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Short communication

### The Vikings were not the first colonizers of the Faroe Islands

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#### 1. Introduction

### ABSTRACT

We report on the earliest archaeological evidence from the Faroe Islands, placing human colonization in the 4th-6th centuries AD, at least 300-500 years earlier than previously demonstrated archaeologically. The evidence consists of an extensive wind-blown sand deposit containing patches of burnt peat ash of anthropogenic origin. Samples of carbonised barley grains from two of these ash patches produced <sup>14</sup>C dates of two pre-Viking phases within the 4th-6th and late 6th-8th centuries AD. A re-evaluation is required of the nature, scale and timing of the human colonization of the Faroes and the wider North Atlantic region.

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The Faroes were the first stepping-stone beyond Shetland for the North Atlantic Viking diaspora that culminated in the European discovery of continental North America in the 11th century AD. The first major phase of human settlement of the Faroes (or landnám – Old Norse for landtake) was hitherto thought to have been by the Vikings in the 9th century (Arge, 1991; 2013; Debes, 1993; Dugmore et al., 2005), represented by archaeological sites <sup>14</sup>C dated to the Viking age (Table 1), for example at Undir Junkarinsfløtti (Church et al., 2005) and Toftanes (Vickers et al., 2005). Previous research on the contemporary literary source of De Mensura Orbis Terrae written by the Irish monk Dicuil c. AD 825, attested to ecclesiastical anchorites settling remote North Atlantic islands (Tierney, 1967), but the specific identification of the Faroes in the text is a subject of debate (Arge, 1991; Debes, 1993; Thorsteinsson, 2005; Dugmore et al., 2010). Palaeoenvironmental reconstruction in the form of

demonstrated archaeologically. 2. Methods Archaeological remains at A Sondum on the island of Sandoy (61°50.3'N, 6°48.1'W), have been exposed by coastal erosion over

close-interval pollen analysis (Jóhansen, 1985; Hannon and Bradshaw, 2000, 2001, 2005; Edwards et al., 2005; Edwards and

Borthwick, 2010), has also suggested that small-scale human set-

tlement may have occurred in 5th-6th centuries AD. This early

settlement was proposed through the <sup>14</sup>C dating of sediment lavers

containing the first appearance of barley-type pollen, at sites such

as Heimavatn in the north of the island chain and Hov in the south

(see Figs. 1 and 2a). However this equivocal literary and palae-

oenvironmental evidence of human settlement in the mid first

millennium AD has never been corroborated from definitive and

stratigraphically robust archaeological remains. This paper presents new <sup>14</sup>C dates from a multi-phase archaeological site at Á

Sondum (see Fig. 1) that places human colonization in the 4th-6th

centuries AD, at least 300-500 years earlier than previously

many decades. Investigations by Arge and Jensen in 1994 indicated

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#### Table 1

<sup>14</sup>C dates from Á Sondum and other Viking age sites in the Faroes. Dates combined in a weighted mean were first tested for internal consistency using a chi-squared ( $\chi^2$ ) test (Ward and Wilson, 1978). This gives a test statistic (*T* value) for comparison against the *T*-value for 95% confidence of 2 <sup>14</sup>C age measurements ( $\chi^2$ :0.05 = 3.8). Where the sample *T*-value < 3.8, the results were combined. Calibrated ages were obtained using OxCal 4.1 (Bronk Ramsey, 2009) and IntCal 09 (Reimer et al., 2009).\*Measured on-line on AMS.

Reporting number	Sample details	$^{14}$ C age $\pm 1\sigma$	$\delta^{13}$ C (‰)	Calibrated age range AD $(2\sigma)$
Á Sondum (this paper)				
SUERC-13997	Carbonized barley grain from Viking longhouse central hearth deposit [132]	$1195\pm35$	-24.1	695-947
SUERC-14054	Carbonized barley grain from Viking longhouse central hearth deposit [132]	$1130\pm35$	-24.6	781-990
	Combined age for barley grains in [132] <i>T</i> value = 1.7 ( $\chi^2$ :0.05 = 3.8) D in Figs. 2 and 3	$1163 \pm 25$	n/a	778-965
SUERC-14045	Carbonized barley grain from external midden abutting Viking longhouse [138a]	$1195\pm35$	-24.6	695-947
SUERC-14046	Carbonized barley grain from external midden abutting Viking longhouse [138a]	$1210\pm35$	-23.5	689-984
	Combined age for barley grains in [138a] T value = 0.1 ( $\chi^2$ :0.05 = 3.8) C in Figs. 2 and 3	$1203\pm25$	n/a	722-891
SUERC-764	Carbonized barley grain from upper peat ash patch in windblown sand [138b] B in Figs. 2 and 3	$1370\pm45$	-24.5	601-765
SUERC-29302	Carbonized barley grain from lower peat ash spread in windblown sand [138b]	$1685\pm40$	-24.1	245-430
SUERC-29303	Carbonized barley grain from lower peat ash spread in windblown sand [138b]	$1555\pm40$	-24.4	420-591
SUERC-30409	Carbonized barley grain from lower peat ash spread in windblown sand [138b]	$1605\pm35$	-23.5	385-545
	Weighted mean for barley grains in lower peat ash patch in [138b] A in Figs. 2 and 3	$1614\pm36$	n/a	351-543
Undir Junkarinsfløtti (Church et al., 2005; Ascough et al., 2006)				
AAR-6928	Sheep bone from basal midden layer in Phase 1	$1190\pm40$	-20.4	695-967
AAR-6929	Cow bone from basal midden layer in Phase 1	$1115\pm35$	-19.9	784-1016
Toftanes (Vickers et al., 2005)				
SUERC-3613	Carbonized barley grain from floor layer in House 1, Phase 1	$1155\pm35$	-25.1	778–972
SUERC-3614	Carbonized barley grain from floor layer in House 1, Phase 1	$1125\pm35$	-22.8	782-993
SUERC-3668	Carbonised hazelnut shell from floor layer in House 2a, Phase 3	$1155\pm35$	-27.6	778–972
SUERC-3669	Carbonised hazelnut shell from floor layer in House 2a, Phase 3 (other half of SUERC-3668)	$1110\pm35$	-27.8	829-1018
SUERC-3615	Carbonised hazelnut shell from floor layer in House 2a, Phase 3	$1215\pm35$	-22.3	689-891
SUERC-3616	Carbonised hazelnut shell from floor layer in House 2a, Phase 3 (other half of SUERC-3615)	$1170\pm35$	-22.3	773–971
Við Kirkjugarð (Arge, 2013)				
SUERC-24836	Carbonized barley grain from hearth deposit	$1215\pm40$	*	685-932
SUERC-24310	Carbonized barley grain from hearth deposit	$1235\pm30$	-22.6	687-879

Viking settlement at the base of the sequence. The 1994 trench was re-opened in 2002 and 2006–7 to take detailed chronological and palaeoenvironmental samples. Standard excavation procedures were adopted (see Figs. 2b and 3 for final site sections in relation to the excavation trench), with a bulk soil sample taken from each context for plant macrofossil analysis (*total* sampling – Jones, 1991) and 100% dry-sieving (4 mm) of the remainder of the soil from each context to recover larger ecofacts and artefacts. Additional bulk samples for beetle analysis and soil micromorphology were taken

from key contexts. The bulk samples were processed using a Siraftype wet sieve tank (Kenward et al., 1980), using 1.0 and 0.3 mm sieves for the flot and a 1.0 mm sieve net to catch the residue. The material was air-dried and both the flot and residue fully sorted under  $\times 6$ –20 magnification. Single carbonized barley grains (*Hordeum* sp. hulled) were chosen for AMS <sup>14</sup>C dating from key contexts, following established dating protocols for North Atlantic archaeology (Ashmore, 1999; Church et al., 2005; Ascough et al., 2009). The <sup>14</sup>C dates were processed by the Scottish Universities



Fig. 1. Location map of Á Sondum and sites mentioned in the text.

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