

# REVIEWS

Bjarne Stoklund

*Det Færøske Hus i  
Kulturhistorisk Belysning*

C.A. Reitzels Forlag,  
Copenhagen, 1996.  
179pp.  
ISBN 87-7876-026-7.

*Det Færøske Hus i Kulturhistorisk Belysning* (*The Faeroese House in a Cultural-historical Perspective*) has a wider appeal than may appear from the title. The nature of the subject has great importance for historians, archaeologists, anthropologists and ethnologists interested in Norse society in the North Sea/North Atlantic region, including the Western Isles. It is primarily an architectural analysis of the traditional Faeroese house, which Bjarne Stoklund has made a study all his own. He brings together work achieved in the past forty

years, initiated with the removal of 'Har Frammi', a traditional house from Muli on Bordoy in the Faeroes which was re-erected in the open-air Frilands Museum in Copenhagen.

Danes have a long tradition of intelligent interest in and study of their former colonial societies. Stoklund provides a very useful analysis of the pioneering work of Daniel Brun who was the first to excavate Norse house sites in Greenland and Iceland and Faeroe, of Holger Rasmussen, Aage Roussell and Åke Campbell. They laid the foundations for the study and understanding of the wooden Faeroese houses, their plan (with the *røgstue* or smoky main living-room and the *glastue*, or best room, named after its window lights), their development and their internal furnishings.

As is well-known in Scotland, Aage Roussell also took a great interest in the Hebridean blackhouse, which he interpreted as being an evolutionary development of the Viking longhouse (with many features deriving from the Iron Age long-houses of the

pre-Viking Age excavated in South-West Norway). Roussell's evolutionistic theories are well-known because he published his book in English in 1934; less well-known are the writings of Åke Campbell (because they were published in Swedish, in 1943-44), in which he broadened the issue of blackhouse origins, seeing them as being of very mixed Celtic and Norse lineage. As Stoklund goes on to expound there is much more to be considered when examining the lineage of the Faeroese house – the whole span of historical development since the Viking Age, with its economic and cultural ups and downs, which affected building changes of plan and structure in many ways. The rest of his book is devoted to studying the Faeroese house as one architectural element in the far-flung maritime world of the North Atlantic.

The principles of house construction are analysed, and immediately we begin to appreciate how distinctive was the style of building development, and the use of certain materials in the Faeroes. Above all it is the

use of timber planking for the construction of the dwelling-rooms which strikes the Scottish reader as so unusual, particularly to those familiar with the buildings of the Northern Isles, where the use of wood is virtually limited to roofing structures. As Stoklund emphasises, there is a remarkable continuation of west Norwegian traditions as regards the structure of the Faeroese house, and of the stave-built Faeroese churches. The log-timbered Røykstova, itself more east Norwegian in origin, at Kirkjubøur, is witness to the bishops' desire to live in the style of their Norwegian counterparts.

Tracing architectural developments back through the centuries and understanding when and why innovations were introduced – like the *stova* or the *glastue* – is not simple, and rarely conclusive. Archaeology may help up to a point but excavations of post-Viking houses are very few and usually disturbed and difficult to interpret. Historical material, which Stoklund has made much use of, is only useful in the post-

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medieval period, and is not then always lucid in referring to houses and their layout.

The introduction of the smaller, timber structures known as *stova/stue* is recognised as being an important feature of the post-Viking house development throughout Scandinavia, but this development takes place in the period when documentation is very sparse and so is not well-recorded. The original meaning of this term and how it spread to Scandinavia has been much debated, and a most useful section of this book presents the most recent theory (by a German philologist, Joachim Hähnel) as to the primary meaning of *stova* (a closed room constructed out of log timbers), and its area of origin in south Germany. But of course, the term did not always remain constant in its meaning or what we can expect it to mean throughout the Scandinavian cultural zone. According to circumstances – particularly economic and environmental – this small room could differ very much in its structure and plan. Even within Norway

there has recently been much confusion and debate as to what a *stofa* was like in different provincial areas. Stoklund helpfully puts this debate into the wider context and explains the technical differences in building methods of log-timbering, stave-construction and the various intermediate types of wooden framing. All this is done with excellent drawings and illustrations.

For my own requirements this book has arrived most opportunely and helped to clarify my own understanding of timber buildings in the North Sea cultural zone, just as I have been concluding my analysis of an excavated *stofa* on the Shetland island of Papa Stour. This discovery shows that timber buildings were also imported into the Northern Isles, and Scottish archaeologists will have to be aware of the structure of the different types of wooden buildings for future discoveries. Many of the debated points have been discussed in Stoklund's own articles before, but are now brought into a coherent study which is a most important contribution towards the definition of house buildings

in the Norse colonies of the North Atlantic. The non-Danish reader is helped by an English summary, but an index would have been useful for all to find their way to discussions of particular subjects.

*Barbara E. Crawford*

Michael P. Barnes

*The Norn Language of Orkney and Shetland*

The Shetland Times Ltd.,  
Lerwick, 1998.

58pp., £9.95.

ISBN 1-898852-29-4.

Norn is the form of Scandinavian language used in the Northern Isles between c. 800 and c. 1800. Michael P. Barnes, a leading expert on Norn, has over the years produced several articles on the subject, but this is his first attempt to present his knowledge to a non-academic audience. He has done so very successfully. Within less than 60 nicely produced pages Professor Barnes has managed to give a thorough biography of this extinct language. The first half of the book deals with the history of Norn and the second half presents and comments on the principal sources we have for the language. As always, Barnes is careful to point to what is documented and what is only indirectly assumed, which is of crucial importance for anyone working on the history and language of