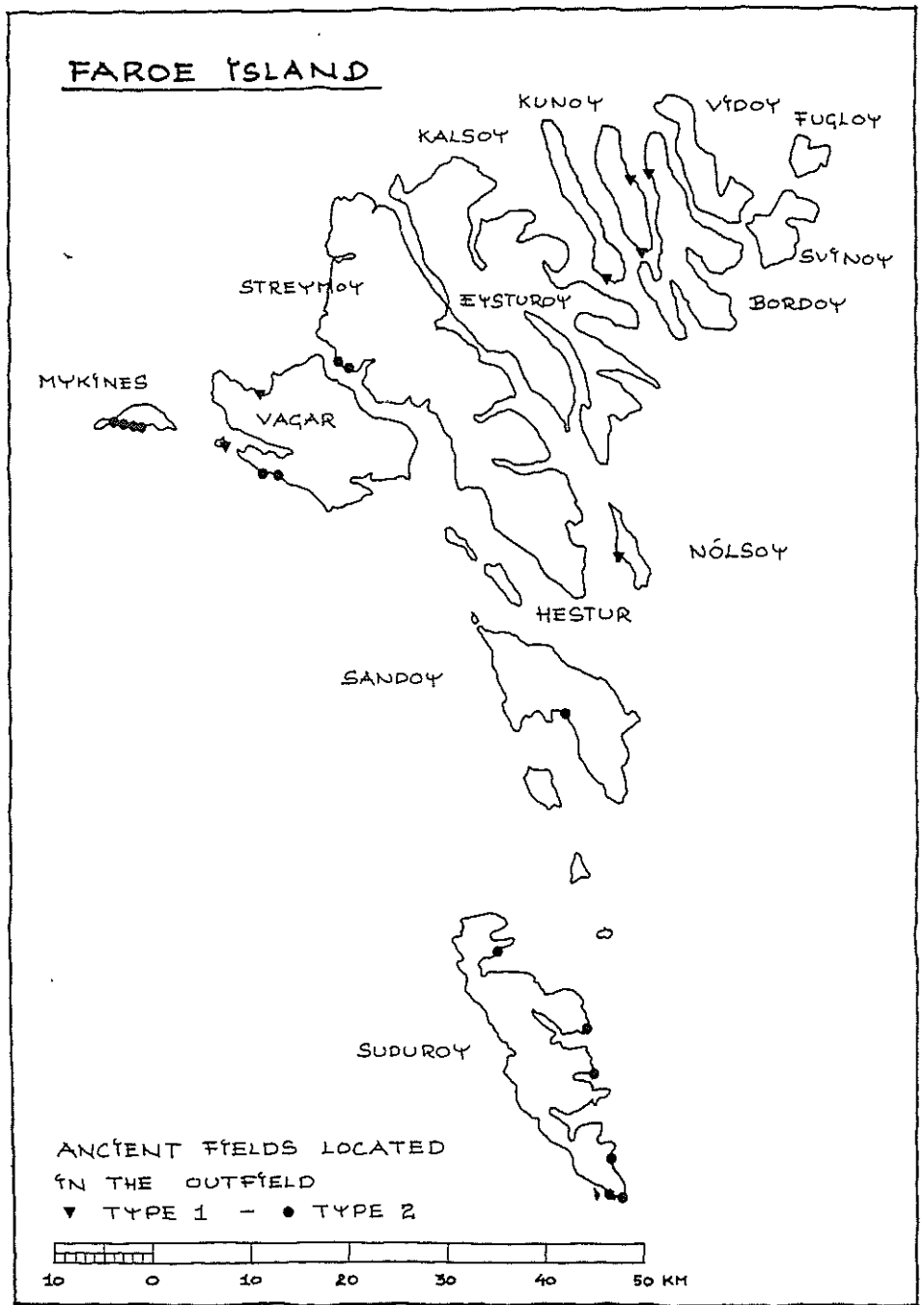


Fig. 1.

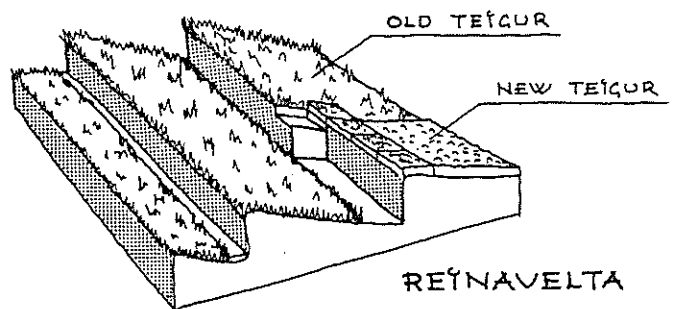


Fig. 2. Reinavelta is a method of preparing ("tipping over") the earth. A portion of the highest part of the old *teigur* is removed with a *haki* (a sort of spade), and levelled out over the rest of the same *teigur*. (From Brandt & Rasmussen, 1976.)

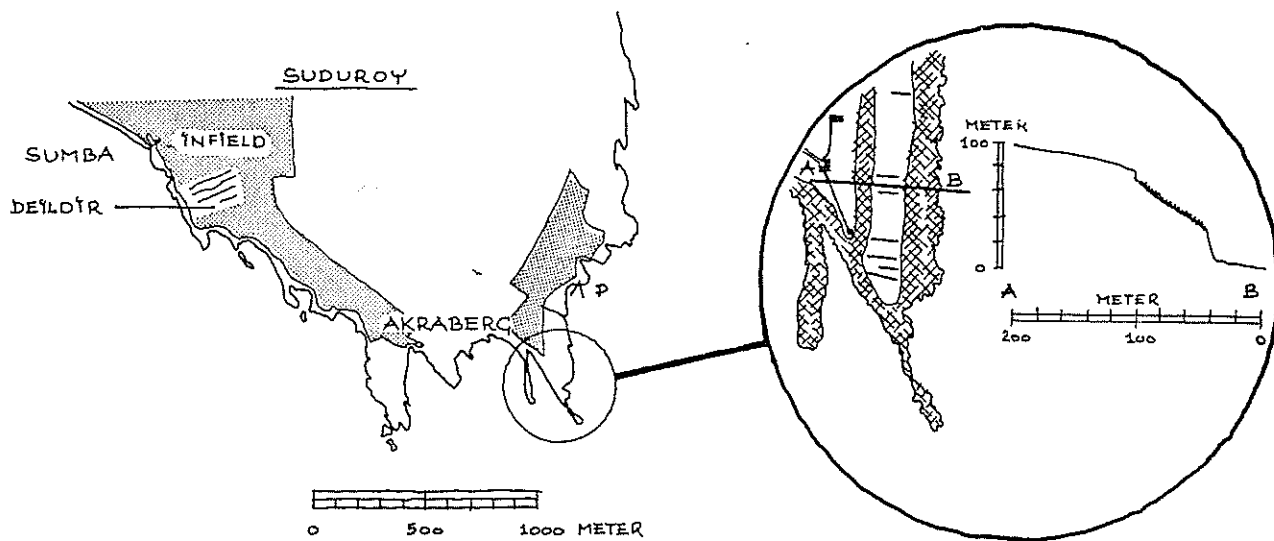


Fig. 3.

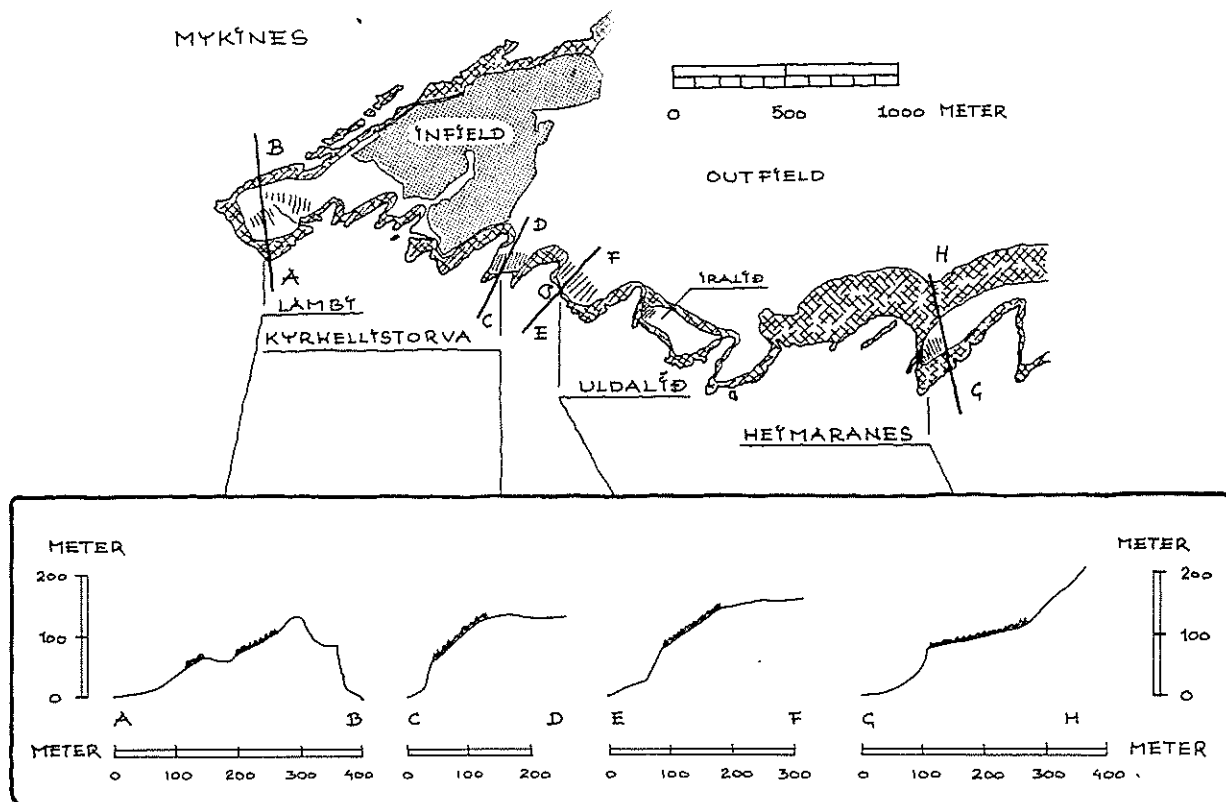


Fig. 6.