

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

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This is an excavation in response to erosion of coastline. Credit: Dr. Mike Church, Durham University

The Faroe Islands were colonised much earlier than previously believed, and it wasn't by the Vikings, according to new research.

New archaeological evidence places [human](#) colonisation in the 4th to 6th

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

The research, directed by Dr Mike J Church from Durham University and Símun V Arge from the National Museum of the Faroe Islands as part of the multidisciplinary project "Heart of the Atlantic", is published in the *Quaternary Science Reviews*.

The research challenges the nature, scale and timing of human settlement of the wider North Atlantic region and has implications for the colonisation of similar island groups across the world.

The Faroes were the first stepping stone beyond Shetland for the dispersal of European people across the North Atlantic that culminated on the shores of continental North America in the 11th century AD, about 500 years before Columbus made his famous voyage.

The research was carried out on an archaeological site at Á Sondum on the island of Sandoy.

Analysis showed an extensive windblown sand deposit containing patches of burnt peat ash from human activity, dating [human settlement](#) to pre-Viking phases. These ash spreads contained barley grains which were accidentally burnt in domestic hearths and were then spread by humans onto the windblown sand surface during the 4th-6th centuries and 6th-8th centuries, a common practice identified in the North Atlantic during this period to control [wind erosion](#).

Lead author Dr Mike Church, from Durham University's Department of Archaeology, said: "There is now firm archaeological evidence for the human colonisation of the Faroes by people some 300-500 years before the large scale Viking colonisation of the 9th century AD, although we don't yet know who these people were or where they came from.

"The majority of archaeological evidence for this early colonisation is likely to have been destroyed by the major Viking invasion, explaining the lack of proof found in the Faroes for the earlier settlement. This also raises questions about the timing of human activity on other islands systems where similarly evidence may have been destroyed."

Co-author, Símun V Arge from the National Museum of the Faroe Islands, said: "Although we don't know who the people were that settled here and where they came from, it is clear that they did prepare peat for use, by cutting, drying and burning it which indicates they must have stayed here for some time.

"We now have to digest these dates of this early evidence in relation to other sources and consider whether there may be other similar sites, elsewhere on the [islands](#), which may be able to provide us with further structural [archaeological evidence](#)."

**More information:** "The Vikings were not the first colonizers of the Faroe Islands", Church M.J., et al, published in *Quaternary Science Reviews* (2013), [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.quascirev.2013.06.011](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.quascirev.2013.06.011)

Provided by Durham University

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