

# A Viking-Age Shieling in Skarðsvík, Fugloy, Faroe Islands

Ærgi í Skarðsvík, Fugloy

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## Úrtak

Í 1950 árunum vísti Christian Matras á eina mongd av føroyskum staðarnøvnum, sum høvdu tað gamla norrøna orðið *ærgi* í sær. Orðið er avleitt av gamla írska *áirge*, í týðninginum summarbeiti ella ærgi. Við stóði í arbeiðnum hjá Matras, fann Sverri Dahl nøkur fornfrøðilig stöð, sum kundu setast í samband við hesi staðarnøvn, og við rannsóknum kom hann við fornfrøðisligum prógvum fyri einum búskapi, við ærgjum tíðliga í føroysku søguni. Alt hugtakið um ærgi, sum part av landbúnaðarbúskapinum í víkingatíð og tíðliga í miðöld í Føroyum, varð tikið upp til nýggja viðgerð av Ditlev L.D. Mahler í 1980 árunum. Á sínum korti yvir ærgi, hevði hann tó ongi toftalendi á teimum norðastu av Norðoyggjunum í Føroyum.

Í 1987 varð eitt tilíkt toftalendi staðfest í Skarðsvík á Fugloy. Toftalendið, sum varð skrásett í 2001, er á einum gróðrarríkur háslætta, sum vendir móti landnyrðingi og er okkurt um 200 metrar yvir havinum. Í toftalendinum er ein leivd av einum lítlum bygningi og einum garðlagi, hvør sína megin eini lítlari á. Húsasniðið kann heilt greitt samanberast við bygningar á øðrum ávístum ærgistoftum, t.d. á *Argisbrekku* í Eysturoy. Tvey staðarnøvn, sum hava í sær *ærgi*, eru staðfest á plássinum.

Staðfestingin av ærginum í Skarðsvík ber prógv um, at ein fullfíggaður landbúnaðarbúskapur, samansettur av høvuðsbúsetingini (vetrargarðar) og ærgi (summarbeiti) eisini varð sett í verk á teimum norðastu oyggjunum av Norðoyum, og gevur hetta tískil ábendingar um, at hetta var ein skipan, sum varð sett í verk um allar Føroyar í víkingatíðini.

Tað hevur verið víst á, at munurin millum lendi í

Føroyum og Noregi tvingaði niðursetumenninar úr Norðurlondum at seta í verk eitt slag av summarbeitum, sum var ólíkt tí í teirra Norðurlandska heimlandi. Hendan skipan er funnin í tí írska/gæliska mæltu økinum sunnanfyri. Høvundarnir loyva sær at halda, at niðursetumenninar vóru eftirkomarar av írska/norðurlandsku samfeløgnum, sum vóru sett á stovn í Írlandi og Skotlandi tíðliga í víkingatíðini, og tískil vóru rættiliga kendir við ærgini sum summarbeiti. Tey høvdu tí ikki fyri neyðini at uppfinna nakað nýtt; tey bara fluttu yvir skipanina til lendar, ið líktist teimum frá teirra heimlandum – til Føroyar.

## Abstract

Almost fifty years ago ancient shieling sites of Viking Age date were identified in the Faroe Islands by Christian Matras, the linguist, and Sverri Dahl, the state antiquary. The sites normally contained archaeological structures and typically had place-names featuring the Old Irish element *áirge* attached to them. The whole concept of shielings as part of the early Faroese farming economy was reassessed by Ditlev L. D. Mahler during the 1980s, and he produced a distribution map of these sites. No shielings were noted in the outer Norðuroyar on this map. In 2001, however, such a site was recorded on Fugloy.



Fig. 1. Map of the Faroe Islands.

Computer-graphics: Irene Seiten.

## Introduction

In 1956 Christian Matras (1900-1988), the Faroese linguist, drew attention to a number of Faroese place-names containing the Old Norse element *ærgi* (argi, ergi, eyrgi). He proposed that this term derived from Old Irish *áirge*, meaning *seter* or *shieling*. Furthermore, he pointed out that the long *æ* of *ærgi* is represented by *e* in place-names of this type on the island of Suðuroy, and by *a* in all of the more northerly parts of the Faroe Islands where it is shortened in front of the consonant combination *rg* (Matras, 1957: 52-53). The fact that this linguistic

element was of Old Irish origin indicated to him that the shieling system introduced to the Faroe Islands in the Viking Age had its roots in Gaelic-speaking areas to the south – i.e. Ireland, Scotland or the Western Isles.

The archaeological verification that these place-names were indicators of the locations of shieling-sites of the Viking Age came some years later when Sverri Dahl (1910-1987), then the State Antiquary, identified and excavated a house structure in *Ergidalur* on Suðuroy (Dahl, 1970: 362-366).

In the 1980s Mahler excavated an extensive shieling site at *Argisbrekka*, near the northern tip of Eysturoy. A total of eighteen houses were investigated, of which seventeen could be dated to the Viking Age (800-1050 AD) and early medieval period (1050-1200 AD). This work triggered off a major reassessment of the Faroese shielings, in which Mahler not only compiled and analysed the available archaeological evidence but also conducted excavations on a number of other presumed shieling sites (Mahler, 1989; 1991a; 1991b; 1993; 1996). Of the thirteen sites referred to by him five are from the Norðuroyar, all on Borðoy (Mahler, 1993, table 32.1 and fig. 32.4). Four of these are from the region around Klaksvík while the fifth is from a plateau above the settlement of Múli on the northern tip of the island. With the exception of the latter site, each of these locations has produced archaeological features to support their interpretation as shieling sites. Thus, by the time of Mahler's reassessment, no shielings had been identified in the outer Norðuroyar,

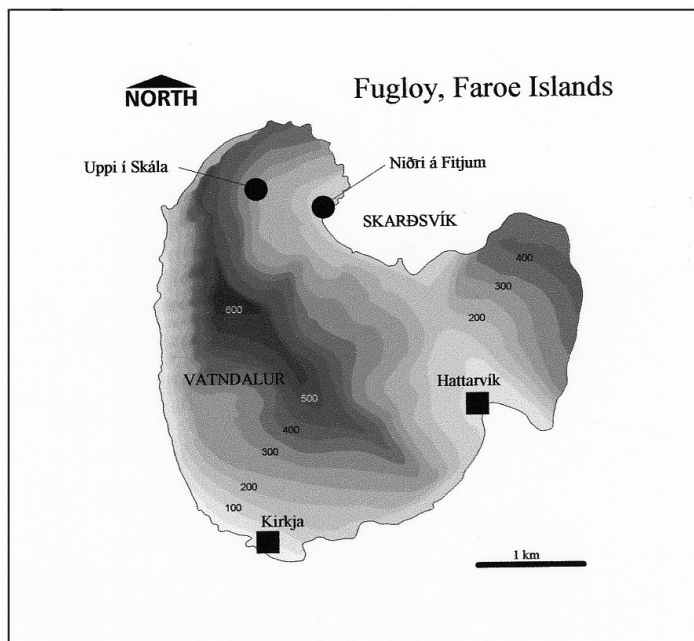
such as Viðoy, Svínoy and Fugloy (Fig. 1).

In August 1987 the authors visited the bay of *Skarðsvík* on the north coast of Fugloy (Fig. 2). There was local knowledge of a *skála* (hall) place-name – *Uppi í Skála* – connected with a specific part of a fertile terrace below an escarpment here (Faroese: *hamari*), indicating that some kind of settlement had once existed in this area. No conclusive archaeological evidence of such a settlement had ever been identified. However, during the visit by the authors a house site was identified approximately 200 meters south of the *skála* place-name location<sup>1</sup>. This site at *Uppi í Skála* was revisited, described and planned in July 2001. On this occasion a second feature, a small enclosure, was also identified on the site.

### The topographical setting

While the coast around the eastern and southern sides of *Skarðsvík* is rather steep, the western side is more conducive to settlement or farming activity. On this side landing from the sea is possible and the slopes are generally not too steep. Although there is no historical record of settlement here, the presence of place-names containing the element *fitja* (English: low-lying pasture) indicate that it was farmed at some stage in the past (Fig. 2). In addition, field boundaries, in the form of low earthen banks aligned down-slope, can be seen here and these are reminiscent of the well-known field-systems at *Akraberg* in Suðuroy and on Mykines (Dahl, 1968: 189-190). The date of the *Skarðsvík* field system (Faroese: *teigalendi*), however, has

**Fig. 2.** Map of Fugloy.  
Computer-graphics: Mette  
Cecilie Krause.

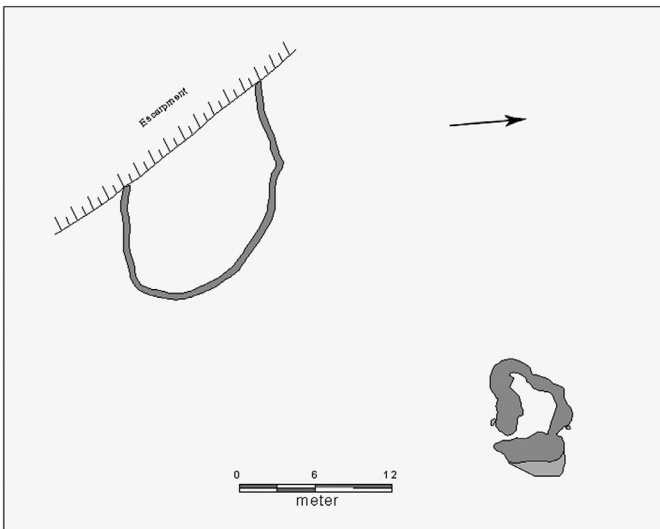


not yet been established. According to local tradition the coastline was heavily eroded within living memory and this resulted in the erosion of cultivated land as well as a fine landing place. Today, because of the shallow depth of the bay, only small boats can land here. Interestingly, heavy erosion of the Skarðsvík coastline was noted in Jens Christian Svabo's (1746-1824) topographical survey of the Faroe Islands in the early 1780s (Svabo, 1783: 40).

Just south of the field system, close to the shoreline, are a number of ruined out-houses (Faroese: *hjallur*) and boat-houses (Faroese: *neyst*). These, according to local tradition, were still in use in the early 20th century<sup>2</sup>, but it is not known when they were first built. However, taking the agricultural potential of the area into consideration, there is reason to believe that the area around Skarðsvík was the target of human

exploitation during most of the history of settlement on Fugloy. Indeed, it is interesting to note that Svabo mentioned Skarðsvík's agricultural capabilities (Svabo, 1783: 381).

Walking uphill from this part of the coastline one comes to a fertile terrace below an escarpment. The terrace is situated at approximately 150 meters above sea-level and is surrounded by high mountains, the highest being *Klubbin* with a height of 621 m. A number of structures can be seen on and around the terrace, and these include buildings for storing turf (Faroese: *krúgv*), sheep-shelters (Faroese: *ból*) and a sheep-fold (Faroese: *rætt*) (Stoklund, 1998; 2002). Conventionally, structures such as these are usually dated to the early modern period. However, in the absence of excavation or other dating evidence, it is not possible to verify such a view. Interestingly, neverthe-



**Fig. 3.** Site plan of the shieling at Uppi í Skála in Skarðsvík. Computer-graphics: Mette Cecilie Krause.

less, there are two other structures on the terrace – a house and an enclosure – and these may be dated to the Viking Age.

### The house and enclosure

These two structures are situated on the terrace on either side of a small stream that runs down from the terrain above the escarpment (Figs. 3-4). North of the stream, situated on a low fertile rise, is the ruin of a collapsed building which is oriented approximately east-west (Fig. 3)<sup>3</sup>. It is reasonable to assume that this building was a turf-built house as hardly any stones are visible. It is aligned down-slope and the collapsed remains measure approximately 8 meters in external length and 6 meters in external width. The bank averages 0.3 m in height. A gap in the southeast corner of the building, facing south, represents its original entrance.

Approximately twentyfive meters south-west of the building, and on the other side of the stream, is a small enclosure located on a gentle slope. This is curvilinear in plan with its upper, south-western side being formed by the escarpment; it measures approximately 16 m in length and 12 m in width. The enclosing earthen bank averages 0.3 m in height and 0.50 m in width (Fig. 3). There is a possible entrance gap between the escarpment and the south-western end of the bank.

It was clear to the authors during the survey that this site had obvious similarities with those shieling sites elsewhere in the Faroe Islands, which were planned and excavated by Dahl and Mahler (Dahl, 1970; Mahler, 1993). Therefore, despite the ap-

parent non-existence of an *ærgi* place-name, the authors felt confident in interpreting the site as a shieling.

It was only after the planning of the site had been completed that it was realised that *érgi* place-names, in fact, were recorded in the area. Natural locations situated just below the shieling itself are named *Eyrgislág*, i.e. the hollow by the shieling, and *Kletturin á Eyrgislág*, i.e. the escarpment at the hollow by the shieling (Miðalberg, 1996: 24-25) (Fig. 5). The existence of these place-names is a very emphatic substantiation of the proposed interpretation of the site as a shieling of the Viking Age and/or early medieval period. It is worth noting that these two Fugloy examples of *érgi* place-names are spelled with an *e*. This indicates that Matras' view that the *érgi* place-names in the southern parts of the Faroe Islands should be spelled with an *e*, and those in the northern parts with an *a* (Matras, 1957: 52-53), is somewhat simplified.

### Skarðsvík in context

The shieling site in Skarðsvík clearly forms part of the group of sites previously presented by Dahl and Mahler as *érgi* or shieling. As has already been noted above, the Old Norse term *érgi* (argi, ergi, eyrgi) derives from Old Irish *áirge*. Kelly notes the historical evidence for the *áirge* in Early Medieval Ireland (400-1100 AD) (Kelly, 1998: 40). There is also archaeological evidence for the practise of transhumance in parts of Ireland, particularly in the more mountainous regions of the west. In Kerry, for instance, over a thousand huts have been recorded in upland locations, above the present limit



*Fig. 4. The site seen from approximately east. Photo: the authors.*

of cultivation, and many of these occur in the vicinity of old field-boundaries and sheepfolds. These huts and their associated features are normally interpreted as the remains of temporary settlements associated with the practice of booleying (anglicised form of Irish *buaile*, meaning shieling). This practice continued in parts of Ireland until the 19th century (Morris 1939; Ó Duilearga, 1939; Evans 1940: 178-179; Ó Heichaidh, 1943; Ó Moghráin, 1943; 1944; Ó Corráin, 1972: 53-54; Ó Dubhthaigh, 1984; O’Sullivan and Sheehan, 1996: 383). It is also referred to in the Book of Leinster: “dotet ind ingen iarom cosin mac lé assind liss dond airgi buí oc Sliab Miss tess”, and

“Luid Mael Ruain Tamlachta fechtas dia airge .i. ceppán i Sléib Mairgge” (Fraser *et al.*, 1931: 34)<sup>4</sup>.

In the Faroe Islands shielings (summer farms) served as one element in a farming system whose other element was the main settlement (winter farm). Such an integrated system did not allow extensive sheep grazing in the outfield (Faroese: *hagi*) unless they were strictly herded all the time (Mahler, 1993: 502). Thus an integrated system would, as pointed out by Mahler, have to predate the present infield-outfield system found in the Faroe Islands.

The topographical setting of the site in Skarðsvík resembles that of most of the



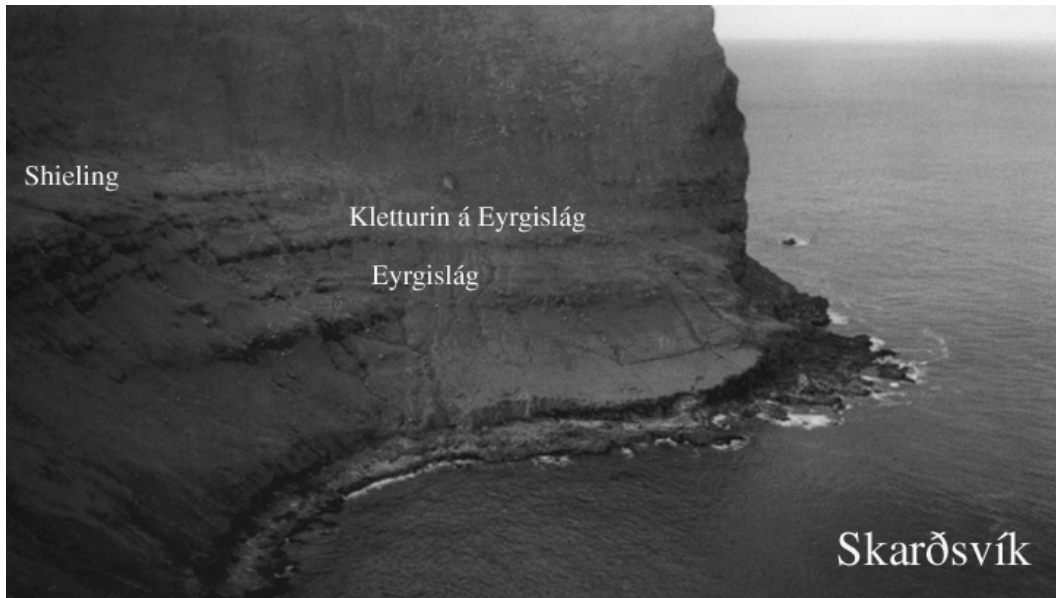
other recorded sites and seems almost typical of this type of settlement. The size and construction of the house can be compared with structures at the excavated shieling site at Argisbrekka. Here the structures were built of turf, sand, clay and gravel without any significant use of stones (Mahler, 1993: 489). Likewise, the house in Skarðsvík apparently has no stone construction. It is also interesting to note that the position of the entrance in the Skarðsvík house is the same as in Argisbrekka houses A XII and A VIII N (Mahler, 1993: fig. 32.2). Each of these houses is also of the same general size and dimensions as the Skarðsvík building.

The date of the establishment of the two present day settlements (Faroese: *bygdir*) in Fugloy, Kirkja and Hattarvík, is as yet unknown but there is no reason to disbelieve that they were both founded in the Viking Age. The shieling in Skarðsvík lies approximately 3.0 and 2.5 km from Kirkja and Hattarvík respectively, and even though the terrain between them is difficult to traverse, its location in relation to these potential winter farms fits well into the pattern from the other shieling sites recorded in the Faroe Islands. None of the other recorded sites exceeds a distance of 4.5 km from the winter farm, with the average distance being 3.0 km (Mahler, 1993: 495). The question therefore arises: did the shieling in Skarðsvík belong to Kirkja, or to Hattarvík, or to both?

The fact that the Skarðsvík shieling comprises only a small building and an enclosure makes it unlikely that it was used by more than one settlement. In recent times this part of Skarðsvík forms part of

the Kirkja outfield. Although it is likely that this was also the situation in the Viking Age, this cannot be established with certainty. It is worth noting that the only other location in Fugloy likely to contain a shieling is the small valley or terrace called *Vatnsdalur*, i.e. the valley with the lake, in the south-western part of the island. This is located just over one kilometre north of Kirkja and, so far, no structures have been recorded here. If *Vatnsdalur* proves to be the location of a shieling, then it must have been associated with the settlement at Kirkja. As it seems unlikely that two shielings on Fugloy belonged to the one settlement, then the possibility occurs that Skarðsvík originally belonged to Hattarvík.

On the basis of its proximity to the main farm, whether it be Hattarvík or Kirkja, the shieling site in Skarðsvík could be termed a *full seter*, i.e. a place “used throughout the summer for the milking of animals, treating and storing of milk and other dairy products, as well as for the harvesting or collecting of winter fodder” (Albrethsen and Keller, 1986: 96; Mahler, 1993: 495). Mahler divides the Faroese shielings on archaeological grounds into two groups: a *simple* and a *complex* group. The first “consists of small 4.5-5 x 3 m<sup>2</sup> [*sic*] house structures (internal measurements)...where the walls are built of turf”; the second group “consists of complex structures showing two to three transverse partitions or...with structures also added to the western long-side” (Mahler, 1993: 499). The structures recorded in Skarðsvík clearly indicate that this site belongs to Mahler’s first group. Whether the two groups represent a chron-



*Fig. 5. The slopes on the western side of Skarðsvík with place-names and site indicated. Based on Miðalberg, 1996: 25.*

ological, functional or geographical difference is as yet uncertain (Mahler, 1993: 501).

With the identification of the shieling site in Skarðsvík, the first of its kind to be recorded in the outer Norðuroyar, it has now been demonstrated that the integrated farming model of main farms and shielings was also established by the early settlers on Fugloy, thereby further strengthening the argument that this was the system initially established all over the Faroe Islands in the Viking Age.

How do we explain the occurrence of an originally Old Irish term for shieling sites in the Faroe Islands? According to Matras, the term was brought here by Viking-Age settlers who had become acquainted with it in

Scotland, where the Scots-Gaelic language derives from Old Irish (Matras, 1957, 66). Dahl did not touch upon this question of origin either in his publication of the shieling site Ergidalur (Dahl, 1970) or in an article published the following year (Dahl, 1971: 71). The linguist Fellows-Jensen suggested in 1980 that the term *ærgi/áirge* referred to a specific type of shieling, which was unfamiliar to the Scandinavian settlers when they arrived in the Celtic-speaking world and, consequently, they adopted the local term. She suggested that the Isle of Man was the most likely place that this occurred (Fellows-Jensen, 1980: 69). Mahler points out that the Faroese landscape is quite different from the homeland of its early settlers, which he assumes to have been Nor-



way, and he proposes that this may have forced them to introduce a somewhat different shieling model than the one they were used to. He suggests that they found this in the Celtic-speaking regions to the south and hence the adoption of the term *érgi* into Faroese (Mahler, 1993: 495).

Fellows-Jensen has recently re-stated her views on the origins of the term *érgi*: “Although the word is recorded in Old Irish sources....it would not seem to have been used there as a place-name element denoting a shieling and it is thus very unlikely that the Norse can have adopted the element from the Irish. It is probable then, that they became acquainted with the word in a sense such as ‘summer grazing land’ in the areas which are known to have had a Gaelic-speaking population in the period of the Norse settlement, that is the Western Isles, the western seaboard of Scotland or the Isle of Man”. She states, furthermore: “The Isle of Man might seem a likely place for the Norse form to have developed because the inhabitants were Gaelic-speaking before the arrival of the Norse” (Fellows-Jensen, 2002: 92). In her 1980 paper she explained why she excluded Ireland as the source of the term: “Although there are a few possible occurrences of the element *áirge* in place-names in Kerry, it seems hardly likely that the Vikings adopted the generic in the sense ‘summer milking-place’ in Ireland. The Viking settlements in that country were small and rather urbanised and practically restricted to the areas surrounding Dublin, Wexford, Waterford, Cork and Limerick” (Fellows-Jensen, 1980: 68-69).

In the authors’ opinion it seems strange

that Fellows-Jensen does not accept that the Old Irish term *áirge*, as it was used in Ireland in the Early Medieval period, was used in place-names to denote a shieling. It seems clear that it must have been used, to the extent that the Irish historical and literary sources indicate what the meaning of the term actually was. Kelly, for instance, based on his study of these sources, notes that: “In summer, cows were milked away from the farm at a contemporary milking-place (*áirge*)” (Kelly, 1998: 40). Clearly, one can argue that if a term is used in literary and historical sources to describe a specific activity then this term is very likely to have been used as an element in the names of places connected to this type of activity. In the authors’ view the opposite argument, which appears to form Fellows-Jensen’s viewpoint, cannot be supported: - if an activity-specific term does not exist as a place-name element, then this means that the concept behind the term was not practised. This is arguing on the basis of negative evidence.

The basis for Fellows-Jensen’s belief, that the Scandinavian settlers did not adopt the term *áirge* in Ireland, is clear. She states: “The Viking settlements in that country were small and rather urbanised and practically restricted to the areas surrounding Dublin, Wexford, Waterford, Cork and Limerick” (Fellows-Jensen, 1980: 68-69). This statement does not stand up to examination, however, and is incorrect on several grounds. The traditional view of the character of Scandinavian settlement in Ireland and of the interaction of the Scandinavians with native Irish society has been trans-

formed in recent decades. For instance, Bradley has demonstrated that there was a significant Scandinavian or Hiberno-Scandinavian presence in the rural areas surrounding the urban centres, and that some of these areas were very sizeable (Bradley, 1988). For example, the total area of the hinterland of Scandinavian Dublin, *Dyfflinarskiri* (Bradley, 1988: fig. 3.1), approximately matches that of Viking-Age Orkney. Recent work by Sheehan, Stummann Hansen and Ó Corráin has demonstrated, by means of archaeological, historical and onomastic evidence from the southwest coast of Ireland, that there is likely to have been a developed network of Scandinavian or Hiberno-Scandinavian settlements along this coastline serving as way-stations for shipping between the urban centres (Sheehan *et al.* 2001). Therefore, it is clear that there were significant amounts of Scandinavian settlement in rural environments in Ireland. In such contexts, there would have been many interchanges of knowledge and practices, including interchanges relating specifically to farming.

Fellows-Jensen's comment on the prevalence of the *áirge* element in Ireland, furthermore, is not correct. The element occurs, for instance, in the following place-name examples: *Arrybreaga*, Co. Limerick (Modern Irish: *An Áirí Bhréige*), *Arywee*, Co. Limerick (Modern Irish: *An Áirí Bhuí*), *Glenary*, Co. Waterford (Modern Irish: *Gleann Áirí*), *Shronahiree Beg/More*, Co. Kerry (Modern Irish: *Srón Áirí Beag/Mor*) (Ó Cíobháin 1978: 158-159, 161), and *Drominaharee*, Co. Kerry (Modern Irish: *Dromainn na hÁirí*). All of these names are

located in upland locations, though the elevation of those in Co. Limerick is slight. The latter locations, however, do contrast markedly with the rolling plains of the adjacent Golden Valley<sup>5</sup>.

All authorities agree that the occurrence of the place-name element *ærgi* in the Faroe Islands derives from the Celtic-speaking world. However, there is disagreement about where specifically it derives from and about how it was transmitted to the Faroe Islands. It is the view of the authors that its adoption may well indicate that a sizeable section of the Viking-Age settlers of the Faroe Islands had their roots in Hiberno-Scandinavian communities, and there is further archaeological and linguistic evidence to support this hypothesis (see for instance Stummann Hansen and Sheehan, submitted). These settlers, probably bilingual, would already have been familiar with the term *ærgi* and it was only natural that they transplanted this term into the landscapes of their new homeland – the Faroe Islands.

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The authors dedicate this article to the late Hans David Matras (1924-2001) who originally brought our attention to the site and shared his extensive knowledge of Fugloy with us. We owe our thanks to Helgi Mikkelsen, Department of Medieval Archaeology, University of Aarhus, who helped plan the site. We also wish to thank Irene Seiten, Danish Polar Center, Copenhagen, and Mette Cecilie Krause, Department of Archaeology and Ethnology, University of Copenhagen, who helped with computer-graphics, and to Gullak and Lone Matras who hosted one of the authors during a final visit to the site. We wish to acknowledge the assistance of the Klaksvík Council, who provided us with maps. Furthermore our sincere thanks to Donnchadh Ó Corráin, Department of History, University College Cork, and to Breandán Ó Cíobháin for drawing our attention to several references. Finally we wish to thank John Sheehan, Department of

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## Notes

1. Letter of March 29th 1988 from Stummann Hansen to Føroya Fornminnisavni with undated note by Hans David Matras attached. Føroya Fornminnisavni j.nr. 29-94-88-46. Símun Hansen, in 1971, stated about Skarðsvík: "in the bay there is a plain which they call inni í skála; now it is a sheep-shelter, but it does not look like an ordinary sheep-shelter. It has rather served as shelter for those who have herded the cows in such a remote place" (Hansen 1971, 101 – authors' translation from Faroese). It is hard to say if it is this site he refers to.
2. These structures were also recorded during the visit in July 2001.
3. The exact location (GPS) of the site is N 62°20.824 – W 006°18.430 (WGS 84).
4. "The girl then (or afterwards) comes, and the son with her, out of the fort (lios) to the place for milking cows (or byre or cowshed) which was at Sliab Miss to the south", and "Mail Ruain of Tamhlacht (Tallaght) went once to his cow-milking place (or byre or cowshed), a stock (or tree stump or log or block or small tillage plot or outcrop) in Sliabh Mairge". The authors owe their thanks to Dr. Neil Buttner of the Department of Modern Irish, University College Cork, for the translation of these quotations from Medieval Irish into English.
5. The authors want to thank Breandán Ó Cíobháin for kindly providing us with the informations on these examples. According to Ó Cíobháin further examples from various parts of Ireland could undoubtedly be listed.

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