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Title	The Leirvik 'Bonhústoftin' and the Early Christianity of the Faroe Islands, and beyond.
Authors	Sheehan, John;Stummann Hansen, Steffen
Publication date	2006-01-01
Original Citation	Sheehan, J., and Stummann Hansen, S. (2006) 'The Leirvik 'Bonhústoftin' and the Early Christianity of the Faroe Islands, and beyond', Archaeologica Icelandica, 5(1), pp. 27-54.
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
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Download date	2026-10-23 08:33:29
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/3034

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THE LEIRVÍK "BØNHÚSTOFTIN" AND THE EARLY CHRISTIANITY OF THE FAROE ISLANDS, AND BEYOND

The best-preserved early church site on the Faroe Islands, locally known as Bønhústoftin (English: prayer-house ruin), is located in the settlement of Leirvík on the island of Eysturoy. Although the site is well known it has neither been the subject of a proper archaeological survey nor has it ever been included in discussions of the nature of early Christianity in the Faroe Islands. The site was recently surveyed and described by the authors, and the results of this work are presented here. Other sites of related type, both in the Faroe Islands and elsewhere, are identified and the archaeological and historical contexts within which these sites should be considered, including the evidence from Toftanes and Skúvoy, are discussed.

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Keywords: *Christianity, Faroe Islands, Chapel*

Introduction

Archaeology in the Faroe Islands was virtually non-existant until 1940 when Sverri Dahl (1910–1987) was hired as an assistant for Tórshavn-based local antiquarians. Before this time very few excavations had taken place, and those that had were mainly undertaken because of the efforts or support of Danish antiquarians and archaeologists (Stummann Hansen 2003). Dahl adopted a broad approach to the archaeology of the islands, and although his name is primarily inextricably linked to a number of settlement sites of the Viking Age (Dahl 1951; 1958; 1971a; 1971b), he demonstrated interest in all types of monuments. For instance, one of his earliest initiatives, in 1940, was to excavate the few remaining burials associated with the medieval church site of *á Luti* in the settlement of Syðrugøtu on Eysturoy (Dahl 1952).

The church site at Gøtu, lying on an exposed coastal location, was badly eroded, and as only a few graves were still preserved there, it proved difficult for Dahl to establish any firm idea of the site's morphology. This possibility, however, was afforded him by a number of, hitherto unregistered, church sites scattered around the islands. These sites generally had place-names attached to them containing the Faroese term "Bønhús", which may be translated into English as

"prayer-house". This type of monument had attracted rather little attention before Dahl started recording them. However, the Danish antiquarian, Daniel Bruun (1846–1932), who visited the Faroe Islands on several occasions, did show an interest in them , and noted: "In the Catholic period there were besides churches at many places, so-called „Bønnehuse", of which there can still be seen remains on some

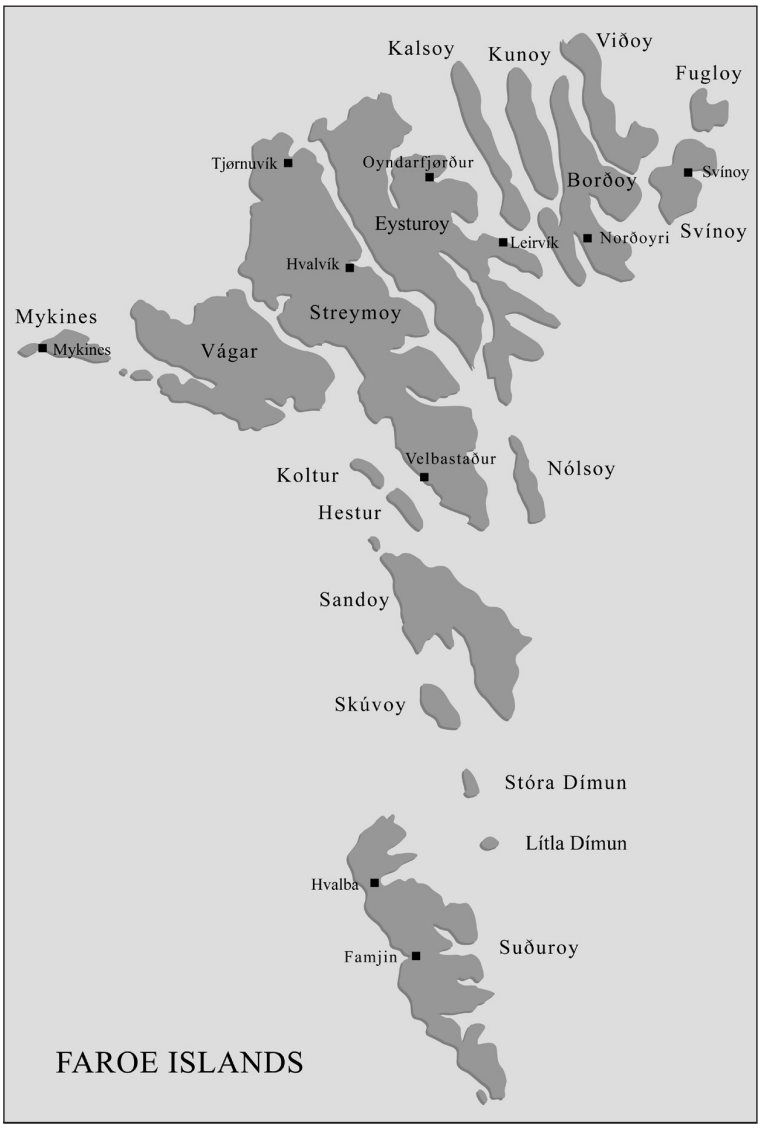

Figure 1. Map of the Faroe Islands with sites mentioned in the text indicated. Computer-graphics: I. Seiten.

sites (for instance in Leirvík on the island of Eysturoy, in Húsavík on the island of Sandoy, and so forth)" (Bruun 1929, 166; authors' translation from Danish).

Dahl, the State Antiquary of the Faroe Islands from 1952, produced a rough sketch-plan in 1956 of a "Bønhús" at the site *Bønhústoftin* (English: the prayer-house ruin) in Leirvík on the island of Eysturoy, and in the following year of the site of *Prestbøtoft* (English: ruin in the field of the priest) in Oyndarfjørður, also on Eysturoy (Fig. 1). None of these sites were, however, fully planned and surveyed (Stummann Hansen, *forthcoming A*). In 1968 Dahl stated: "It seems, that throughout the medieval period there were churches or prayer-houses attached to all the central farms in the ancient settlements. Supposedly they were all demolished by the time of the Reformation, and all that is left are a few ruins situated in grass-covered churchyards surrounded by circular enclosures". Dahl furthermore stated: "Investigations of these bønhús-sites have now been initiated" (1968, 207; authors' translation from Danish). However, while church topography has been a very important issue in the archaeology of medieval Greenland and Iceland for a long time, very little research has been conducted to date on this topic in the Faroe Islands.

The *Bønhústoftin* site at Leirvík consists of a small rectangular structure, which is located towards the centre of a sub-circular enclosure (Figs. 2–3). To date, it has never been fully described or surveyed. It is not referred to in any known historical source and its existence is first noted in print in 1929 (Bruun 1929, 166). More recently Arge has referred to it in his consideration of the nearby settlement site of *Í Uppistovubeitinum*, dated to the twelfth/fourteenth centuries, suggesting that together they formed 'an entity' (1997, 39). This may be so, but it seems equally likely that the *Bønhústoftin* may have formed part of either *við Garð* or *á Toftanesi*, another two ancient settlements in Leirvík. The latter site, better known as Toftanes, is the location of an excavated Viking-age settlement (Stummann Hansen 1991).

The only record of the Leirvík *Bønhústoftin* that exists in the archives of the National Museum of the Faroe Islands (Føroya Fornminnissavn) is the sketch plan made of it in 1956 by Sverri Dahl. This plan is of particular importance because it shows the site as it existed prior to the alterations that took place, especially to the northern part of its enclosure, in more recent times. Dahl, however, omitted to include the entrance to the enclosure in his plan. There are also two photographs of the site on file but, unfortunately, neither of them shows this section of the site.

There is a number of surviving local traditions concerning the Leirvík *Bønhústoftin,* all of which refer to it in the context of burial. According to one of these, stillborn and unbaptised infants were buried there clandestinely up until the early twentieth century[1]. Another holds that victims of the Black Death, which took a heavy toll on the Faroese people in the mid-fourteenth century, were buried there. This tradition may, however, actually represent a conflated account of a later event, namely the

[1] In modern times there was no church or cemetery in Leirvík until 1906. Before that time people would have been buried in the neighbouring settlements of Fuglafjørður or Gøte

Figure 2. Photo of the Bønhústoftin church site in Leirvík, seen from approximately west. Photo: S. Stummann Hansen.

death of thirty-nine inhabitants of Leirvík in a smallpox epidemic in 1725[2]. Finally, there is a tradition concerning a local man, who drowned at sea in 1877. His body eventually drifted ashore, but without one of its arms, and it was buried in the churchyard in the neighbouring village of Fuglafjørður. The missing arm was later recovered and, interestingly, buried at the Leirvík *Bønhústoftin*[3].

Description

The village of Leirvík is situated on the north-eastern shore of the Gøtunes peninsula, on the island of Eysturoy. It is located in a fairly level area, open to the sea at the north, and is defined by two high mountains – *Ritufjall* and *Sigatindur* – at the south. The site consists of a sub-circular enclosure containing the sod-covered remains of a centrally located building. The field in which it is located slopes down northwards and features a number of small drainage ditches, locally referred to as *veitir* (Figs. 2–3).

The enclosure measures 19.5 m north-south by 19.2 m east-west, internally. Its enclosing element consists of an earthen bank with an entrance gap, measuring 0.5 m in width, at west. The bank is very well preserved from the entrance towards the south. Along this stretch it survives as a flat-topped bank averaging 0.45 m in external height, 0.2 m in internal height and 0.75 m in basal width. At south its external side has been scarped back to form an almost

[2] Dahl incorrectly refers this event to 1736 in his reference to the site (Trap 1968, 290). Thus a record of October 4th 1725 states that this year 11 men, 14 women and 16 children died from smallpox. Faroese National Archives (Færø Amt – Indkomne Breve til Stifsbefalingsmanden 1723–25).

[3] Pers. com., Páll Mikkelsen, Tórshavn.

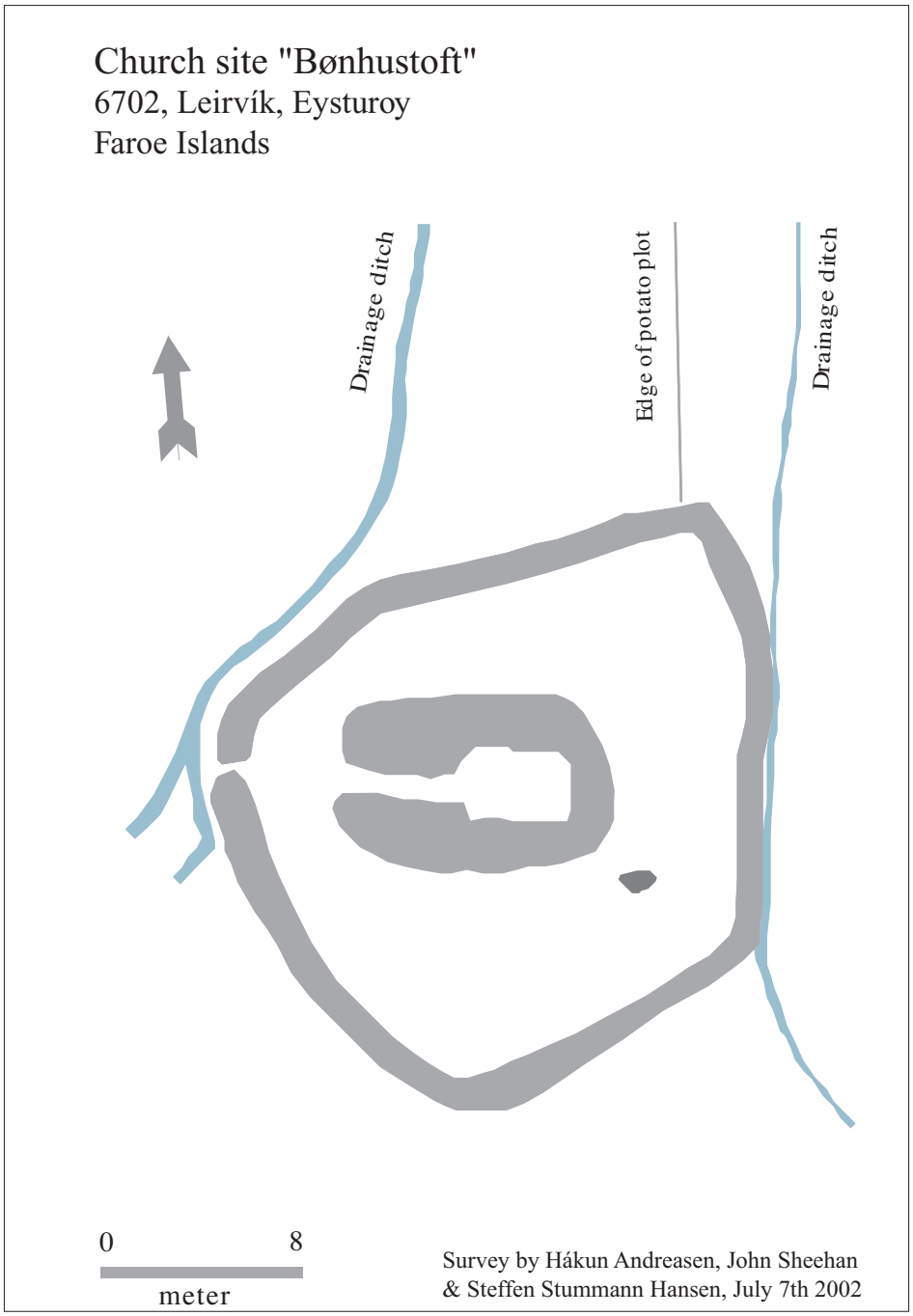

Figure 3. Plan of the Bønhústoftin church site in Leirvík. Computer-graphics: M. C. Krause.

vertical face. At east-southeast an external *veitir* abuts the bank and continues down towards north for a distance of about 12 m, and this has resulted in a narrowing of the width of the bank here. A short stretch of well-preserved bank is extant at northeast, but it has been completely removed at north. This was caused when an area, measuring *c*.10 m north-south by *c*.9 m east-west and up to 0.8 m in depth, which incorporated part of the enclosure at north, was dug away. This resulted in a low vertical edge to the site, averaging 0.6 m in height, at this point. No visible trace of the site's enclosing element is apparent at northwest, though here the line of a curving *veitir* preserves its probable course.

The building is centrally located, approximately, within the enclosure. It is a rectangular structure, with its long axis aligned east-west and with an entrance passageway at west. Internally, it measures 3.6 m east-west by 2.7 m north-south, while externally it has dimensions of 11.4 m east-west by 7.6 m north-south. Its walls, earthen banks furnished with coursed stone-facing internally, stand up to 0.65 m in internal height. Externally, at west, the long sides of the building extend for a further 4.6 m to form its entrance passageway. This averages 1 m in width and there are some indications of stone facing evident on its northern side.

There is a large boulder/outcrop of basalt located about 1 m southeast of the building's corner. It measures 1.6 m by 1 m and features two bored holes. These latter are of recent origin.

The North Atlantic context

The essential characteristics of the Leirvík site – a small rectangular structure, oriented east-west, set within a sub-circular enclosure – suggest that it belongs to a group of sites interpreted as chapels. Other examples of sites of this type survive in the Faroe Islands, including those at *Bønhúsgarður* (English: farm of the prayer-house) in Norðoyri, on the outskirts of the town of Klaksvík (Hansen, 1980, 150–156; Trap 1968, 306), at *Bønhúsgjógv* (English: prayer-house ravine) in Famjin on Suðuroy[4], at *Prestbøtoft* (English: ruin in the field of the priest) in Oyndarfjørður on Eysturoy (Bruun, 1929, 166; Trap 1968, 294), at *Bønhúsfløtu* (English: the prayer-house at the plain) in Hvalba on the island of Suðuroy[5], and at a site in Velbastaður on Streymoy (Fig. 4)[6]. The *bønhús* place-name element occurs at approximately thirty other locations in the Faroe Islands, and is always attached to settlements. At a number of these locations there are as yet no archaeological indications to confirm the presence of an ecclesiastical site, but there are no recorded examples of the place-name element being attached to other types of site (Stummann Hansen, *forthcoming A*).

A rather well-preserved bønhús-site is located close to the settlement known as *Heiman á*, on the island of

[4] Nothing is visible on this site today. An aerial photograph, taken in 1968, shows a dark structure which probably reflects half of the sub-circular churchyard wall. This area has a diameter of approximately 20 m. The other half of the enclosure has been eroded away by the sea.

[5] Pers. com., Oliver S. Thomsen, Tórshavn. According to Thomsen the ruins of the church site could still be seen here in the 1930s.

[6] Archives of the National Museum of the Faroe Islands (Sverri Dahl). No local name exists for this site, despite the fact that it is very well preserved.

Figure 4. Aerial photograph of church site at Velbastaður on Streymoy. The diameter of the enclosure is approximately 20 meters. Photo: Faroese Cadastral Office (Matrikulstóvan) 1994.

Mykines[7]. The site, to which the place-name *Bønhúsberg* (English: the rock wall of the prayer house) is attached, is located on a promontory that rises about 20 m above sea-level. It consists of the remains of a sub-circular enclosure, almost 30 m in diameter, the enclosing bank of which is visible to the south, east and north; at the west, which is now formed by a vertical cliff, it has been eroded away, while to the east it borders a stream (Fig. 5). Excavations were conducted here in 1960, but unfortunately were not completed. However, the foundations of a small church were uncovered and, according to the excavator, this superimposed an earlier and somewhat smaller church. Interestingly, sherds of bowl-shaped pottery of 'Viking-character' were found in the context of this earlier church (Dahl 1976, 103). Some thirty-five years ago an oil pipeline was dug through the enclosure. On this occasion human remains were discovered, and these were subsequently reburied[8].

[7] This site was preliminary surveyed and recorded by one of the authors (SSH), together with Karin Roug of the University of Copenhagen, during a visit to the island on September 1st 2004. In 1962 a very small excavation was conducted here by Sverri Dahl and the Danish archaeologist, P. V. Glob (Dahl 1968, 207). The extent of the excavation is now difficult to assess as the excavators are not known to have produced a plan. All that is stored in the archives of Føroya Fornminnissavn are two simple drawings of sections on the site. Neither of these is accompanied by any description. This material, and a small number of objects allegedly deriving from this excavation, were stored in Dahl's private home and only found its way to the museum after his death in 1987 (Føroya Fornminnissavn: Sverri Dahl Archive 49).

[8] Pers. com., Jákup Pauli á Eyðansstova, Sandavágur. Around the same time, approximately 50m north of the church site, the remains of a settlement were discovered during construction work. Further work at this location in 2002 resulted in the discovery of a large rim sherd of a circular soapstone vessel, and a number of sherds of locally produced pottery of medieval date (Pers. comm., Esbern á Eyðansstovu, Mykines, and Jákup Pauli á Eyðunstova, Sandavágur). This may indicate that this area was the location of a Viking-age or medieval farmstead, and, if so, it seems very likely that this would have been associated with the adjacent *bønhús*.

Figure 5. Aerial photograph of church site at Mykines on the island of Mykines. Photo: Faroese Cadastral Office (Matrikulstóvan) 1958.

The form of the present-day churchyard on the island of Svínoy is also of interest in the context of Leirvík and its related sites. Here, a curvilinear stone-built wall encloses the churchyard and it is very probable that this reflects the sub-circular enclosure of an underlying earlier church site. The diameter of the enclosure is estimated to have been approximately 20 m, practically the same as that of the *bønhús* site at Leirvík, as noted above. Nearby, within the settlement of Svínoy, is a *bønhús* placename. Circular stone-built walls, similar to the Svínoy example, also enclose other churchyards on the Faroe Islands including, for instance, the old churchyards at Hvalvík (Fig. 6) and Tjørnuvík, both on Streymoy. Tjørnuvík, of course, is also the location of a well-known Viking-age cemetery of the tenth century (Dahl and Rasmussen, 1956; Dahl 1971a, 65)[9].

None of the relevant Faroese sites have been subject to a professional

[9] Interestingly, the grave-goods from here include a ringed pin of the type that is well represented in Viking Dublin, and this was interpreted by Dahl as an indicator that the earliest Viking Age settlers in the Faroe Islands may have derived from the Scandinavian settlements in Ireland rather than from Scandinavia itself (Dahl 1971a, 65).

Figure 6. Photograph of the ancient church site at Hvalvík on Streymoy. Photo: J. Sheehan 2006.

archaeological excavation, nor do they have any form of independent dating evidence for their construction or use. However, there are a series of similar ecclesiastical enclosures known from the Shetland Isles, Iceland and Greenland and some of these can be dated. Indeed, the similarities that exist between all of these sites may be taken as indicators of the cultural connections that joined these parts of the North Atlantic world during the Early Medieval period.

In Shetland, an ecclesiastical site at *Kirkaby* on the island of Unst, should be considered in this context. This consists of a sub-circular enclosure, measuring approximately 27 m in diameter, containing a church with internal dimensions of approximately 10 m by 5 m (Brady and Johnson 2000, 22–25, figs. 7–8). The unpublished circular churchyard walls at *Hillswick*, on mainland Shetland, and on the small island of *Uyea*, off the coast of Unst, should also be noted.

A number of ecclesiastical enclosures of sub-circular form also occur on Iceland. Lárusson has discussed these and has proposed that they are earlier in date than the rectilinear ones that also occur there (Lárusson 1963, 399–401; see also Sigurðsson 2000). There is a problem in dating these sites, but it seems to be clear that several examples predate the Hekla eruption of 1104. Otherwise it is usually assumed that such circular sites are "early" rather than "late", if only because several of them are associated with sites that were abandoned before *c*.1700 and are otherwise very rare in early modern contexts (pers. comm., O. Vésteinsson).

A couple of examples of the sub-circular type are located within the Þjórsár Valley (*Þjórsárdalur)*, at the foot of the Hekla volcano, which is one of the most thoroughly investigated archaeological landscapes in the Viking world. Two of these have been archaeologically excavated, Skeljastaðir and Stöng. The latter site, which is adjacent to the well-known hall, featured the remains of a small turf- and stone-built church with internal dimensions of 4.8 m x 2.8 m. It was surrounded by burials and, according to the excavator, "much indicates that the churchyard had a circular form or a circular enclosure …" (Vilhjálmsson 1996, 133). He concluded that the church dated to the eleventh century (Vilhjálmsson 1996, 130–131). The excavations at Skeljastaðir revealed an extensive cemetery but, unlike at Stöng, no structural remains of a church or enclosure were evident. It is possible, of course that these were turf-built and consequently they may have been eroded away in this harsh environment. The excavator of Skeljastaðir, however, concluded: "Due to the location and orientation of some of the marginal graves the churchyard is likely to have been circular … . The distance between the most southerly grave and the most northerly graves indicated that it had a diameter of approximately 20 m" (Þorðarson 1943, 134, figs. 181–182). A possible location for the church was represented by an 8 m x 4 m area in the centre of the cemetery within which no burials occurred. Furthermore, recent excavations on the Icelandic sites *Neðri Ás* and *Keldudalur*, both with circular enclosures, have established that these sites pre-date the 1104 Hekla eruption (Vésteinsson 2000, 2005).

The majority of churches in Norse Greenland are contained within rectilinear enclosing elements (Roussell 1941; Krogh 1976; Keller 1989; Arneborg 1991). A small number, however, features sub-circular enclosures. The most important of these forms part of the famous *Brattahlið* settlement complex (Ø 29a), established by Eric the Red in the 980s[10]. Excavations were undertaken at this church site during the 1960s and the results indicated that it dates to the primary settlement period of the late tenth century; it may, in fact, be the church mentioned in the *Saga of the Greenlanders* as having been built by Eric's wife, Þjódhildur (Krogh 1982a; 1982b, 34–50; Meldgaard 1982. It was mainly built of turf, measured approximately 4 m x 3 m internally, and was oriented east-west with the entrance at the west. Although no traces of an enclosure were noted during the excavations, careful study of the plan of the associated cemetery, within which over 150 burials were excavated, indicates the likelihood of the former existence of a sub-circular boundary to it (Keller 1989, 187; Fig. 7). This is particularly noticeable on the northern and southern sides of the cemetery where the orientations of the graves shift as if to follow or respect such a boundary. Given that the church was primarily built of turf, it is likely that this putative enclosure was also turf-built, and this may explain why the excavator did not note it. If it is accepted that the Brattahlið church dates to the later tenth century, as has recently, based on circum-

[10] The conventional way of referring to Norse settlements in Greenland has been by the so-called Ø-numbers (for Danish "øst" = east) for sites in the Eastern Settlement and by the V-numbers (for Danish "vest" = west) for sites in the Western Settlement respectively.

stantial evidence, been suggested by Arneborg (2003, 115), then, given that the settlers of Greenland originated in Iceland, this site may be taken as further evidence for the form of Icelandic and, by extension, Faroese tenth-century ecclesiastical sites.

The Brattahlið enclosure probably measured in the region of 22 m in diameter. There are other ecclesiastical sites of this general type on record from Greenland, for instance: *Qorlortoq* (Ø 33), *Qorlortup Itinnera* (Ø 35), *Inoqquasaat* (Ø 64), *Eqaluit* (Ø 78) and *Narsaq*, *Uunatoq* (Ø 162) (Keller 1989, 187–208; Guldager *et al.* 2002, 45–48, 55–57, 76–79; Arneborg, pers. comm.) (Fig. 8). These enclosures vary between 13 m and 22 m in diameter, tend to have entrances at either the west or south-west, and feature centrally located churches. Arneborg has recently been conducting excavations on three of these sites and it is hoped that this exercise will result in the acquisition of close dating evidence for them.

In summary, it is possible to demonstrate that the Leirvík-type of ecclesiastical site is found right across the North Atlantic region, from the Shetland Isles and Faroe Islands, through Iceland, to Greenland. From this brief survey of the evidence it is suggested that the type may have already been in existence in this cultural zone by the later tenth century. It is difficult in the present state of knowledge to come to any conclusion about how long-lived this type of ecclesiastical site may have been, but examples may well have been used and constructed until well into the post-Medieval period. It seems likely that there is a general development of ecclesiastical enclosures within the region from circular to rectangular forms.

Origins

It has been established that the Leirvík ecclesiastical site shares important features with a series of other sites across the North Atlantic region. These sites primarily consist of small churches set within sub-circular enclosures. What is the background to this type of sites and where does it lie? Given that both literary and historical sources state that the impetus for the Christianisation process in this region came from Norway (Sawyer and Sawyer 1993, 103–104), then one might expect to find a significant number of parallels for this type of site there. This is not the case, however, and churchyards usually have a rectilinear layout in the Nordic countries. In fact, it is interesting to note that the earliest church and burial site in Norway, and possibly in Scandinavia, is contained within a rectangular rather than a circular enclosure. Occurring on the island of Veøy, Romsdal, this was in use from as early as the mid-point of the tenth century (Solli, 1996, 103).

There are, nonetheless, some enclosed ecclesiastical sites of sub-circular plan in Norway and elsewhere in Scandinavia, but these are difficult to date. They have, however, recently been discussed by Brendalsmo and Stylegar who concluded (2003, 171): "That the circular, oval or 'sub-circular' church yards in many cases probably derive from the Middle Ages seems to be a fair assumption. But we have no safe basis for saying whether they are particularly old …" (authors' translation). In fact, none of these sites appear to date to earlier than *c.*1200 AD, and others appear to be very considerably later than this. It, therefore, seems unlikely at present that these Scandinavian sites are of any relevance in the context of the origins of the North Atlan-

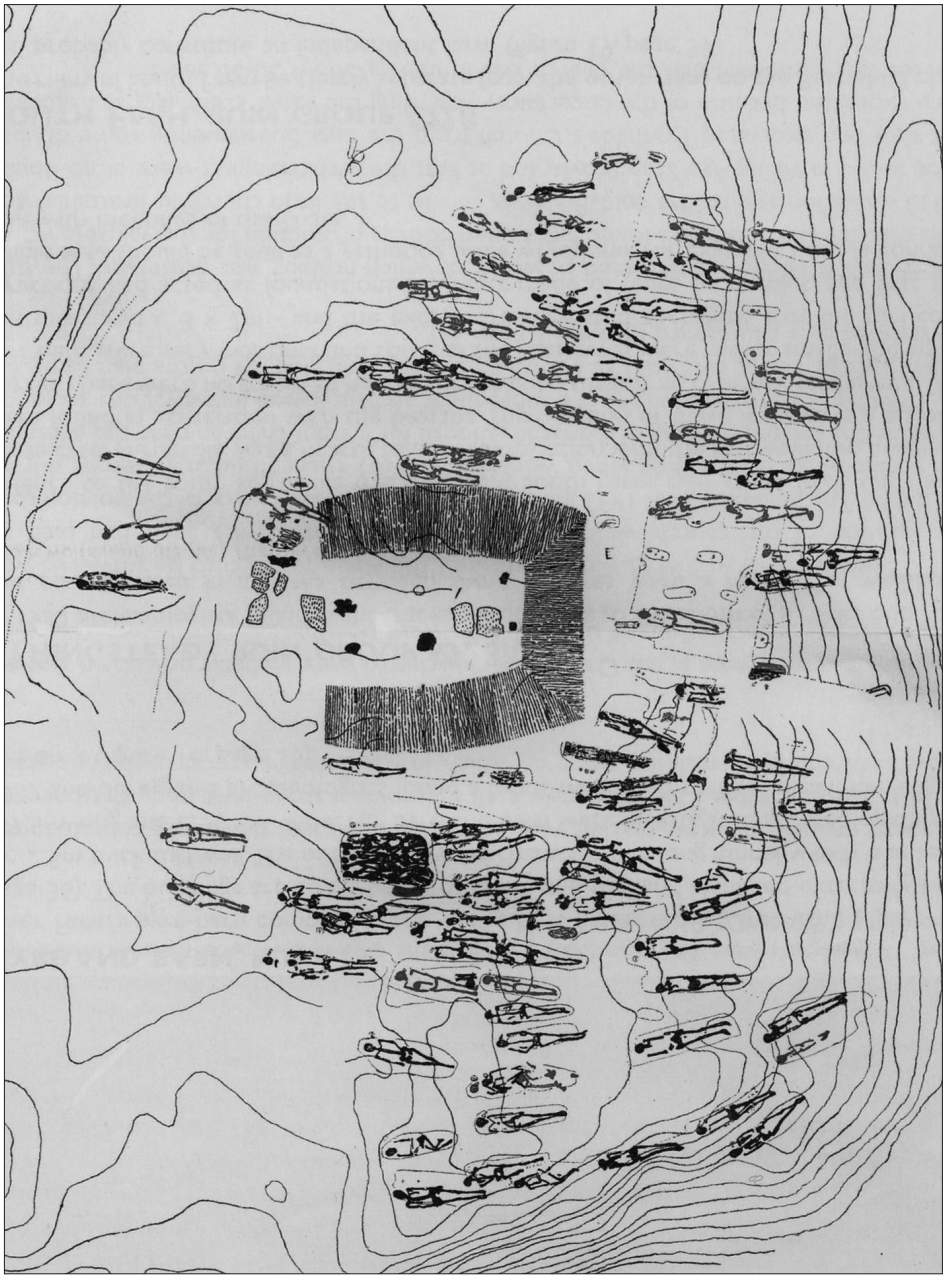

Figure 7. Plan of Brattahlið church site in the Eastern Settlement, Greenland. After Arneborg, n.d.

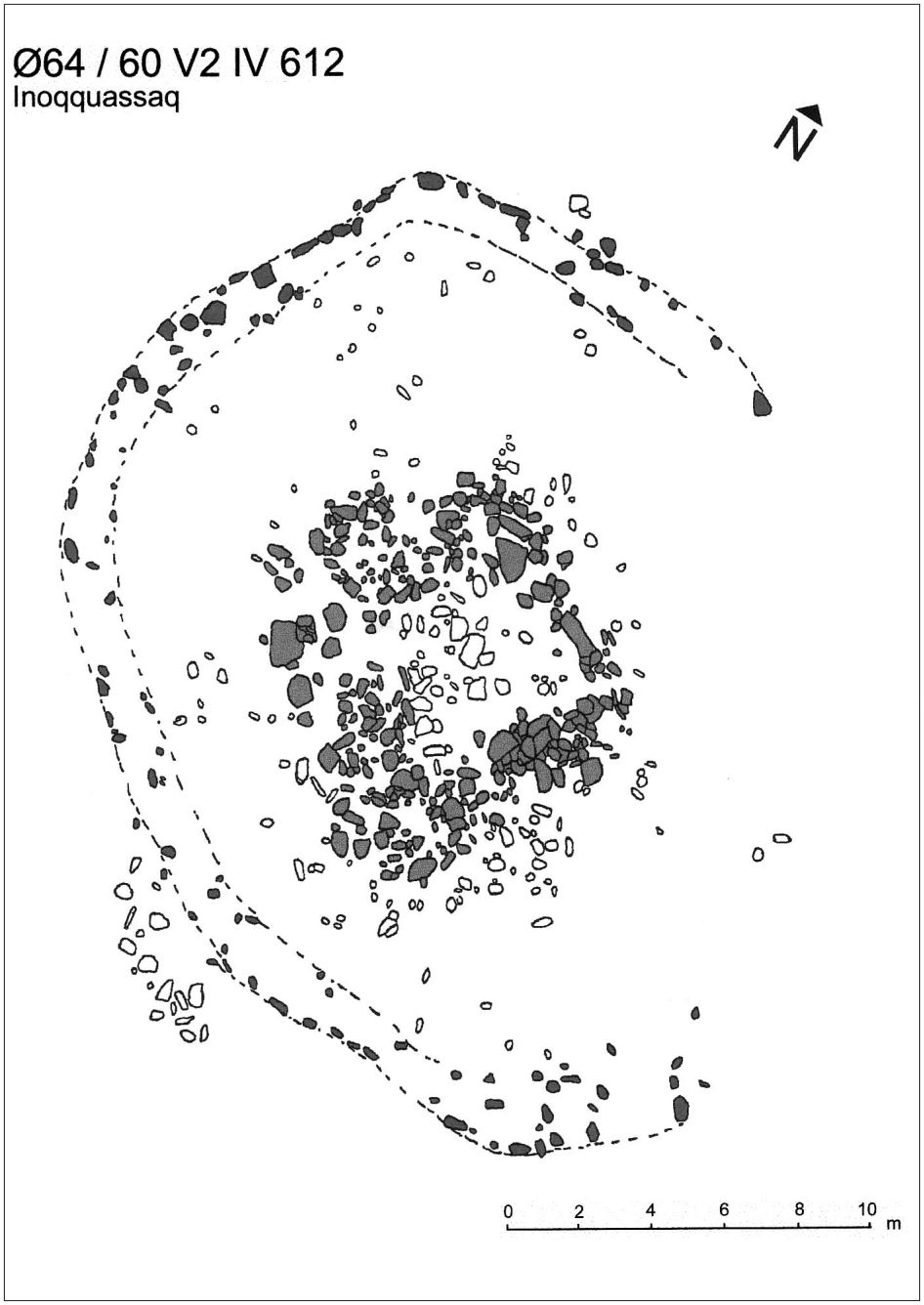

Figure 8. Church site at Inoqquasaat (Ø 64) in the Eastern Settlement, Greenland. Survey by S. Stummann Hansen 1999. Computer-graphics: O. Guldager.

tic sites discussed above. Future research, however, particularly excavation, may confirm or deny this view.

In his discussion of the origins of the Greenlandic enclosed church sites Keller concluded "that the circular churchyards in Iceland and Greenland are, however, most probably evidence of a Celtic Christian style. And it may indeed be asked, if this stylistic feature also symbolized a Celtic Christian faith. Whether this tradition was brought to Iceland by Irish monks or by Norse Christians can be subject to discussion" (Keller 1989, 199). It is interesting to note that the preliminary results of Arneborg's recent excavations, noted above, indicate that these enclosed church sites do indeed belong to the earliest phase of the settlement of Greenland, and this has prompted the project director to state: "Whether the earliest churches with their circular enclosures have their origins in the northern and western parts of Britain and Ireland is a matter for discussion. However, recently conducted genetic research into the population of Iceland and Faroe has demonstrated that a major part of the landnám women had Celtic blood in their veins, so the theory does not appear unlikely" (Arneborg 2005, 16; authors' translation)[11].

The evidence from both Iceland and Greenland, and by extension the Faroe Islands, may indicate that such circular or sub-circular ecclesiastical sites may be lower status sites, functioning perhaps as chapels or subsidiary churches (pers. comm., O. Vésteinsson). This may, of course, be a function of age, with the smaller sub-circular sites being abandoned earlier and therefore representing an earlier practice. It is an intriguing possibility, as has recently been suggested by Kristjánsdóttir in her study of the Icelandic evidence, that the small turf churches, which are frequently enclosed, might be regarded as private or proprietary churches, dating to before the historical watershed of AD 1000 when Iceland was officially converted to Christianity. She proposes that these sites might be connected with a form of "unorganised missionary activity" that she describes as "an *infiltration* process that may have originated from the Celtic branch of Christianity" (2004, 156). Similar ideas, at least with regards to the chronology of the conversion process, have recently been proposed for the North Atlantic region and for southern Scandinavia by Morris (2004, 188) and Brink (2004, 173–74), respectively.

Early ecclesiastical sites in Ireland

Following on from Kristjánsdóttir's suggestion concerning the possible 'Celtic' origins of parts of early Icelandic Christianity, it is interesting to note that many ecclesiastical sites in Ireland and Scotland display the essential characteristics of the North Atlantic sites being considered in this paper. A great variety of ecclesiastical sites existed in Ireland during the Early Medieval period (*c*.400–1100 AD). Some developed as large monastic 'cities' that were involved in secular politics, while others functioned as small isolated hermitages. Between these two extremes there was a wide range of monasteries and church sites. Some were early episcopal foundations and others were tribal churches, but the majority may have been proprietary churches that were transmitted as family property from generation

[11] Translated from the Danish by SSH.

to generation by a non-celibate clergy (Ó Corráin 1981, 388).

Normally, early ecclesiastical sites in Ireland are defined by circular or sub-circular enclosures. The enclosing element is usually an earthen bank with an external fosse, but in the west of the country it often takes the form of a stone wall or bank. Most of these enclosures measure 30 m or more in diameter, while some of the large monasteries are contained within enclosures measuring over 200 m across. Their circuits define the monastic *termon* or area of sanctuary, the legal area belonging to the monastery. In the case of smaller hermitage sites the enclosing elements may have been regarded as boundaries between sacred and secular land. Almost invariably, a church and burial area are found within the enclosed space and huts or houses are also usually present, but the following features may also be found depending on the complexity of the site: cross-inscribed slabs or pillars, *leachta* and other forms of shrines, ogham stones and *bullauns*. Many of the larger sites also feature impressive monuments such as high crosses and round towers (Manning 1995; Hughes and Hamlin 1997, 54–56).

The focal point of such enclosed ecclesiastical sites was the church. Many stone examples of Early Medieval date survive and literary and historical sources indicate that wooden churches were also very common. The churches often stood in the eastern part of the enclosure, where the burial grounds also tended to be located. Many simple examples of stone, built without mortar, are on record from enclosed sites in county Kerry, in the southwest of the country (Cuppage 1986, 257–346; O'Sullivan and Sheehan 1996 246–322). These are rectangular structures, almost invariably aligned east-west, and are usually of corbelled construction. A small window in the east gable lights them and the doorway occurs opposite. The Kerry churches are typically small: one of the largest examples, Church Island, measures 5.7 m x 3.8 m internally, while the internal dimensions of the two smallest examples, Loher and Kildreelig, are approximately 3.2 m x 2.3 m. Churches of this type are mainly confined in their distribution to the southwest of Ireland. A number of outliers, however, are on record from counties Clare and Mayo, further north along the west coast. It is of particular interest in the context of the present discussion to note that a small number of corbelled churches of the same general type also occur in the Hebrides, off Scotland's northwest coast, though Swift appears reluctant to connect these with the Irish sites (1987, 349). These include St. Flannan's on Eiliean Mor, North Rona and Teampaill Beanachadh.

There are obvious differences between Ireland's Early Medieval ecclesiastical sites and the North Atlantic sites of the type dealt with in this paper. However, there are also important similarities and these are sufficient to suggest that the latter sites should be considered in the context of the Irish evidence (as well as the Scottish sites which develop as a result of Irish influence). The relevant churches from the Faroe Islands, Iceland and Greenland are similar in scale and general ground plan to many churches from ecclesiastical sites in Early Medieval Ireland, particularly those from the west and southwest. On the other hand, the enclosures of the North Atlantic sites are quite small compared to typical enclosures found on Irish ecclesiastical sites. However, the important point in this con-

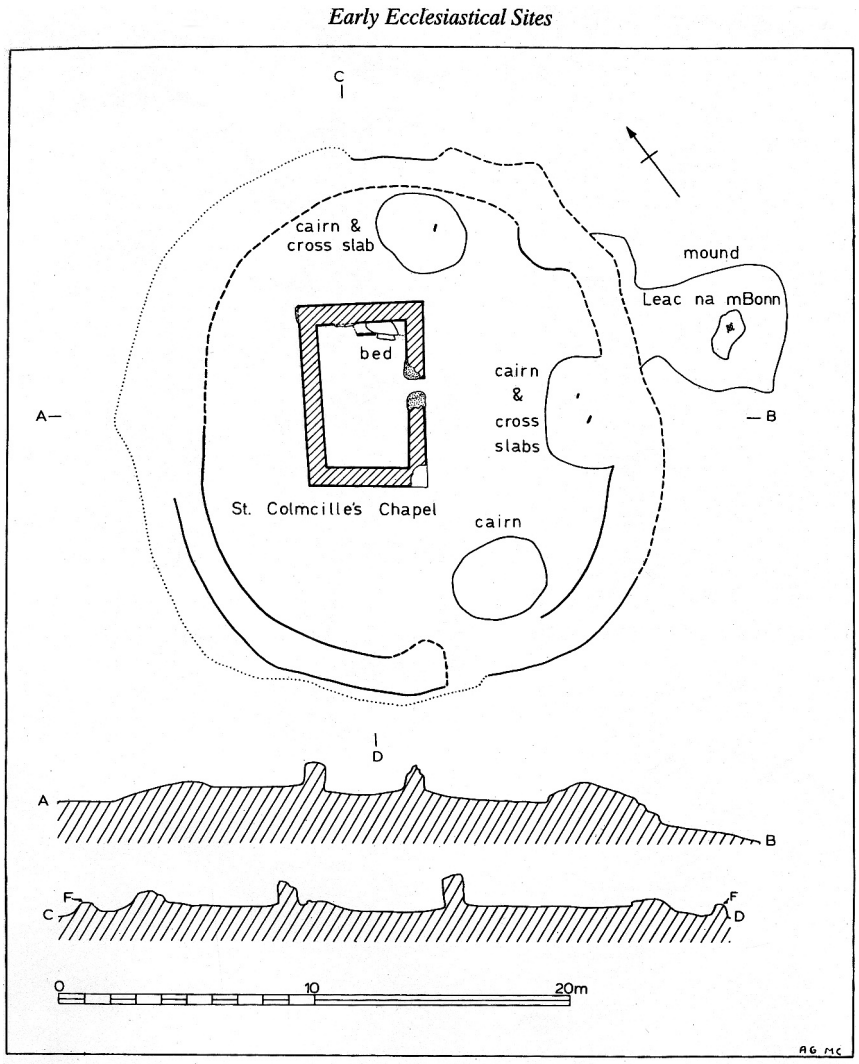

Fig. 125—*Beefan early ecclesiastical site (1522).*

Figure 9. Plan of the Beefan church site in Donegal, Ireland. After Lacy, 1983.

nection is that the former are of circular or sub-circular plan, like the Irish sites, and that the difference may simply be a matter of scale. In fact, there are some early ecclesiastical enclosures in Ireland that are actually within the size-range of the North Atlantic sites, including the one associated with St. Columcille at Beefan, Glencolumcille, county Donegal (Lacy 1983, 244) (Fig. 9).

The general difference in the sizes of the North Atlantic and Irish enclosed ecclesiastical sites is probably related to the different roles these sites

played in their respective societies. Many of the Irish sites may have primarily functioned as monastic centres and these, by their nature, contained houses and huts. The North Atlantic sites, on the other hand, functioned as proprietary churches attached to major farmsteads and did not have a residential function. This single difference in the function of the two types of ecclesiastical site may well provide a satisfactory explanation for their difference in scale.

Finally, up until recently it could be argued that the Ireland's Early Medieval churches differed in one major respect from the typical churches of the North Atlantic region, being built of stone, or wood, rather than of turf. The turf-built construction of many of the churches from the Faroe Islands, Iceland and Greenland made them distinctive and contributed towards the conception of these buildings as almost representative icons of the distinctive culture of Viking-age Christianity in the North Atlantic region; in a sense construction methods and materials combine to define a culturally definable form. While it is of course true that the archaeology of early Christianity in the region is unique and distinctive in an overall sense, it is no longer possible to view these turf-built churches as truly unique cultural phenomena. This is due to the recent discovery of a pre-Viking Age turf-built church on the small island monastery of Illaunloughan, Co. Kerry (White Marshall and Walsh 2005, 23–27, 152–155, figs. 17–19) (Fig. 10).

It has long been recognised that literary evidence exists for the construction of sod or earthern churches in Early Medieval Ireland. In Tirechán's late seventh-century *Life of Patrick*, for instance, there are two mentions of '*acclessiam terrenam*' (Bieler 1979, 144, 158–159). The excavations on Illaunloughan, however, have produced the first archaeological evidence for the practise. Here, it was revealed that during the primary phase of settlement, dated by both radiocarbon determinations and artefacts to between the mid-seventh and the mid-eighth centuries, three domestic huts and a small church were constructed, with sod being a primary component of each of the structures (ibid, 11–36). A number of burials were also associated with this phase of the site, and the ecclesiastical settlement was enclosed by a low curvilinear wall. The walls of the church, which measured 2m N-S by *c*.6m E-W internally, were formed of sod retained at the bases by double rows of upright slabs. The evidence indicated that the roof may have been supported on posts at the gable ends, independently of the walls.

Apart from including turf in its construction, of course, the Illaunloughan church is quite different in dimensions and structure from the North Atlantic chapels. It is also worth noting that the earliest Icelandic chapels (Þórarinsstaðir, Neðri Ás and Hofstaðir) were initially built of timber, with the turf walls being added later. Nevertheless, while the importance of the Illaunloughan excavation results are manifold, in the present context their relevance is simply that they demonstrate that a distinctive cultural characteristic of the churches of the North Atlantic region is not unique, finding broad parallel in earlier contexts in Ireland. It would be unwise to speculate on whether the church-building tradition of the North Atlantic region owes anything to Ireland on this evidence alone, however, though the possibility should not be dismissed out of hand.

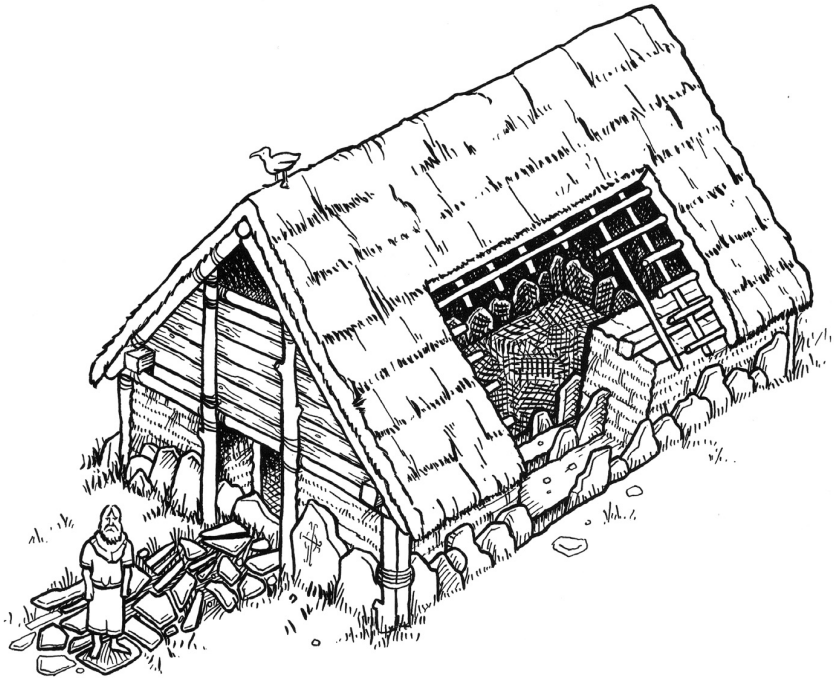

Figure 10. Conjectural reconstruction of the early church at Illaunloughan, Co. Kerry, Ireland (after White Marshall and Walsh 2005, fig.19b).

The Skúvoy evidence.

If it is accepted that the origin of the Leirvík-type of ecclesiastical site in the North Atlantic region may ultimately lie in Ireland, then it remains to consider the mechanism by which it was transmitted northwards (Fig. 11). It is tempting to relate this to the tradition of Irish monks – the *papar* – travelling to the Faroe Islands and Iceland in the pre-Viking period. This is a possibility, and the writings of the Irish ecclesiastic Dicuil, c.825 AD, may well serve to support this interpretation (Tierney 1967). Indeed, the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani,* a fabulous tale of sea-going pilgrimage that was originally composed during the last quarter of the eighth century, at the latest, may also be of relevance in this regard. It has been described as a tale that "cannot be described as having no foundations in reality, for there are indications that the tale may represent an amalgam of sailors' yarns and lore … . There are too many similarities between the places described in the *Navigatio* and what we now know of the many islands along the north Atlantic face of Europe for the resemblance to be merely fortuitous" (Harbinson 1991, 41). It is interesting to note, furthermore, that there were no technical reasons why Irish boats could not have reached the Faroe Islands and other locations in the North Atlantic region, being far more

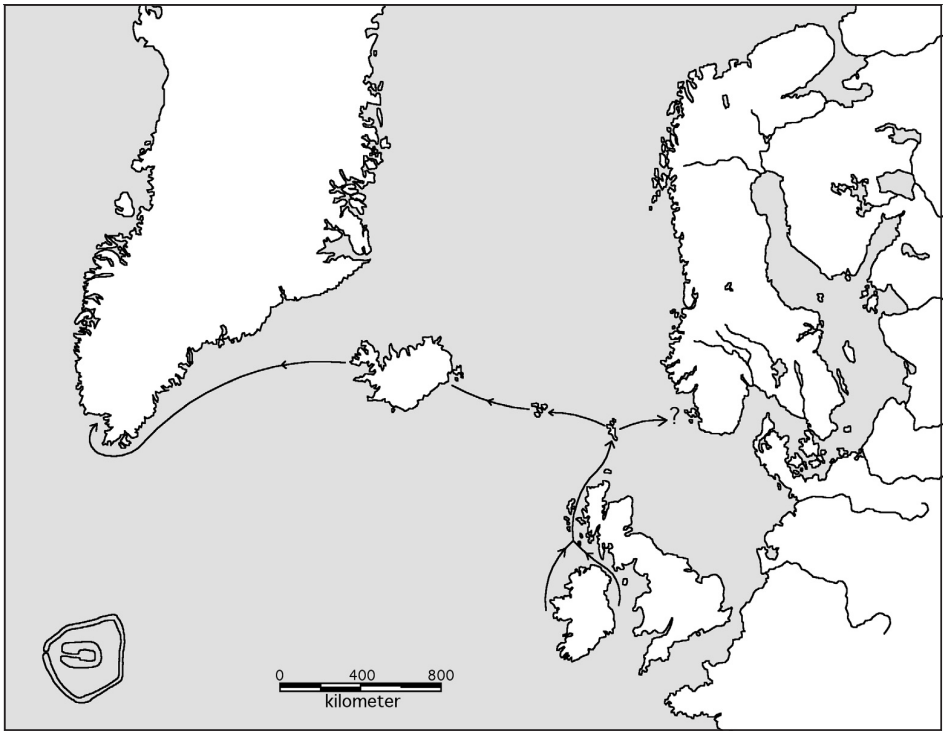

Figure 11. Distribution map of church sites with circular or sub-circular enclosures. Computer-graphics: M. C. Krause.

sophisticated than the skin-covered boats which are often considered to be typical of the Early Medieval Irish sailors (Breen and Forsythe 2004, 45–49). However, much further analysis of the historical and archaeological evidence needs to be undertaken before a final conclusion on these matters can be reached.

Any further analysis of the archaeological record must inevitably commence with the well-known group of cross-inscribed slabs from Ólansgarður, on the small island of Skúvoy. This comprises over a dozen slabs, formed of the local basalts and tuffs, which in the main display encircled linear and outline crosses. Some, but not all, of these have been published, in greater or lesser detail, by authorities such as Kermode (1931) and Krogh (1990), and their general similarity to cross-inscribed slabs of Early Medieval date from Ireland and Scotland has often been noted. It has recently been stated, for instance, that "all of these show clear "Irish" influence and have no close Scandinavian parallels" (Fisher 2002, 40). Obviously, this potential connection between Ireland and the Faroe Islands is of considerable relevance to the question under consideration in this paper, in that if these slabs can be demonstrated to date to before the Scandinavian *landnám* period then archaeological evidence will have been identified that supports the lit-

erary evidence of Dicuil and the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani,* independent of the *bønhús*-type enclosures discussed above. Conversely, if the slabs are shown to be Viking Age in date, it follows that they cannot be used to support the evidence of these sources, though they may, of course, be considered in the light of the other archaeological and related evidence for connections between the Hiberno-Scandinavian settlements in Ireland and the North Atlantic region during the Viking Age (see below).

This is not the place to give a full account of the Skúvoy cross-inscribed slabs[12] . However, it is opportune to make some important points concerning them, particularly in view of the fact that they are sometimes dismissed, firstly, as being similar in only a general way to Early Medieval slabs from Ireland, and, secondly, as being impossible to date to before the critical threshold of *c*.800 AD. It is the authors' contention that neither of these objections are valid, and that some, at least, of the Skúvoy slabs most probably date to before the Scandinavian *landnám* period.

The most crucial slab in this connection is no. 8 in Kermode's listing (1931, 374). This is a basalt slab, measuring 41 cm in length and 23 cm in width. One face is occupied by a simple Latin cross of outline form, measuring 27 cm long and 21 cm wide (Fig. 12). There is a small depression or dimple located at the meeting of the crosses' arms with its shaft, and a short groove, 2.5 cm in length, extends outwards from the upper terminal of the cross to the viewer's right (Fig. 13). This feature may be identified as a simplified version of the *rho* element of the *chi-rho* symbol, in which the loop of the *rho* is depicted.

The *chi-rho* symbol is made up of the initial two letters, merged together, of Christ's name in Greek, *chi* (χ) and *rho* (ρ). Its evolution as a Christian symbol is well attested (Thomas 1985, 86–92). It was in common use in Gaul, Spain and the Mediterranean lands during the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries but also occurs in Ireland, where ten definite stone-carved examples are now on record (Sheehan 1994, 25). These are generally dated to the sixth, seventh, and possibly the eighth centuries, and certainly belong to within the earlier part of Ireland's Early Medieval period. No less than half of the examples from Ireland are found in county Kerry, in the southwest of the country, while all but one of the remaining examples occur in the western counties. The distribution of this motif also extends northwards into Scotland, with a fine example occurring, for instance, at the Irish foundation on Iona (Fisher 2001, 128).

To summarise the point, the *chi-rho* motif on the Skúvoy slab is an early feature which would be assigned to a sixth to eighth century date-range had it been found in Ireland. It is a motif that could not possibly date to the period of the Scandinavian settlement of the Faroe Islands, and so must be regarded as incontrovertible evidence for the discovery of the Faroe Islands by Christians from the south. Its closest exemplars, in terms of its form and simplicity, lie in Ireland. Here, the crosses on the ogham stones from Arraglen and Killeenleagh (Cuppage 1986, 248–50; O'Sullivan and Sheehan 1996, 298–99) (Fig. 14), both of them

[12] The authors are currently preparing for publication a catalogue and a full discussion of this material.

in county Kerry, provide good parallels for the specific variant form of its *chi-rho*[13]. In fact, these parallels are particularly useful in another context, as the inscriptions on both of these stones have been assigned dates in the second half of the sixth or the early seventh century (McManus 1991, 96–97; Swift 1997, 76).

It is especially interesting to note the statement, in the so-called *Saga of the Faroe Islanders,* that Skúvoy was the location of *Sigmundr Brestisson's* church. Given that the sources state that he was instrumental in introducing Christianity, it is generally accepted that Skúvoy was the first church to be built in the Faroe Islands in the Viking Age. Elsewhere, the author of the *Saga of the Faroe Islanders* confuses Skúvoy with Stóra Dímun, another small island, and it has been noted that this detracts from the reliability of his transmission of old traditions (Brú and Long 1962, 59, 102). However, the question of whether it was on Skúvoy or Stóra Dímun that the first Viking-age church was built is not of primary interest in the present context, but rather why this early tradition attaches itself to one or other of these small and remote islands, rather than to one of the larger and more important islands in the archipelago, such as Eysturoy, Streymoy or Suðuroy? And why is it Skúvoy/Stóra Dímun that carries this important distinction, rather than the major ecclesiastical site of Kirkjubøur, on Stremoy, where the medieval episcopal centre of the Faroe Islands later came to be located? Could there have been an early tradition

Figure 12. Skúvoy cross-slab no. 8. Photo: J. Sheehan.

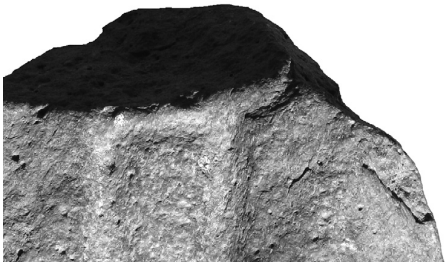

Figure 13. Skúvoy cross-slab no. 8, detail showing the chi-rho motif. Photo: J. Sheehan.

[13] It is of interest to note, as an addendum, that another feature of several of the Skúvoy slabs, the central dimples that occur at the crossing of the arms, also find parallels in early contexts in the Kerry cross-slabs, occurring, for instance, on the Dromkeare ogham stone, the inscription on which has been dated to the late sixth or early seventh century (McManus 1991, 96–97).

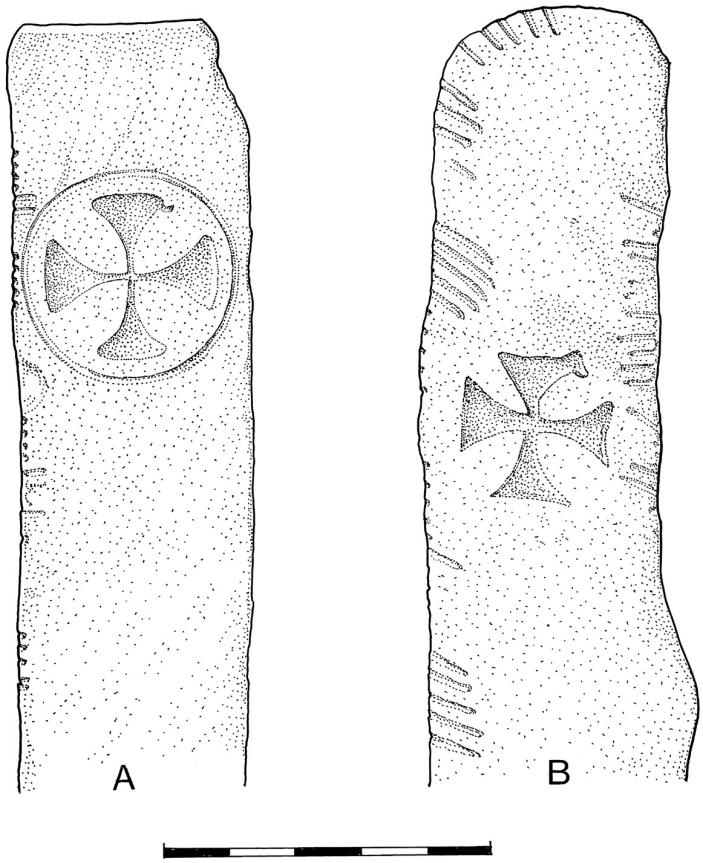

Figure 14. Crosses with chi-rho motifs from the ogham stones at Arraglen and Killeenleagh, both Co. Kerry.

about one of these two islands, perhaps even focused on the Ólansgarður site on Skúvoy, which reflected the former presence of an Irish, pre-Viking, Christian community there and later came to be subsumed into the *Saga of the Faroe Islanders*? Is this the explanation of the reference to Skúvoy/Stóra Dímun as the Faroe Islands' first Christian centre?

Clearly, Skúvoy and its slabs merit a great deal of further work, the results of which may allow the placement of the origins of the Leirvík *Bønhústoftin* and related sites in an early, pre-Viking Irish context.

An alternative scenario?

An alternative explanation for the ultimate Irish background of the Leirvík *Bønhústoftin* may be sought in the relationships that existed between Ireland and the North Atlantic period during the Viking Age, rather than during the pre-Viking period. There is clear archaeological evidence for connections between the Hiberno-Scandinavian settlements in Ire-

land and the entire North Atlantic region, from the Faroe Islands as far west as Newfoundland (Fanning 1994, 30–36, fig. 12; Larsen and Stummann Hansen 2001, 121–124). In addition, there is linguistic evidence for connections that existed between the Hiberno-Scandinavians and the population of the Faroe Islands and Iceland (Matras 1957; Ó Cuiv 1988; Matras *et al.* 2004).

Given the archaeological and related evidence for connections between Ireland and the North Atlantic region during the Viking Age, it is clear that a context existed for the transmission of concepts relating to the form and morphology of ecclesiastical sites. The Hebridean churches noted above have parallels in Ireland, rather than elsewhere in Scotland, and are of crucial importance in this regard as they may demonstrate Irish or Hiberno-Scandinavian influence in a group of islands which formed part of the Scandinavian periphery of the North Atlantic cultural province. It is of interest to note in this context that there is historical evidence linking the Scandinavians in Ireland with the Hebridean *Flatnose* dynasty, as well as a literary tradition that links this dynasty with the early Viking-Age settlement of the Faroe Islands (Smyth 1984, 155–171).

A number of very significant discoveries, relevant to this topic, have recently been made during the post-excavation work on the finds from Toftanes, a Viking-age farmstead at Leirvík which is situated a mere 500 m from the *Bønhústoftin*. Among the many well-preserved wooden objects from this site an almost complete cross has been identified as well as a fragment of another cross; there are stylistic affinities between these crosses and the form of Irish Early Medieval crosses (Stummann Hansen *forthcoming B*) (Fig. 15). The mean date range for the C-14 dates from the site is 860–970 (Vickers *et al*. 2005, Table I), and as the two crosses derive from the earliest deposits at the site, they represent hard archaeological evidence for the presence of a Christian community in the Faroe Islands well before the official conversion of around 1000 AD. The material finds from the site, ringed pins, etc., clearly suggests that the Toftanes settlers derived from a Hiberno-Scandinavian background.

In this connection it is also worth noting that 'classical' pagan Viking-age graves have never been found in the Faroe Islands. The graves from Tjørnuvík are devoid of grave goods, except for a ringed pin of Hiberno-Scandinavian type and a few other small personal items (Dahl and Rasmussen 1956). This was later interpreted by Dahl as an indicator that the earliest Viking-age settlers on the Faroe Islands may have derived from the Scandinavian settlements in Ireland rather than from Scandinavia itself (Dahl 1971a, 65). Apart from Tjørnuvík, the only other Viking-age graveyard so far recorded in the Faroe Islands is the site of *Heima á Sandi,* on the island of Sandoy. Here, twelve graves were excavated. They were all orientated east-west and contained very sparse grave-goods of personal character, including a small bronze item with an Irish design. These graves, in many respects, give the impression of being Christian, although the excavators, despite a number of arguments, prefer to remain completely open on this question (Arge and Hartmann 1992, 17–20).

It may therefore be suggested that the Faroe Islands in the Viking Age were part of a Christian, or at least partly-Christianised, Hiberno-Scandinavian

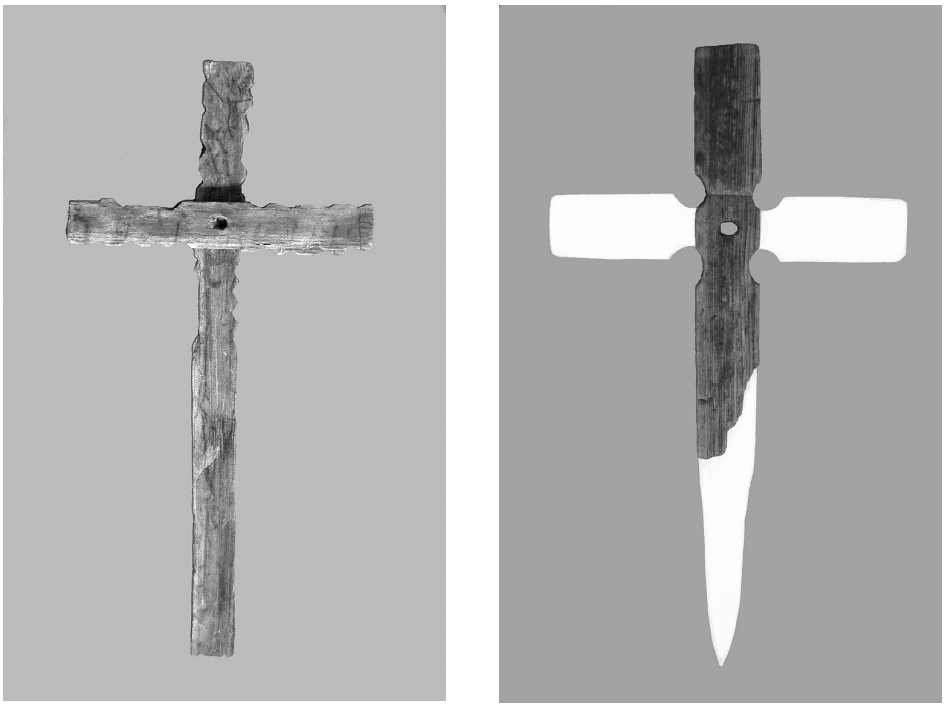

Figure 15. a: wooden cross from Toftanes in a length of 38.5 cm; b: fragment of wooden cross from Toftanes preserved in a length of 35.0 cm. Photo: Haldane Joensen/Føroya Fornminnissavn.

world. In this context, it would not be at all surprising to find Irish elements in the archaeology of the period, such as the features of the Leirvík *Bønhústoftin*.

Conclusions

The authors propose that the *Bønhústoftin* in Leirvík is a fine example of a North Atlantic form of ecclesiastical site that has its ultimate origins in Early Medieval Ireland. Irish influence on the Scandinavian settlers of the North Atlantic may have been mediated through the Hiberno-Scandinavian communities during the second half of the ninth and the tenth century, though it remains a strong possibility that the form of these early sites was due to the influence of pre-Viking *papar* in the Faroe Islands, the presence of whom is most strongly indicated by the archaeological evidence from Skúvoy. The implication of this study is that the initial Christianisation of the North Atlantic region owes more to Ireland than to Norway, and may have occurred significantly earlier than is conventionally accepted.

Acknowledgements

The authors want to express their thanks to Hákun Andreasen of Føroya Fornminnissavn, who helped plan the site and provided useful information, to Anna Katrin Matras, likewise of the Føroya Fornminnissavn, who kindly provided information on other sites in the Faroe Islands, to Gud-

mundur Ólafsson, Þjóðminjasafn Íslands, who provided information on some of the Icelandic sites, to Eivind Weihe of the Fróðskaparsetur Føroya who kindly provided information on place-names, to the Faroese Cadastral Office (Matrikulstóvan) who put aerial photographs at their disposal, and to Irene Seiten, Danish Polar Center and Mette Cecilie Krause, Copenhagen, for computer-graphics, as well as to Rhoda Cronin, University College Cork, for preparing Fig. 14. In particular, they also wish to thank Orri Vésteinsson, Fornleifastofnun Íslands, for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper (though he may not agree with all that is proposed in the paper). They also wish to acknowledge funding from the Department of Archaeology, University College Cork, towards the costs of visiting the site at Glencolumbcille (JS), and to the Nordic Research Council for the Humanities (NOS-H) who sponsored SSH. The planning of the Leirvík site took place in connection with a visit by the authors to the Faroe Islands, where travel and accommodation costs were funded by the local historical societies of Vág, Tvøroyri and Porkeri, in Suðuroy, to whom they express sincere thanks.

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