

A scalped peatscape on Nólsoy, Faroe Islands

Uppskornar torvheiðar í Nólsoy

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Úrtak

Økið sunnan fyri bøgardin í Nólsoy, „Uppi í Heiðunum“, er uppskorið, har er eingin mógvur eftir og lítið og einki jørðildi. Slík uppskorin heiðalendi eru væl kend í skotsku oyggjunum og vísa á, at tørvurin á mógvi var so stórir í hesum oyggjunum, at heiðarnar vórðu uppskornar og gjørdist oyður. Í greinini verða hesi viðurskifti viðgjørd saman við fornfrøðiligu leivdunum, sum síggjast í økinum, møguliga komin undan í sambandi við, at torvheiðarnar vórðu uppskornar.

Abstract

An area of land south of the village of Nólsoy, Faroe Islands, has been stripped of its peat and turf capping. Such ‘scalping’ of the land surface is a recognised feature of peatland landscapes in the Northern Isles of Scotland and reflects the need for past human populations to obtain

peat, even if population pressures result in the total loss of a valuable resource. Such aspects are discussed together with a consideration of the archaeological features which have been revealed from beneath the peat by scalping on Nólsoy.

Introduction

The practice of peat ‘scalping’ or ‘flaying’ – the near-total removal of peat or turf down to the mineral soil surface or to bedrock – is a well-known phenomenon in Scotland’s northern island groups of Shetland and Orkney, especially up to the nineteenth century (Fenton, 1978; Spence, 1979; Crawford and Ballin Smith, 1999; Gear, 2003) and doubtless elsewhere (cf. Hammond and Brennan, 2003). This reflects a number of factors including the demand for peat as a fuel, for animal



Figure 1. Scalped land on the island of Papa Stour, Shetland. The area over the greater part of the photograph has suffered the near-total removal of peat or turf down to the mineral soil surface or to bedrock (the brighter patch in the top centre right is the island's airstrip). The land in the top right of the picture is an area of improved soils and managed agricultural land. (Photograph courtesy of R. M. Crawford).

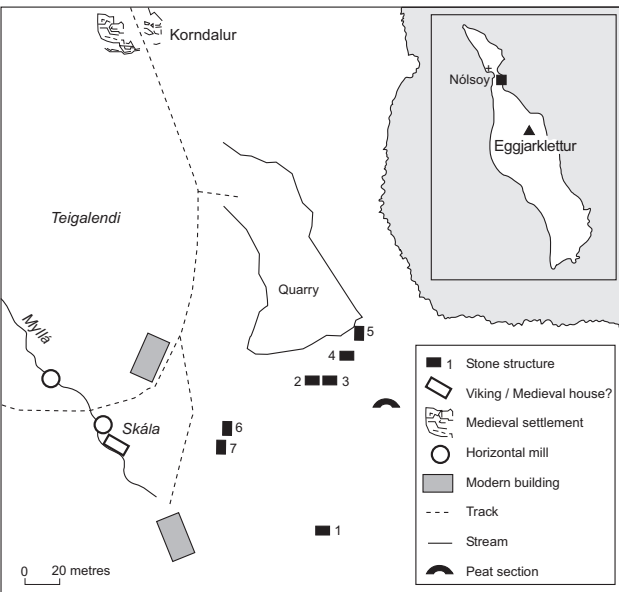


Figure 2. Maps relating to Nólsoy with places mentioned in the text. The inset map shows the island and the black rectangle demarcates the scalped land and adjacent area of reinavelta shown in the larger map. The latter shows the approximate locations of the stone-built structures.

bedding and roofing material, population pressures, and the limited availability of superior, deeper blanket peats in some areas. The result was a land surface which can contrast greatly with adjacent well-kept land. This is seen dramatically on the Shetland island of Papa Stour (Fig. 1). There, a hill dyke – a walled boundary between managed and unmanaged land – separates the eastern, lush, grazed and cultivated portion of the island from the western two-thirds of the land area which is characterised by a stony ‘desert’ of rock, mineral soil and sparser vegetation.

An area of land on the Faroese island of Nólsoy (Fig. 2) also appears to have suffered from scalping. Such a process seems to be unremarked in the Faroese literature (cf. Sigvardsen, 2006) and here this is con-

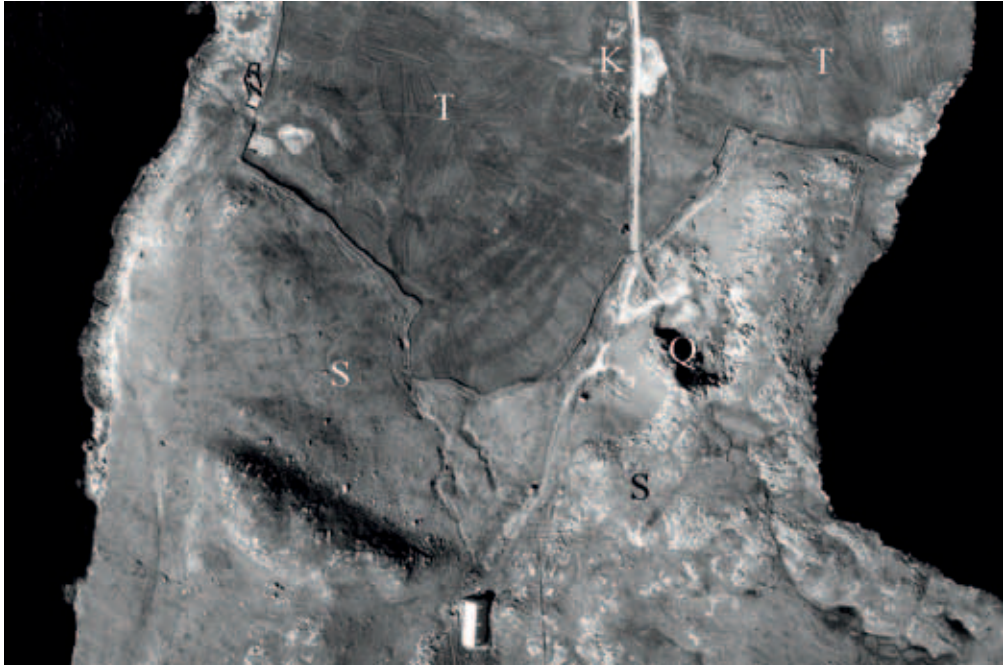


Figure 3. Aerial photograph taken in 1988 including the study area delimited in Figure 2. North is at the top of the picture. Key: K, Korndalur; Q, quarry; S, scalped areas; T, *Teigalendi* (area of reinavelta). Only the more southerly modern farm building was present at this time. (Photograph courtesy of Matrikulstovan, Tórshavn).

Figure 4. The scalped area on Nólsoy seen from the west. (Photograph K.J. Edwards).





Figure 5. Features and places mentioned in the text from the area at the junction between the managed reinvelta area of *teigalendi* and the scalped land. (Photograph K.J. Edwards).



Figure 6. Remains of blanket peat (30 cm deep) on the scalped area. A wayside cairn is visible in the top right of the picture. (Photograph K.J. Edwards).

sidered in relation to similar peatscapes in Scotland. Furthermore, the removal of peat has revealed a series of stone-built structures and we take the opportunity to describe them and to speculate as to their function.

The scalped area on Nólsoy, *soppatorv* and related matters

The track south of Nólsoy village (Faroese: *bygd*; Figs 2 and 3) leads past the medieval settlement of Korndalur and on to the upland, locally referred to as *Uppi á Heiðinum* (literally ‘up at the peat moor’) which is overlooked by the hillmass of Eggjarklettur (372 m a.s.l.). The moderately inclined basalt plateau above Korndalur is strikingly devoid of much surface vegetation other than for an intermittent cover of impoverished grass- and sedge-dominated flora over a thin gravely basaltic soil (Figs 4 and 5). The occasional relict portion of blanket mire (Fig. 6) testifies to a formerly more extensive peat cover. In the context of the Faroe Islands, there seems to be nothing unusual topographically about the area, and it is difficult to see it as anything other than a landscape modified by human agency. The scalped area lies at an altitude of about 20–50 m a.s.l.

The island was also witness to a related activity of which some memory lingers – the taking of *soppatorv*. This refers to the practice of digging both the surface vegetation sward as well as the underlying peat and then drying it. Like peat, the turf in Nólsoy was taken for fuel and to roof the houses (cf. McMullen and Edwards, 2007). Whether the area under investigation was

subject to both *soppatorv* paring and the scalping of deeper peat is impossible to say now given the impoverished state of the landscape. In any case, the two activities might best be seen as the two ends of a spectrum of activity. Later, local overseers enforced the replacement of the sward back on the freshly cut mineral soil in order to stem the sterility of the land surface.

Poul Nolsøe (1898–1992) had told GB that where it was possible, the diggers of *soppatorv* came back and dug turf a second and maybe a third time at the same place, taking the minerogenic turf down to the sand and gravel. In this way, all the sward disappeared on the lower land close to the modern village of Nólsoy. North of the village, the land is also stripped and the inhabitants tell that when turf was first dug there, only one stone was visible. This altered when people from Toftir in Eysturoy came to dig turf there. The people of Nólsoy cannot understand why people from Eysturoy should have wanted to do this, as that island had plentiful peat supplies of its own, although another local man (Jógvan Ingvar Olsen [born 1930], pers. comm) wondered whether this was a joint venture to sell turf in Tórshavn. As Sigvardsen (2006) has recorded, however, there were many historical conflicts in the Faroe Islands over the rights to turbarry between landless householders and landowners.

GB was also told (though there was no documentary evidence) that the inhabitants started to dig their peat in the south of the island before about AD 1750 because there was insufficient peat remaining in the lowland near the village and *soppatorv*

extraction was also forbidden. Williamson (1948: 65) records that bagged peat was transported back to the village by boat from the landing place at Borðan, while the map in Sigvardsen (2006: 1512) displays additional transshipment points.

The area which lies to the immediate north of the scalped zone (Figs 2, 3 and 5), locally called *Teigalendi*, was clearly subject to *reinavelta* – the form of strip cultivation for barley which is unique to the Faroe Islands (Christiansen, 1996) – with its characteristic long, prismatic field strips (*teigar*; Christiansen, 1989-90). Although it might be pondered as to whether scalped peat or *soppatorv* (as opposed perhaps to residues of old turf ash and byre bedding as was done in Scotland – cf. Fenton, 1978; Simpson, 1997; Meharg *et al.*, 2006) might have been used to augment such field systems – adding

nutrients as well as alleviating soil wetness if mineral-rich turves were involved – there is no tradition of this. For soils associated with supposed older field systems in the Faroe Islands, the cultural enhancement of soil depths did take place (Edwards *et al.*, 2005; cf. Gear, 2003; Donaldson *et al.*, 2009), but not always markedly so (Edwards and Borthwick, 2010).

There remains the issue of Korndalur which lies just beyond the scalped zone and is in the midst of *reinavelta*. Was the upland area adjacent to the remains of these old dwellings scalped early given the proximity of this possibly medieval settlement? This is discussed in the next section.

Stone-built structures

A number of denuded stone-built struc-

| Feature | Coordinates | Comments |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------|
| Structures | | |
| 1 | 62°00.082 N, 006°40.035 W | Rectangular, 4 x 2 m |
| 2 | 62°00.121 N, 006°40.032 W | Oval, 4.5 x 4 m |
| 3 | 62°00.121 N, 006°40.020 W | Oval, 4 x 3 m |
| 4 | 62°00.136 N, 006°40.012 W | Rectangular, 5 x 4 m |
| 5 | 62°00.142 N, 006°40.006 W | Rectangular, 4 x 2 m |
| 6 | 62°00.114 N, 006°40.103 W | Rectangular, 6 x 4 m |
| 7 | 62°00.107 N, 006°40.111 W | Rectangular, 6 x 4 m |
| Horizontal mills | | |
| | 62°00.114 N, 006°40.191 W | |
| | 62°00.140 N, 006°40.218 W | |
| House | | |
| | 62°00.118 N, 006°40.184 W | Uppi á Skála |
| Peat section | | |
| | 62°00.126 N, 006°39.989 W | |

Table 1. Stone-built and nearby structures within the peat-scalped study area of Nólsoy. A Garmin Dakota™ 10 GPS device was used for coordinate measurements.



Figure 7. Archaeological structure no. 1. (Photograph K.J. Edwards).

tures are to be found on the stony surface of the scalped plateau. Those closest to the quarry (there may be others elsewhere) are described in Table 1 in terms of their approximate shape and size (maximum dimensions in plan); the structure numbers correspond with those in Figure 2. We have not included the series of wayside cairns (one of which is visible in Figure 6) which trace the path leading from the village of Nólsoy to Borðan on the southern tip of the island. These were constructed in 1892 when the lighthouse was built at Borðan and a small community was established there.

Structures 1 and 4 reach a maximum height of about 1 m and 1.5 m respectively, with five courses of stones where preservation is at its best (e.g. Fig. 7). In the case of the other structures, their outline is generally in the form of a single visible course (Fig 8). In all instances, wall tumble beyond the area delimited by the foundation stones is apparent. It is not possible



Figure 8. Archaeological structures no. 3 (foreground) and 2 (background). (Photograph K.J. Edwards).

to say whether the structures pre-date the former peat cover without excavation. Even if the foundations are placed directly on the underlying rock after peat formation had already begun, this would be understandable in that it would facilitate structural stability. The structures all have a single stone-built wall as opposed to an inner and outer stone wall with a turf-and soil-filled cavity; this almost certainly rules them out as dwellings.

A key question is whether the structures are associated with the exploitation of the peat resource? Their location in the scalped area indicates a function within that altitudinal zone, irrespective of whether peat was the determinant. They are surely too close to potential lowland settlement (see below), to have

been shielings (Mahler, 1993, 2007) and they do not resemble sheep pens (*ból*). If associated with peat, there is the possibility that they are peat storage structures (e.g. *gróthús* rather than *kráir*; Sigvardsen, 2006; Edwards *et al.*, 2008) even if the settlers responsible for their construction lived nearby. There is no indication, however, that the blanket peats here were of any great thickness, but this may not be a factor in the use of storage structures if that is what they were.

Their age is equally unknown, although local contacts on Nólsoy have no folk-memory of their purpose which suggests that they passed out of use many decades ago and, judging by their condition, perhaps centuries ago. Stones from the structures were robbed to support a nearby water pipeline when it was built in 1954 (Jens-Kjeld Jensen, pers. comm.).

A few hundred metres south of the village of Nólsoy are located the impressive ruins of Korndalur. According to local tradition, the inhabitants started to abandon the settlement by the middle of the 15th century, allegedly because its exposed situation was making it susceptible to a deteriorating climate and strengthening south-westerly winds. Between Korndalur and Uppi í Heiðinum a number of house-structures were visible, but these have been destroyed by recent road-building. Unfortunately only one of these, thought to be a smithy belonging to Korndalur, was excavated. The unpublished excavation was conducted by Sverri Dahl in 1952 and seems to confirm this interpretation, with an inferred date of c. AD 1600. There is no clear evidence for the date of

the establishment of Korndalur, and it could even date back to *landnám* times (Stummann Hansen, 2008: 60-64).

There is, however, another indication of early activity in the area. To the west of the scalped area, immediately beside a small stream called Myllá (= mill stream), the ruins of a small house-structure with slightly curved walls is visible. The place-name *Skála* (meaning house) is attached to the site. The morphology of the structure indicates a date in the late Viking Age or early medieval period (Stummann Hansen, 2008, p. 66). A horizontal mill-complex is partly superimposed on the house-structure and the ruins of another horizontal mill are to be seen c. 40 m further down-stream. Both mills are probably of 19th century date (Stummann Hansen, 2008: 67).

Discussion

Scalped areas are a recognised landscape phenomenon in the Northern Isles of Scotland – an area whose place-names testify to a Scandinavian-speaking past (Jakobsen, 1936; Waugh, 1996). The history of peat-working in the Scottish islands has a much greater longevity than that of the Faroes, and peatland exploitation and the archaeological features revealed from beneath the peat cover extend beyond the time of Norse immigration and into prehistory as far back as the Neolithic, perhaps some 5500 years ago, or even further (Whittle *et al.*, 1986; Edwards 1996; Branigan *et al.*, 2002).

The practice of peat scalping in the Scottish islands is documented even if the historical records relate to the terminal

phases of what was a longstanding process. Fenton (1978: 223) records that in Papa Stour 'The peat had been cut for centuries and no soil was left in the scattald. As soon as a little accumulated round a stone it was again taken for fuel'. Elsewhere, as 'peat was so plentiful, except in a few areas, little thought given to conserving supplies' (Fenton, 1978: 224). In 1839, the Governor (*Amtmand*) of the Faroes, Christian Pløyen, visited Shetland and noted that peat cutting was badly managed and that no care was taken to preserve the top layer of turf – as, indeed would appear to have been the case in the Faroe Islands (Pløyen, 1894: 20), though not in well husbanded areas at a later date (Williamson, 1948: 61).

The Nólsoy landscape would appear to be a good example of peat scalping and perhaps the taking of *soppartov*, resulting in peatscapes akin to those seen in the Northern Isles of Scotland. The formation of such an 'impoverished' landscape has the bonus of revealing structures which may be related to peat extraction activities, although excavation and dating would be necessary to test this possibility. It would be surprising if similar landscapes were not evident elsewhere in the Faroe Islands.

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