

A 'FUTHARK' FROM EIDĪ, EYSTUROY, FAROE ISLANDS

John R. Baldwin

Background

Eiði is situated at the north-west corner of Eysturoy [Fig. 1], one of the largest of the Faroe Islands and containing Faroe's highest mountain, Slættaratindur (882m). Almost directly across the narrow sound dividing Eysturoy from Streymoy, but hidden from Eiði, lies Tjørnuvík, a tiny settlement huddled in a stark mountainscape at the head of a short, squarish bay and beside a good beach. A small cemetery of 10th century Viking graves was excavated here in the mid 1950s, though pollen analysis suggests earlier habitation, in the first half of the 7th century A.D., perhaps by pre-Norse Irish hermits, rather than by Norse farmers.¹

As well as grave-sites and a major church site (at Sandur), house sites from the Viking period have also been excavated in Faroe, notably at Kvívík, on the west side of Streymoy just south of Vestmannahavn, where an associated byre suggests a total of 8–12 cows. Artefacts from these sites point to a fairly basic subsistence economy based on livestock, fishing, fowling and the ca'ing whale. The structures themselves suggest considerably larger farming units than in more recent times, and in the case of Sandur — a very fertile, unusually flat and prosperous area — building standards in the adjacent long-house, as well as the church, were particularly high.²

Eiði is a good settlement site. As its name implies, it lies by a narrow neck of land linking two bays — both of which provide landing places for boats, but especially that facing south down the narrow and well-sheltered sound. As with Vidareði, at the northern end of Viðoy, it would have been an important link amongst the high, rocky and stormy headlands of the northern Faroes. At the same time, the vulnerability of such isolated settlements in mediaeval and early modern times is

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In 1976 clear evidence of Eidi's Viking past was found after workmen constructing a car-park came upon traces of stone foundations. Archaeologists from the Faroese Historical Museum have been excavating the site which, by the summer of 1979, had produced over 560 finds — large amounts of broken pottery, but also a fine comb and a runic alphabet or futhark [Fig. 2], found between Viking and mediaeval levels.⁴

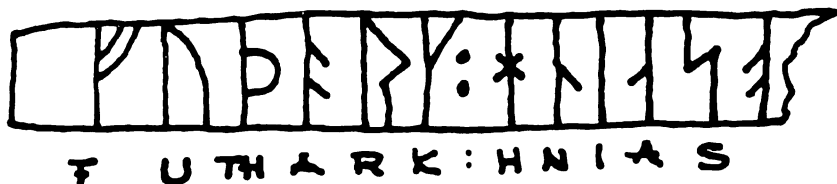


Fig. 2 The runic 'futhark' found at Eidi, Faroe Islands, 1979 (after *Dag Bladid*, 20 July 1979).

Though broken, with the last part missing, 12 runes survive — enough to show that they form part of a 'Younger Futhark' or shorter runic alphabet.⁵ And though yet to be examined closely, the letters show clear similarities with those of the 'Mixed' alphabet [Fig. 3] — a mingling of the 'Swedish—Norwegian' and the 'Danish' futharks generally reckoned to have developed during the 11th–12th centuries in Norway. (In contemporary Sweden, by contrast, the 'Swedish—Norwegian' variant seems simply to have been superseded by the 'Danish' futhark.) This 'Mixed' futhark provided the basis for the common Scandinavian 'pointed' or 'dotted' alphabet, where the addition of 'points' or 'dots' helped differentiate sound values that had not only evolved considerably over the centuries, but had been linked severally to single symbols since the 8th century when the two closely-related 16 symbol Northern runic alphabets ('Danish' and 'Swedish—Norwegian') emerged from the 24 letter Germanic futhark. (The parallel English development, by contrast, resulted in an extended runic alphabet of up to 33 symbols.)⁶

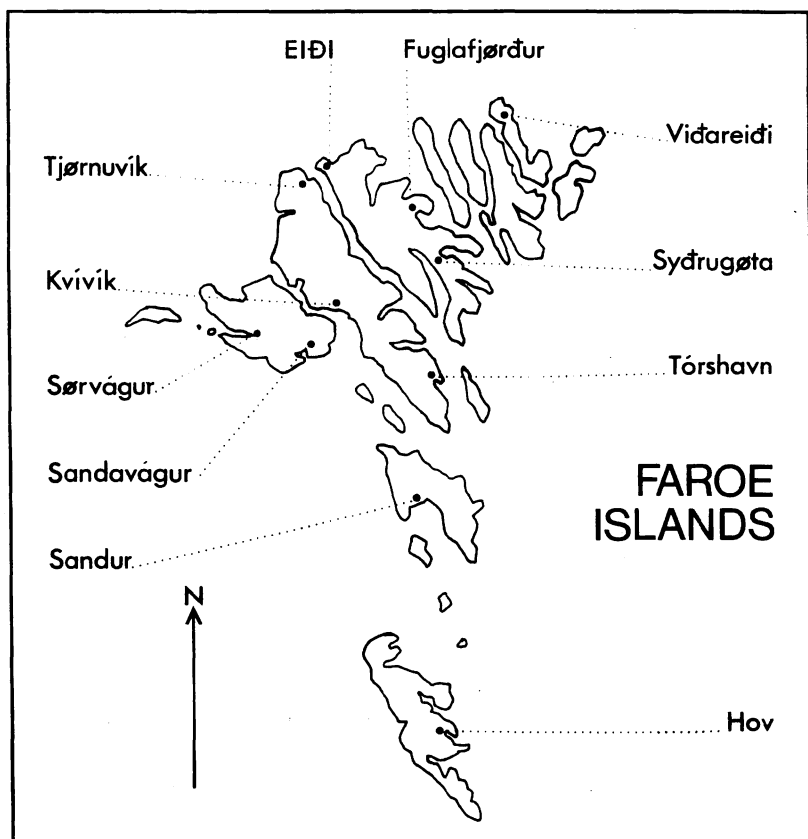


Fig. 1

highlighted by the Vaktarahúsbrekka or 'watch-house hill',³ sited on the west side of the Kollur – the steep hill dominating the headland immediately to the north of Eíði, and guarding the narrow channel running south through the islands towards modern Tórshavn. Similar placenames are found in many parts of Faroe.

Taking Elliot's table as a guide, many of the Faroese symbols show similarities with the 'Swedish-Norwegian' as well as with the 'Mixed' futhark, and there are hints of parallels with the 'Orkney' futhark (þ, ✕) and with the 'dotted' futhark (ḣ, ḣ̇). It would, therefore, be unwise at present to go beyond a broad ascription to the west Scandinavian group of futharks, and premature to ascribe a specific dating. It is perhaps significant, though, that a large proportion of the Orkney runic inscriptions date to the second half of the 12th century, that none in Iceland appear to pre-date the 13th century, that Faroe's own Sandavágur stone is dated to around 1200 A.D. This stone stands in Sandavágur church on the island of Vágur, not far from the site of a Viking farmhouse excavated in the mid 1970s before its destruction by a new road. It commemorates the first settler who built in that place — one Thorkel Østman (also referred to as Thorkil Önundarson)⁷ from Rogaland; and as such is a clear statement of ownership of considerable importance in documenting early settlement in the Faroes.

The Eidi futhark is the first such runic alphabet to be found in direct association with a Viking-period longhouse site in the Faroes, and an interesting addition to the Viking period artefacts found there.

Footnotes

1. Johansen, J., A Palaeobotanical Study indicating a pre-Viking Settlement in Tjørnuvík, Faroe Islands, in *Fróðska-parret nr. 19*, 1971 — see also Manson, T.M.Y., Faroe and its Shetland Connections, in Baldwin, J.R. [ed.], *Scandinavian Shetland: An Ongoing Tradition?*, 1978. 13; Thorsteinsson 1976.12 [below].
2. Thorsteinsson, A.E., The Testimony of Ancient Architecture, in *Faroe Isles Review I.1*, 1976. 11–19. Other Viking sites excavated include Fuglafjørður, Sandavágur, Sørvágur and a 'seter' site at Ergidalur, near Hov. Secondary farm sites have been revealed at e.g. Syðrugøta, and an uninterrupted sequence of buildings at Tjørnuvík from ca. 1200 A.D. to 1936. See Fig. 1.

3. Williamson, K., *The Atlantic Islands*, 1948. 22.
4. See Rúnakelvi funnið i víkingabústaði, in *Dag Bláðið*, 20/7/1979. 28.
5. See Elliott, R.W.V., *Runes: An Introduction*, 1980 [1936 ed.]. 21–32; also McNaughton, A., Edinburgh Runestone, in *Northern Studies* 15, 1980. 31.
6. Elliott 1980 [op.cit.] provides a useful background to the different Scandinavian, English and Germanic futharks, to their development and use.
7. See Isaksson, O. and Hallgren, S., *Färöbilder*, 1976. 26, 154; also *Faroës: A North Atlantic Adventure* edited and published by Ferðamannastovan, Torshavn, 1978/1980.