

## **The traditional Faroese village: 22**

Sheep-breeding on Eastern Sandoy: 23. Modern faroese farming: 24

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*Published in:*  
The faeroe Islands

*Publication date:*  
1996

*Document Version*  
Early version, also known as pre-print

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Brandt, J. (1996). The traditional Faroese village: 22: Sheep-breeding on Eastern Sandoy: 23. Modern faroese farming: 24. In R. Guttesen (Ed.), *The faeroe Islands: Topographic atlas* (pp. 80-87). Det Kongelige Danske Geografiske Selskab.

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## 22 The Traditional Faeroese Village

There are about 90 old villages on the Faeroe Islands. Physically, they consist of two parts. The *bøur* is the infield and smaller part with an area of 25-50 hectares. The *hagi* is the outfield, which surrounds and lies beyond the *bøur*. It is therefore much larger with an area of 500-3,000 hectares. The *bøur* is always located close to the shore, and is normally separated from the *hagi* by a dry-stone dike about one metre in height. The buildings of the settlement are all within the *bøur* and often arranged within separate hamlets known as *býlingar*. According to certain property rights, a *býlingur* might have its share of sheep-rearing concentrated in a certain part of the *hagi*, called a *hagapartur*, (cf. Article 23).

About 90% of the *bøur* was used for the cultivation of grass for hay production to feed the cows in winter. Barleycorn was cultivated in rotation with grass. Barley provided the local community with bread grain. The unique barleycorn-grass cultivation practice replenished the soil and guaranteed high-quality yields. Towards the end of the 18th century, the potato was introduced to the Faeroe Islands. Rootcrops, cabbage, and angelica providing vitamin C, were among the other common crops.

Out in the *hagi* is where the sheep graze. Peat is cut for fuel, and sod for thatch. In some villages, geese are kept. There are vast numbers of seabirds, especially in areas with high cliffs. Although seabird fowling in the Faeroe Islands is renowned, it has only been seriously practised in a few villages. Fowling has never been as important as farming, nor as important as fishing was after the mid-19th century.

The main activities were; barleycorn cultivation, sheep and cattle rearing, hay-making and cutting peat for fuel. By the end of the 17th century, barleycorn cultivation had declined and after the Second World War it was abandoned. It had demanded much toil and trouble as the grain seldom dried or ripened before being reaped, and fuelling the kiln-house, *sornhús*, where the corn was dried, necessitated vast quantities of peat.

The most important farming activity was cow and sheep rearing. In earlier times there was a close relationship between these two stocks and the use of *bøur* and *hagi*. In winter, the cows were confined to the byre and fed on the hay harvested the previous summer in the *bøur*. The sheep, which remained outside in the winter, grazed the fields of the *bøur* and the lower part of the *hagi*.

In summer, the cows returned to the lower *hagi* of the outfield. Used for the purpose of grazing cows, it was often called the *húshagi*, while the sheep were shepherded to the upper *hagi* where they often grazed close to the summits. The *húshagi* was separated from the upper *hagi* by a low headdike which prevented the cows from straying, thus helping to limit the walking distance for the womenfolk who had to milk the cows.

The uses of the *bøur* and *hagi* were fixed by ancient codes of law; such as the right of the sheep to graze inside the *bøur* from the 22nd October until 15th May.

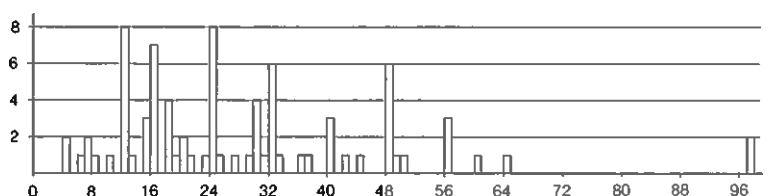
Landownership, tax payments, rights and duties, were all regulated by the traditional land measurement system, *markatal*, (sing. *mørk*, plur. *merkur*), in which property rights were tantamount to a specific share of the village. All old villages have their own *markatal*. The *markatal* was a property value awarded to a village as an indication of its total production value. The village property owners were each given their own *markatal* to represent their individual share of the village *markatal*.

An example of how the *markatal* system worked is shown here by referring to Húsavík, in eastern Sandoy; a village whose *markatal* is fixed at 31. If a farmer had 1 *mørk* in the village, he had rights to 1/31 of the village, or more accurately:

1. Specific land parcels in the *bøur*, being equivalent to 1/31 of the production capacity of the *bøur*.
2. Right to 1/31 of the sheep output, mostly expressed as a larger share from a particular *hagapartur*.
3. Right to summer grazing for a certain number of cows or 1/31 of the grazing capacity of the *húshagi*.
4. Right to a share in other resources, such as; turbaries (peat), fowling cliffs, *feitilendir* (rich pastures for fattening rams), driftwood, seaweed for fertilizer, *grind* (pilot whales).
5. Right to keep a fixed number of horses and dogs.

The *Markatal* as the measure of total village production, was the taxation basis in olden times. Unfortunately, there is no documentation to tell of its origin. Many *markatal* values (Fig. 80) are divisible by 8, and there is an evident concentration of the values 12, 16, 24, 32, 48 and 96. This may stem from an even older system of land valuation when the basic unit was eight times higher and known as *mørk gold*, and when a simple taxation system was based on the "normal farm" whose value or *markatal* of 48 was equal to 6 *merkur gold*. Only a few classes were fixed when the system started, but the subsequent property subdivision and sale resulted in odd property values such as the *markatal* of 31 at Húsavík.

Fig. 80: Frequency distribution of the old "markatal", land measurement units, characteristic of the old villages. It is noteworthy that values divisible by 8 are rather common. JB part.



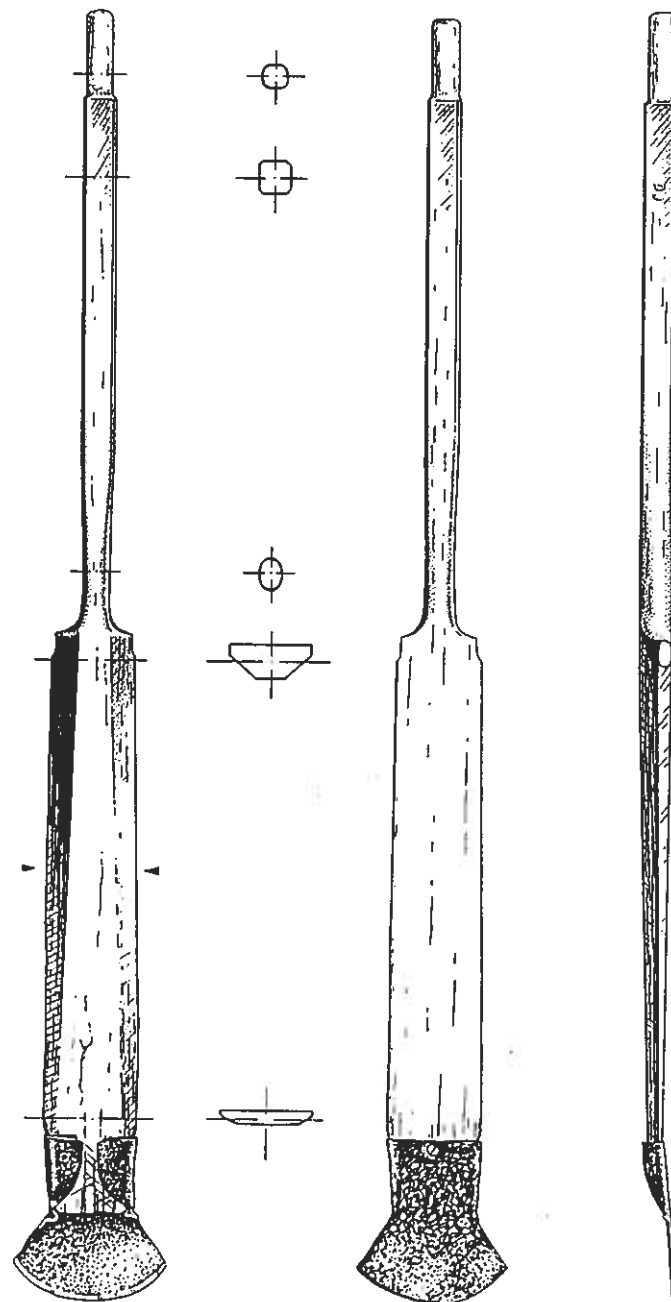
The Danish Crown owned almost half the land in terms of markatal, *kongsjørð*. It was leased to tenants and citizens of high status, such as royal officials and priests. These were the Crown tenants, *kongsbøndur*. The allodial land was known as *óðalsjørð* and owned by freeholders called *óðalsbøndur*. On the death of the landowner, it had to be subdivided equally among all the children. This led to *óðalsbøndur* holdings becoming continually fragmented and thus smaller. However, as long as cultivation with the use of the spade-like *haki* prevailed, the continual division of land did not imply increased operational costs, but the result was a very complicated pattern of landownership. By contrast, the *kongsjørð* was hardly ever divided. Not surprisingly, the *kongsbøndur* emerged as wealthy upper-class farmers.

The constant division of *óðalsjørð* was not initially serious. In the late 18th century, the potato was introduced. The crop was ideal for the small plots, producing high yields every year as long as the poor sandy soil was well manured with seaweed. Traditionally, the sheep returned from the *hagi* in mid-autumn to graze in the *bøur*, but a problem arose because the potatoes were often still in the ground at the end of October. Moreover, it was forbidden to enclose the plots of land and so the sheep were free to roam across the potato beds. When the age of the fishing smack began in the late 19th century, the task of potato-seeding coincided conveniently with the lapse between the spring and summer fishing seasons and kept wage payments down for the shipowners.

Population growth during the early 19th century increased the pressure on the land. Part of the *hagi* was converted into small allotments called *traðir* (sing. *trøð*). However, the right to work these new allotments did not entitle the cottagers to a markatal, nor did it guarantee them other privileges or rights. Moreover, they complained bitterly about the compulsory winter grazing by sheep on their land and demanded to be free of it.

The allocation of *traðir* to labourers and fishermen was a matter of utmost judicial importance as it contravened the venerable Faeroese property rights. Nevertheless, the legislation was eventually passed, having been strongly supported by the new industrial elite who were keen on weakening the stranglehold that the conservative peasant society had maintained for so long on the political and economic life of the islands. The ancient property laws had frustrated the business sector by hindering the acquisition of land for commerce and industry, and by imposing too many restrictions and duties.

*Jesper Brandt*



*Fig. 81: The Faeroese spade-like implement "haki" which is made of wood with a sharp steel blade. The one illustrated was used by Dávur Joensen in the documentary film "Kornvelting í Gásadali" (page 76). The length of the "haki" is 131 cm.*

*Drawing: Rolf Guttesen.*

## 23 Sheep-breeding on Eastern Sandoy

From the time of the first settlement until the mid-19th century, sheep-rearing was of great economic importance to the Faeroe Islands. The world wool price substantially rose in the 13th century and provided the islands with a lucrative export trade in wool and woollen products. By the 16th century, the wool trade accounted for 90% of the foreign income. Hence the old Faeroese proverb “*Seyða ull er Føroya gull*” meaning “Sheep’s wool is Faeroese gold”!

Sheep-rearing was practised extensively and relied on the flocks being able to graze outdoors throughout the year. Sheds and winter fodder were first introduced this century. The traditional grazing methods minimized production costs but the sheep were totally dependent on the sustainability of the outfield pastures to constant grazing. Furthermore, the animals were always exposed to the capricious Faeroese weather.

Of the utmost priority, was the need to establish an efficient grazing system in order to:

1. Ensure the best utilization of the grazing areas.
2. Minimize the risk of sheep loss in severe winters.
3. Reduce conflict between landowners through a sensible administration of the unfenced outfield.

In the Faeroese language, the outfield is called the hagi. At least 95% of the Faeroe Islands consists of hagi grazing territory. It is divided into 250 *hagapartar* that have traditionally functioned as the basic property units in sheep-rearing. Hagapartar vary in area from 2 km<sup>2</sup> to 25 km<sup>2</sup>, and the flocks that graze them vary from 100 to 900 ewes. In addition, there are rich grassy areas called *feitilendir*. They are found on islets or in other segregated places where rams and wethers are sent to be fattened. Although the *feitilendir* are limited in extent, they have proved very productive owing to their phosphate-rich soils, which are made very fertile by the excrement of the many seabirds nesting along the mountainous coast.

It was the duty of the local shepherd, *seyðamaður*, to ensure the sustainability of the pastures in a *hagapartur*. The grazing capacity of the hagi was expressed in terms of the number of ewes it could bear, the *skipan*. The rules on how the *skipan* was to be calculated were written in the medieval Faeroese code of law on the utilization of natural resources and landuse practices, *Seyðabrævið*, which came into force in 1298. *Seyðabrævið* means literally “The Sheep Letter”. Sheep-rearing was vital to the economy, and the *skipan* rule read as follows: “*the number of sheep within a certain grazing area shall remain the same as before unless it is discovered that the area can sustain more.*”

A shepherd might be tempted to put more sheep in the hagi than it could sustain so the *skipan* was one way of limiting the number. Other measures prevented private

Fig. 83: The outfield areas and sheep flocks of eastern Sandoy. The name and number of each flock are given. Circles indicate gathering places called “*savningar*”. JB part.

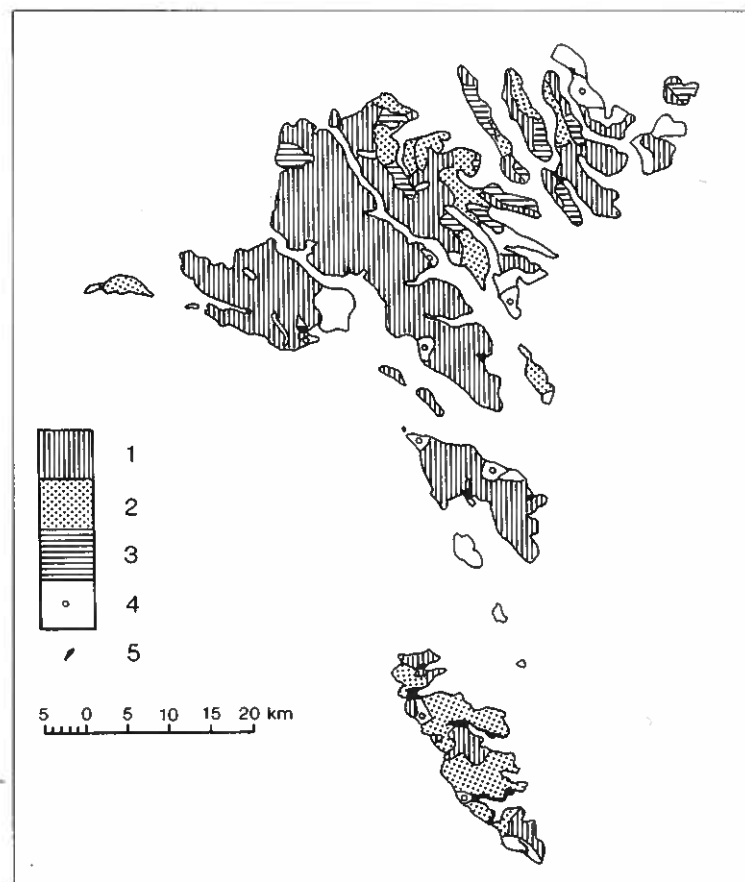


Fig. 82: Sheep ownership in the Faeroe Islands, 1758. The distribution of private ownership and common ownership. Source: *Føroya Landsskjalasavn*. JB part. Legend: 1: Feli, 2: Kenning, 3: Mixed, 4: Single owner, 5: Cultivated areas

owners or shepherds from unfairly exploiting the hagi. One rule, in force from 1659 until 1856, forbade the system of sheep-marking and individual sheep ownership called *kenning* and only allowed common sheep-rearing, *feli*, whereby each landowner received a share of the slaughtered sheep and plucked wool according to his own *markatal*. The poor, yet eager, sheep-owners naturally wanted to keep their flocks on the best pastures so as to guarantee themselves a superior share of the profit. To prevent this from happening, the law necessitated the annual selection of one or more shepherds, *seyðamenn*, who undertook all the work in the hagi. Their decisions were to be obeyed and respected by the rest of the community. The duties of the shepherd were; to ensure that all pastures were grazed optimally, to select the best rams for breeding, to manage the shearing and slaughtering of the sheep. The rules were so strict that not even the owners might enter the hagi without permission or supervision by the appointed shepherd. However, as the 1758 report shows (Fig. 82), the *feli* law was often difficult to impose, especially on Suðuroy and in parts of Eysturoy and Norðuroyar.

There were several reasons why so much authority was invested in the shepherd, *seyðamaðurin*. First of all,





the sheep were not allowed to wander at random in the hagi. They were divided into flocks, *fylgir*, numbering 10-80 animals. Each flock had its grazing area (see map page 83). If desired, the flocks could be subdivided into smaller groups, *kneppir*.

As a rule, the shepherds made sure that the flocks grazed as high up the mountainside as possible in summer, reserving the lower parts of the hagi for colder seasons. Even so, the grazing location depended on the weather, as exemplified by the shepherding of the *Knaggaseyður* flock from Húsavík. Even in winter, the flock would be taken as high up as Stórafjall, and the clever shepherd made sure the flock remained there so long as the weather remained clement. A fence now marks the hagi boundary between Húsavík and Dalur. This was not the case in the past. However, the *Knaggaseyður* flock rarely strayed into the nearby Dalur hagi as it was checked by the *Moldbakkaseyður* flock in Dalur itself. The latter was so large so there was no reason for either flock to trespass, and it is reported that the two flocks were deliberately “shepherded against each other”. In the event of adverse weather, the flocks were allowed to cross the fenceless boundary. In gales and snowstorms, the sheep sought refuge in the lee of landforms or behind drystone wind shelters called *støður*. The wind direction was all important. In northerly gales, the *Knaggaseyður* flock sought shelter and wandered leeward of Stórafjall and into the Dalur hagi. Likewise, the sheep from Dalur sought shelter in the Húsavík hagi when gales blew from the south. The following quote is from 1753 and describes the use of the hagi boundary between Húsavík and Dalur:

*“Concerning the wind shelters in Húsavík hagi, Christian tolerance should be shown when the Dalur sheep gather there of their own accord. They should be left in peace to wander there freely until the danger has passed. Then they can return home. Likewise, the men of*

*Fig. 84: Grazing areas on the eastern slope of Stórafjall between Húsavík and Dalur. The different flocks are numbered while the arrows indicate routes to and from summer and winter grazing areas. Circles indicate “savningar” (relate to pages 85 and 83). JB part.*

*Dalur should tolerate the incursion of Húsavík sheep into their hagi; both parties shall return their sheep to their own hagi at the first convenience.”*

Unless disciplined, sheep are normally shy and flee when approached. On some islands, but in particular Sandoy, each flock had gathering-places or *savningar* along its route to the upper pastures. A well-disciplined flock would always congregate at a *savning* and stand perfectly still, even if closely approached. This was practised at least twice a week. It facilitated the systematic grazing of the mountainside and saved time and manpower on the return, *rakstur*. The *rakstur* followed carefully selected routes where it was easy to control the sheep and prevent them from straying. The use of the *savningar* enabled the shepherd to work with a minimum of farmhands or just with sheepdogs, but it was far from easy in some areas. Norðastihagi in Skálavík was a difficult place to undertake the *rakstur* because of the distance to the village and the high ridge that sharply divided the area into east and west. The ridge could be crossed by many routes and so there was a high risk of the sheep straying. The shepherd employed as many as three *savningar* on this route.

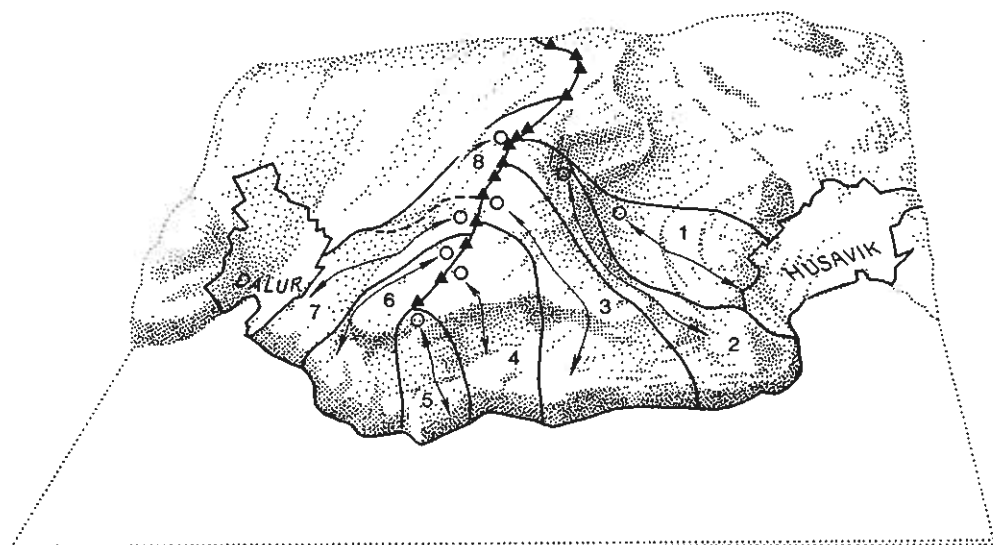
The duties of the shepherd were not confined to tending sheep. He had to maintain the quality of the out-field, and improve it, if possible. At regular intervals, he would appoint a team of labourers to cut drainage ditches in the wettest areas; partly to increase the size and quality of the pasture, and partly to combat the parasitic diseases that sheep tended to contract in waterlogged areas.

The method of electing a shepherd was not based on “one man, one vote” but on the *markatal*. A farmer who owned more than 50% of the total village *markatal* could quite literally decide who was to become the shepherd.

*Jesper Brandt*

### Names of the sheep flocks

- 1: Líðarseyður
- 2: Knaggaseyður
- 3: Hoygimbrannar
- 4: Heimariseyður
- 5: Syðstiseyður
- 6: Óðiseyður
- 7: Kyrriseyður
- 8: Moldbakkaseyður



*Fig. 85: Aerial photo of eastern Sandoy showing the villages of Dalur, Húsavík and Skálavík. Route 8491-N, no. 207. Date: 06.06.1984, time 9.26 am. Scale approx. 1:9,000 (1 cm = 90 m). GI, Copenhagen.*



## 24 Modern Faeroese Farming

Only 2% of the Faeroese population remains employed in the farming industry, and its importance to the economy is equally insignificant. Nevertheless, farming is still very important considering its vast use of land and contribution to self-sufficiency. Moreover, it counteracts rural depopulation and ensures some kind of future for the Faeroese villages.

Most importantly, farming is of great cultural importance when viewed from one particular economic aspect: as a consequence of the continuous division of allodial land and the formation of some 1,000 smallholdings, *tráðir*, many Faeroese have retained their connection to farming; albeit solely through landownership. Apart from occasional cultivation with potatoes or vegetables, the plots belonging to an absentee freeholder are seldom utilized economically, but the possession of even small plots safeguards the right to a share of the village common property, not least the highly relished Faeroese mutton and lamb. In return, the freeholder is obliged to provide manpower for various tasks such as; rounding-up the sheep, the *rakstur*, and assisting with the slaughter.

Nevertheless, the prevailing landownership structure is antiquated. It has stifled progress. The tiny, irregular plots are incompatible with the operational requirements of modern farm machinery. Likewise, the demand made by smallholders and cottagers for the protection of their plots in the *bøur* in winter was impossible because individual properties were scattered throughout the village. The quest for a satisfactory basis for modern farming began early this century. In 1927, the process of land reallocation or *útskipting* began. Apart from during the Second World War, the process of land reallocation has continued to this very day.

### Progress in milk production

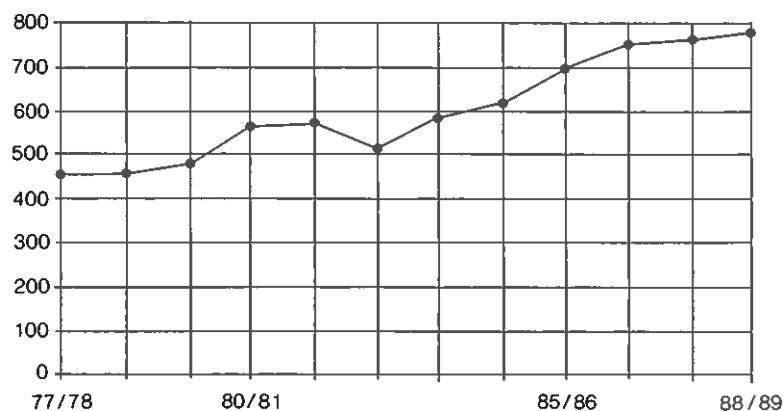
One reason behind the *útskipting* was the need to improve the milk supply. Before 1950, the Faeroe Islands had about 3,300 head of dairy cattle; after which the number fell continually until the 1970s when new measures reversed the trend. Very small herds and inadequate transport facilities made milk production unprofitable, and, moreover, there was increasing competition from imported conservable milk.

Government support programmes, beginning in the 1970s, helped increase the size of herds and yield per cow. During the 1980s, milk production doubled, and today the islands are self-sufficient.

Home Government support to dairy farmers has not only been geared to current production but also to investment in the future. Rationalization has led to fewer, larger herds. By 1974, farms generally had fewer than 5 head of dairy cattle but none had more than 15 head. However, by 1989, 80% of the milk production came

Fig. 86a: The annual number of dairy cows that provided the Faeroe Islands with milk in the period 1977/78 to 1988/89.

Source: Hagdeildin, Tórshavn.



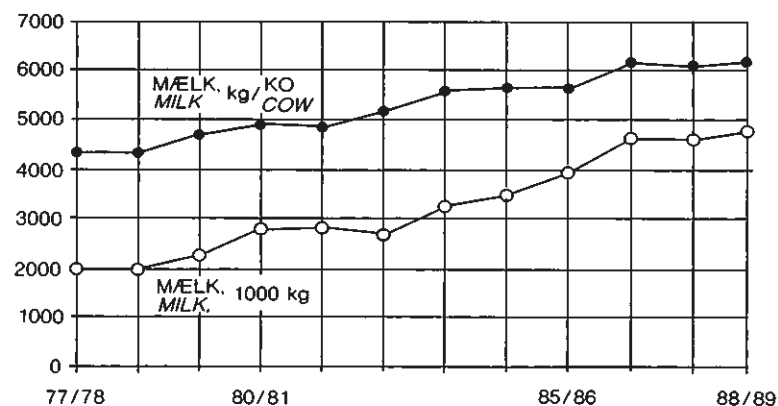
from just 20 farms, each of which had a dairy herd of more than 15 head.

The rise in milk production increased the demand for fodder so the government began to support domestic grass cultivation until the new EC grants facilitated the import of high-energy feed, while the shortage of natural rough fodder was alleviated by importing Icelandic hay.

A sufficient quantity of hay could always be cultivated in the *bøur* if required, but the need for larger herds has led to a geographical concentration of milk production on Streymoy and Eysturoy. This is the supply area for the sole dairy cooperative *Mjólkarvirki Búnaðarmanna* in Tórshavn. On these two islands, much of the *bøur* has been lost to urban and infrastructural development. It has been necessary to cultivate new areas to meet the needs of the largest dairy farms. In the 1980s, the Home Government helped create about 300 hectares; an amount equal to 3% of the total *bøur*. The new farmland is found in several inner valleys where the flat terrain facilitates the use of modern machinery, and where the price of land is sufficiently low. The most difficult technical problem in these new areas is to secure good drainage. Land that suffers from waterlogging limits production and hinders the operation of machinery.

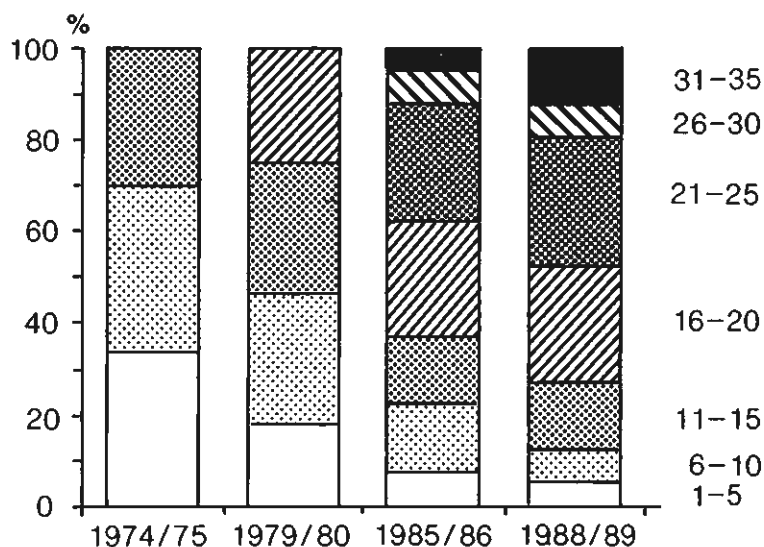
Fig. 86b: Production increase in the total milk yield, and milk yield per cow, in the period 1977/78 to 1988/89.

Source: Hagdeildin, Tórshavn.





**Fig. 87a:** The steady increase in the size of cattle stock per dairy farm in the period 1974/75 to 1988/89. Source: Hagdeildin, Tórshavn.



Given favourable conditions, cultivated grass may be harvested thrice a summer. Liming and manuring of the acid soils raises yields substantially above those attainable in the hagi. Fertilizer experiments with offal from fish-processing and by-products from fjord fish-farms are being made. If successful, their use will reduce both import costs and the serious pollution of the fjords.

### Sheep-rearing on the decline

Whereas favourable economic circumstances have led to greater efficiency and higher yields in dairying, sheep-rearing has stagnated in recent times. The number of ewes remains at 70,000 head and the regional distribution has changed little in more than a century.

A few communities retain their shepherding tradition and here the *rakstur* is still practised. Individual flocks, *fylgir*, are kept in some villages but today they seldom exploit the upper hagi as well as in the past because they are rarely taken up the mountainside.

Nevertheless, productivity expressed by the slaughter percentage has been maintained because of; innovations such as sheephouses in the hagi, the extensive use of hay and imported high-energy feed in the winter months, and medical success against disease.

Shepherding has disappeared in many districts, and more sheep are under private ownership as a result of land reallocation. Likewise, the *hagi* is today being divided into smaller, privately-owned, fenced *hagapartar*. The recent introduction of enclosures has reduced the need to shepherd flocks against each other; which was a practice requiring the expertise of skilled shepherds. The enclosures facilitate the rounding-up of sheep for shearing or slaughter, but they have unfortunately precluded the optimal utilization of the different types of land in the hagi.

**Fig. 87b:** Newly cultivated land (green areas) in Millum Fjarða valley on Eysturoy. The northern area belongs to the village of Elduvík, the eastern part to Syðragøta and the western part to Skála. Extract from topographic map no. 411. Scale 1:20,000. KMS, Copenhagen 1990.

Moreover, sheep that feed all winter on high-energy feed often cease to grow in springtime when they are sent into the hagi. They have difficulty in surviving the next winter. This century has seen productivity in terms of slaughter increase from 50% to 70%, but this is small compared to that achieved by many other sheep-rearing countries. In Iceland, productivity is as high as 160%.

Broadly speaking, sheep-rearing has often become more of a pastime. Without doubt, production would increase significantly if more care was taken of winter grazing areas, while genetic improvements were made to the stock and shepherding modernized.

Despite large quantities of mutton and lamb being imported from New Zealand and Iceland, the verdict of the Faeroese is that foreign meat is no match for their own product for which they are willing to pay fourfold.

Nevertheless, cultural acceptance of the commercialization of this traditional farming sector will be necessary before modernization can occur.

Jesper Brandt

