

# The Faroese Cultural Archive: The Archive as a Source and Theme in Local Historical Writing

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*Abstract:* The cultural Faroese archive consists mostly of local historical writing. This article focuses on works of local history and claims that the local historical part of the archive constitutes the most extensive part of Faroese writing conventions. In publications on local history, the archive progresses into book form without undergoing any significant interpretation. This phenomenon is examined here as an expression of the archive as active and as an element of access, but one that is still used in a traditional cultural-historical context. However, what does “archive” really mean in this context? As a central writing convention, the cultural Faroese archive transcends common notions of the archive as collection, registration and unpublished source material. The article examines the cultural Faroese archive as both source and theme. In other words, it distinguishes between 1) the original archives as sources, which are kept in museums and libraries without being published, and 2) the use of archival sources as topics and cultural resources within published works. Through employing an elastic conception, the article understands the archive as a metaphor in Faroese writing conventions. On this basis, it argues that Aleida Assmann’s distinction between the archive as a source and subject cannot be maintained in a Faroese context because the sources per se are treated as a cultural-historical subject. Finally, it contends that the active and totalizing dimension in the cultural Faroese archive transcends abstract notions of the archive among leading archival theorists, who potentially disregard the cultural archive. Their view is countered by a study of the archive as a felt, experienced and interpreted cultural reality related to the Faroe Islands as a specific, ultraminor, geographical entity. By making geography an independent explanatory factor – and not only as a metaphor

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for a powerful centre and a powerless periphery, as in classical postcolonialism – it is possible to see connections between size and structure. In the case of the Faroese archive, the (colonial) order of things cannot be understood fully without acknowledging the relations between size and structure. The size of the Faroese cultural archive is associated with a lack of capacity, which in turn contributes to an understanding of Faroese uses of it. This power of action in ultraminor cultures is treated as a willingness to compensate for their shortcomings. Thus, what seems to be deprivation only turns out to be cultural capital.

*Culture has been described as “the” medium through which social change is experienced, contested and constituted.*

Denis Cosgrove and Peter Jackson,  
“New Directions in Cultural Geography”

### **The total archive**

As Walter Benjamin (1999, 21) suggests of the archive, “[t]he struggle against dispersion [is the] most deeply hidden motive in the person who collects.” According to Benjamin, this is the archive’s most meaningful expression, and reflects the time-honored view of the archive as something that should not be published and disseminated, but simply stored.

In a small literary culture like the Faroese, the situation is almost the opposite. Here, the archive is not just the result of a collection of documents, but also something that spreads in the form of book publications. As a starting point, the archive constitutes a raw material of sources, but which in this context is the subject of a definite reuse. This is evidenced by the fact that the archive figures in Faroese local histories as a subject in the form of direct reproductions of archival material without undergoing significant processing or interpretation, but which is nevertheless generally embedded in a cultural-historical context. Therefore, the written Faroese tradition is pervaded by archival traits which are referred to as a cultural archive. Different Faroese archives are effectively mobilized as a cultural, local and historical subject, mapping central conditions in the creation and development of the village as the base of Faroese settlements. This idea of a cultural archive has a metaphorical character, while

remaining deeply marked by classical characteristics of accumulation and registration. As a branch of European culture, Faroese culture is equipped with various kinds of official and administrative historical archives. The Faroese Tjóðskjalasavn (the Faroese national archive) also stores many other types of materials and archives, including personal archives comprising cultural-historical material. Other cultural institutions (see later) store oral cultural heritage of various kinds. However, both administrative historical archives and decidedly culture-related archives can become part of the modern cultural archive by virtue of book publications, in particular, local historical writing. This qualifies the use of archives under the auspices of local history as the core of the Faroese cultural archive. The present article's central point is that the archive is used simultaneously as a source and as a subject of local history. This condenses two dimensions of the archive: on the one hand, the archive as a source, i.e. collection, storage and registration, which corresponds to the function of the classical archive; and on the other hand the archive as a subject, i.e. publication and dissemination of information or promotion of a certain subject, which in the Faroese context typically constitute works of local history. The broad use of the archive as a subject renders the archive a cultural carrier, a developer and moreover an effective concrete agent in Faroese culture and writing conventions.

The archive is expanded into a whole writing convention through its connections to a large number of themes, which are primarily related to a mapping of Faroese places in local historical writing. The use of the archive as a model for this form of writing has a cultural-historical character. As a subject of cultural history, local histories are connected with identity and values. The cultural archive constitutes an active, a productive notion of the Faroese archive that connects physical archives with productive, archival writing conventions. The dominant part of the Faroese cultural archive consists of local historical writing written by laypeople in the form of maritime histories, village histories, parish histories, company histories, sports histories, biographies, autobiographies and more, all of which bear the archive's signature and which are also among the best-selling books in the Faroe Islands. The cultural archive has additionally spread to electronic media, including Faroese radio, Útvarp Føroya, which for decades has carried interviews with mainly older Faroese men in a form that bears a strong stamp of tradition-based local history.

### The thesis

This article describes archival trends in Faroese writing conventions, with a particular focus on how the archival dimension is being expanded with local historical works, which are becoming increasingly central to the Faroese cultural archive. The emphasis here is on village stories. The thesis is that Faroese cultural history constitutes a foundational writing convention and is thus the decisive dimension in the construction and further development of the Faroese total archive. The archive can be read as an *intentio operis* of Faroese written culture with cultural history – and a continued transformation of this – in the foreground. The cultural-historical archive is almost ubiquitous in the Faroese written tradition and is therefore referred to in the singular as the Faroese total archive.

The accumulative approach of local and cultural histories to the material has been cursorily mentioned in previous research (Wylie 1987; Andreassen 1992; Joensen 2003), but its significance for the Faroese cultural-historical archive and thus for large parts of Faroese writing conventions (especially concerning the relationship between the archive as source and subject) has yet to be investigated. Additionally, the Faroese cultural archive has not yet been the subject of independent studies based on theoretical perspectives from modern archival theory.

### A brief history of the Faroese archive

The Faroese archive dates back to 1615 and has been preserved under different circumstances (Nolsøe 1956, 20, and 2010, 66ff). At the beginning of the 19th century, people began to discuss a storage place for Faroese archival material. Formerly, Faroese official archives had been preserved in the Royal Danish Trade at Tinganes in Tórshavn (today the current government headquarters), which was supposed to be the “Repository for the country’s public archives” (Nolsøe 1956, 20). Significant parts of the Faroese official archive have been preserved in Danish archives, including but not limited to land registers, bailiff accounts and correspondence between officials.

The Faroese archive as an institution was formally established in 1932. The preparatory work was linked to the Danish archivist G. Hornemann, who came to the Faroes in 1921 to examine the Islands’ preservation facilities for archival material. Hornemann’s preference was for Faroese archives to be moved to Denmark, but Faroese opposition meant that the

material continued to be stored in the Faroe Islands. He then proposed better storage options in the Faroes, which resulted in the Islands establishing their own archival institution. Today the main task of the National Faroese archive is to “ensure the preservation of archives of historical, administrative or legal significance for authorities and citizens, to make archives available to authorities, the public and for research” (Bryderup 1996, 24). Páll J. Nolsøe (1956, 20) notes that it contains archives from across the county, including ombudspeople, bailiffs, churches, medical examiners and business enterprises.

Although the Faroe Islands lacked a professional archive system until the 1930s, the country up to that point could not easily be called a non-institutional archival society, as other institutions (e.g. the judicial authority, the church) were in possession of their own functioning archives. In this sense, the Faroese archival situation resembles that of the layered European archive, whereby different kinds of official archives preceded the current cultural archive. Official archives are also practised as part of the cultural archive. Due to the presence of popular local stories, they are frequently consulted by local historians.

Philology, ethnography and other scientific disciplines also help legitimize the cultural archive and the Faroe Islands’ culturally and historically oriented local and national educational tradition. This tradition of collection has meant a relatively long overlap between orally stored knowledge and one of the first phases of written culture, which is precisely collection and registration with a particular aim of preservation and access to cultural heritage.

Faroese dictionaries have tended to be created at Føroyamálsdeildin, the Faculty of Faroese Language and Literature at the Faroese University (Poulsen, Hansen, and Lon 1998). This is the university’s oldest department (having been founded in 1965) and has long constituted a cornerstone of the Faroese collection tradition. The institute has special documentation tasks in connection with its collections: “the note collection for dictionary work, the folk memory collection (especially quatrains and dance traditions), the place name collection, the dialect collection and the collection of the entire Faroese fiction” (Bryderup 1996, 20). These collecting activities reflect a deeply embedded effort within Faroese culture. Even prior to the establishment of an official Faroese etymology and a standardized written Faroese culture, there was an extensive collecting culture written in different dialects, which arose from the national romantic interest in language, history and memory.

### The archive as source and subject

To my knowledge, the only person who has researched the Faroese archive as a more or less extended metaphorical matter is Kim Simonsen. Simonsen's (2012) thesis, *Literature, Imagining and Memory in the Formation of a Nation*, is primarily about memory, the nation and travel writing. Simonsen touches on the archive seen in relation to cultural nationalism (2021, 220–222). With reference to Assmann, Simonsen links the idea of the archive to the conceptual pair archive and canon, which is also connected to Faroese nationalism and nation-building in general.

On the other hand, my angle on the archive comes primarily from written culture and cultural history, as I derive my arguments from recent cross-disciplinary archive theory (Foucault, Derrida, Stoler, Millar, Osborne, etc) and the theoretical field regarding writing conventions and material as well as document-focused media theory (Ernst 2002; Ferraris 2012). In recent years, scholars, including those in manuscript studies, have demonstrated that these theories constitute interconnected theoretical fields within the material turn.

Ann Laura Stoler (2002, 86) broke up with the distinction between the archive as objective present source (registration, preservation, management) and the archive as theme (the archive in motion, interpretation). Stoler's opinion is that the archive is far from just a source, i.e. "passive" management, storage, accumulation and reference; moreover, it is not simply an object for something else in the form of cultural memory.<sup>1</sup> Stoler's perspective is consistent with the idea of culture as a dynamic, co-creative dimension. The present article builds upon Stoler's view of the archive as active and of the cultural archive as a productive, cultural-historical writing convention in the Faroese writing tradition. Stoler's scholarship differs from Assmann's (2010, 99, and 2011, 329) cultural memory studies, which consider the archive to be a form of storage, a passive matter and merely the object of something else, which for her is memory. Assmann perceives the archive as a passive memory storehouse and a reservoir through which the activating memory draws its traces. Simonsen (2012, 64–64) approaches Assmann's (2010, 105) view of cultural memory, in which canon figures as the active part and the archive as the passive part of cultural memory. My view of the archive as active constitutes a corrective to this separation between canon as ac-

1 Giorgio Agamben (1998, 136 and 172) also describes the archive as active and not as storage for what is written.

tive and the archive as passive. The Faroese archives are certainly subject to use and are activated not only as a repository of memory, but also as a cultural archive, because their very use has an archival character. The archive as a central subject in Faroese writing conventions is the main example of this phenomenon.

### **An Elastic Total Archive**

There is total theatre, total novel, total football – but also the total archive. Indeed, the Faroese cultural archive has such profound significance for Faroese writing conventions that it can be called a “total archive” (Millar 1998) and a repository of total memory.

The Faroese cultural archive has the character of what Laura Millar (1998, 103ff) in a Canadian context has called the theory of “the total archive,” which is aimed at what she terms “complete memory.” More broadly, the core of local history writing has also been described as a holistic endeavour: “Synthesis ambition is for me something of the essence of local history, with the entire local community as an object and with the aim of grasping the entirety of this community” (Niemi 1991, 13). Knut Sprauten (2014, 31) has the same point of view as Einar Niemi, in that he emphasizes local history as an “ambition to create total history. Everything must be included, everything that happened on the spot.” Faroese local history bears the same overall character.

The transformation of the archive as source to the archive as subject in the form of a totalizing cultural archive has a metaphorical character. However, it is still rooted in the original archive. This approach to the Faroese archive corresponds to Thomas Osborne’s description of the cultural history archive as an elastic dimension connecting concrete and metaphorical manifestations of the archive:

What makes the notion [of the archive] really useful is its very elasticity; that it goes beyond such a literal reference, or that it can be used to do so [...] The notion of archive is useful precisely because it enables us to oscillate between literalism and idealism. (Osborne 1999, 51–53)

In this context, the elastic element means an archive that includes both the archive as a classic archival source and the archive as a theme or writing convention. The most widespread example of this elasticity

is the wide range of local history written by laypeople that mimics the form of the archive as sources, while at the same time constitutes a subject: local history.

### **Village histories: the main stem in the Faroese cultural archive**

Quantitatively, the most important part of the Faroese cultural archive comprises Faroese village histories. The vast majority of Faroese settlements – both alive and extinct – have had their more or less authoritative local history or are on the way to having it. In these cases, the name of the settlement is usually mentioned in the title of the book, indicating that the work constitutes the history of the locality in question. They are largely devoid of historical contextualization and interpretation, and they mostly present no critical stance on the sources used. Such works have become the most popular books among the Faroese, not least because of the authors' own experiences and their closeness to the oral sources/informants. Many of these local historical works have been published by their authors, further emphasizing their local origin. The publishers in these cases are either directly called "egið forlag" (own publisher) or something similar.

Village histories and related works constitute the first actual current within Faroese historiography. Although the frequency of publication of village histories and other mainly local historical works increased only slowly from the original in 1940 through the 1950s, since the 2000s, such writing has become common and today represents a very viable genre that appeals greatly to Faroese readers.

The composition of local historical writing reveals direct kinship with the formal characteristics of the classical archive in the form of accumulated material with a recording presentation (Joensen 1987, 120). To this form of composition belongs a simple style that harmonizes with the general convention of communication within which local stories operate. Transparent and unobtrusive object language is used to describe concrete things. Narratively, the works are governed by "naïve" representational thinking and implicit authorial authority, and the appeal to the reader is implicitly collective. Furthermore, there is an absence of polysmy and virtually no direct references to the utterance, because this is perceived as noise. Some authors are journalists (for example, Jógvan Arge and Helgi Jacobsen), and the simple style in these cases is in line with the transparent and easily digestible journalistic language, which



compliments with the local histories' implicit ideal of making the archives accessible. Many authors of local histories have been teachers, who in Faroese culture play an important role as mediators of cultural heritage. It is part of their vernacular nature that these village stories are strongly legitimized by a local audience, which must almost be perceived as an implicitly co-creating addressee.

In these village stories' descriptions, emphasis is placed on them being laypeople's works, written as they are by school teachers and other non-archivists or non-historians. Nevertheless, there are exceptions, as the genre has in recent years been overtaken partly by historical science and its source-critical principles. The still unfinished multi-volume work *Havnar søga*, Vols. 1–5 (2004–2009) by the historians Kári Jespersen and Jens Pauli A. Nolsøe as well as the ongoing project *Klaksvíkar søga*, Vols. 1–2 (2008–2009) by the historian Hans Andrias Sølvará – and thus the histories of the country's two largest localities – have become the subject of professional historiography. Even so, these are exceptions that prove the rule. Another aspect of these local histories, which this study has not chosen to focus on either, is the connection between the local historical tradition and local fiction called Heimat literature, as it is expressed in the local histories per se (cf. Lund 1980, 15). An obvious example of this link is the Faroe Islands' first village history *Miðvinga søga* (1940) by Mikkjal Dánjalsson á Ryggi, which has a narrative, literary-influenced thread in its presentation not true of most Faroese local histories. Thus, it is not only literature that approaches local history, which Faroese literature does to a great extent; the opposite is also the case.

The introduction to *Miðvinga søga* finishes with a poem in which there is a mobilizing and self-conscious appeal to people from other settlements to start writing village histories:

Skrivað havi eg søgurnar  
 sum fornir søgdu mær  
 skrivið nú tit í hinum bygdunum  
 ein og hvør hjá sær.  
 (Á Ryggi 1940, x)

I have the stories written  
 as the departed told me  
 now you write in the other settlements  
 each to himself.

This has proved to be a successful call. Today, virtually all Faroese settlements have their own official village history, and the frequency of publication has been steadily increasing over the years. In addition, a multitude of other local histories and related works are being published continuously.

### Village stories: form and content

In this context, I want to take a closer look at the form and content of the Faroe Islands' village histories in order to gain a greater insight into how they constitute part of the Faroese cultural archive.

The archival aspect already catches one's eye in the works' content overview, where the enumerative approach is clear in relation to family- and personally named material, the houses in the settlement and so forth. The village histories describe the society and its material prerequisites as the whole of the settlement in question: land, population, houses, economy, production, culture, working life, significant events and social conditions.

These village stories are part of Faroese local history, which contains many variants. Therefore, a distinction must be made between local history and village history, with the latter constituting an attempt to tell the entire history of the settlement from its origins to the present day. The more specific local histories constitute independent treatments of individual topics or phenomena from the world of the village, including separate histories such as stories of different institutions, well-known local figures, companies, municipalities, place names and family-specific works. However, they all have strong archival features. In relation to these local histories, the village histories are totalizing, which is strongly hinted at in their titles (e.g. *Vestmanna søga*, *Hovs søga*), corresponding to books that intend to describe the entire history of the settlement. Therefore, a recurring feature in village histories is what is often called "búseting" ("settlement") and "upprunasøga" ("history of origin"). This kind of beginning anticipates progression towards the present, although this fact does not apply to thematically composed village histories (cf. later).

In other words, the village histories constitute a kind of total topography. In his village history, *Skúvoyar søga*, Petur Andreassen (1988, 156) even uses the word "topography" with respect to his own work. Nevertheless, neither in the village stories per se nor in the debate about them are many reflections made concerning the notion of wholeness:

as Niemi (1991, 12) notes, “it is seldom theoretically reflected,” although as a “holistic discipline” (1991, 12), additional theoretical reflection may be necessary. Instead of problematizing the totalizing concept, as one would probably do were this a question of professional historiography, the literature on local histories has generally emphasized valuing them and being happy that they have been written at all (cf. Niemi 1991, 13). This is connected to the fact that village histories and local histories in general are “a field of work for the amateur historian, a pastime, ‘the happy science’” (Niemi 1991, 12).

However, it is my experience in the Faroese context that were one to describe these local stories as amateurish and as a manifestation of the initial stage of written culture, this would be perceived negatively. Gradually – as Niemi (1991, 12) points out – the writing of local history has become professionalized with “strengthened formal research competence[s] of authors and editors.” The same applies to the Faroe Islands. A scientifically distanced description of this genre as partially amateurish does not mean that one disregards its intrinsic value as a source for professional historiography and as providing access to sources about “*hitt dagliga lív fólksins*” (“the folk’s daily life”) (Rasmussen 1985, 1), which otherwise has been under-elucidated relative to political, administrative, legal and religious matters. The local stories thereby provide access to an identity that often goes under the radar in the usual focus on national identity. Jóan Pauli Joensen (1989, 15) notes that “the identity of the Faroese in the 18th century was deeply immersed in daily life,” and the same applies in the centuries both before and after.

Although there are also tensions between the local and the national in the Faroese context, the Faroese awakening to a national consciousness at the end of the 19th century was closely connected with the origin and shaping of a local consciousness. According to Joensen, national symbols such as museums, libraries, national costumes and public meetings

did not prevent that they were not also aware of the local identity. The first so-called village history was published during the Second World War and since then there have been more and more. One had become aware of one’s identity on several levels. (Joensen 2003, 49)

Where the local histories describe settlements, the national poetry predictably describes the nation. Thus, they both stand in contrast to fiction’s use of the archive bridging myth and modernity, as practised

particularly by William Heinesen. In an international context, the Faroese local histories are to be regarded as an implicit response to the foreign topographies of the Faroe Islands by Lucas Debes, Thomas Tarnovius and others. My use of the term “implicit” is connected with the fact that topographical and historiographical awareness is not an active aspect of the local histories.

The village historians generally do not consider it their task to reflect on their expression, but rather to make their village’s cultural heritage available to the public. As in classical historiography, contextualizations and ongoing considerations about the meaning, development and function of history and associated historiographic awareness are not the concern. The village histories do not reflect on the abstract or general contexts of the cases, nor on the many production possibilities that the material offers. Instead, the local histories are concerned with the close local as well as the factual and archive-based perspective, and as a rule they do not take a critical view of the sources used. Consequently, they are more concerned with recording and preserving the people’s material and spiritual culture for posterity than with how the material is put together and interpreted, although there are exceptions (Rasmussen 1985, 2).

One of the most prevalent features of village histories and local histories in general is that they archive the settlement as a matter of the past, which distinguishes from national conceptions, where there is a “tension between the unchanging and the changing” (Feldbæk 1991, 12). National identity is anything but “static,” as it is constantly “changing” (Feldbæk 1991, 12). The background of the local stories is scarcely different from the national consciousness in the sense that it too recognizes that everything has changed. However, in the village histories, the gaze is turned backwards, with a particular focus on the awareness that the hourglass is about to run out and that one must try to save what can be saved by writing it down. Cultural heritage that must be saved from oblivion and made accessible mobilizes momentum in local histories. Settlement histories generally seal their subject, corresponding to the fact that they describe the settlement in a closed space representing the old Faroese settlement, which is now definitively history. The settlement is encapsulated in the past; it is simply archived.

One of the best examples of this archival encapsulation can be found in the introduction to *Sandavágs søga*:

Siðir hava skift, og tann tíðin er farin, tá ið pápin tók sonin við sær og lærði hann at kenna bø og haga, lærði hann at kenna og virða tann heim, sum teir, ið undan vóru farnir høvdu livað í, og lærði hann at kenna og virða ætt sína, ta ætt, sum hann sjálvur skuldi føra víðari [...] Ungdómur okkara í dag kennir mangan ikki ætt sína og tí ikki heldur tann arv, ið hann hevur skyldu at fara undir at bera til teirra, sum skula koma aftaná. Tí er tíðin komin at festa tað á blað, sum fyrr var øllum kunnugt, men sum nú er ókent fyri ungdómi okkara. Henda bókin er skrivað fyri at varðveita minnið um tey, sum ígjøgnum nógvar øldir hava búð í tí bygd, har eg sjálvur sleit fyrstu skógvar mínar, og sum ein roynd til at vísa ungdómi okkara, hvar ið haldgóður botnur er at byggja á. (Petersen 1963, 5)

Traditions have changed, and the time is gone when the father took the son with him and taught him to know and appreciate the world in which the ancestors lived, and taught him to know and value his family, the family that he himself had to carry on [...] Our youth today often do not know their family and therefore neither the heritage that they are obligated to pass on to those who come after them. Therefore, the time has come to put down in writing what was previously known to everyone, but which is now unknown to our youth. This book has been written to preserve the memory of those who have lived for centuries in the settlement where I made my first step as a child, and as an attempt to show our youth where there is a solid foundation to build on.

This passage makes explicit that this village story, like those similar to it, is about what has already disappeared. But it also emphasizes with a moral pointer that the past is the solid foundation that the youth should get to know.

More recent village stories are more open towards the present. However, there are limits to openness even in the modern development within the local historical writing as it is more or less closed to the outside world, including to other settlements, immigrants and non-residents or on and off residents such as seafarers (Sprauten 2014, 36). The starting point is to a large extent the land and the related property conditions. Therefore, it is admittedly easy to problematize the village histories as a total archive. Nevertheless, the intention within the given narrow framework is to provide some kind of overall picture of the settlement

in question. In the Faroese context, some of these absent elements within village histories have been compensated for in book series and the Faroese cultural history of the sea, including Páll J. Nolsøe's *Føroya Siglingarsøga* in 17 volumes, Niels Juel Arges' *Teir Sigldu Úti* in five volumes and Jógvan Arges' *Teir Tóku Land* in eight volumes.

Finally, it is worth taking a closer look at the chronology of the village histories. In the majority, the chronology is anchored in the creation of the settlement during the settlement period or later, and is made more or less explicit. Here are some examples:

- Edward Hjalt: *Sands søga*, 1953
- Ludvig Petersen: *Sandavágs søga*, 1963
- Hans Jacob Sigvardsen: *Argir. Minningarrit í samband við 150 ára dag í Argja bygdarsøgu*, 1978
- Jákup Berg: *Hovs søga*, Vols. 1–2, 1984
- Marius Johannesen: *Fer hvirla yvir Funningsfjørð*, 1985
- Meinhardt Jacobsen, Herluf Berthelsen, and Obert Eliassen: *Brot úr Fuglafjarðar søgu*, 1989
- Robert Joensen: *Klakksvíkar bygd í søgu*, 1992
- Sonni Jacobsen: *Sørvágur og sørvingar*, Vols. 1–2, 1995
- Birgar Johannesen: *Havnin – fólk og yrki*, Vol. 1 (1900–1939) and Vol. 2 (1940–1969), 2008
- Helgi Jacobsen: *Vestmanna søga*, Vols. 1–2, 2011
- Páll Kunoy: *Skarðsbygd. Tey orkaðu ikki meir*, 2012
- Petur Jacob Sigvardsen: *Úr Gjáar søgu og Føroya bygdasøgu í nýggjari tíð*, Vols. 1–2, 2013

The following village histories have a thematic structure:

- Poul Andreasen: *Úr Vágs søgu*, 1977
- Arnstein Niclasen: *Fólkini úti í bø. Eitt tíðarrák um bygdarlív og ættir*, 2013
- Petur Andreasen: *Skúvoyar søga*, Vols. 1–2, 1988
- Sigfríður Joensen: *Gøtuskeggjar*, 2008
- Freydis Poulsen: *Úr Oyndafjarðar søgu*, 2004
- Helena Samuelsen: *Hellurnar – ein niðurseturbygd í Fuglafjarðar kommunu*, 1999
- Óli Egilstroð: *Úr Eiðis søgu*, 2004

Also worth mentioning are local historical works covering an entire region, such as Símun Hansen's septology *Tey Byggja Land* (1971–1981). This work concerns the northern islands, where it is so highly revered it almost enjoys the status of being a Bible. In addition, the cultural Faroese archive contains different kinds of publications. There are, for instance, handwritten books, such as *Høvdið Uppundan* (1979) by Hans Mikael Jacobsen, and there is a collection of sermons written by K.O. Viderø, which have been slapped together and published by others without prefaces and comments of any kind, and then finally published by his wife at her own publisher with the title *Prædikur* (2018).

Apart from some of the most recent village histories written by historians, the village histories tend not to reflect on either language, style or material treatment. Virtually without exception, the village stories and local stories in general are presented with numerous pictures, and in this way the authors try to meet their readers and the market.

### The meaning of the list

What is specifically archival about the local histories is their accumulative character, their character of list formation. The list has had a great impact on the development of writing systems and writing culture. According to script theorist Jack Goody (2012, 338), the early phase of a written culture is characterized by “primitive classifications,” which are significantly expressed in the formation of lists. The best example of this in Faroese writing conventions is local historical writing. Such works have become a dominant trend in Faroese written culture due to their mapping mainly of the material living conditions of Faroese people, including land, family, working life/business and community.

In the shift from oral culture to written culture – or in the transition from what Goody (2012, 338) calls “Verschiebung von der blossen Äußerung zur Textform” [shift from mere utterance to text form] – the list constituted a significant developmental step. Enumerative as it is, the list is in itself an expression of a lack of flexibility, but this lack takes a backseat because of its fundamental importance for cultural development (Goody 2012, 339). The list “erhöht die Sichtbarkeit sowie die Grenzen von Klassen” [increases the visibility as well as the boundaries of classes] (Goody 2012, 396), and this visibility and distinguishing approach applies initially to the present subject (classification of the elements of rural culture, etc). Moreover, it not only registers all these

elements in the exterior, but also the language per se: “Schreiben und Listenbilden impliziert, dass Sprache aufgezeichnet wird” [Writing and list-making implies that language is recorded] (Goody 2012, 393).

The local historical works and the related genres are the best examples of the young written culture’s “raw” classification or initial mapping of Faroese culture in accumulative terms such as lists: pay lists for ships’ crews, ship lists, family and personal lists of names, lists of place names, lists of priestly offices, lists of various property relationships, legends and other stories, an overview of the number of houses in the settlement, censuses, registration of drowned people, etc. The entire compositional structure of the local historical works bears the stamp of the list. Even Faroese visual art starts with images that bear this stamp. The first Faroese visual artist, Díðrikur á Skarvanesi and his drawings of moon pigeons, constitute a list of pigeons drawn from corresponding images in popular magazines.

These “primitive” classifications are closely related to the oral culture in the sense that the written culture makes explicit what has been more or less implicitly available in the former (Goody 2012, 385). The early written culture constitutes a radically different medium from the modern one by virtue of its “Reorganisation von Information durch Listen” [reorganization of information through lists] (Goody 2012, 363). It is connected with the fact that writing is able to create a spatial order (Goody 2012, 354), to “restructure consciousness” (Ong 1982, 78–117) and to carry out a “structural breakdown of the said memory” (Derrida 1996, 11). Derrida (1996, 7) describes written culture as both traditional and revolutionary, because it is at the same time reminiscent and radically renews memory.

With reference to the catalogue-storing and accumulating nature of the original archive, Walter Benjamin (1996, 457) asks: “But when shall we actually write books like catalogues?” In a certain sense, this is exactly what is happening with the transformation of the archive’s accumulative list formations into cultural themes in Faroese village histories and within local historical writing in general. A culturally Faroese answer to Benjamin’s question could therefore be that books will take on the character of a catalogue when the archive reaches far enough into the geographical “periphery,” which has additional cultural significance in very small cultures like the Faroese. Deleuze and Guattari (1986, 17) quote Kafka’s description of the collective dimension of minor literatures:



What in great literature goes on down below, constituting a not indispensable cellar of the structure, here takes place in the full light of day, what is there a matter of passing interest for a few, here absorbs everyone no less than as a matter of life and death.

Bergur Rønne Moberg and David Damrosch (Moberg 2017 and 2022; Moberg and Damrosch 2022) have coined the term “ultraminor literatures,” which builds on “literature mineur,” but represents a more radical version of minor literature. In ultraminor literatures and cultures, it is particularly the case that what goes on down below in great literatures and cultures takes place in the open here. Ultraminor cultures are considerably more collective than both minor and major cultures, and the autonomous role of the Faroese cultural archive is a good example of this.

### Source use and collectivity

Letter writing is rarely a source in local history works, regardless of whether the letters are Faroese or foreign (Lund 1980, 13). Letters express the attitude and thus subjectivity of individuals, whereas the local history genre for the most part focuses stubbornly on facts about the locality rather than on the voice of the individual. As an individualized expression, letters do not constitute the most obvious source material for a collective genre such as village history, which emphasizes a collective, harmonious presentation of the given locality: “[t]he citizens appear united (...), but as whole individuals will possibly stand in opposition to each other” (Lund 1980, 13). The point is that rather than an individual feeling and thinking, there is a collective feeling and thinking in local historical writing. By largely excluding individual sources such as letters, local history thus avoids presenting contradictions in the parish or the settlement (Lund 1980, 13). The local historian is a local kind of polyhistor (Lund 1980, 12) who totalizes and harmonizes, but from a very traditional angle. For the same reason, neither individuals, the class reality, women nor children, let alone exceptional existences, have any further significance in the writing of local history. Another reason for harmonizing the representation is that these works are written for the residents of the given locality and for others related to it (cf. Lund 1980, 13), and in this respect the appeal of the genre lies in the egalitarian.

“Folk culture functions on a collective basis,” and the cultural archive of local historical writing can be read as an expression of a modernized

folk public (Andreassen, 1992, 111), which builds on the original oral-based folk public. It is as if the predominantly descriptive and non-scholarly structure of the local histories is tailored to the still popular and informal Faroese public.

## Conclusion

This article has investigated the basic conditions surrounding the cultural archive as a popular Faroese writing convention and as an important way of organizing knowledge. It has operated with an elastic notion of the archive as a source and theme corresponding to the archive and its use as a bridge between the physical archives and dominant writing conventions in the Faroese writing tradition. Emphasis has been placed on the use of archives under the auspices of local historical writing, especially in the genre of village history, where the archive functions both as a source and as a subject. Village histories and local historical writing in general form the main artery of Faroese writing conventions and mapping of Faroese settlements. The Faroese cultural archive is overdetermined by local cultural history, which strongly legitimizes and organizes knowledge in such a young and tiny written culture, which continues to have a largely collective character.

The archive relates culturally and historically to Faroese culture and to the culture's orientations in time and space. It contains possibilities that allow it to spread with the help of cultural history and to become an access-giving element in Faroese culture. As a central writing convention, the cultural archive transcends common notions of the archive as collected and registered source material stored in specially designed archival institutions. Against this background, this article has argued that the distinction in Faroese writing conventions between the archive as source and as subject cannot be maintained, because the sources specifically are treated as cultural-historical subjects, especially in the works of local historical writing. This has been examined as an expression of the archive as active and used in a traditional cultural-historical context.

Although the Faroese local histories are retrospective, as an active cultural archive they also represent the present and mostly productive part of Faroese written culture. In its archivally accumulative form, the local histories lie close to the archive as uninterpreted source material, although they are filled with implicit self-interpretations. However,

these stories differ from the classic passive archive as a memory store because, as publications and providers of access to cultural heritage, they organize cultural-historical knowledge while at the same time sending it into circulation. In this way, the original archives are spread through the local histories.

The local awareness of village histories is in itself an example of the interest in the local, which runs as a side track in Faroese culture to the processes of nation-building and thus to the construction of a Faroese identity. The use of the Faroese archive continues into literature, in particular in the writings of William Heinesen and his use of local historical writing as an artistic, spiritual way of mapping his homeland. The cultural archive here becomes a literary and cultural archive, not reproducing lists, but instead governed by sovereign artistic interpretations of Faroese history as a part of world literary history.

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