

HISTORY OF THE FAROE ISLANDS

By Jane Sproull Thomson & Callum Thomson

THE FORMATION OF THE FAROE ISLANDS

The Faroe Islands and Iceland both rose from volcanism along the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, the divergent boundary between the Eurasian Plate and the North American Plate. Layers of volcanic basalt formed as the plates separated, opening the northeast Atlantic Ocean. Volcanic eruptions deposited lava on the seabed, eventually pushing it above sea level to form islands, and eastwards into the Eurasian Plate, where the islands now lie. Sedimentary layers subsequently formed of varied organic materials, some of which have generated coal beds. Today, the Faroe Islands rise uniformly more than six kilometres above the sea bed, with approximately nine hundred metres of that above sea level.

The flat summits of the islands are covered with glacial moraine or peat soil left from colder climate periods. Sheer cliffs, fjords, and narrow ravines separate the islands and strong tidal currents course between them. The coastline of the islands is indented with numerous sandy bays, at the head of which many of the settlements were founded. The warm North Atlantic Current keeps the harbours free of ice. The mild oceanic climate experiences little variation in temperature and is characterized by frequent fog and rain. Natural vegetation is treeless, due to the cool summers, strong westerly winds, and frequent gales—although where shelter is provided, hardy trees have been planted and survive.

These volcanic islands do not have native land animals, but the seas are rich with fish, grey seal, orca, and harbour porpoise, as well as pilot, blue, and bottlenose whales. Seabirds are abundant and were economically important in the early days of settlement—especially the puffin, for food, and the eider duck, for its down.

HUMAN HISTORY

Until recently, it was believed that the Faroe Islands were settled first by Irish monks around AD 700, followed about a century later by Norse with a strong admixture of genes from Ireland and Scotland.

Recent archaeological evidence from the island of Sandoy suggests that a few people may have been living there between the fourth and sixth centuries, cultivating barley brought as seed from mainland Europe and burning peat for fuel. Where these people came from is still a mystery. Like that of Iceland, the ancestry of Faroese men has been shown to be mainly Scandinavian while eighty-four percent of Faroese female mitochondrial DNA is traced to Scots and Irish ancestry, suggesting either the truth of the

tales of Viking raids for slaves—or possibly a more mundane story of Norse farmers who had settled in Scotland and Ireland uprooting their families to relocate.

These early Norse settlers were farmers, hunters, and fishermen; archaeologists have found many structural remains above ground, including stone livestock shelters and pens, buildings for storing peat, cairns lining old mountain trails, and field dykes.

Most of the domestic structures have disappeared except for stone foundations: classic Viking farmsteads had long stone and turf dwelling houses with a central hearth, stone and earth benches along the side walls, and centre postholes that held roof supports. Adjacent stone cattle byres had stone slab stalls, a central drainage channel, and outhouses. Timber for the roofs would have been imported and covered with turf. These structures carried on the Norwegian building tradition, emulated in the western and northern isles of Scotland.

Outside of the main communities, place names and stone ruins seem to represent summer relocation when some members of the family took livestock to remote fields to allow the home fodder areas to recover over the summer. There they harvested sea birds, especially puffins, and fish, both of which made up a major portion of the Faroese diet; sheared sheep for the wool, milked cattle and processed the milk, cut and dried peat, and collected winter fuel.

The main source for the political and religious history is the Icelandic *Færinga Saga*, compiled in Iceland around 1200. In the *Saga*, the name appeared as *Faereyiar*, meaning Sheep Islands. Christianity was introduced around 1000, and a bishopric was established at Kirkjubøur on Streymoy, subject to the archbishop at Nidaros Cathedral in Trondheim, Norway. At Kirkjubøur, visitors can see the ruins of the Magnus Cathedral—begun sometime around 1300—along with an eleventh-century farmhouse. Olaf's Church, dating to the 1200s and on the same site, is still in use. Lutheranism was introduced to the islands in the sixteenth century by King Christian III of Norway and Denmark, replacing Catholicism. A Faroese Lutheran minister, Venceslaus Ulricus Hammersheimb, created a spelling system for the Faroese language in 1846.

The first formal government, the Althing, dates to around 900, making it the oldest existing parliament in the world (along with Iceland's). The Faroes became a Norwegian province in 1035 and passed to Denmark with the rest of Norway in 1380.

RECENT HISTORY

The Faroe Islands are now a principality of Denmark but with a largely autonomous parliamentary government. The Parliament (*Lagting*) has thirty-two elected members, who in turn elect an executive body (*Landsstyre*) headed by a chairman.

During World War II when Germany invaded and occupied Denmark and Norway, Great Britain pre-empted Axis incursions into the Faroes and Iceland by occupying both. Although apparently accepted as a necessary compromise by the Faroese parliament, the situation ultimately strengthened demands for home rule. In 1948, the islands were granted self-government under the authority of

Denmark, with their own flag and currency (the krona). The University of the Faroe Islands in Torshavn, the capital, was founded in 1965.

Overfishing around the islands—together with poor fiscal discipline in the 1980s—resulted in an economic crash in the early 1990s, requiring Danish intervention. The islands bounced back, buoyed by the economic promise of offshore oil drilling and a growing independence movement.

The Faroese population numbers around fifty thousand. There are seventeen inhabited islands in the group, and many islets and reefs. Since 1900, the economic focus of the islands has shifted from sheep farming to fishing and related industries, including the export of frozen and dried cod. The fishing and processing industries employ about fifteen percent of the labour force and account for about twenty per cent of the Faroese economy and ninety per cent of the total export of goods and services. The addition of salmon farming to the fishery and development of new industries in the financial services, petroleum businesses, shipping, manufacturing, IT, tourism, civil aviation, and creative industries have contributed to the current employment rate of nearly 100%. Little of the land is cultivated and the main crop is grass for sheep. Wool is still used in a small home-based spinning and knitting industry.