

From Centre to Periphery

Main Lines of North Atlantic Cultural Development from Medieval to Modern Times

Bjarne Stoklund

Stoklund, Bjarne 1992: From Centre to Periphery. Main Lines of North Atlantic Cultural Development from Medieval to Modern Times. – *Ethnologia Europaea* 22: 51–65.

Hitherto, most ethnological and anthropological research on society and culture in the North Atlantic islands has assumed, explicitly or implicitly, a very long, almost unbroken continuity (“the traditional community” or “the old peasant culture”) which was superseded in the nineteenth century by a period of transformation and modernization. This article argues that the history of the islands since their settlement in c. 700–900 has been marked by considerable changes in ecological and economic conditions, and that the small island communities cannot be studied as isolated entities, but should be analysed in terms of their shifting relationships with the rest of Europe. One main thesis is that their development can be described as a movement from an economically and culturally “central” position in the early middle ages through increasing marginalization to the “peripheral” status that was typical of these communities in the centuries of Absolutism. The article seeks to demonstrate that the changes in these centre-periphery relations have been of great significance for the society and culture of the islands.

Professor Bjarne Stoklund, Department of European Ethnology (University of Copenhagen), Brede Allé 69, DK-2800 Lyngby, Denmark.

The North Atlantic island communities were established as part of the rapid Scandinavian expansion in the last third of the first millennium after the birth of Christ. The wave of emigration west from Norway began in the eighth century when settlers arrived in the island groups lying along the sea route to Ireland: the Shetlands, Orkneys and Hebrides. While these islands were already inhabited by Pictish and Gaelic tribes, the Norwegian emigrants, if they went beyond them to more open seas, could find islands with more virgin territory. In the ninth century they settled on the Faroes, and in 874, according to tradition, the first *landnám* man came to Iceland. A century later emigrants from Iceland founded two settlements in South West Greenland.

Within a period of a few hundred years, then, a number of independent Norwegian colonies were created in the North Atlantic area.

Geographically, they were very varied, but they did have one thing in common: they all possessed resources that allowed them to continue the farming culture that the emigrants brought with them from their West Norwegian homeland. It was based on agriculture with cattle and sheep farming as the most important element, but supplemented by fishing and hunting of various kinds. It was a seafaring culture, and its maritime expertise was not only a precondition of the actual settlement; it was also the cultural factor that enabled the pioneer communities, despite distances of hundreds or even thousands of kilometres, to maintain contacts and form a relatively homogeneous Nordic culture in this extensive area.

During the high middle ages the pioneer communities came under the sovereignty of the Norwegian Crown, and in 1380 they followed Norway into the Union with Denmark.

Parts of this “archipelago” were however lost in the transition from the middle ages to modern times: the Norse settlers in Greenland disappeared from history, and the Scottish island groups came under Scottish rule: the Orkneys and Shetlands as a pledge to the Scottish Crown in 1468–69, while the Hebrides had been lost to the “Norwegian realm” as early as 1280. In the post-medieval centuries Iceland and the Faroes were governed from Copenhagen, and the two island communities remained under Danish rule when Norway was united with Sweden by the Act of Union of 1815.

When the spotlight of research turned to the North Atlantic island communities around the turn of the century, they were remote and poverty-stricken possessions of the British and Danish kingdoms. And the first things to attract cultural researchers were of course the archaic features one could encounter here; the “primitive”, the “relics” provided the frame of reference when researchers tried to reconstruct their cultural development from an evolutionist point of view. The archaeologist Aage Roussell travelled all over the Scottish island groups in the 1930s to find material to compare with the farm sites he had excavated in Greenland. However, Roussell found much more than that; he found that the so-called “black-houses” in the Hebrides could in reality be interpreted as direct, living descendants of the Scandinavian Iron Age houses. They were relics in the evolutionist sense (Roussell 1934).

However, cultural research in the area between the wars was dominated more by the diffusionists and their attempts to discover the “*routes of culture*”. In the same year as Roussell was travelling through the Hebrides, the Swedish ethnologist Ragnar Jirlow, in an article on “aspects of Faroese occupational culture”, submitted a textbook example of how such a diffusionist analysis could be done (Jirlow 1931), and about a decade later another Swedish ethnologist, Åke Campbell, wrote about “the meeting of Celtic and Nordic culture in the Hebrides” (Campbell 1943/44).

In reality evolutionists and diffusionists agreed on the overall aim of cultural research: the reconstruction of the long lines of European or global cultural development. So the

great divide in cultural research is between these scholars on the one hand and the functionalists on the other. The functionalist cultural researchers dissociated themselves from the sometimes rather rash attempts to (re)construct the course of development, based more on speculation than documentation. Instead they concentrated on the study of culture and society as functioning totalities; they described and analysed sociocultural systems at a given time, and for good reasons that time was the present day or the period immediately before it; for nothing else could be studied that way with even a reasonable degree of certainty.

The period after about 1960 was typified in North Atlantic studies as elsewhere by *community studies*, carried out by both English-speaking anthropologists and Scandinavian ethnologists. The communities that were chosen for such studies were in fact by preference in peripheral areas of Europe – so-called “traditionalist” societies still more or less untouched by “modernization”. This way the functionalists – although their brief is quite different from that of the cultural historians – in reality end up with a model almost indistinguishable from theirs. Both operate implicitly with a crucial turning-point somewhere in the nineteenth or twentieth century. Before this we have the “traditional society”, “the old peasant society” or whatever it is called; from this there is an almost unbroken line back through time. The turning-point marks a radical process of transformation or modernization, “the advent of the new age”, the break-up of something ancient and firm-rooted.

Of course such a model is not completely wrong. Much of what could be observed at the end of the last century and the beginning of this one, but which was doomed to yield to “modernization”, was in fact phenomena that represented continuity throughout as much as a millennium. This is true, for example, of many of the working methods used in North Atlantic occupational life. Yet it is questionable to assume that everything one encounters in the so-called traditional communities can simply be projected backwards into the remote past. What looks ancient or primitive is not necessarily so. And one does not need to deal

for very long with the history of the North Atlantic area before realizing that this is a region where one should rather expect radical breaks than a long, unbroken development. Historical study also makes it obvious that it is not advisable to view these island communities as isolated entities. It is not only in recent history that the North Atlantic islands have been inextricably linked with the rest of the world; this is just as true if one wants to understand the earlier phases of the cultural development of the area.

If one wishes to view the North Atlantic culture from these perspectives, there is inspiration to be found in the work of some recent scholars who share the following features: 1) they try to reinstate a wider historical perspective in the cultural and social sciences; and 2) they want to view social and cultural change in a global context. I am thinking first and foremost of the historian Fernand Braudel, the sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein and the anthropologist Eric R. Wolf. The first two have worked in parallel throughout the eighties on related projects. With separate points of departure but in constant dialogue and mutual inspiration – they have tried to analyse and explain European economic expansion from the end of the middle ages on. While Braudel writes “universal history” in the tradition of the *Annales* school (Braudel 1981–84), Wallerstein’s project is the more ambitious one of discovering general laws of development. Throughout the three volumes on “The Modern World System” (1974–89), he has developed his theory of the economic “world system” as an all-embracing whole whose parts can only be understood as elements in the totality. The growth of the market system and the worldwide social division of labour leads to a classification into *centres* (economic nucleus areas) and *peripheries*, which depend on the centres and are exploited by them. The two are interlinked such that conditions in the periphery can only be understood in relation to the development of the centre. “Underdevelopment” in the periphery is not seen as a result of conservatism or stagnation, but is interpreted as the result of certain active economic pro-

cesses within a system which encompasses both centre and periphery.

These and similar ideas have inspired the American anthropologist Eric R. Wolf to reexamine the classic anthropological field of study. The “primitive” peoples have been studied either as representatives of older stages of global cultural development or as cultures that could be viewed as isolated totalities. But the history of such peoples is indissolubly bound up with our own, says Wolf; their culture is not an isolated phenomenon, but must be analysed as a result of European expansion under the capitalist world system (Wolf 1982).

I do not intend in the following to apply Immanuel Wallerstein’s theoretical apparatus to the study of the North Atlantic area. But the three scholars to whom I have referred may be of assistance in underscoring the need to use the study of cultural variation in Europe to take the long historical view, and to analyse the individual areas as elements in larger, economically interrelated wholes.

In order to bring out the important lines of development in the North Atlantic area, it is not enough to follow Wallerstein and Wolf by starting with the emergence of the capitalist system around 1500; we must go back to the Norse settlement of the area and to the society of the Viking Age. In the chronological chart on p. 54 I have tried to sum up North Atlantic history in four main stages: 1) the period of Viking society, from the *landnám* until about 1100; 2) “Europeanization” from c. 1100 until c. 1350; 3) “Marginalization” c. 1350–1600; and finally 4) a period with a relatively stable society at the periphery of Absolutist Europe, c. 1600–1800. The crucial cut-off point, marked with a broken line, represents the radical late medieval changes that meant the definitive end of the central position of the islands in Viking and late medieval society and laid the basis for the *peripheral* status typical of the centuries of Absolutism.

The displacement from *centre* to *periphery* is emphasized here as a main line in the history of the area. The concepts are borrowed from Wallerstein, but it is unlikely that he would concur in the extension of their use to the his-

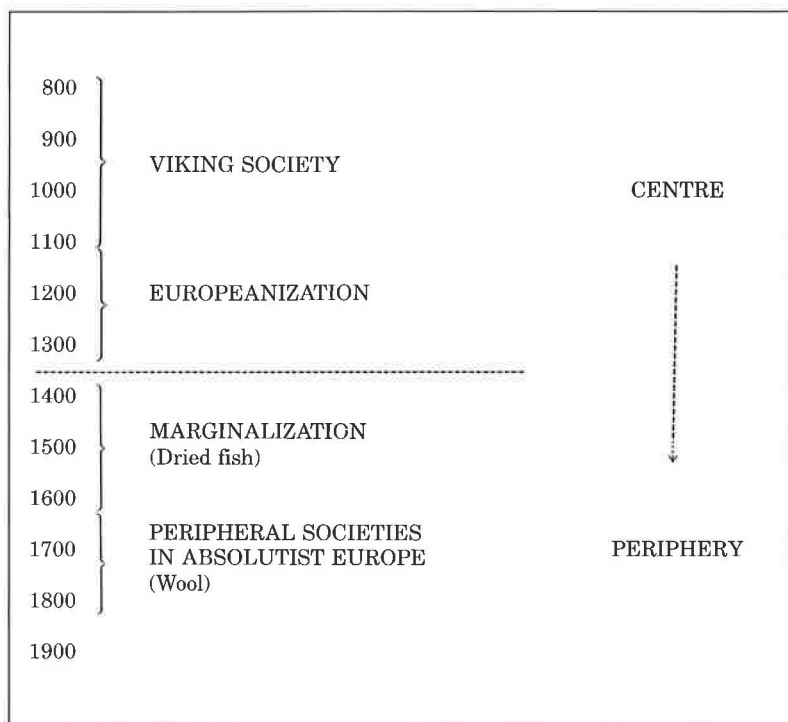


Figure 1. The most important periods in the history of the North Atlantic area.

tory of Europe before 1500. In this respect we are more in agreement with Fernand Braudel, who seeks precursors of capitalism in earlier periods of history and points out that there have always been economic “world systems”: the Phoenicians, Rome and the world of Islam are some examples. And, he says, the Vikings created “a short-lived and fragile world economy” which others were to continue (Braudel III, 1985: 25).

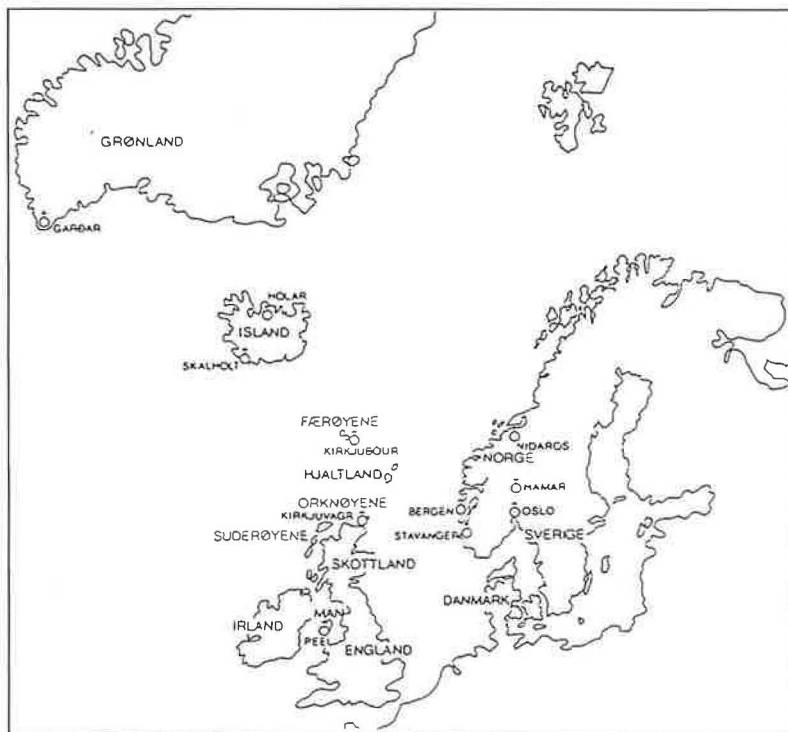
In the necessary revision of the view of the Viking Age which is now in progress, but which is only making a slow impact on European historiography, this passing remark by Braudel is perhaps worth pursuing. The situation of Christian Europe in the early middle ages can with some justification be described as the remains of the Roman Empire squeezed between two “world economies” in the Braudelian sense: that of the Arabs in the south and that of the Vikings in the north. If the Viking societies made up a whole, it was an economic rather than a political whole. And although the merchants of the Viking age were great farmers, not burghers, there are many points of

resemblance between them and the colonizers of the 1500s. Their economic expansion was based on superior technology and organizational abilities, and on the mastery of a script (runes) which made communication over long distances possible; they opened new trade routes, established trading stations and created “periphery” areas where the population paid tribute and supplied commodities in the form of furs and slaves, among other things.

We will not pursue this thought – only note that it is as an element in such a dynamic cultural system that we find the North Atlantic island communities in the first centuries of their history, with a culture-bearing upper class actively involved in trade and maintaining close contacts over the very long distances that separated them.

This “centre situation” – as we will venture to call it – persisted into the centuries of the high middle ages. It is this period I have called the age of “Europeanization” in the chronological chart, because in these centuries the Norse communities took over a number of new cultural features from the south and were remod-

Figure 2. The episcopal dioceses in the Norse area in the twelfth century. After *Handbok i Norges Historie*, Vol. III.



elled on the European pattern with an effective royal authority and ecclesiastical organization that quickly, in the course of the 1100s, established its network of episcopal dioceses throughout the North Atlantic area (Fig. 2).

The Norse communities of the 1100s were a fantastic world where old Viking norms and ideals were judiciously mixed with new Christian ideas of piety and penance. Central in this world were the later so remote island groups, the Shetlands and Orkneys, as described in the *Orkneyinga Saga* of the end of the twelfth century (Pálsson & Edwards 1978). In the vivid account given by this saga we meet a class of powerful men who are still citizens of the world with a radius of action extending thousands of kilometres. This is a culture-bearing upper class whose splendid wooden drinking-halls stand side by side with newly-built stone churches. A few still keep up the traditional Viking raids in quiet periods for farming, in the spring and autumn. Others work off their urge for action and adventure by going on pilgrimages to Rome or crusades to the Holy

Land. These are island communities which have still kept their own fleets and their own trade, and whose *farmmenn* (or trading peasants) sell a wide range of goods to a discerning European clientele – from dried fish and wadmel to walrus ivory and hunting falcons.

From the end of the 1200s on, however, the picture changes. The independent trading of the North Atlantic islands stops, and trade gradually falls into German hands. From about 1350 on the Hanseatic merchants command Bergen, which is the centre not only for West and North Norway, but also for trade with the Norwegian tributaries, the islands in the sea. The roles were now reversed. The economic focus had shifted to the south. From now on it was the merchants from the German trading cities of the Baltic and the North Sea who organized the hunt for the resources of the North Atlantic: fish, fish oil, whale blubber and many other goods. The marginalization had begun.

This marginalization meant several things.

It was not only the economic centres that were displaced; it was also political power that, with the union of Denmark and Norway, moved south. Late medieval Dano-Norwegian royal power was weak and unable to enforce its sovereignty in the North Atlantic or to afford effective protection to the inhabitants of its tributaries. As the latter had lost their own fleets, they would now more and more live "enclosed like cattle kept on islands", as an Icelandic source of the beginning of the 17th century put it (Thorsteinsson 1985: 163) – abandoned to the mercy of the tough sailors who followed the schools of herring and whale.

The expansion of the English, Germans and Dutch in the northern part of the Atlantic can be compared with that of the Portuguese farther to the south. There are many resemblances between the procedures in the two regions. Defenceless islanders along the sea routes had to supply free provisions to the ships – sometimes, indeed, slave labour, inhabitants who were taken on the voyage to the hunting grounds and put ashore again on the way back if they had survived the tribulations of the voyage. Throughout the 1400s and 1500s there were many accounts of pirate raids on Iceland and the Faroes, and these lawless conditions in the transition between the late middle ages and modern times are quite clearly something that has to be taken into consideration when one is seeking the reasons for the disappearance of the Norsemen in Greenland (Krogh 1982: 165f).

Economically, the area increasingly assumed the role of *periphery* in Wallerstein's sense. The North Atlantic islands were bulldozed into the economic system as suppliers of raw materials or cheap mass-produced articles for the European market. In each of the two main periods into which we have divided post-medieval North Atlantic history, the economy is dominated by one such product: from about 1350 until the end of the 1500s, dried fish was most important; but from about 1600 until 1800, knitted woollen stockings took over the role of main product from dried fish (cf. the chart).

Let us first look a little more closely at the dried fish period. There were both economic

and technological factors behind the late medieval expansion of fisheries in the North Atlantic. The demographic crisis of the late middle ages was marked economically by falling grain prices and rising prices for animal foods – meat and fish. A large European market developed an increasing demand for dried and salted fish, which could be transported over long distances and form part of household provisions. This is an important part of the background for both the boom in the Scanian herring fisheries in the 1400s and the Hanseatic interests in West Norway.

If we see a burgeoning of fisheries in the North Atlantic from the end of the 1300s, it is not enough to regard it as the attempt of the Dutch and English to get around the Hansa's – first and foremost Lübeck's – monopoly of the Norwegian fish trade through its control of the old trading node of Bergen. It must also be linked with the technological revolution accomplished by the Dutch when, around 1400, they developed the *haringbuis*, a fishing vessel that combined plenty of space and good sailing qualities. It can with some justification be called the first "factory ship"; it was possible to process and salt the herring catches on board, so the Dutch no longer had to depend on shore bases and could now sail to remote fishing grounds off Scotland.

In the end this boat and fishing technology helped the Dutch North Sea herring to victory in the competition with the Hanseatic merchants' Scanian herring. But it was also an important prerequisite of the Dutch drive into the North Atlantic. Indeed, Wallerstein even sees it as the actual starting-point for the build-up of Dutch economic hegemony in the next centuries (Wallerstein 1980: 39).

However, the Dutch were not allowed to monopolize the North Atlantic. The English and Hanseatic merchants from the North Sea cities of Hamburg and Bremen quickly adopted the technological innovations, and while the Dutch and the Hamburg merchants dominated the waters around the Orkneys and Shetlands for a few centuries, the English conquered the teeming fishing grounds around Iceland.

Björn Thorsteinsson attaches the same kind of importance for the development of English

world trade to the Iceland fisheries as Wallerstein attributed to the fishing revolution in Dutch trade history: "From all the harbours and points in England between Newcastle and Bristol, people set out on the Long Voyage to Iceland. In the fifteenth century a hundred ships or more set sail in the spring and sailed north, and around midsummer they set their course homeward again. The last of them reached harbour in October. Most of the vessels were fishing boats of the Dutch type, of 30–80 tons, and until the mid-century a few large merchantmen came on the voyage, but then they disappeared. It was the most extensive sea trade any nation plied before the discovery of America, and the Iceland trade taught the English to sail the dangerous seas that Norwegians and Icelanders only dared sail in the summer... The role of the Iceland trade in the history of English sea power can hardly be overestimated" (Thorsteinsson 1985: 126–26).

The Anglo-Dutch activity in the North Atlantic meant that everywhere among the islands fisheries assumed a much larger role in the overall economic pattern. For a couple of centuries fish became the predominant export item, while trading in the North Atlantic island communities became the *de facto* domain of these foreign fishermen and merchants. The role of dried fish in the period from c. 1350 to c. 1550 is the first example of the way the growing capitalist economy in the North Atlantic periphery demanded a single product and thus forced the area into a one-sided, market-dependent type of production.

Economic changes were heralded in the latter half of the 1500s by a drop in the price of fish and a decline in the fisheries. The causes are hard to establish. Among factors that have been mentioned are competition from the newly-discovered, rich fishing grounds off Newfoundland and the decline in European demand due to the Reformation's abolition of the weekly fast day.

However this may be, the long dried-fish chapter of the economic history of the North Atlantic must be said to have ended in about 1600, at least as far as Iceland and the Faroes were concerned. But the turn of that century

was at the same time a watershed of more general significance. In Wallerstein's analysis it marks the transition from the first to the second phase of the emergence of the capitalist world economy. The sixteenth century was the great, dynamic period of expansion which, after a crisis at the beginning of the seventeenth century, phased into something that cannot actually be called decline, but was rather consolidation. In this process the emergent national states and their mercantile protectionist policies played an important role.

These new tendencies had a strong impact in the North Atlantic area, especially in Iceland and the Faroes. From about 1600 and for the next two centuries these island societies were subjected to an increasingly regulated, restrictive trade monopoly. At the same time, however, the state was better able to assert its sovereignty in the area – for example against the newly-opened English trade route north of Norway to Archangelsk. For the Atlantic islands this meant more stable and peaceful conditions, but also a more static period when the challenges and economic potential were more limited than in what we have here called "the age of marginalization".

As mentioned above, the dried fish trade was superseded by a new mass product which assumed an even more dominant role: knitted stockings and other woollen goods. This "hosiery trade" constitutes an interesting chapter of cultural history which still awaits a broad, comparative study. For it is very intriguing that mass production of woollen goods using a new technique began at about the same time in a large north west European area which included Iceland, the Faroes, the Shetlands and West Jutland.

The woollen stockings were cottage industry products, but regulated by precise instructions that ensured a standardized product of uniform quality. Wool and idle hands could be found almost everywhere in the north west European region, but above all wherever dried fish production had been abandoned. But from whom came the demand for this standardized product in such large quantities? We appear to be dealing with two categories of consumers: on the one hand the great new merchant com-



Figure 3. Most Faroese settlements are at the foot of the steep, grass-covered fell slopes, where land and sea meet. Around the houses is the cultivated infield, and farther off the outfield, where cows and sheep graze. Everywhere there is easy access to the fish resources in the sea, and in many places there is also bird hunting on the fells. Most of the farms in the Faroes have been split up into smaller units, which now appear as a *byling* – a cluster of houses like the one in the picture. Part of the village of Hattarvík on the island of Fugloy. Photo: Bjarne Stoklund 1959.

panies, first and foremost in the Low Countries, which needed the stockings for their thousands of seamen; and there was a similar need among the navies that the national states were vying to build up in these years. The new North Atlantic “monoculture” of the beginning of the seventeenth century can thus be related to two typical phenomena of the period: the

expansion of overseas trade and the growth of the state apparatus.

We can see how quickly and radically the new industry made its impact and became economically dominant from the description of the Faroe Islands written by the priest Lucas Debes in the mid-1600s. The former importance of fisheries was still fresh in memory.



Figure 4. In Iceland the settlement pattern is still dominated by the big, undivided farms that lie along the watercourses in the wide valleys stretching inland. These offer fine opportunities for hay harvesting on the homefield and grazing on the mountain slopes. The farm Hólar in Eyafjörður, North Iceland. Photo: Bjarne Stoklund 1974.

Nevertheless, hosiery had by that time been fully integrated into the economy of the islands. Lucas Debes rails at the role played by the wool trade, even in his own household economy. The priest “must live not only as a good farmer, but also as a craftsman or stocking knitter. For he and his wife must take pains to ensure that his people spin and knit stockings that will be good merchandize... And since this kind of husbandry requires many people, one must have at least five or six labourers and as many servant-girls” (Debes 1673: 300). He also writes that work norms on a farm are counted in terms of finished woollen goods: “For each morning they weigh out to each lad or lass the amount they are to spin and knit that day – to wit, two pounds of wool to spin and two pounds of spun wool to knit a pair of stockings during the day” (Debes 1673: 248).

How should we describe the Faroese economy that we find in Lucas Debes and later

sources, and which has the manufacture of a single product for a far-off market as its dominant activity? Is it a phenomenon we can justifiably call “old peasant culture” or “traditional peasant economy”? No, strictly speaking it is the exact opposite; what we encounter here is in reality a very modern economy, extremely specialized and market-oriented. It shows that the Faroe Islands – and Iceland at the same time – had become closely linked to the new European economic system.

One could with some truth object that an area like the Faroes at that time had a dual – or sectoralized – economy. True, hosiery was a market economy phenomenon; but beside it there was a self-sufficiency or subsistence economy, with cattle farming, fisheries and bird hunting, which existed independently of the market economy and continued the old traditions unchanged.

To this I would reply that the two “economies” cannot simply be separated, for they

form parts of the same economic totality. The subsistence economy, too, was affected and changed by the shifting market relations. It was said of the hosiers in West Jutland around 1800 that they neglected their farming so that it was left at a relatively backward stage of development. Interrelationships of a similar kind can be found in large numbers in the North Atlantic area.

They already existed in the dried fish period, in the transition between the middle ages and modern times. Porkell Jóhannesen, who presented a doctoral thesis on *Die Stellung der freien Arbeiter in Island* in 1933, had a keen eye for such interrelationships: "Dieser Umbruch in der Wirtschaftsweise ist ein lehrreiches Beispiel dafür, wie eine ganze Volkswirtschaft mit fest eingewurzelten Wirtschafts- und Arbeitsformen geradezu auf den Kopf gestellt wird durch das Vorgehen ausländischer Wirtschaftsinteressenten, die es fertig bringen, um ihrer Vorteile willen die Arbeitskraft des betreffenden Volkes auf ein ganz anderes Produktionsgebiet umzuleiten. Bisher waren die Isländer in erster Linie ein tüchtiges Bauernvolk gewesen. Von jetzt an bekommt der Fernhandel mit Fisch immer mehr Wind in die Segel, während die Landwirtschaft in immer grössere Abhängigkeit von der Fischerei und dem Handel mit ausländischen Kaufleuten gerät" (Jóhannesen 1933: 46).

The early effect of the emergent capitalist world economy could hardly be formulated more clearly. Here I will only add a few of the mentioned effects of the dominance of fisheries: a shifting of the focus of settlement from the inland to the coastal areas; a widening of the social gap between a large peasant class and a landless proletariat; and finally, possible changes in the nature of agriculture.

The last point is difficult to treat with certainty, because we must also reckon with the effects of the climatic deterioration that came in the late middle ages. We know that medieval Icelandic agriculture included the cultivation of grain, and that this ceased during the transition to modern times. Even a slight fall in average temperature in the marginal areas of cereal cultivation could make this branch of agriculture industry impossible. On the other

hand, it seems reasonable to assume that in an economy with the main emphasis on fish, and in a period of high fish prices and low grain prices, people chose to react to the market economy by giving up cereal farming and buying the cheap cereals for bread from abroad.

We know a little more about the effect of the next dominant type of market production – knitted stockings – on Icelandic farming. It has been estimated that the ratio of cows to sheep in the middle ages, up to about 1600, was 1:6. In the hosiery period this balance shifted, so that the ratio of cows to sheep around 1800 was 1:20 or 1:25. This period is marked by a steep decline of birch wood and rapidly increasing soil erosion (Bjarnason 1976). It seems logical to interpret the latter phenomenon in particular as a result of the increase in sheep farming and the overpasturing this must have meant.

In the Faroes the effect of the hosiery trade is harder to establish – among other reasons because the sheep had always played a more important role, relatively speaking, than in Iceland. Nevertheless, one must beware of simply assuming that the outfield system and the pattern of exploitation we know from sources of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries also existed in the middle ages. E. A. Bjørk's studies of Faroese agrarian common law seems to show that from the middle of the 1600s on there was a shift from individual sheep farming (so-called *kenning*) to the communal *fællig* system that later became dominant (Bjørk 1956/57: 73, 133, 373). Although this change in the system is difficult to interpret, it seems reasonable to link it with the increase in sheep farming and intensification of wool production that began at almost the same time.

So far, we have taken our examples of centre-periphery relations from Iceland and the Faroes. These two island communities shared common conditions – for example political dependence on Denmark and subjection to the restrictions of the trade monopoly. As a comparison, we will now look at the two island groups north of Scotland, the Orkneys and Shetlands. These too had a decidedly peripheral status in the centuries of Absolutism, but

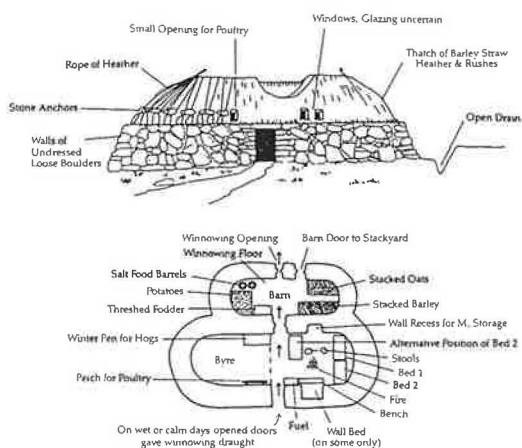


Figure 5. "Black-house" in the Hebrides. After Fenton 1989.

their relations with the European centres had a different character and social and cultural development took a different course there.

The crucial historical turning-point for the Orkneys and Shetlands, too, was the transition from the middle ages to modern times, but the transition was given a particular emphasis by the pawning of the islands to the Scottish Crown in 1468–69. This inaugurated a massive "Scotticization" and politico-economic linkage with Scotland and later Great Britain. In the course of the 1700s and 1800s the islands became a remote province of the expanding British industrial society. An important difference from Iceland and the Faroes was that, from the 1400s on, immigrant Scottish "lairds" transformed the old Norse peasant society to a feudal society of estate tenants who became increasingly dependent on the lairds. This was a long process, which resulted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the characteristic crofter society, typified by the very small farms (crofts) whose tenants eked out the yield of their small land holding with fishing, kelp burning and other "secondary occupations".

Where trade and the fish market had been in the hands of German and Dutch merchants in the seventeenth century, these too were now subsumed under the dominance of the lairds. The estate owners became "merchant lairds", developed and financed fisheries and in gen-

eral took very deliberate steps to turn their estates into economically profitable concerns. A well-known result of this throughout northern and western Scotland was the so-called "sheep-clearances" – the annexation of the peasants' old common lands – and sometimes whole villages – as pastures for a new and bigger breed of sheep so that the estates could meet the demand for wool from the British textile industry. The Orkney and Shetland economies were thus moulded by the same two products for the European market – fish and wool – but production took on a different nature, and social and cultural development followed other paths than farther out in the North Atlantic (Smith 1984; Fenton 1978).

Let me conclude by showing how a "traditional" element of culture – the house or dwelling – becomes more comprehensible when interpreted in the long historical perspective for which I have argued here. This can only be a very rough sketch, but it is a theme I have dealt with in more detail elsewhere (Stoklund 1980; 1982; 1984; 1987).

The houses on the Scottish islands which have interested cultural historians can be illustrated by two drawings of dwelling types. Figure 5 shows a so-called "black-house" from the Hebrides and Figure 6 a "long-house" from Shetland. Both have been regarded as representatives of an ancient tradition. It was

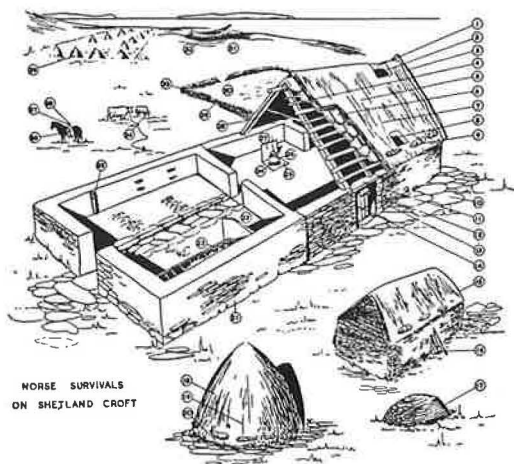


Figure 6. "Long-house" in the Shetlands, drawn for the Jarlshof publication. After Hamilton 1956.

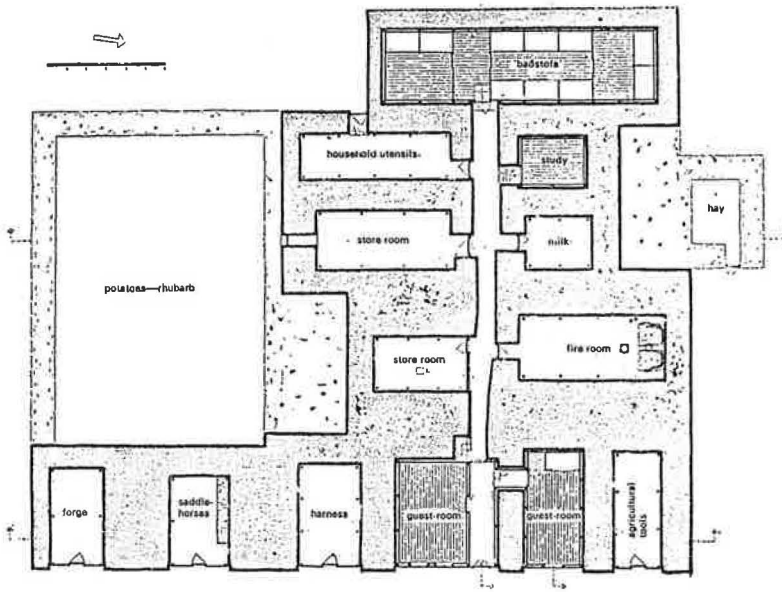


Figure 7. Plan of the manse farm, Glaumbær in Skagafirði. Surveyed by Sacher 1938.

houses like the one in Figure 5 that were interpreted by Aage Roussell as direct descendants of the Scandinavian iron age houses. The long-house from Shetland was drawn by the archaeologists who excavated the Viking age sites at Jarlshof, and who used it in their reconstruction of the excavated building on the basis of a postulated unbroken tradition.

In both cases, however, it is important to be aware that these houses were used by the crofters – by the cottager class that only emerged on the islands in the 1700s. The primitive appearance of the buildings need not necessarily be the result of a very ancient tradition. It could also be the result of poverty rather than age. This possibility seems to be strengthened by the fact that there are strong indications in the Shetlands that the houses preserved from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had certain predecessors which disappeared almost without a trace. The more prosperous peasants or “udallers” who were turned into tenants in the 1600s appear to have obtained wooden houses from West Norway, with which trade relations were maintained for a long time. We do not know with certainty what they looked like. They may have been log houses, but there are a few items of information that suggest that they were close relations of the stave-built Faroese houses.

The buildings in Iceland in which cultural historians have primarily been interested are not small houses like those on the Scottish islands, but large farm complexes like the manse farm at Glaumbær in Figure 7. This is partly because in Iceland we have a quite different social structure. Here there is no landlord class in the European sense, culturally distinct from the ordinary peasant population, but an indigenous class of big farmers who built turf farms like the one shown above.

The construction of such farms represents an old tradition in a particular Icelandic version; but the actual farm layout, which consists of one-room elements linked by a connecting passage, is a seventeenth and eighteenth-century phenomenon. Thanks to archaeological investigations and Hørður Águstsson's reconstructions on the basis of valuations (Águstsson 1982), we can trace how this complex gradually takes form in a course of development stretching from the late middle ages to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. An important room element is the peculiar *badstofa*. In the late middle ages it seems to have lived up to its name: then it was really a bath-house for steam baths, but this function had to be abandoned at an early stage because of the increasing scarcity of fuel. Instead, everyday working and accommodation functions were

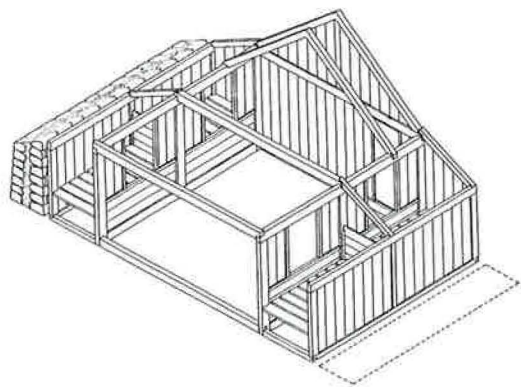


Figure 8. Stave construction of the Faroese house. After Stoklund 1987.

moved to this stove-heated room. First it became a workroom for the women, then a dining-room for the whole household. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the former bath-house also became a bedroom, first for the farmer and his family, then also for the servants, so that it became a kind of “multi-purpose room”. But by that time the stove in the *baðstofa* had long since disappeared. Only the name remained as a reminder of the history of the room. It was now applied to a phenomenon which was unique in Europe – an everyday living-room heated solely by the body heat of the members of the household combined with the efficient insulation provided by the metre-thick turf walls.

Among the factors that contributed to the development of the distinctive Icelandic *ganghús*, three are worth mentioning: the first is the deterioration in climate that began at the end of the middle ages; the second is the disastrous shortage of firewood that arose in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when the birch woods had been exhausted; and the third and final factor was the cultural isolation for which the trade monopoly’s single-stranded bond with Europe must bear much of the responsibility.

Where the Icelandic *ganghús* or passage-house thus represents an independent, endogenous cultural development determined by the special economic and ecological situation of Iceland in the centuries of Absolutism, the traditional Faroese house on the other hand showed

a high degree of persistence with the Norse or Western Scandinavian traditions of the middle ages and Renaissance. This applies both to the construction and planning of the house. In the Viking age and in the middle ages stave construction was widespread all over the Norse area. Today we know it best from the Norwegian stave churches, but there are traces of it in the oldest Icelandic farms, just as there are indications, as we have seen, that it was used in the Shetland dwellings. However, the Faroes are alone in keeping stave construction as the preferred method of building in the special variant shown in Figure 8.

The dwelling, as represented here by a house from Múla in the Danish Open Air Museum (Fig. 9), includes two main elements, the *roykstova* and *glasstova*. The former, the “smoke-room”, originally simply called the *stova* or room, was a medieval innovation introduced to the Faroes and the rest of the North Atlantic area in the period of Europeanization in the high middle ages. The *glasstova* or glass-room was a Renaissance innovation which reached the Faroes by way of West Norway, probably in the sixteenth century when contacts with and impulses from Norway were still maintained.

However, the *glasstova* only became more widespread in the Faroes in the latter half of the eighteenth century. This is a development that can be followed fairly closely in probate proceedings and sales accounts. The background for this is the relative prosperity that the trade monopoly ensured the Faroese population from about 1750 on. But it is important to point out that at that time the *glasstova* was an element that had already been absorbed into Faroese culture – that is, not an innovation from abroad. Nor does the Faroese population seem to have adopted new furniture types in this period. Bourgeois Danish home furnishings can only be found in the probate records among a small group of inhabitants in Tórshavn. But these people were not held in very high esteem, so they did not come to function as models for, or suppliers to, the more prosperous people out in the populated districts. Perhaps one might also venture to see national self-assertion in the massive rejection of Danish household culture and the persist-

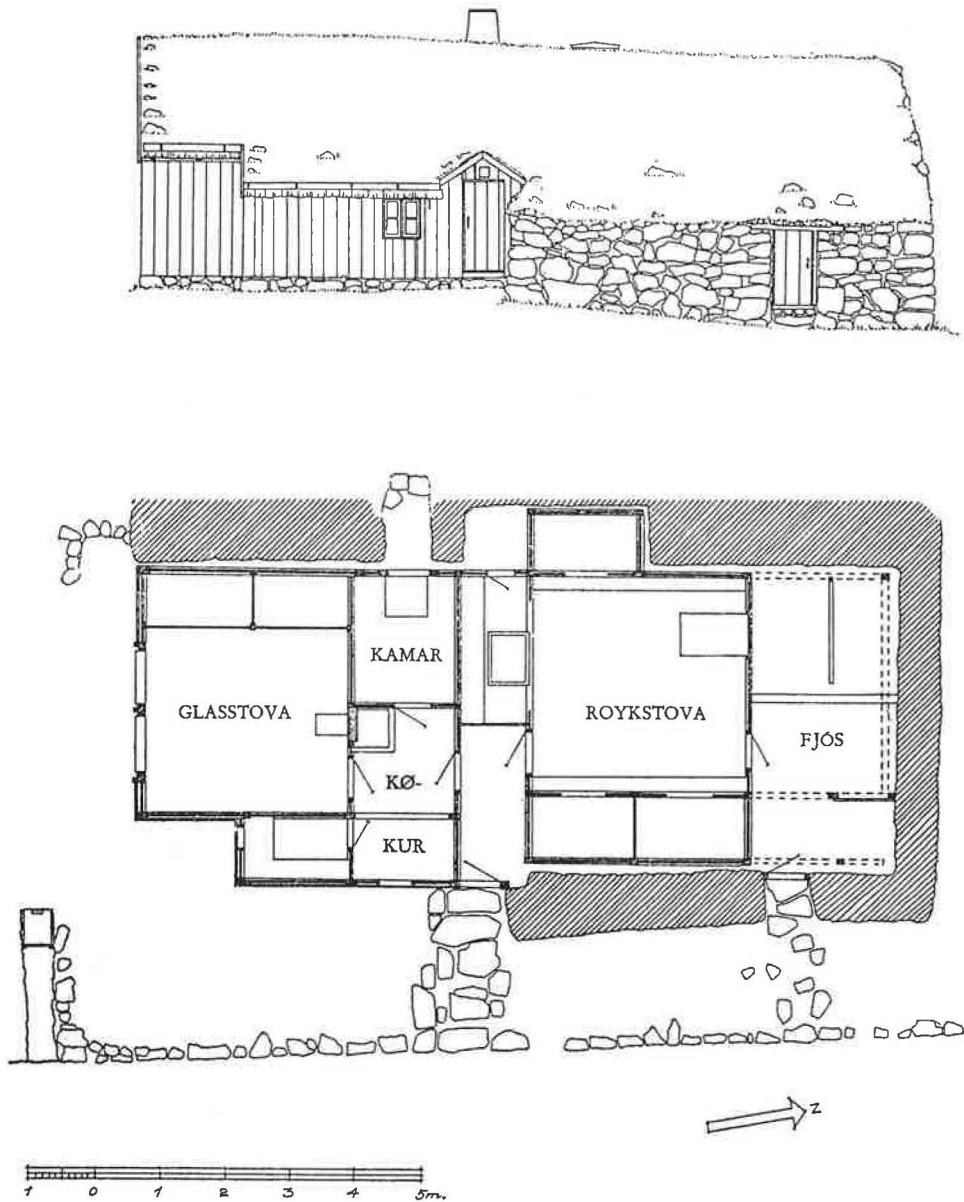


Figure 9. House at Múla on Borðoy, now in the Danish Open Air Museum at Lyngby. The living-room of the house, or *roykstova*, is to the right of the entrance behind thick stone and turf walls. There are no windows, but the room is lit through a "louvre" in the ridge of the roof. Originally the louvre was also a smoke vent, but this house has a wooden chimney above the open hearth in the niche behind the front room. On two sides of the room there are built-in bed alcoves. To the left of the entrance is the best room of the house, the *glasstova*, so called because of the windows in the gable. Other recent cultural features in this room are the ceiling and the iron stove, fired from a small kitchen. On two sides the room has wooden outer walls. After Stoklund 1982.

ence in something genuinely Faroese in the society of the 1700s.

This brief overview of the development of dwelling types in the North Atlantic area has, I

hope, shown how useful and necessary it is to apply a long historical perspective when cultural conditions in this area are to be understood and explained. It has also – along with

the outline of shifting relations with Europe – emphasized that these island societies cannot be studied as isolated units, but should be seen as elements in larger economic systems. The example chosen, the dwelling, may however help to remind us that such interrelationships in themselves cannot explain everything. Many other factors have an influence; that ecological conditions are crucial in an area like the North Atlantic, for example, goes without saying. It is important that the centre-periphery model does not become a new kind of reductionism, but remains a perspective that can reveal new, important aspects of North Atlantic cultural development.

Translated by James Manley

Note

The first version of this paper was presented as a lecture at a conference on North Atlantic cultural research August 27.–30. 1990 in Tórshavn, Faroe Islands, and published in *Nordatlantiske Foredrag. Seminar om nordatlantisk kulturforskning i Nordens Hus på Færøerne* 27.–30. august 1990, Tórshavn 1991.

References

Ágústsson, Hørður 1982: Den islandske bondegårds udvikling fra landnamstiden indtil det 20. årh. In: Myhre, Stoklund & Gjerder, ed.: *Vestnordisk byggeskik gennem to tusen år*. Stavanger.
 Bjørk, E. A. 1956/57: *Færøsk byggeret* I. Tórshavn.
 Bjarnason, Hákon 1976: Nogle bemærkninger ang. Islands historie i forbindelse med birkeskovens ødelæggelse. Lecture at a conference arr. by Nordiska rådet för antropologisk forskning.
 Braudel, Fernand 1981–84: *Civilization and Capitalism 15th–18th Century* I–III. London/New York.
 Campbell, Åke 1943/44: Keltisk och nordisk kultur i möte på Hebriderna. In: *Folk-Liv* VII–VIII.

Debes, Lucas 1673: *Færøernes Beskrivelse*. (Reprint 1963). København.
 Fenton, Alexander 1978: *The Northern Isles: Orkney and Shetland*. Edinburgh.
 Fenton, Alexander 1989: *The Island Blackhouse*. Edinburgh.
 Hamilton, J. R. C. 1956: *Excavations at Jarlshof, Shetland*. London.
 Hastrup, Kirsten 1990: *Nature and Policy in Iceland 1400–1800. An Anthropological Analysis of History and Mentality*. Oxford.
 Hunter, James 1976: *The Making of the Crofting Community*. Edinburgh.
 Jirlow, Ragnar 1931: Drag ur färöisk arbetsliv. In: *Rig* 1931.
 Jóhannesson, Þorkell 1932: *Die Stellung der freien Arbeiter in Island*. Reykjavik/København.
 Krogh, Knud J. 1982: *Erik den Rødes Grønland*. København.
 Pálsson, Hermann and Paul Edwards 1978: *Orkneyinga saga*. London.
 Roussell, Aage 1934: *Norse Building Customs in the Scottish Isles*. København/London.
 Smith, Hance D. 1984: *Shetland Life and Trade 1550–1914*. Edinburgh.
 Stoklund, Bjarne 1980: Houses and Culture in the North Atlantic Isles: Three Models of Interpretation. In: *Ethnologia Scandinavica* 1980: 113–132.
 Stoklund, Bjarne 1982: Røgstue og glasstue. Boligudviklingen på Færøerne set i vestnordisk sammenhæng. In: Myhre et al. ed.: *Vestnordisk byggeskik*. Stavanger.
 Stoklund, Bjarne 1984: Building Traditions in the Northern World. In: Fenton and Pálsson ed.: *The Northern and Western Isles in the Viking World*. Edinburgh.
 Stoklund, Bjarne 1987: *Nordatlantisk byggeskik. Kontinuitet og forandring 9–19. årh*. IEF Arbejdsrapport I/1987.
 Thorsteinsson, Björn 1985: *Island, Politikens Danmarkshistorie*. København.
 Wallerstein, Immanuel 1974–89: *The Modern World System* I–III. New York/London.
 Wolf, Eric R. 1982: *Europe and the People without History*. Los Angeles/London.