

## Fair Isle

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FAIR ISLE is located about half way between Shetland and Orkney. An area of 5.6 km<sup>2</sup> makes it the tenth largest of the Shetland isles, and cliffs up to 217 m high form a distinct profile and aid to navigation for the crossing between the two island groups (Fig. 1). In good weather, the island is visible both from Orkney and Shetland. The significance of this visual link is difficult to overestimate. For sailors, it will always have been a crucially important landmark, and the name of the island will have been widely known among those who navigated the waters of the Northern Isles of Scotland.

Even though the name *Fair Isle* has not been explored in any detail, there seems to be a consensus on an origin in Old Norse – unsurprisingly, given that this is the agreed origin of nearly all the other island names of the Northern Isles. The earliest sources for the name are in Old Norse, where the written form is always *Friðarey*. There can be no question about the location *á milli Hjaltlands og Orkneyja* ‘between Shetland and Orkney’ (*Brennu-Njáls Saga* 154). In the *Orkneyinga Saga*, *Friðarey* is mentioned several times, mostly in connection with a beacon meant to be lit on the island in times of danger coming from Shetland so that another beacon can be lit on North Ronaldsay, warning the Orcadians.

The Norse name *Friðarey* is unique in a North Atlantic setting; only a couple of island names could be said to come close. Among them is *Friðnar*, an island name in *Bulur* (III, 3) which could possibly be associated with *Fair Isle* – were it not for, in all probability, a scribal error for *Friðnar* (*Lexicon poeticum* 1931: 154).

The Shetland island name *Samphrey* (in 1512 written ‘i Sandffriarø / Vm Sanffrijdar ey’) is according to Peter Andreas Munch from Old Norse \**Sandfriðarey* (see Andersen 1984: 26). Since *sand* is largely absent on the island, Jakob Jakobsen (1936: 122) is more convincing when he proposes that the specific may be the little known female personal name *Sandfríðr* (see also Gammeltoft 2005: 123). In this context it is also worth considering the

Norwegian names *Sundfær*, in 1559 written 'Sundfaarhus', and 'Sandferhus', in 1590 'Sundfarhuss'. This is from Old Norse \**Sundfarahús* where the specific is *sundfari* m., 'ferryman', and where *u* is mutated to *a*, as it often does before *nd* (NG XV: 33, 175). The location, in the middle of Yell Sound between the Mainland and Yell and close to where the ferry now runs, does speak in favour of this etymology.

In Norway, the name *Freiðarey* is given in *Gísla saga Súrssonar* (Chapters 2 & 3) for the modern island name *Frei*, Nordmøre. On the basis of other old, rather dissimilar written forms and the pronunciation of the modern name, it is easy to agree with *Norsk stadnamnleksikon* (NSL: 157) that a derivation from *fríðr*, adj., meaning 'beautiful, peaceful' is 'uncertain'.

For *Fair Isle* there are no other competing written Norse forms. The earliest Scots forms of the name, however, are very different from *Friðarey*: *Fairyle* 1572, *Fair yle* 1576 etc. (Ballantyne & Smith 1999). Not only are the early Scots forms unlike the written Old Norse forms; they also match the modern pronunciation of the name.

There is, nonetheless, a real possibility that the Scots name is a direct and full translation of Old Norse *Friðarey*, in the sense 'peaceful, fair' being a translation of *fríðr* and 'isle' being a translation of *ey*. Although full translations of names from Norse to Scots are documented from the Northern Isles, they are rare. Berit Sandnes (2003: 336-8) identified only three or four examples in her research on names in Orkney. A possible translation of the adjective *fríð(ar)* to *fair* could have happened at a stage when a degree of Scots/Norse bilingualism existed. The first element of the name may have been translated but the second element probably was. However, this part translation of the Norse element *ey* to *isle* need not have happened in a time-limited linguistic window of bilingualism. The name element *-ey* (now as *-ey*, *-ay* or *-a*) is even today understood by most Shetlanders to mean 'island'. The fact that *-ey* was not kept but translated, unlike all other island names in Shetland, probably says something about the importance of this particular island and the frequency of use of the name among Scottish administrators and cartographers and navigators. The (part-)translation of the name can, in other words, be due to a Scottish administrative usage, creating a name form that eventually came to replace the old local name, which hypothetically ended with *-a*, *-ay* or *-ey*.

There is one difficulty in seeing *Fair Isle* as a translation of *Friðarey*, and that is the semantic meaning 'peaceful, fair' in the Norse and the Scottish name. Both the Old Norse *fríðr*, adj., 'beautiful, peaceful, lovable' and the English *fair*, adj. are highly unusual, if not unique, specifics to find in old island names. One possible motivation for such semantic content might be seafarers seeking shelter after having crossed the Roost, one of the most dangerous stretches of



Fig.1: Fair Isle as seen from the west. (Photo by author)

water in the North Atlantic, and finding a safe harbour on the island. However, the landing on Fair Isle is notoriously difficult. For larger boats and without local knowledge the landing is near impossible (Hunter 1996:31-2), in which case a semantic content of 'fair' in the name of this windswept island could be imagined as irony – which makes it even more a rare naming practice.

There are reasons to be sceptical about the Old Norse written form *Friðarey*. As a written form it is isolated in time to documents of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. There are, moreover, no certain parallel names from the Norwegian coast or the areas colonised by the Norse. The same can be said if we confine the search to the use of the adjective *friðr*; it is simply not used in old coastal names. The adjective gives the name *Friðarey* an almost poetic and literary quality, and raises the suspicion that the name may be exactly that; a literary construction. The name *Fair Isle*, on the other hand, is in harmony with the modern pronunciation of the name. Also, *Fair Isle* matches similar-sounding names on islands in the Scandinavian world.

The usual pronunciation of *Fair Isle* on Shetland is /fer ail/. The local pronunciation is /frail/, where the first syllable is more likely to be a contraction of *Fair* rather than of *Frið*-. The fishermen on seine net boats from

Shetland who travelled frequently to *Fair Isle* in the 1950s and 1960s used to refer to the inhabitants as 'Frileys', mocking the local pronunciation.<sup>1</sup>

It is unlikely that *Fair Isle* is a phonetic adaptation of *Friðarey*. For this to have happened we would have to assume that the grammatical element *-ar-* was seen exactly as that – and therefore could be dropped; that the consonant *ð* was dropped; that a metathesis of the *r* took place, and, finally, that the front vowel /i:/ became lowered to a centred /e:/. This, frankly, is a bit much to assume. It must be accepted that the Old Norse and modern Scots forms of the name simply do not have much in common phonetically. This, in turn, forces us to select which of the two forms of the name – the Scots or the Old Norse – is to be given priority as the more ‘genuine’.

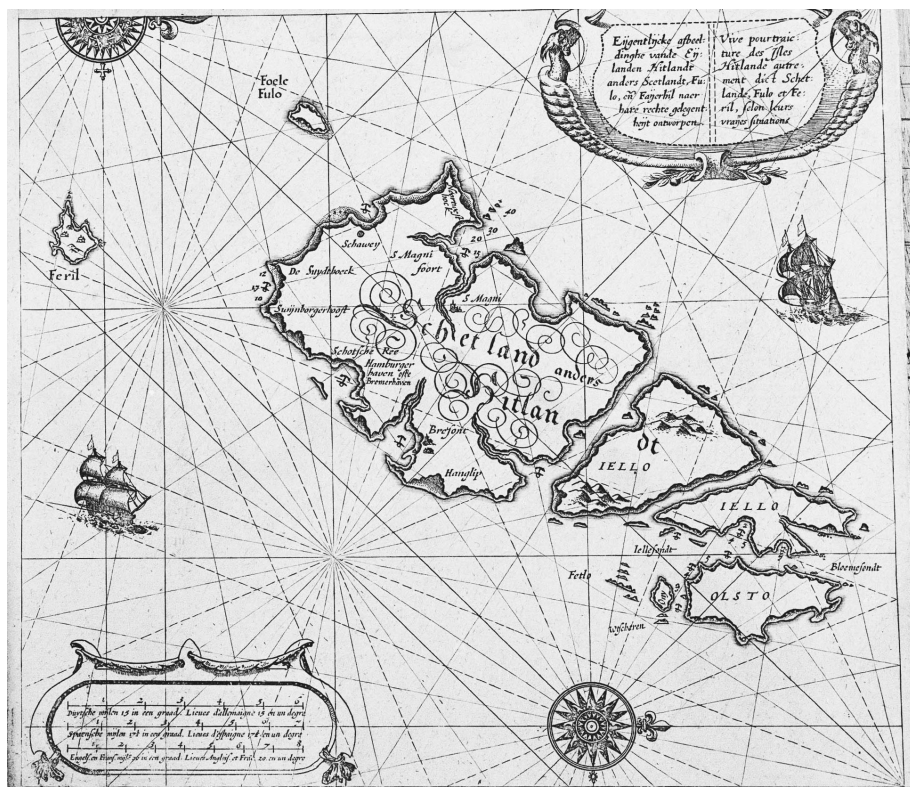


Fig. 2, 'Eijgentlijcke afbeeldinghe vande Eijlanden Hitlandt anders Scetlandt, Fulo, en Faijerhil', from Lucas Janszoon Waghenaeer in *Thresoor der Zeevaert*, 1592. 'Feril' is furthest left on the chart.

1 I am grateful to Ian Tait, Shetland Museum, for this information.

Two possible origins for the island name(s) present themselves from the reading of the *Orkneyinga Saga*. From the posting on the island of a beacon to warn Orcadians one could construct *\*Fire Island* as a possible origin to the modern name. A certain support for *\*Fire Island* is found on Dutch sea charts, where *Fair Isle* is referred to as 'Faijerhil' (Janson 1620-9), 'Fayerhil' (Keulen 1682) or 'Faierhil' (Keulen 1695); name forms that reasonably could be claimed to be Dutch renderings of 'Fire Isle'. There are, however, two parallel names on the Dutch charts. Janson's chart was based on an original with the same title by Lucas Waghenaeer of 1592, and on a version of this from the 1620s 'Eijgentlijcke afbeeldinghe vande Eijlanden Hitlandt anders Scetlandt, Fulo, en Faijerhil', we notice that the French parallel title of Janson's chart has 'Feril', which is also the name form indicating the island on the chart itself (Fig. 2).<sup>2</sup> It is noticeable how dominant and long-lasting this practice is, with dual names for the island: one on the chart itself and another, different, in the title or as a margin comment. As late as 1803 the French map 'Carte des Isles Shetland' has 'Î. Faire' as the name on the chart, and 'Fairhill' in the margin, just below, under a drawing of the profile of the island. Still, Blaeu's *Atlas of Scotland* from 1654 has 'Faire Yle', and Greenville Collins' map of 1693 has 'Fair Isle'.

It would not be surprising if beacons were lit on Fair Isle in times of danger. However, *Fire-* does not give the meaning 'fire' in Dutch. Neither is it a usual name specific to indicate beacons in Scots names. Other names with this specific are hard to find. So, why are there parallel charter names? While the form 'Feril' undoubtedly must be based on the modern Scots pronunciation, and a possible linguistic explanation of the forms 'Faijerhil' or 'Fayerhil' could be as farey+isle, i.e. with a metathesis of a Norse *\*Farey* or *\*Færey*, we are still missing a reasonable justification for why there are parallel name forms on the Dutch and French maps. It is difficult to see why the two frequent and transparent words *fire* and *fair* should have been mixed up in this name, unless it is a product of a folk-etymological attempt to explain the name.

The second possibility that springs to mind when reading the *Orkneyinga Saga* concerns the name *Friðarey*. In Earl Rognvald's time the island had a rather ambivalent position in between bickering Orkney and Shetland, and 'truce island' could be a tempting reading of the Norse name.<sup>3</sup> The suggestion, however, is based on one short episode that happens to be documented, and it pre-supposes that any earlier name on the island will have changed because of this episode. Although name changes of this type do occur, it is fair to say that they are rare. Further, the reading 'truce island' from *Friðarey* does not save the semantic content from being exceptional; the name remains unique.

2 Ian Tait, Shetland Museum, has kindly provided the information about these charts.

3 I am grateful to Brian Smith, Shetland Archives, who suggested this.



If anything, with the interpretation ‘truce island’ the name takes on an even more literary aspect than ‘peaceful island’. Although it cannot be proven, it is tempting to suggest that the explanation for the unusual name *Friðarey* actually is that the reported conflict in the *Orkneyinga Saga* – with *Friðarey* geographically in the middle – motivated and initiated a literary tradition with this name form used in learned medieval Norse circles.

In sum, we may say that that the Old Norse *Friðarey* is unlikely to be the basis for the modern Scots *Fair Isle*; it looks like they are two entirely different names. Even though *Friðarey* is transparent in Old Norse it is semantically problematic, it has a constructed, literary ring to it and it has a very restricted usage. *Fair Isle*, on the other hand, is widely used, although it may not figure in the oldest written sources. If we regard *Fair Isle* as a name with an origin in Old Norse – something close to *\*Ferey* or *\*Færey* – we must analyse this name in a Norse context and look for cognate names in the North Atlantic. Recently Tom Schmidt (2005) has discussed the many *Færøy*-islands along the coast of Norway and suggests they were named after Faroese-related activity of some sort or other. A revisit to this name complex may provide some useful clues in tracing the origin of *Fair Isle*.

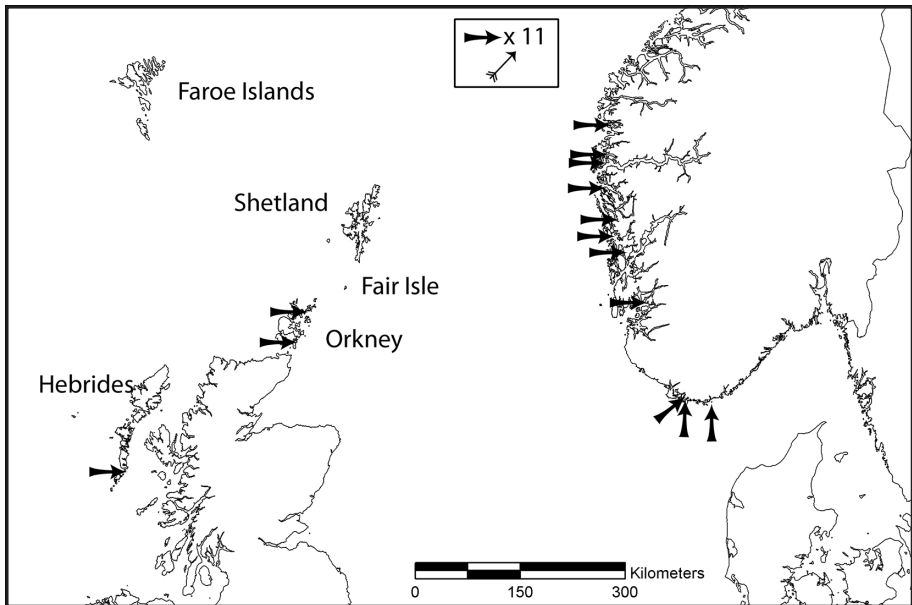


Fig. 3: Map with arrows indicating some of the islands named *Færøy* or similar discussed in the text.

## The *Fær*-islands in Norway

There are many island names with the specific *Fær*- in Norway, characteristically *Færøya*, and typically pronounced /ˈfæ:rʌya/. In *Norsk stadnamnleksikon* (NSL: 162) such-named islands are somewhat hesitantly derived from ON *fær*, n. 'sheep', explained semantically as sheep grazing on the islands. The name of one bay, *Færvik*, is said to 'probably' have the same origin.

In his article called 'Onomastic Evidence for Faroese and Shetlanders in Norway?', Tom Schmidt (2005) discusses names in Norway with the specific *Fær*- in an attempt to trace onomastic links to the Faroe Islands. He is sceptical of the etymology suggested in NSL for several cogent reasons (Schmidt 2005: 192):

I have compared them to places called *Sauøya*, which can only mean 'sheep-island', and found that these much more frequent names have a somewhat different distribution; they are found over a larger part of the country, frequent even in the south-east and further to the north, though not least in the same areas as the *Færøy*-names, the west coast. The islands bearing the name of *Sauøya* are, however, generally much smaller than the ones called *Færøya*, and they have on the whole a much more sheltered position, screened by other islands, and they are also often found close to old settlements (though there are of course exceptions to this). However, the most characteristic feature is that there are often other islands in the vicinity with names like *Lamøya*, *Lamholmen*, *Geitøya*, *Nautøya*, *Feøya*, all of them indicating that the islands in question have been used for the grazing of domestic animals.

Schmidt (2005: 193) finally notices how *Fær*- is not found in compounds with *-holm(en)* while variants of *Sau+holm(en)* are very frequent along the whole coast of Norway. This makes him reject the suggested etymology for *Færøya*, and he proposes that these names rather reflect an association with the *Færeyjar*, the Faroe Islands, but without discussing further what this may mean in practice; if it involved settlement of Faroese people, if it meant trade to/from the Faroe Islands or trade posts set up by Faroese merchants. Schmidt does not table any historical evidence for such occurrences, nor any folk tradition to justify this semantic content. The distribution of the *Færøy*-names shows no special concentration in the region closest to the Faroe Islands. Indeed, apart from Finnmark and the Oslo-fjord it shows an even distribution along the coast, with representation in parts of Norway that are far from the Faroe Islands. In itself, this distribution pattern provides a strong argument against Schmidt's suggested etymology for the *Færøy*-names. There

is, however, good reason to countersign Schmidt's scepticism towards the etymology from ON *fær*, n., 'sheep'.

A systematic analysis of the Norwegian islands named *Færøya* or similar reveals that they often have a characteristic location, as previously noticed by Schmidt (2005). It should be noted that most of these islands are positioned close to important sailing routes and many relate to *Leia*, the crucially important sheltered sailing route along the west coast of Norway.

The following islands, listed from north to south, carry the name *Færøya* or similar<sup>4</sup>:

**Færøya**, Berg, Senja, Troms, **Store** and **Lille Færøya** are two islands in the middle of Bergsfjorden. The larger, relatively high island could have been used locally for navigation in and out of the fjord. To the south, on the main island Senja, is *Hamn*, 'harbour', and to the north are the bay *Knarvika* and the headland *Katteberg*, indicating the boat-types *knarr* and probably *kati*.

**Færøya**, Røst, Nordland, is south-east of the harbour of Røst. The island can be seen as indicating the harbour, although on a very local scale. It is, however, worth noting *Lamholmen* to the south of the island.

**Færøya**, Bodø, Nordland, is north in an archipelago which includes the fishing community of Helligvær. It is difficult to see a role played in navigation, unless it is for local access from the north to the fishing community.

**Færøya**, Bodø, Nordland, just north of the town of Bodø, is on *Leia*, the protected sailing route, and could have been used for taking bearings. On the mainland to the east of the island are Skipshaugen and Geitvågen with beaches ideal for landing.

**Færøyskeret**, Gildeskål, Nordland, is a small peninsula at the northern tip of Nordarnøya, just south of an exposed stretch of *Leia*. There is no *\*Færøy* in the vicinity which could justify the name, 'the skerry of *Færøya*'. Possibly, the bigger island, Nordarnøya, was once called *\*Færøya*. There are good harbours for smaller boats on the protected eastern side of this island.

**Færøya**, Rødøy, Nordland, is just north-west of the fishing community Myken. The island is quite high but the location does not make it obvious whether it has been used for local navigation.

**Færøya**, Sørfold, Nordland, is at the junction of Sjunkfjorden and Sørfolda. It forms a sheltered bay. Above the island to the south is the mountain *Færøytind*, 646 m. From the mouth of the fjord Sørfolda one would just

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4 The Norwegian part of this survey was done with the help of *Norgesglasset*, made by Statens kartverk, at <http://kart.statkart.no/> (Accessed November 2010).



make it around the headland of Segelvikneset, at a bend in the fjord, and land at *Færøya*, if following a bearing on *Færøytinden*. There is fresh water next to the island. (See Fig. 4)

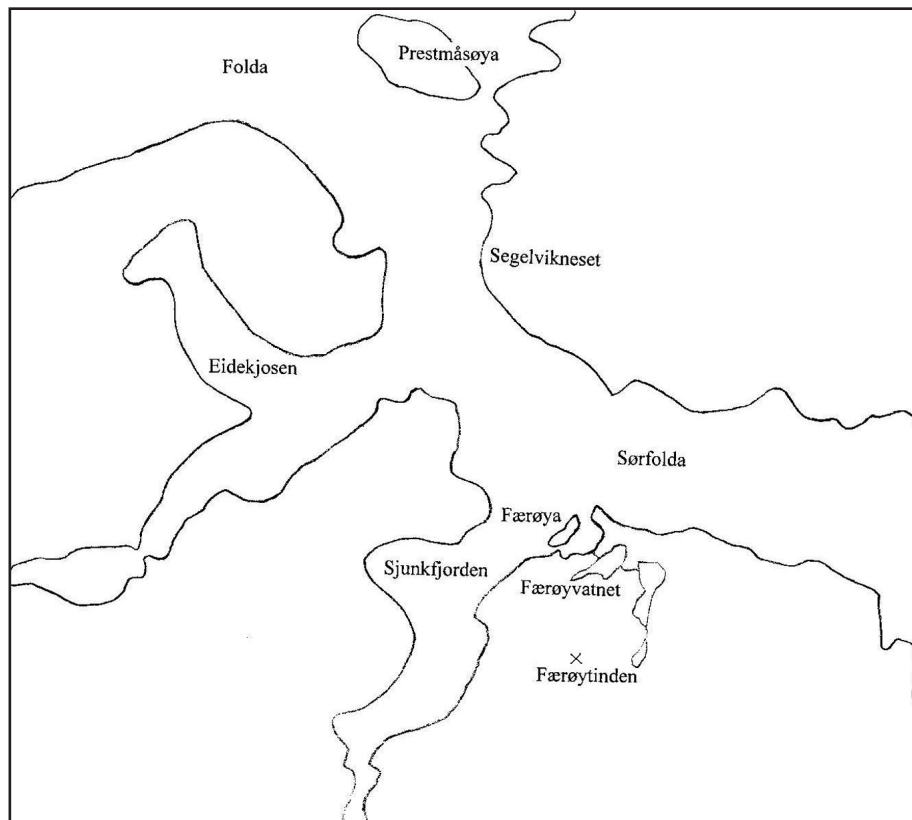


Fig. 4: *Færøya*, *Sørfolda*, Nordland.

**Færøya**, Lurøy, Nordland, is not on Leia. It is, however, in Lurøysundet which provides a deep, natural harbour with good shelter off from Leia. In rough weather Lurøysundet is a much used alternative for small boats. *Færøya* is to the north in the narrow but deep sound.

**Færøya**, Herøy, Nordland, can be used by smaller boats as a part of Leia. The name is currently attached to a peninsula which is once likely to have been an island. The island is at the entrance to a narrow passage. The bay *Færøyvågen* forms a protected harbour.

- Færøya**, Brønnøysund, Nordland, is a small island just off a much bigger island on the course of Leia through Toftsundet and west of Torga, an alternative course to the one through Brønnøysundet. On this course, *Færøya* can be used as a bearing from both the south and north.
- Færøya**, Flora, Sogn og Fjordane, is a relatively high island just west of the town of Florø. Together with Nekkøyane it forms a narrow passage of Leia, just before the exposed Vassreset to the south.
- Færøyna**, Solund, Sogn og Fjordane, is an island with a farm on it. In 1291 it was written *Fæøy*, and in 1427 and 1463 *Færøy*. Tom Schmidt (2005:191-2) interprets this name as coming from *fær*, n. 'sheep'. However, the location of the island is also related to Leia; going north it provides the last shelter before the exposed Buefjord, and coming south, smaller vessels will aim for *Færøyna* to make a shortcut along Leia via Ytre or Indre Steinsundet.
- Færøyna**, Solund, Sogn og Fjordane, is along the latter sound, forming a course of Leia used by smaller boats.
- Færøyna**, Austrheim, Hordaland, is on the exposed Fedjefjord by Leia, at the entrance to the sound leading to Austrheim. The island is flat and rather unremarkable. The larger Fosnesøyne, from *\*fólgsn*, related to the verb *fela*, 'to hide', is used up along the coast as a name attached to protected harbours.
- Færøyna**, Askøy, Hordaland, is in the middle of Hjeltetfjorden (another name discussed by Tom Schmidt (2005)). To sail north along Leia from Bergen, one would take a bearing on this island after rounding Hjeltaneset from Byfjorden. It is worth noting that the smaller island next to *Færøyna* is called *Lamøyna* 'lamb island'.
- Færøy**, Fitjar, Hordaland, forms a sheltered bay north of the large island of Stord, where Leia follows the sound Langnuen and where the open Selbjørnsfjord comes straight in from the west. With bearings on *Færøya*, and a high point on the headland of Klårnes (from *klår*, adj. meaning either 'good visibility' or 'apart'), or, further away, in *Færøya* and the mountains Handfjell or Midtfjell, you head safely into Langnuen to the south. The farm on the bay formed by *Færøya* is called *Levåg*, 'sheltered bay'. There is fresh water next to the island (See Fig. 5).
- Færøyna**, Sund, Hordaland, is not on Leia, but in an exposed position in Risøysundet, leading into protected waters and the long fjord past Glesvær. A long, narrow sound, *Færøysundet*, is formed by the island. There is a lighthouse on Nordøyna, an island likely to have been regarded as part of *Færøyna*.
- Færøyna**, Tysvær, *Stora* and *Litla Færøyna* are two relatively high islands furthest in Boknafjorden at the junction of Nedstrandsfjorden, Jelsafjorden, and

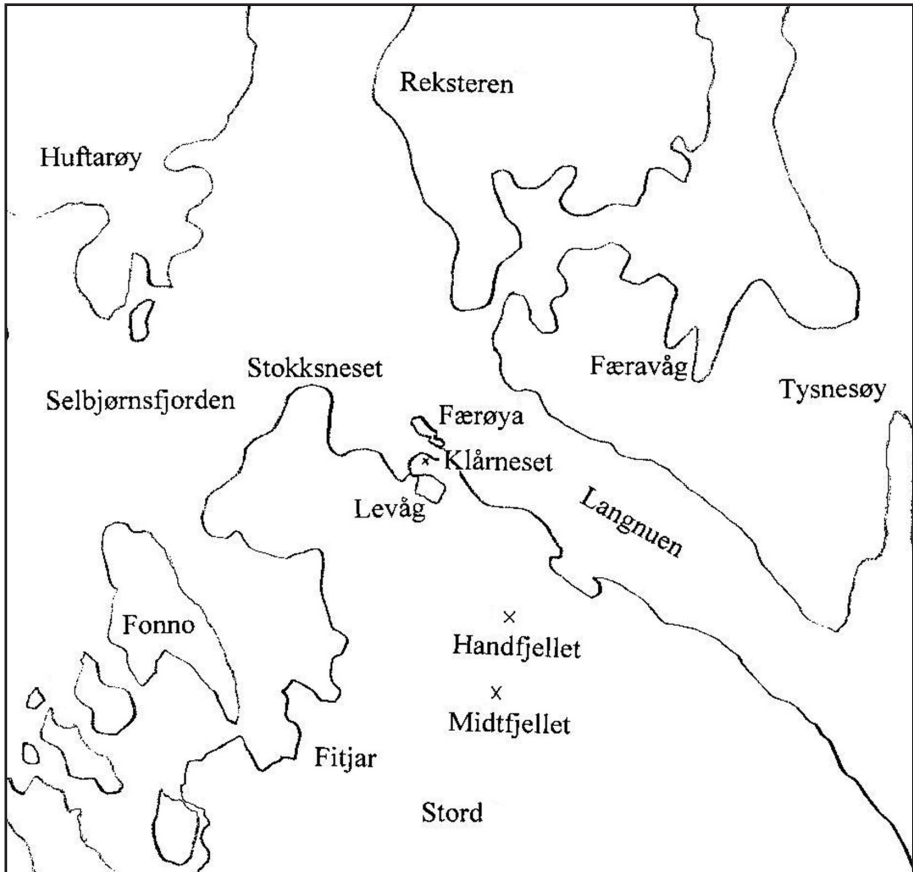


Fig. 5: Færøya, Stord, Hordaland.

Sandsfjorden. One can keep a straight course in Boknafjorden with a mark on *Færøyna*. In from the islands at Tunganæs is *Kjøphammar*, a name that indicates trading in some form or other.

**Færøya**, Farsund, Vest-Agder, at the mouth of the fjord leading into the town of Farsund, is the highest island in the area (35 m) and it will certainly have played a role in navigation. Close to the island is the settlement Loshavn, 'pilot's harbour'.

**Færøy**, Mandal, Vest-Agder, at the mouth of Mannefjorden and north of the lighthouse Ryvingen, is a fairly high island (64 m) that will have been used for navigation and possibly as shelter from the otherwise open fjord.

In addition, we should consider the following three islands:

**Farøya**, Vikna, Nord-Trøndelag, is in the middle of Langsundet which forms an alternative course of Leia through the Vikna archipelago.

**Farøya**, Nærøy, Nord-Trøndelag, has an unexpected location in the middle of a small enclosed bay. It is, however, very suspicious that it belongs to the adjacent farm of Varøya (in 1432 written 'Warøy' and 'Varøy'). The two names are very close in pronunciation. The location of this island within an enclosed bay demonstrates effectively how other islands with this name are not located. We should hesitate to include this *Farøy* in our equation.

**Farøy**, Farsund, Vest-Agder, is in the middle of *Farsund*, the narrow mouth of Lyngdalsfjorden. The name of the sound has given name to the town of *Farsund*, on the western side of the sound.

If the two relevant *Farøy*-names are taken alongside the *Færøy*-named islands, three types of island locations can be identified. The first consists of islands close to *fiskevær*, fishing communities, or other settlements in the outer stretch of islands along the coast. Some of the islands of this group are located by stretches of open water and/or they are relatively high and can have been used for taking sailing marks by fishermen. *Færøya* by Røst, *Færøya* by Myken and *Færøyna* by Glesvær illustrate this type of location. It will have to be pointed out that the function of the islands in this group as bearings is not always distinct. The closeness to settlements makes sheep-grazing a possible motivation for the name and a derivation from *fær* with the meaning 'sheep' a real option. Finally, it would perhaps be unwise to discount the possibility that a few islands might have been given a name to reflect a link to *Faroes*-related activity of some sort or another, as suggested by Tom Schmidt (2005). A detailed local historical investigation may help identify names in this last category.

The second type comprises islands located at junctions of fjords, providing shelter and/or navigational marks for sailors. They are located out with Leia. *Stora* and *Litla Færøyna* in Boknafjorden are good examples, and the type is illustrated by *Færøya* in Sørfold (Fig. 4).

The third and most common type of location consists of islands clearly linked to navigation and/or shelter along Leia, the protected coastal route along the coast of Norway. Typically, this type of *Færøy*-name is attached to islands at the mouth of a fjord or a sound, where fjords meet and sometimes form straight stretches of Leia, ideal for taking bearings on or landing. This type of location is illustrated by *Færøya* by Stord, Hordaland (Fig. 5).

In sum, there is a strong case for linking most of the *Færøy*-islands in Norway to the need seafarers will have had for navigational marks and/or shelter. Other names in *Fær*- are similarly indicative of an importance in sea-journeys; as shelter or orientation points, for example the bay *Færevig*, Eigersund, on the east side of Nordre Eigerøya, a protected small bay, a safe shelter from the dangerous and exposed Lista. Several other names are indicative of journeys on land, e.g. the farm and hill *Færåsen*, Lindesnes, Vest-Agder, where the distinct hill is located on one side of an isthmus between two lakes. Likewise, *Færavåg*, Tysnesøy, Hordaland (see Map 2) is at the northern end of a low-lying stretch of land ending in Amlandstøa. One of the first roads on the island was built here. NG (11:50) suggests an origin in *ferd*, f. in the meaning 'school of fish', but this is less likely and certainly cannot be related to inland names with similar specifics. It seems more likely that the *Fær*-element in names connected with travel is related to the Old Norse verb *fara* 'to travel', and the noun *far*, n. 'course, trail', developed from a Proto-Germanic root *\*far-* and Indo-European *\*por-*, from which e.g. Latin *portāre* 'carry, bring', Gothic *farjan* 'sea travel', Old Norse *ferð*, f. 'travel, journey', *fjorð*, m. 'place to cross' and English *fare* and *ford* have developed. Names with the morph *a* or *e*, like *Færavåg* and *Færevig* will probably have an origin in *ferð*, cf. *ferdamat*, *ferdamann* etc. In a similar way to *fār* > *fær* 'sheep' the West Scandinavian R-umlaut will have worked on *far* 'course, trail' to create *fer* and *fær*. The cognates *Færåsen* and *Faråsen* are respectively found to the west and to the east of Norway, as expected, according to the distribution of R-umlaut. This will also explain the *Farøy* in Trøndelag, where East-Norwegian is spoken. Correspondingly, the locations *Farberg* and *Farsjø* are in the east of Norway. This rule is not clear-cut, as it seldom is with umlauts; there are some *Fardal*-names in Inner Sogn, and we have already mapped *Farøy* by *Farsund* in Vest-Agder where there is also a *Faråsen*. The general tendency is still quite evident.

## Outside Norway

Some names outside Norway will illustrate that the element *far* (without the R-umlaut) elsewhere in Scandinavia and the *fær* found in Scottish names are related to travel. In the Baltic Sea, just north of Gotland, is the island *Fårö*. In spite of the many sheep on the island and its modern, official name, meaning 'sheep island' in Swedish, the name is of a different origin. The noun *får*, n., is not in use in the Gotland dialect, and, moreover, the local pronunciation of the island name is with /a:/. Therefore, says *Svenskt Ortnamnslexikon* (2003: 85), the name is linked to the verb *fara* 'travel, journey' and the first element is most likely the noun *far*, n. 'place one travels'. The parish name *Färentuna* in Uppland, Sweden, has its origin in the island name *Färingö* (in 1277 written



‘in Feringaøm’), connected to the noun *far*, n., ‘track’ because of its position on the important travel course towards the settlements along western Mälaren (Anderson 1961: 120, *Svenskt Ortnamnslexikon* 2003: 85-86).

In Denmark there are no islands with a relevant name, although the Old Danish cognate elements *\*far* and *\*farth*, both with the meaning ‘road’, are found in *Fårevejle*, Langeland, in 1372 written ‘Farthewethla’, and possibly in some names in southern Jutland starting with *Får*-. *Fårbjerg* and *Fårkrog*, although these names may contain *får* ‘sheep’ (Jørgensen 1979:44). Further, *Fårupgård*, Vejle, in 1436 ‘Fathrup’; *Fåre*, Ringkøbing amt, in 1445 written ‘Foere’; *Fårup*, Randers, in 1460 written ‘Fardrup’, all contain Old Danish *\*far*, while *Fårup* at several other places probably refers to the animal (Jørgensen 1994).

The German island *Helgoland*, associated with the Germanic deity Fosite, seems at one stage to have had the alternative name *Farria*. Adam of Bremen (1917: 231) writes in *Descriptio insularum Aquilonis* III:

Lib IV, Cap X, Schol.117 (104): In hoc oceano, qui ante commemorabatur, insula est modica, que nunc Farria vel Heiligland nomen habet. Hec distat ab Anglia remigratione tridui. (Adam 1917: 238)

Adam should be respected as a source for the name since this is within the geography of his own back yard. Several islands named Holy Island or similar carry alternative names, especially when found in an area with ethnic overlap. As a name, *Farria* could be explained as a cognate to the Scandinavian *Fær/Far*-names, and the location of the high and distinct Helgoland in the middle of the German Bay, indicative to sailors of the mouths of the Elbe and Weser, is a superb example of an island which will have been important for coastal travel.

In Scotland, *Fiaray*, in Gaelic written *Fiaraidh* /‘fiarëi/ (written ‘Fera’ in 1549, ‘Fara’ in 1654, ‘Fiaray’ in 1695)<sup>5</sup>, is located just north of Barra in the Outer Hebrides (Fig. 6). *Fiaray* is the last shelter before the open waters north of Barra and west of South Uist. Sailing southwards along South Uist, the bearing on *Fiaray* leads to the northern entrance of the Sound of Barra. This position is comparable to several of the Norwegian *Færøy* islands linked to travel.

The two islands in Orkney carrying relevant names are *Faray* in the north of the archipelago, between Westray and Eday; and *Fara* in Scapa Flow, between Hoy and Flotta. The former is in 1380 (Fordun) written ‘Fareay’ and c. 1590 ‘Faray’, and the latter is in 1492 and 1500 written ‘Faray’ and in 1595

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5 Pronunciation and old name forms are from Anke-Beate Stahl (1999:198).

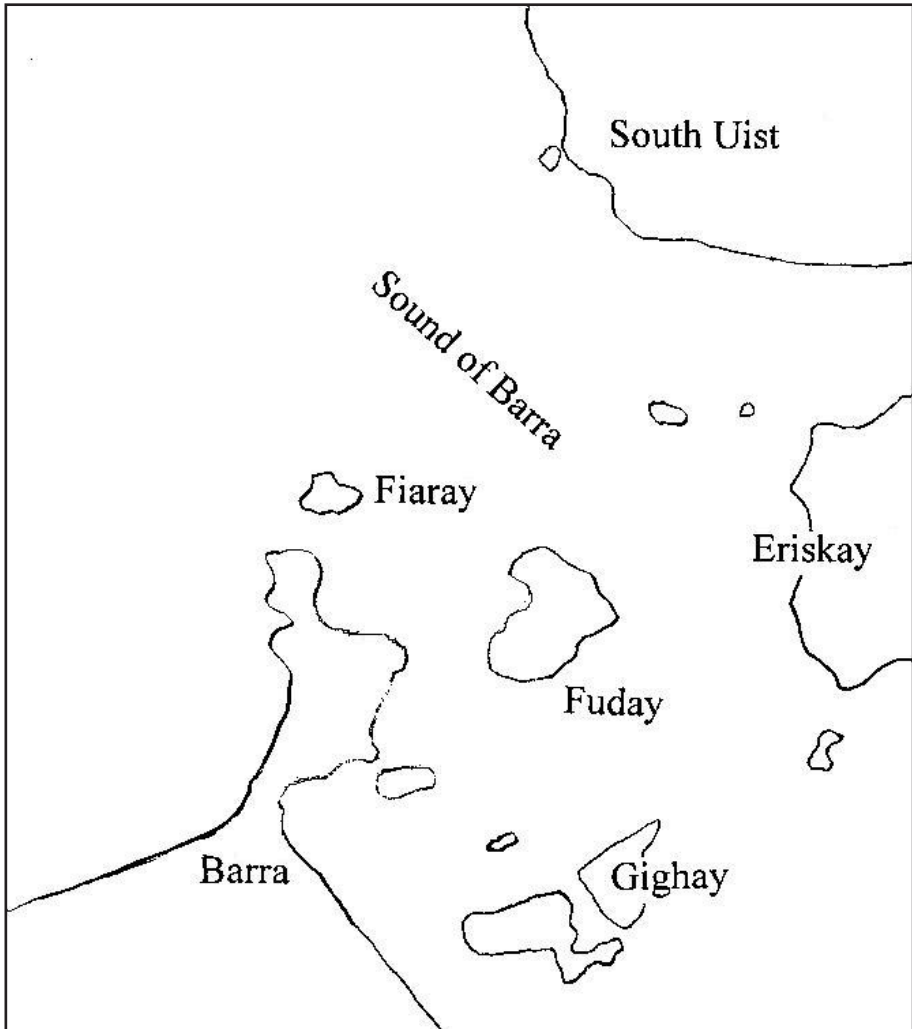


Fig. 6: Fiaray, Barra, Hebrides

'Farra' (Marwick 1952: 52, 186). The difference in pronunciation is due to a dialectal characteristic where names with the Old Norse *-ey* in the north of Orkney are pronounced 'ay' and in the south as 'a' (*ibid.*: 187). One should be open for an etymology from *fár/fær* in this case (Marwick 1952: 52). A semantic meaning acknowledging the fact that there are now only sheep left on these two islands is certainly close at hand but it should not blind us from

other motivations for name-giving based on different usages of the islands in the past. An etymology linked to Old Norse *fara* and *far* could be argued for due to the islands' respective positions. The southern *Fara* indicates the south-western exit out of Scapa Flow, on a bearing from Stromness. The northern island, *Faray*, gives protection to northbound travellers from the exposed Westray Firth, setting sailors off to open waters northwards into the North Sound between Westray and Eday. *Faray* is on the sailing course between Kirkwall and Scalloway. Some old charts indicate the bearings with drawn navigational lines from Stromness and Kirkwall over *Fara* and *Faray*, respectively (e.g. Keulen, 1695).

One practical difficulty in equalling the specific elements of *Fara* and *Faray* with that of *Fair Isle* is their relative proximity, which will be in conflict with the principle that names ideally should be mono-referential. Then again, there is a similar close proximity between some of the *Færøy*-names along the coast of Norway. This frequency in Orkney and Norway opens up the possibility that we are dealing with a compound appellative \**færey*, f., being used to indicate important islands in sea travels.

There is one more group of islands whose name is closely linked to sheep, and these are the most prominent of them all, namely the *Faroe Islands*. A discussion of this name is unavoidable in this context.

## The Faroe Islands

The Faroese scholar Christian Matras pointed to the similarity between the names of the *Faroe Islands* (*Færeyjar* in Old Norse, *Føroyar* in Faroese, pronounced / fö:rjar/), the many Norwegian *Færøy*-names and the names of the two Orcadian islands *Fara* and *Faray*. Matras concluded that they all sprung from Old Norse *fær*, n., a rare variant of *fár*, n. 'sheep' (Matras 1960: 78-9).

The early sources linking the islands to sightings of many sheep are from Irish and Norse traditions and the first are very old indeed in a North Atlantic context. *Navigatio sancti Brendani abbatis* is perhaps written in the second half of the eighth century about Brendan's seven year quest to find paradise, allegedly undertaken early in the sixth century. The account reports an 'island of sheep' and a 'paradise of birds' (Brendan, Chapter 9). Although *Navigatio* is today rather assumed to be a religious allegory (O'Loughlin 2000: 91-98), it is also just possible that it contains elements of reported factual observations made by Brendan or other Irish anchorites. At any rate, Brendan's account became a much read and much quoted work and it is the starting point of a learned convention of linking the *Faroës* with sheep. Around AD 825 the Irish monk and geographer Dicuil (1967: VII.15) described a group of small islands 'nearly all separated by narrow stretches of water' and 'filled with countless

sheep' and 'very many diverse kinds of seabirds.' He also informs us that for over a hundred years monks had been resident on the islands, and that they had recently been driven off by Northern pirates. The twelfth century Norwegian author of *Historia Norwegiae* echoes the Irish impression of many sheep and also informs us that the presence of sheep is the background to the name 'Fereyjar'.<sup>6</sup> In Debra Kunin's English translation the passage on the *Faroe Islands* is as follows (Kunin and Phelpstead 2001)<sup>7</sup>:

In the streams of oceans there are also islands of sheep, eighteen in number, which the inhabitants call Færejar in their native tongue, for fat flocks abound in the ownership of the farmers there, some having sheep by the thousand. These islanders also pay tribute to our kings at fixed times.

The scholarly tradition noting an abundance of sheep on the islands could have found its way into Norse learned circles via clerical contacts or via written sources such as the (now lost) Latin work that seems to have been used by the authors of *Ágrip*, *Historia Norwegiae* and *Historia de antiquitate regum Norwagiensum* (Ulset 1983). This tradition can, in other words, be fictional and fictional only. It can, however, also be a claim based on repeated factual observations.

Skepticism about an etymology from *fár* is, nevertheless, far from new. The Renaissance Norwegian scholar Absalon Pedersen Beyer (1895: 57) said in 1567 that 'faar oc fier', i.e. 'sheep and feather', are equally good interpretations of the name. This is reflected by Peder Claussøn Friis (1881: 433) in 1592, when he wrote in his notes about Faroese matters:

One group considers that these islands have their name after *faar*, which is not likely, because *faar* is a Danish word and not a Norwegian, but ought to have been called Saudøy, for a *saud* is a sheep in the old Norwegian language. Then some also think that they are named so because of *fjer* or *fjedre* for the many birdfeathers that are falling or *Fierøer* because they are situated so *fier* ['far away'], it is far away from Norway, but it is all uncertain. (This author's translation)

The object of this uncertainty is *fær*, n., developed by R-umlaut from *fār*, n. 'sheep' (Noreen 1970: §71.2). The noun *fār* is indeed East or South Scandinavian, in Modern Swedish and Danish appearing as *får*, n., 'sheep'

6 Manuscript A has 'farcar' which is quite close to *Farne* which Bede and others use for the *Faroe Islands* (Ekrem, Mortensen and Fisher 2003: 129).

7 In a note without further comments Kunin and Phelpstead observe the thematic link about sheep in Dicuil's *Liber de mensa orbis terrae* and *Historia Norwegiae*.

(Zetterholm 1940: 55). In Modern Norwegian *får* is borrowed from Danish in the restricted meaning 'mutton'. The compounds Icelandic *færilús* and Faroese *førilús* 'sheep tick' (Matras 1939: 53) are about the only occurrences in the modern languages. The noun *får* n. with the meaning 'helpless animal or child' in Modern Norwegian dialects (Torp 1919: 98), may be just another faint echo of an old word once likely to have been found in the whole of Scandinavia, related to a possible Proto-Scandinavian *\*fahaR* 'wool' (Lindeman & Bjorvand 2007: 333). As an Old Norse simplex noun *fær* is poorly documented. The only clear example is in the mid-twelfth century *First Grammatical Treatise* (Haugen 1972: 16-17): 'Annat er þat, er sauðrinn heitir *fēr*, en annat þat, er han *fēr* lambs'. [It is one thing that a *sheep* is called *fēr*, and quite another that it *gets* (*fēr*) a lamb.] Apart from this it appears as a simplex only once, in poetry, otherwise 'now and then' as part of a compound, e.g. in the law codex of Gulaping: *gjalda færsauði oc eigi geitr* (NGL I §223), and in a broken form of *fær*: *fjar-sauðr*, both 'sheep-sheep' (Cleasby & Vigfusson 1957: 184). The epexegesis reveals that there may have been uncertainty about the actual meaning of *fær/fjar*, or, alternatively, that in the twelfth-thirteenth centuries this word on its own did not carry the meaning 'sheep'. It is worth noting that the written evidence for the use of the word is found only in formal texts, in poetry and in law-texts; types of sources known for conservative language. It is not unreasonable to conclude from this that *fár* only existed in 'classical' Old Norse as either a vague memory of an indigenous word or that the semantic value of the word was known from East Scandinavian, just as most modern Norwegians' understanding of *får* as 'sheep' derives from familiarity with Danish and Swedish. This can explain how Norse scribes were able to give the name *Færeyjar* the semantic meaning 'sheep islands' in a way that could support the scholarly Irish/Latin insistence of 'islands filled with countless sheep'. It should be remembered, however, that the written sources are noted down hundreds of years after the Norse name of the *Faroe Islands* was coined, and, consequently, do not rule out the possibility that *fár/fær/fjar* was used by Norwegians at the time of the discovery of the islands.

The usual word for sheep in Old Norse and in Modern Norwegian is *sauðr*/*sau* respectively. Supporting Peder Claussøn Friis' doubt about the noun *fár* in *Færeyjar* AW Brøgger (1930: 32-33) rejects the idea that the name with the specific *fár* could have been given by a random Swedish or Danish man on the *Faroe Islands*. There would, he argues, have been little reason for the local population to accept and preserve a name based on a word that hardly existed in the West Scandinavian vocabulary. He points to the name *Soay*, in ON *\*Saudēy*, 'sheep island' among the St Kilda islands as a name one would expect the Norse to have used for an island containing sheep. In the case of



*Soay* in the St Kilda group the name reflects the remarkable flock of wild sheep native to the island. *Soay* elsewhere in the Hebrides, as well as *Sauðeyjar* on Iceland and the frequent *Sauøya* in Norway, are names indicating islands used for grazing sheep.

A.W. Brøgger, supported by Christian Matras (1939: 53), then goes on to suggest that the name of the *Faroe Islands* may be among the island-names that the Norse adopted from speakers of Old Irish; the word *fearann*, 'domain, land', could be what the Norse heard from Irish-speaking anchorites on the islands and adapted to form the first element in *Færeyjar*.<sup>8</sup> Also, it is thinkable that Celts either indicated the position of the archipelago or piloted the Norse to the islands. There are other major islands and island groups with likely pre-Norse origins. These are noticeable with their rather peculiar semantics, like *Uist*, in Old Norse *Ívist*, meaning 'in-dwelling'; and *Lewis*, in Old Norse *Ljóðhús*, meaning 'house of people' (Kruse 2005). The name *Færeyjar*, on the other hand, makes perfect sense in Norse and does not stand out as an anomaly compared with island names in Norway. We should bear in mind that Brøgger does admit that a Celtic origin to the name *Færeyjar* can never be more than a hypothesis. There is, in other words, no reason to treat the name as a pre-Norse construction and as something different from other Norse island names.

To end this rather long excursion around the name *Færeyjar*, one will have to conclude that the sources do not support the claim that *fár* or *fær* could not be the basis of the name. Although the normal noun which was used to denote 'sheep' during the Viking Age was *sauðr* the older word *fár* may well have existed in West-Scandinavia at the time of the Norse discovery of the island group – in the ninth century or earlier. There is nothing to preclude the mutated word *fær* from having been used spontaneously as a characterising element at this early stage.

Asscholars, the medieval Norse scribes were able to draw on a Continental written tradition and it is perhaps this we are seeing when in *Historia Norvegie* it is stated that the semantic content of the name *Færeyjar* is based on the many sheep found on the islands. There are, however, also practical considerations behind this claim. It is very likely that the Norse will have noted the presence of sheep on the Faroe Islands.

When the historical and literary evidence is considered, we bear in mind Dicuil's comment (1967: VII.15) that Irish anchorites had been visiting Iceland and the Faroe Islands certainly since about AD 720. Indeed, Adomnán of Iona refers to extensive journeys in the North Atlantic in the seventh century.

8 This has also been suggested as the origin of the names *Lindisfarne* and *Farne Islands*, off the coast of Northumbria (see e.g. Room 2006: 220).

In fact, a strongly ascetic and solitary outlook was an integral part of Celtic monasticism from the very beginning. This is attested in an early Irish narrative obsession with challenging sea journeys. A whole genre in early Irish literature is about sea journeys to the Otherworld. The *immrama*, 'voyage tales', mainly inspired by Christian thinking – the earliest from the seventh century – follow chronologically and thematically the more pagan *echtrae* (Dumville 1976). These tales are, of course, far from anything we can call historical evidence but, on the other hand, they cannot be seen as existing in splendid isolation from historical events, such as the sixth century monastic settlement of Skellig Michael and Colomba's funding of Iona in AD 553; results of the desire for isolation and penance that drove the Irish monks further and further afield.

Whenever they did arrive at the Faroe Islands the Gaelic anchorites would have brought sheep, and with a very small human population and without any natural enemies it is quite possible that the animals would have gone feral – in a similar way to the Bronze-Age Soay sheep on St Kilda (Ryder 1981). However, human presence at an early stage should not be thought of solely in the form of Christian anchorites. The evidence for a pre-Norse settlement is by now convincing, and some of the most recent environmental research is pointing to the possibility of human interaction with the Faroe Islands going much further back than hitherto thought possible. Summing up various studies over the last twenty years, Kerry-Anne Mairs (2007: 70-4) concludes that there would have been human presence all across the Faroes by AD 600 and that, projected from this, human interaction on a small scale would have begun at least in the sixth century. Investigating the southern islands of the Faroes, Mairs (*ibid.*) finds that a kind of erosion dating from as early as AD 200, during the so-called Roman Warm Period, can not be due to cold climate, but is best explained by animal grazing. Mairs suggests that at this early stage, when the islands may have been visited seasonally to exploit natural resources such as birds and whales, livestock could have been introduced as a deliberate provisional strategy, independent of permanent human presence.

It is not yet possible to indicate the ethnic origin of the earliest utilisers of the pastures of the Faroes. We do not know if they came from the British Isles or from Scandinavia. It is, however, fair to say that sheep may have a long history indeed on the Faroe Islands, actually longer than permanent human presence, and that 'an abundance of sheep' will have been a noteworthy feature of the islands and an obvious naming motive.

## Conclusion

This article has questioned the validity of the name *Friðarey* in the Old Norse sources. The Old Norse manuscripts are of course invaluable as a source for

onomastic research, and as the first recordings of many names in the north of Britain, they must be given due respect. At the same time, it should not be forgotten that the Old Norse forms of Norse names in Britain were written down some 3-400 years after the names are likely to have been coined. Furthermore, medieval Icelandic and Norwegian scholars did not show modern concerns of factual accuracy. Possibly just as important to the saga writers and the poets was the literary aspect in their work. Just as historical events were very often shaped into better stories than they actually were, onomasticians are aware that similar creative ‘improvements’ can sometimes take place when place-names are written down. This happened, for example, when Danish administrators recorded Norwegian farm names, especially in the cadastral surveys of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Although the cadastral names are very often the first recordings of farm names, they are now given less importance than the local pronunciation of names when it comes to establishing their origins (Stemshaug 1976: 26).

As discussed, the *Faroe Islands* have a resilient, very old written tradition claiming that an abundance of sheep was a striking characteristic of the island, and that this is the origin of the name. Further, there is relatively good historical and archaeological support for this claim. For *Fair Isle* there is no similar old tradition linked to sheep. The famous Fair Isle home-knitted sweater industry is too new to really qualify. The island would have been settled at an early stage and there would undoubtedly have been sheep on it when the Norse first explored these lands. It is unlikely, however, that this would have been so remarkable that it motivated the Norse name.

Linguistically, there is no way one can differentiate the semantic content of the many *Færøy*-named islands. Only the location and practical usage can give away the likely meaning. What links very many of these islands is the significant role they would have played in sea journeys, and *Fair Isle* is, in this respect, the example *par excellence*. Not only would the island have been of utmost importance for communication between Shetland and Orkney; it would also have been crucial for the North Sea crossing from Norway. *Fair Isle* makes the Northern Isles a continuous, visually linked archipelago that stretches over 160 km and, consequently, makes it hard to miss on a westwards course from Norway, even in ships without modern equipment for navigation. This importance for sailors, both between the Northern Isles and in a wider North Sea setting, is likely to be the motivation behind the name that connects the *Fair Isle*, like similarly named islands elsewhere, to its significance for sea-based travel.

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