7.2 Medieval sources

Unfortunately, the history of Faroese through the middle ages is very poorly documented. In this respect the situation is very different from that of Icelandic with its rich literary heritage. Here we will list the most important medieval sources that are available to those who want to study the history of Faroese.

7.2.1 Runic inscriptions

Two runic stones from the Viking age have been found in the Faroes. One was found in Kirkjubøur in 1832 and is now believed to be from around the year 1000, although some scholars have considered it to be older than that (see e.g. Dahl 1980:13–14). The inscription is very difficult to read, but according to one of the latest attempts to decipher it (by Marie Ingerslev Simonsen in 1959), the last words can be read as shown in (1a). An earlier attempt (by Ludvig Wimmer 1887) is given in (1b) (the first line below the inscription is an attempt to transcribe it into standardized Old Norse orthography, cf. the section on phonological changes below):

(1a) a. uik ufí uni rue b. uftir hrúa

Vigúlfri umni ró eftir Hróa
‘granted peace to Vigúlfri’  ‘after Hróa’

The other stone was found in Sandavágur 1917. It is believed to be from around 1200. The inscription is longer and easier to read and has been deciphered (by Johannes Brondum Nielsen) as shown in (2) (cf. Dahl 1980:15):

(2) þorkið onondarsun austnaðr af ruha
þorkell Qnundarson Austnaðr af Roga
þorkell Qnundarson Norwegian from Roga-
lande X byggðe: þen a síðþaþ: fyrst
lande byggðe þenn a stað fyrst
land settled this place first

‘þorkell Qnundarson, a Norwegian from Rogaland, was the first settler in this place.’

Here Austnaðr (literally ‘Eastern’) means ‘a Norwegian’, a term commonly found in Old Icelandic literature (Norway is east of Iceland — and and of the Faroes), and Rogaland is an area in Norway.

A third runic stone was found in Fámjin on Suðuroy, but it is considered to be from a much later time (presumably the 16th century, cf. Dahl 1953) and is of no linguistic value since it only contains a few runic symbols. Two wooden pieces with runic carvings on them have also been found in Eiði on Eysturoy. One of them seems to contain a (part of) a runic alphabet, the other possibly a word or a part of a word.

The language on the old runic stones is, of course, not especially Faroese but rather the common Nordic language of the Viking age. Hence they do not tell us anything about the history of the Faroese language as such, although they are interesting in and of themselves.

7.2.2 Legal documents

The Seyðabrev ‘Sheep Document’ is generally considered the oldest and most important authentic Faroese document written in the Latin alphabet (see e.g. Jakobsen 1907). As the name indicates, it contains regulations about sheep farming in the islands. It is dated 1298 and usually referred to in Faroese as Kongsbókin (Sth. perg. 33, 4°, now preserved in the National Archives in Tórshavn), basically written in Norwegian (or Old Norse). The writer, reverend Teitur, is otherwise unknown and it is not entirely clear whether he was Icelandic or Norwegian (see e.g. Hagland 1983, Gúlvarþur Má Gunlaugsson 2000:94). The manuscript contains, however, a few words and expressions believed to be especially Faroese (cf. e.g. Matras 1960) and hence it has been suggested that the original draft was written in the Faroes (for discussion see Gúlvarþur Má Gunlaugsson 2000:94 and references cited there). A transcription of Seyðabrévið from the early 14th century is preserved in the University Library in Lund (Perg. Hist. Lit. 12, fol.). This transcription has been "edited" (some sections moved) and it has been claimed that the transcriber must have been Faroese, since this version contains more specifically Faroese linguistic traits. This is apparently also true of other documents in this vellum book in the Lund University Library (cf. Jakobsen 1907:XXXI). These traits include word forms like göða ‘make a fence’ (where the original has the more “Norwegian”-looking gjøða) and expressions like hvarki ... nea ‘neither ... nor’, instead of Old Norse hvarki ... né (cf. Jakobsen 1907:XXXIX-XL — see also Sørlie 1965). A short passage from the Seyðabrev follows below (in italics), together with Jakobsen’s translation (1907:9 — Jakobsen’s orthography has been modified slightly here) and an English translation:

(3) Nu liggja haglendi saman utan gardís
Nú liggja hagalendi saman utan garðs
now lie pastures together outside fence
oc æigv æj. menn huarr sinn haga,
og eiga tveir menn hver sin haga,
and own two men each his pasture
oc gengr savr or annars haga oc i hins ...
og gongur seyður úr annars haga i annars
and goes sheep from one’s pasture (and) in another’s
þa taci sa savö sinn allan oc beri i sinn haga
tá skal hin taka seyð sin allan og flýta i sin haga
then shall the other take sheep his all and move to his pasture

No special Faroese traits can be seen in this excerpt from the Seyðabrev but the observant reader will note some inflectional differences between the Old Faroese (Old Norse) text and the Modern Faroese one. Here we have highlighted old past tense plural form æigv (or eigu in more common normalized orthography), which ends in -u as was typical of the present tense plural of
preterite-present verbs, but eiga now ends in -a in the pres.pl., as do many of the preterite-present verbs (cf. section 3.8.2.3). We have also highlighted the old subjunctive forms taci (or taki) and beri — note that here they call for a translation including the modal verb skula ‘shall’.


A more important linguistic source is the series of letters called Húsavikarbrevini ‘The Letters about Húsavik’. The six letters exist in transcriptions from 1407 (preserved in the Arnarmanegn Collection in Copenhagen as Perg. AM fasc. 100, 1a) and they are dated from 1403–1405. Another set of letters is also preserved (as AM fasc. 100, 2a) in a transcription from 1479 (the certified transcriptions concern letters from 1412 and 1443). A third somewhat younger but linguistically important source is a transcription of the Seyðabréf from 1600 (AM 316 fol.). These documents (the Húsavik letters and the transcription of the Seyðabréf from 1600) are generally considered to be written in Early Faroese (as opposed to Old Norse, Icelandic or Norwegian), which can then be dated as far back as to the beginning of the 15th century. Although the spelling is not drastically different from that of older documents (the spelling still has ð and ð, for instance), occasional “misspellings” indicate Faroese phonological changes. In one of the Húsavik letters we find the form hrentadi for older rentadi (cf. Jakobsen 1907:38; Matras 1960:82), which indicates that initial /h/ before a consonant (here n) had been lost so the scribes did not know where to write an h before a consonant and where not. Hence they would occasionally insert it where it did not belong, as in the form hrentadi. Another Húsavik letter (cf. Jakobsen 1907:37; Matras 1960:82) has the spelling huvast for older kvask (or kvask or kvast ‘said self’. Here /kv/ would be etymologically correct but the spelling indicates the change from /hv/ to /kv/ in initial position, making it impossible for the writers to know when to write hv- and when kv-. We will return to developments of this sort in the section on phonological changes below. An illustrative sample from the Húsavik letters is given in (4) in the same format as the one from Seyðabrévið in (3) (cf. Jakobsen 1907:38–40):

Here we see the “reverse” spelling hrentadi (for rentadi) explained above. Note also the “lack” of ð-umlaut in kannur ‘pitchers’ (for Old Norse kunnur), typical for Faroese (as opposed to Icelandic — but similar forms are also common in older Norwegian). Finally, observe that Jakobsen inserts û ‘that’ in the indirect question beginning with hvussu mong ‘how many’ but there is no such element in the corresponding Old Faroese sentence.

7.2.3 Other written sources

After the Reformation around 1540, most documents concerning Faroese matters were written in Danish, but some Faroese words, mostly names (personal names, place names), can be found there. The so-called jarðabókur ‘cadastres’ (the oldest from 1584) and indbókur ‘court records’ (going back to 1615) are the most important documents here. Although these books are mostly written by Danish officials, one can occasionally glean some information about Faroese pronunciation behind the dianicized forms of Faroese words (see especially Hamre 1944). This is admittedly not easy, however, since most of the words are names of some sort and hence prone to various kinds of analogical and folk-etymological changes. Consider the examples in (5):

(5) | Danicized form | Modern Faroese form |
--- | --- | ---
| a. Place names: | | |
| Gjov | Gjóv |
| Myygenes | Mykinès |
| b. Personal names: | | |
| Joen | Ægn |
| Peder | Ætur |

The dianicized form Joen may suggest a disyllabic form of the Faroese name at the time (as opposed to the mono-syllabic Old Norse/Icelandic Jón, for instance), but one might have expected that the Verscharfing (ð > Ø) would have left some trace. The fact that it does not do so either in the place name Gjov (now Gjóv) might seem to indicate that it had not occurred at the time, at least not in the general form that it has today (see the discussion in section 7.4.2.3).1 This suggestion receives some support from certain other forms in the cadastres, such as Roffse for the place name (à) Rógu (cf. Petersen 1993a:15; see also Hamre 1944). The form Myygenes, on the other hand, is probably to be interpreted as some sort of Danish folk etymology (Myygenes = “midge peninsula”) and the form Peder may not tell us anything about the pronunciation of Pætur since the name Peder exists in Danish. — But the jarðabókur also contain other types of examples, such as interesting spelling forms like “gaars ende” for modern gards endi (’end of a fence’), suggesting that the /ð/ had been lost at the time (see also the discussion in section 7.4.2.1).

It should also be mentioned here that it is occasionally possible to find information about the Faroese language in a couple of travel reports from the Faroes in the 17th century, namely

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1 Note, however, that one could argue that a Danish tradition in the transcription or spelling of Faroese names of this sort might have been established earlier and the spelling would thus not tell us anything about the pronunciation of the names at the time of writing.
7.3 Faroese orthography and Faroese as an official language

7.3.1 Examples of phonetically based orthography

The first person to do any extensive writing in post-reformation Faroese was Jens Christian Svakob (1746–1824). In the 1770s he began to write down Faroese ballads and also compiled the first Faroese dictionary (Faroese-Danish-Latin).

Svakob was forced to try to develop a systematic way of writing Faroese when recording the ballads and working on the manuscript of the dictionary. He based his orthography on his own dialect of Faroese, that of Vágar (his father was a Danish minister in Jansagerbó in Miðvágur). As a result, his manuscripts give a quite clear indication of the pronunciation of the Vágar dialect of Faroese in the late 18th century. An example of Svakob's orthography is given in (6), both from his collection of ballads and from his dictionary (see also Hansen 1991, 2003a, Barnes and Weyhe 1994:197, Jóansson 1997:81ff, Poulsen 1997a, etc.).

(6) Svakob’s orthography: Modern Faroese orthography:

a. Aarlo veár um Morgunin Árla var um morgunin
Seulin roár új Fjódl sólín roðar f j ðl
Tajr seuí án smó milkan Mann riújá eáv Garsía Hódl. teir sóú ein smó milkan mann
riúá av Garsía hól.

(Roughly: ‘It was early in the morning, (when) the sun was coloring the mountains, (that) they saw a great man ride from Garsía’s palace.’)

b. Fjðesteruvur s.m. en lang Stav, beslagen nedenom med Jern, baculus longior, annulo ferreo et cuspidé infra munitus ...

(‘Long stave, iron-bond at the bottom with fitted spike’)

As the reader can verify, Svakob’s orthography shows evidence for various phonological developments in Faroese. Thus it indicates the development (diphthongization) of the old long vowels, e.g. when Old Norse /ô/, /ʉ/ are spelled “œ” and “uj”, respectively (cf. új, rúja for i, róða; Séulin, seúð for sólín, sóu). Observe that the spelling “œu” rather than, say, “ou”, for old /œ/ presumably indicates a dialectal feature of Vágar (cf. the discussion in 6.2.3.3). Svakob’s orthography also shows the diphthongization of long /u/ (spelled “æa”) whereas the modern orthography does not. Similarly the spelling “aj” for the diphthong /ei/ is phonetically based. Note further that Svakob does not use “Ô” in his phonetically based orthography, and he uses “dl” for old /il/ where the phonological development calls for it (cf. Fjódl, Hódl) whereas the modern orthography does not. Finally, observe that unstroked /ð/ is sometimes represented as “d” (roár, Garsía — unstroked /ð/ is also occasionally written “¬”, e.g. baðjir for baðir ‘both’).

Other aspects of Svakob’s orthography worth mentioning here include the (fairly consistent) use of double vowel symbols (ee, ii ...) to represent long vowels (e€r for er ‘is’, till for til ‘to’ ...), although this is without exceptions (e.g. betur ‘better’). Note, however, that “aa” is used to represent old /ã/ regardless of quantity (thus aarla for àrla ‘early’ (short vowel) and Baatin for báton ‘boat(Asg.)’ (long vowel)). Consonant length between vowels is also indicated by doubly written consonants (laaðu ‘loaded’, Monnum for monnum ‘men(Dpl.)’), and this also includes the (presumably preaspirated) “hard” stops /pp, tt, kk/ (e.g. etir for efr ‘after’, ikki for ikki ‘not’). Word-finally, on the other hand, consonant length is not always indicated (thus Mann ‘man(Asg.)’ but han for hann ‘he’ (but note that here (lack of) sentence stress may play a role). Svakob represents the “hard” stops /pp,tt,kk/ as “p,t,k” between vowels (Leipi for leip ‘wooden creel(Dsg.)’, Baatin for báton ‘the boat(Asg.)’, tekir ‘takes’), suggesting that these stops had (some sort of) aspiration in his dialect in this position (see the discussion in 6.2.1.3 above). The palatalized /k,j/ are generally represented as “kj”, “gj”, also before front vowels (gievi for gi ‘I’ give’, Ba’nkjir for be’nk ‘banks’). The Verschärfung combinations now represented as “-qv” and “-tg” are typically represented as “-qv” and “-tv”, respectively (thus Sjögvur for sjögvur ‘sea’ and Brygg for brygg ‘bridge’), which is somewhat surprising as this does not correspond to any known dialect variant today (cf. 6.2.3.3). Otherwise the letter “y” is generally not used by Svakob (nor is “y”). The dative ending is always written “-un” and not “-um” as in the modern orthography (e.g. sjailvan for sjálvum ‘self(D)’). Finally, the glides inserted by the glide insertion rule (see section 2.3.5) are sometimes but not always represented (thus both naaun and naaun for náðum ‘peace(Dpl.)’, bognai and bognai for bognádi ‘bent’).

All in all, however, Svakob’s orthography is remarkably consistent and hence he managed to establish a kind of orthographic tradition, although there is some variation in the orthography used by those who followed in his footsteps. We will now look at some examples below for comparative purposes.

In 1817 the Danish minister and natural scientist Hans Christian Lyngebye visited the Faroes and learned about the Faroese ballads. Lyngebye himself recorded fragments of the so-called Sjóhárkverdu (‘Ballads about Sjúður’) and later contacted the minister in Suðuroy, Johan Hendrik Schrøter (1771–1851), and asked him to provide more complete transcriptions. Schrøter wrote down a number of ballads for Lyngebye and these formed the basis for the first book published in Faroese, Føroya Qvøder om Sigurd Føjershorne og hans Æt 1822 (‘Faroese Ballads about Sigurðr Fáfinisbar [i.e. Sigfried] and his kin’), cf. Lyngebye 1822). An illustrative sample is given in (7) below:

(7) Schrøter’s orthography (in Lyngebye):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modern orthography:</th>
<th>Sjáhild situr ûg giðaí Stouli, Teå hit veåna Vuv, Drevur hoon Sjúra és Norðlóndun Uj Hildarhøj til suń.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brynhild situr i gyltm stóli, tað hit vænna vív, dregur hon Sjúður av Norðlóndum í Hildarheili til sín.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Roughly: ‘Brynhild sits on a golden chair, the beautiful lady, she attracts (‘draws, pulls’) Sjúður from the North to herself on Hildarheili’.)