NORTHERN LINKS

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South West Norway, the north and west of Scotland, the Faroes and Iceland, all lie broadly within the same band of the northern hemisphere, and share in a close interaction of land and sea. The sea, facilitating movement, is the primary link. It was said to be easier both in thought and deed for a man from Hordeland or from Møre to sail to Shetland than to travel over the mountains to Eastern Norway (Leirfall 1976, 13).

Because of the strength of the Viking tradition, and the romantic as well as scholarly interest it has engendered, it is as well to remember that sea contacts long antedate the coming of the Vikings in this country; and also, that traffic was not one way. Recent studies by Norwegians on petroglyphs in West Norway and Western Europe led them to conclude that several characteristic features in West Scandinavian "agrarian" carvings point to other Western European areas near the Atlantic. They found a particular relationship with Irish passage grave art, and to a lesser degree with Irish, English and Scottish rock art, and are tempted to believe in a direct impulse from the British Isles to Norway's western coast (Fett & Fett 1979, 89). Sea links, therefore, existed from the earliest times, and have continued through the Viking period till the present.

In another direction, at a much later date, sea-interaction between Shetland and the Faroe Islands may be specified in relation to the introduction of the smack fisheries to the Faroes, when old vessels began to be purchased from Britain. This was in part due to the efforts of Governor Christian Pløyen, who in 1839 voyaged to Shetland to study the fishing methods (Pløyen 1894) which Shetlanders had been developing around the Faroes from 1810, and which ended in 1906 with the sloop *William Martin* (which had a Faroese skipper and crew). The Faroese probably learned cod-fishing skills by fishing with the Shetlanders, working with them in their boats. The Shetlanders came frequently into the Faroese fjords to gather whelks for

bait. The islanders also fished quantities of the whelks for sale to the Shetland fishermen and some of the oldest folk in Sørvagur remembered the Shetland name for them, "wulks", and had picked up a smattering of English. For long the Shetlanders had it all their own way. Then, with the purchase by the Faroese of the sloop *Fox*, the changing situation was summed up in the words of an old Shetland skipper who said to a Tórshavn acquaintance that 1873 would never be forgotten by the Shetlanders, because their luck went from then when the Faroese got fishing boats (Joensen 1975, 20–21; Degn 1929, 51).

This change was an economic development arising out of a natural interaction between Shetlanders and Faroese at the production or action level, which was then fostered and shaped through the thinking of officials like Pløyen.

Official intervention can be seen in another link. In 1781 Jens Christian Svabo, the son of a priest from Mithvágur on Vágoy, got official support for assembling material for a physical-economical description of the Faroes. In it he discussed methods of cutting peat, and pointed out – possibly as a result of a visit to Britain in 1775 – that in "Hetland" (Shetland), nearly twice as much peat could be cut in the same time as with the Faroese digging spade, *haki*, or the slightly longer peat spade, *torskjera*, because the Shetland spade had a wing at right angles to the blade, which allowed a peat to be cut with one thrust instead of two (Svabo 1976, 136). There is no evidence that Svabo's recommendation was taken up immediately. It seems to have been Governor Pløyen who took positive action in 1839. He said of the Shetlanders then, that "their spade, called a tuskar, the Faroese *Towskjaeri*, is shaped with a curve, so that with one cut it effects the same as ours with two; each single peat is cut thin and uniform, and when the labourer has cut it, he casts it immediately out on the field, with a dexterity which one cannot but admire. Without leaving his place, he can give to each peat the position which it ought to have, and thus it takes up the least possible space, which has this advantage, that when peats are cut on a fine day, by evening

they have got a skin, which in the Faroese process can only be the case with the uppermost layer. I have brought home a couple of Shetland tuskars, which anyone can see who wishes" (Plóyen 1894, 205–206).

In spite of such official support, the winged peat-spade did not spread throughout the islands, and in many places the earlier type has survived (av Skarthi 1970, 67–68). In this case there is a difference from the easy, natural adoption of smack-fishing, within the context of work and equipment with which the fishermen felt at home. The Shetland peat-spade was different from the native tools – different, even, from most of the peat spades used elsewhere in Scotland (Fenton 1970, 176–189) – and no one working within the framework of a long-established economy likes to throw away tools with which he and his forefathers have been familiar, and whose techniques of use have become part of his muscular memory, and so the adoption of the innovative peat-spade was sporadic.

The cutting of peat for fuel is attested for the Norse period in Scotland by Torf-Einar Rognvaldsson, Earl of Orkney, who was said to be the first man to dig peat for fuel at Torfness, i.e. Tarbat Ness at the entrance to the Dornoch Firth, "firewood being very scarce in the islands" (Taylor 1938, 141, 354; Pálsson and Edwards 1978, 32). This does not mean that Torf-Einar invented the cutting of peat for fuel, for this was certainly done from the Stone Age, but rather implies that his preferred fuel was wood – apparently, and somewhat oddly, brought by sea from Orkney, which is the nearest island group to the Dornoch Firth.

The Norsemen, then, were digging peat in Scotland in the twelfth century. What tool were they using, and what was it called? The first question cannot be answered positively. The blade of a peat spade with a right-angled wing, from a Romano-British hoard of metalwork from Berwickshire, shows that such tools were known up to half a millenium before the Norse came (Fenton 1962–3, 271–272, Fig. 4, 7). Outside this Roman-influenced area, however, early peat-spades were of

wood, probably in the shape of a double-sided sword blade with or without a T-handle of varying width, as found in Faroese and Danish peat bogs, and in Norway, though ordinary spades would certainly have been used as well. The Faroese situation argues for a link between digging spades and peat spades, for the main difference between them – at least in the present and recent past – is that the *haki,* averaging 120–130 cm long, is shorter than the *torvskeri* at 125–135 cm, whilst the spade blade at 12–16 cm is wider than the peat spade blade at 9–11 cm (av Skarthi 1970, 67–68). A drawing of Suthuroy in 1791, done by Christian Ludvig Ulrich von Born, from Schwerin in Mecklenburg, shows peat being dug by means of a wingless spade with a metal-shod mouth that splays out a little at each side (Thorsteinsson and Joensen 1977, 17). In Norway, a variety of peat-spades was used, many with rounded or squarish blades in spade or shovel form. A local name for such spades in Hordaland is *torvhakje,* reminiscent of the Faroese *haki.* In Sogn and Fjordane, and in Møre are to be found peat-spades named *spode, spoda* or *spøde,* with winged blades. These are like the winged Faroese *torvskeri,* and there is also a similarity, in varying degrees, to the *tuskers* of Shetland, Orkney, Caithness, the north-west Highlands, Outer Hebrides and parts of the Inner Hebrides, such as Skye (Borchgrevink 1972, 79).

It is true that this distribution coincides broadly with the area of Norse settlement, but there are some puzzles. The name *torsker* is first recorded in Old Scots in 1621; in 1629, the iron blades of "tuskardis" were mentioned (*Acts,* 1840. IL 206). The Gaelic name *toirsgian,* peat knife, is not the same, though Lewis has the related term, *tarasgear.* In the Faroes, Svabo recorded *torvskjeri* 'torvspade, ligo ad terram inflammabilem effodiendam aptus' in the late 18th century, and in Iceland, *torfskeri* appears in the *Landnámabók,* of which the first version was written by Ari Thorgilsson in the 12th century (Turville-Petre 1953, 106), about the time Torf-Einar was allegedly digging peat in Scotland. Terminologically, therefore, the North and North West of Scotland, the Faroes and Iceland constitute a "tusker" area. Norway lies outside it. This hardly supports the common view – based largely on the Torf-Einar

episode, no doubt – that knowledge of peat-cutting and associated tools came with the Norse. The knowledge was here already. Peat-cutting tools are sensitive indicators of the kind and quality of peat in which they work, by the nature of their adaptations. Terminology is less affected by environment. The name, "tusker", therefore, seems to bind its areas of occurrence in a cohesively cultural manner which must date from a period later than the earlier Norse settlements in this country (cf. Matras 1958, 75).

This same territory, which seems in some degree to set Norway to one side, is marked in other ways. Christian Matras has shown that the Faroese and Icelandic word *lámr, lámur,* and the Shetland and Orkney words *lomek, lomo,* are derived from Celtic. The earliest (13th–14th century) Icelandic sources are poetical; in Faroese the senses cover a paw and a seal's flipper as well as a hand or sometimes left hand (cf. the saying "vaskar ketta saer vith vinstra lámi (or illvethurslámínum) verthur illvethur"); in the Northern Isles it probably was a taboo name for hand. Poetical, jocular, taboo – these are all part of the psychological atmosphere that facilitated the adoption of a word from another language.

It is possible too that the immediate source may be more precisely defined than just "Celtic". Christian Matras believes in a Scots Gaelic origin, a belief which is reinforced by the compound *cadlãamor* , recorded in the Faroes from 1781, meaning left-hand or left-handed. It is a compound, with the adjective first in the normal Norse way, of *làmh* hand and *cearr,* left, in Gaelic *làmh chear.* The phonology fits the Faroese pattern (**làm cerr* > *kiarr-lámr,* with *rl* > *ll* > *dl*); *cearr* in Irish means wrong, not left-handed; there is no parallel word for left-handedness in the other Scandinavian languages. The pointer to Scots Gaelic is direct and clear (Matras 1954, 60–77), and we may see the oddness of left-handedness in a mainly right-handed world as part of the cultural heritage that demarcates the area influenced by the peoples of north and west Scotland.

Other examples of terminological links relating to more material things are:

Faroese *soppur,* a wisp of hay, found with this same sense in Gaelic and Irish *sop,* but not in the other Scandinavian languages.

Faroese and Icelandic *tarfur, tarvur,* a bull, as in Gaelic *tarbh.*

Faroese *blak,* Orkney *blatho,* Shetland *bleddik,* buttermilk, as in Gaelic *blàthach* (Matras 1955, 15–31).

Faroese *køkja* and Gaelic *caigeann,* referring to a pair of sheep – or goats or ponies – tethered to one peg but kept separate by a wooden swivel which has two holes in it in the Faroes and usually three in the Hebrides (Matras 1956, 98–107). Shetland examples also have three holes (Fenton 1978, 449, Fig. 218).

Faroese *drunnur,* the tail-piece of an animal, Gaelic and Shetland *dronn,* id. In the Faroes, it was a custom at weddings to tie a ribbon on this piece and make verses over it when it was sent round the table (Jakobsen 1957, 76). In Gaelic, "at weddings, the man to whom the *dronn* would come was obliged to make a verse, or *an dubh chapull* (the black mare) would be on him" (Dwelly 1949 s.v.). Icelandic *drundur* has the same sense of ridge, back, tail, and seems to be the same word, but without the folklore attachment of the Faroes and Scotland (Matras 1957, 20–33).

An interesting word from a work context is *børka,* used in the Faroes for tormentil roots used in tanning. In the Northern Isles the equivalents are *bark, eart(h)-bark, hill-bark,* the compounds corresponding to Faroese *heimabark* and *hagabark.* This name is not found in Norwegian, and tanning with tormentil is not a Norwegian, nor, it seems, an Icelandic, custom. It is, however, well known in Ireland and Scotland, being referred to for example in 1698 in St. Kilda by Martin Martin (Matras 1958, 74–75; Bjørk 1972, 114–120).

A similar message comes from an examination of edible seaweed, *Rhodyminia palmata* or *Fucus palmatus,* in Faroese known by the Norse name *søl.* In Scotland, Ireland, the Faroes and Iceland it is an article of human diet. In Norway there is

no documentary evidence from saga times or later to show that it was eaten by people (Høeg 1975, 138), though it appears to have been used to feed stock. It is the familiar *dilse,* Gaelic *duileasg,* which I have tasted in Aberdeen after blades were roasted round a red hot poker. Here the Celtic name has not travelled; but at least two examples of the transfer of seaweed names, presumably in Viking times, exist. One is Faroese *slavak,* Icelandic *slafak,* from Gaelic *slabhagan,* Irish *sleabhac,* giving Scots *slake* and *slawk,* and applied to various types of edible algae. Another is Faroese *mirkjalli,* Alaria esculenta. A number of forms are to be found in the Faroes and Iceland, as listed by Matras and Guthmundsson, as well as in the Northern Isles where the plurals, *mirkels, mirkyals,* occur. All, however, seem to go back to the Gaelic *mircean.* No version of this name is known in Norway, nor does *dilse* appear to have been eaten there (Matras 1958, 76–99; Guthmundsson 1970, 192–205).

An example of a term that ties in with the evidence of archaeology and of structures surviving till recent times is the name applied to a corn-drying kiln. Starting from Gaelic *sòrn,* defined by Dwelly as the 'flue of a kiln or oven', the 'fireplace of an oven or kiln', we get Faroese *sodnur* by the regular linguistic process by which *–rn–* becomes *–dn–,* and Icelandic *sofn.* Shetland has *sonn* and *sinnie.* In Sogn in West Norway, there is a word *tonn, torn,* applied to a floor of wooden spars on which malt was dried. This must derive from *thorn,* used of a building in a probate inventory dated 1314, and has been associated with another West Norwegian name, *sonn,* from Trondelag, but is more likely to be related to the group of words like *tarre, terre,* applied to drying. *Sonn* is defined by Aasen (1918 s.v.) as a 'maltovn, et Slags Tørreovn bygget af flade Stene eller Heller' and he draws a comparison with the Faroese name. The Scottish National Dictionary considers that in Shetland, *sinnie* is a derivative diminutive form of Norwegian dialectal *sonn,* but in view of the limited distribution of the term in Norway, and of the evidence that has been assembled by Jakobsen, Matras and others for an "Atlantic" vocabulary, it is more tempting to see here an example of a Celtic word getting back along the road the Norsemen travelled as part of its process of diffusion.

Further supporting evidence in the form of actual structures can be demonstrated. It is possible to compare the small, four-sided *sinnie* of Shetland, built in a corner inside the barn, with the bigger, but still four-sided *sodnhus* or kiln-barn of the Faroes. A possible late thirteenth century example was excavated in a barn at the Viking settlement of Freswick in Caithness. Equally interesting, however, is the fact that the circular kiln that characterises Orkney, also occurring in South Shetland in the 14th–15th century farmhouse at Jarlshof, is paralleled by a drying-kiln at Gröf i Öræfum in Thjórsárdalur in Iceland. The latter is circular, and stands at the end of a small barn. Both it and its associated farm were overwhelmed by a volcanic eruption in 1362 A.D. Here, it seems, the influence of the North of Scotland on both terminology and structures, can scarcely be disputed (Fenton 1974, 247–252; 1977, 95–98; 1978, 376–387).

If we think in very broad and oversimplified terms, we may note points that suggest cultural diffusion between Britain and Scandinavia in prehistoric times; the strong flow from Scandinavia to Northern and Western Britain in Viking times, and on to the Faroes, Iceland and Greenland; and, a little after the first surge of movement, a settling down and reorientation that certainly involved the spread, in an Atlantic context, of words and things, concepts and ideas, which were Celtic rather than Norse in origin. Sea links were relatively easy. It was no great problem for someone like Gaukr Trandilsson, first settler at Stöng in Iceland, to stop at Maeshowe on a trip back, and leave his name in a probably twelfth century Runic inscription at Maeshowe in Orkney (Eldjárn 1978, 16). But far more subtle was the quiet spread and intermixing of the Celtic heritage – and in this I am including the Northern Isles – of Scotland and Ireland. Icelandic and Faroese place-names have counterparts in the Hebrides. One group of names in a small area of Lewis recurs in another small area near Reykjavk, stated in the *Landnámabók* to have been settled by people who came at least in part from the Hebrides (Oftedal 1954, 363–409). The Faroe Islands have a less closely localised but still extensive range of parallels (Matras 1968, 91–95).

But what is of particular interest is that the items I have been discussing are basic elements of everyday life and work, of subsistence and survival. In this context it is relevant to remember that the *Landnámabók* names 50 settlers from the British Isles, usually the Hebrides or Ireland, and 130 Norwegians, many of whom probably travelled by way of Northern Britain, stopping there for longer or shorter periods. These Vikings brought Celts with them, as evidenced by a small number of Celtic loan words in Icelandic, as well as personal and place-names. Cranium indices of Viking Age Icelanders also agree closely with bone finds from Ireland and Scotland, and apparently the distribution of blood-groups in the population of modern Iceland is closer to that of the Irish and Scots than to that of modern Scandinavians. At least a number of the Celts will have come from Orkney and Shetland as well as from the Hebrides (Fenton 1979, 7–8). If a proportion of such people were of servile or servant status, carrying out much of the work about the farms, then the context for the easy spread, followed by adaptation in the light of environmental variation, is obvious.

We do, of course, have to remember that links of this nature constitute only part of the story. It is easy, in looking for evidence of a specific nature, to forget that we are concerned with a much broader cultural complex, in which the realities of what is Norse and what is Celtic are seen in proper perspective. It is all too easy to seek one or the other element, as Jakobsen did with his Shetland Norn, in which he included many terms that are really Lowland Scots (Jakobsen 1928) – which is not to decry his achievement. In examining building traditions in Norway, Northern Scotland, the Faroes and Iceland, writers like Roussell and Clouston were somewhat misled by their concept of "Norseness" (Fenton 1979). We should forget such concepts and look at the evidence, particularly the material evidence, in terms of morphology, physiology and development – i.e. trying to assess what kind of social structures can be interpreted from the evidence, trying to interpret the material evidence in order to explain the means by which these social structures functioned, and trying to interpret and to explain the growth of new social structures as evidenced again by the

material culture. If applied for all periods, prehistoric, Viking and medieval to modern, and if worked at through collaboration between scholars in related fields, we should end up with the new and accurate historical perspectives that we ought to be seeking.

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