

Peter Foote Memorial Bursary Report

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Thanks to the support and generosity of the Peter Foote Memorial Bursary, I was able to undertake a week-long research trip to the Faroe Islands in May 2024. This visit was for the purposes of supporting the research for my doctoral thesis, “‘Sheaves from Sagaland’: Ecomedievalism and the Norse North Atlantic in British Writing (1860-Present)”. Without the support of the Viking Society for Northern Research, this journey would simply not have been possible, and I am very grateful to the bursary committee and the society as a whole.

My PhD thesis focuses on the reception, translation, and influence of Old Norse literature on British writing between the mid-nineteenth and early twenty-first centuries. The structure of the dissertation is archipelagic with each of the three chapters focusing on British texts about one island or archipelago (namely Iceland, Greenland/Kalaallit Nunaat, and the Faroe Islands). The trip supported by the Peter Foote Bursary formed part of the early research into the Faroes chapter and complemented previous research-led visits to Iceland and the south of Greenland.

The purpose of this trip was to visit archival and heritage sites related to my research but also, crucially, to experience the Faroese landscape. This is because one of the key focuses of my thesis has been on how modern readers of Old Norse texts have in turn been influenced in their writing about places and landscapes associated with Norse stories and settlement. Prior to my journey, I had hoped to visit museums such as Krígssavnið (‘The War Museum’) and the Saga Museum, as well as sites such as the Kvívík farmstead ruins. However, the timing of my visit was unfortunate as it coincided with the sudden calling of a nationwide workers’ strike which took place between the 14th May and 9th June. This strike action shut down the bus network, as well as key imports such as petrol and fresh food. Taxis were, therefore, only allowed to run between certain hours, and I was at one point perilously close to being stranded at the airport overnight. Thankfully this was averted, but it did mean that for the duration of my visit I was limited primarily to where my feet could take me, ruling out places such as Krígssavnið and the Saga Museum.



Figure 1 The ruins of the cathedral at Kirkjubøur

The limitations imposed by the strike were, however, generative for my thinking about sense of place and the historical experience of living on this archipelago. The Faroes' location in the North Atlantic and their historic (and very much continuing) reliance on imports becomes a form of experiential knowledge when you are watching fresh produce disappear from supermarket shelves and local menus. I was also afforded the opportunity to literally follow in the footsteps of the twentieth-century Old Norse-Icelandic scholar, and prominent member of the Viking Society for Northern Research, Gabriel Turville-Petre (1908-1978) when I made the journey on foot between Tórshavn and Kirkjubøur. The latter is a village around 8km from the capital and was the site of the medieval bishopric; Turville-Petre visited it during the Second World War when he was dispatched to the Faroes by the British Foreign Office. His official reason for travel was to report on the views of the Faroese on subjects such as the British Occupation (which began in 1940) and the possibility of Faroese independence from Nazi-occupied Denmark. However, Turville-Petre also used it as an opportunity to explore the archipelago's Norse history and story traditions, including making the hike between the capital and medieval village of Kirkjubøur. Reading the diary of his time in the Faroes whilst visiting myself created at times a kind of double vision as I saw the Norse history of the islands through Turville-Petre eyes as well as my own.

In Kirkjubøur, I was able to visit the ruins of the medieval cathedral (which sparked a lot of new thinking for me as I compared it to my experience of the ruins of the Norse cathedral in Igaliku, Greenland), the medieval parish church, and the partial ruins of what is believed to be St. Brendan's Chapel – now known as Líkhúsi ('The Corpse House'). I was also able to look

around what remains of the Bishop's Palace – a still inhabited farm house – and to see the likely location of the writing of the oldest surviving document from the Faroe Islands – the late 13th century Seyðabrævið ('The Sheep Letter').



Figure 2 Statue of Madonna and Child held at the National Museum

Back in Tórshavn, I made the most of the National Museum's collections. I was particularly pleased to have the opportunity to see items which demonstrated the centuries old connections between the British Isles and the Faroes. Such items included the statue of the Madonna and Child (believed to have once stood in the cathedral at Kirkjubøur) which is thought to have perhaps been either made in England or to have been created by an English craftsmen; as well as the 'Treasure of Sandur', a hoard which included coins from eleventh-century England. It was also fascinating to see how

the literary and documentary history of the islands, for example the Saga of the Faroe Islanders, was presented and discussed within the exhibitions.

During my research trip, I was also assisted by staff from the National Library of the Faroe Islands, the National Archive, and the University of the Faroe Islands. Through their help I was able to access archival materials related to mid-century British visitors to the Faroes, such as the Scottish writer Hugh MacDiarmid (1892-1978) who was inspired by the Norse connections between the archipelago and his home of Shetland. I was also grateful for the opportunity to have conversations, both those which were planned and those which were happy accidents, with scholars whose work related to my own. Finally, I really appreciated the chance to learn more about Faroese culture and history from Faroese people and cultural institutions.

I would like to thank the Viking Society for Northern Research once more for the support of the Peter Foote Memorial Bursary. The research trip which it enabled is already shaping and directing the research of my final thesis chapter, and it also allowed me to experience what the historian David Gange has called 'the archive of the feet' as I walked the landscapes which I have long read about.

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