



# A peatland landscape at Akraberg, Suðuroy, Faroe Islands: Peat mounds and a cautionary lesson

Kevin J. Edwards, Rolf Guttesen & Petur J. Sigvardsen

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## Abstract

The peatland landscape above the headland of Akraberg at the southern tip of Suðuroy in the Faroe Islands features relict peat cuttings of various age – from the 1950s and perhaps centuries before – as well as mounds of peat. Superficially, the latter might be thought to be abandoned stacks. In fact they are ‘torvløð’ (singular ‘torvlað’) representing platforms of fragmentary peat upon which stacks had been constructed after turves had passed through several intermediate drying stages. The removal of dried peat from the torvløð and the continued use of the platforms led to a gradual increase in torvlað height. General comparisons are made with peat mounds from the British Isles. The peatscape at Akraberg yields implied lessons for studies of ethnography and warns of potential dangers in landscape misinterpretation.

## Keywords

Peat cutting, peat stack, ‘torvlað’, Faroe Islands, Suðuroy, landscape interpretation

Kevin J. Edwards (Corresponding author)

Departments of Geography & Environment and Archaeology,  
University of Aberdeen, UK

E-mail: kevin.edwards@abdn.ac.uk

Rolf Guttesen

Department of Geography and Geology  
University of Copenhagen, Denmark

E-mail: rg@geogr.ku.dk

Petur J. Sigvardsen

25 Fútalág, Tórshavn, Faroe Islands

E-mail: pjs@post.olivant.fo

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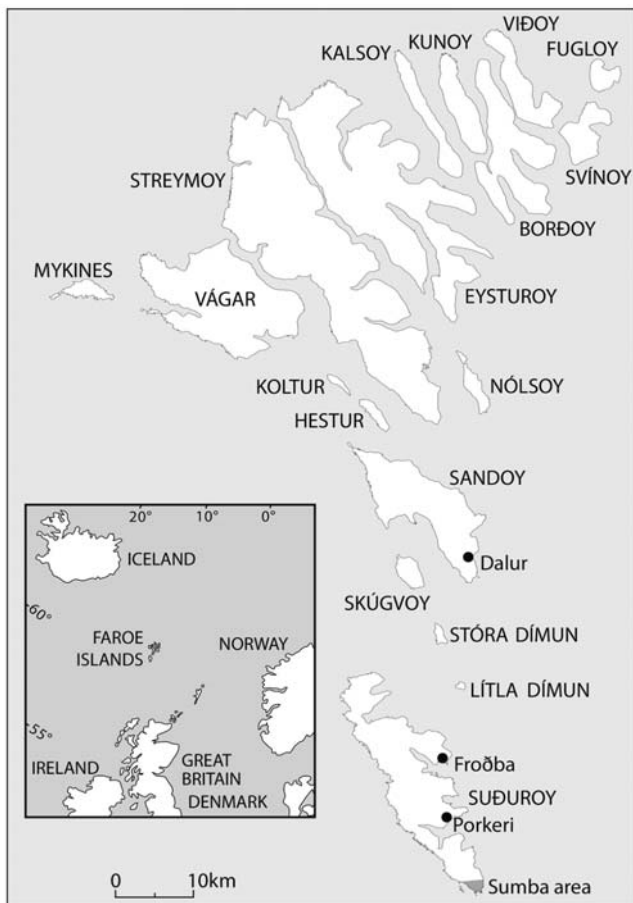
Peat and peaty soils cover a large proportion of the land area of the North Atlantic islands (Figure 1). While peat may severely constrain opportunities for agriculture and settlement, it also offers a source of fuel which has been utilized since at least Neolithic times up to six millennia ago (Whittle et al., 1986; Branigan et al., 2002). Many landscapes bear testimony to peat-cutting activities in both the recent past and at the present day (Fenton, 1978; Ardron, 1999; Rotherham, 1999). The Faroe Islands are no exception to this (Williamson, 1948) and peat winning was common in the archipelago until the 1950s by which time people had largely moved to oil and electricity for power generation and domestic heating, although coal, mined on Suðuroy, had also been in use in the southern Faroes (Poulsen, 1947; Sigvardsen, 2006).

The legacy of extensive peat extraction in the Faroes is seen in the many relict peat cuttings in the blanket peats which cover most of the upland landscape. These are being considerably denuded with time and will eventually disappear as a part of natural processes of erosion and

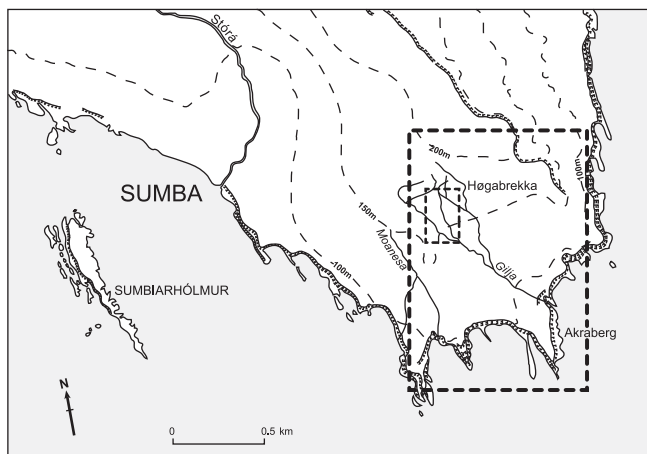
peat accumulation. This paper focuses upon the currently visible manifestations of past peat-cutting activities across a hillside in the Faroe Islands and offers a general description of the resultant peatscape. In addition, it also outlines the misapprehensions that can occur when engaging in landscape study, with potential consequences for the reliable interpretation of historical features.

## The study area

The headland of Akraberg lies at the southern tip of Suðuroy (Figures 1-2). A cliff face on the headland is well-known as the site of so-called ‘ancient’ or ‘Celtic’ fields – the name Akraberg derives from *akur* (= cereal field). These features are of unknown antiquity, but they have been associated with the possible pre-Viking presence of Irish monks or *papar* (Joensen, 1963; Brandt & Guttesen, 1978; Arge et al., 2005). Indeed, it has been hypothesised that these ‘fields’ are relicts of turf-stripping,



**Figure 1:** The location of Suðuroy and the Sumba area and places mentioned in the text.



**Figure 2:** The Sumba area. The study area (cf. Figure 4) is delimited by the large dashed rectangle and the area of old peat cuttings shown in the photograph (Figure 5) is marked by the smaller dashed rectangle.

the nutrient-rich minerogenic surface layers of peat having been used to improve the fertility of farmed land at the nearby settlement (*bøur*) of Sumba (P.C. Buckland, quoted in Edwards, 2005: 588).

The peat-covered hillsides above Akraberg and centred upon the hillslope of Høgabrekka (61° 24' N, 6° 41' W; see demarcated area in Figure 2) lie within the administrative unit (*partur*) of Eystari Húshagi, part of the outfield (*hagi*) of Sumba. It is this area, ranging from approximately 130-230 m above sea level, which has been investigated.

### Description and initial interpretation

Peat cuttings (*torveygu*; sing. *torveyga*; Table 1) are clearly visible over the lower slopes of the study area (Figures 3-4). These relatively fresh sections, around 0.3 m in depth, presumably date back to the 1950s when peat was last extracted with any frequency in the area. Much earlier cuttings, perhaps dating back many hundreds of years, are discernible, albeit faintly, in the field at higher altitudes. They are, however, more distinct in air photographs and this is evident in the enlarged section of part of the 1972 image (Figure 5). Where peat has been cut close to the bedrock, the gravelly basaltic substrate is visible.

Of equal prominence to the cuttings and covering much of the hillside are vegetation-covered mounds of peaty material (Figure 6). Over 150 of these are evident in the aerial photograph. These mounds are up to 1.5 m high, although many are half this size and they are generally oval or rectilinear in shape with dimensions varying typically from 3.0-8.0 m in length. Some have relatively straight sides to the bases of the mounds, and, if not displaying their original form, this may show where peat has been extracted subsequent to initial mound formation. Where incisions or hollows consisting of bare peat faces or surfaces are found on the mounds, they seem to represent scrapes where sheep have caused erosion or have taken advantage of natural denudation to obtain shelter (Figure 7). In several cases, large stone-built structures with external peat cladding are found on top of mounds (Figure 8). These are sheep shelters (*ból*) rather than peat storage structures (*gróthús* or *kráir*).

Where visible, the peat within the mounds is either a homogeneous stratum (especially close to the surface) or appears as dried-out small peat blocks. The bright green colour of many of the mounds is almost certainly due to their superior drainage and the fact that arctic skuas (*Ster-*

**Table 1:** A select terminology associated with peat cutting activities in the Faroe Islands (cf. Young and Clewer, 1985 and Sigvardsen, 2006) together with our clarifications.

<b>Faroese word (plural in parentheses)</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
gróthús or torvhús	A stone-built roofed shelter for storing peat (usually close to or within a settlement)
krógv (kráir)	A stone-built roofless shelter, with relatively loose packing to promote drying, for storing peat (in, close to, or between the peatfield and a settlement). With a grass turf cap (vegetation side down) to protect against rain
misskifta (verb)	To turn the torvreisa upside down to promote the drying process
leypur (leypar)	Wooden creel or basket used to carry peat
lutastaður (-staðir) or torvlutastaður (-staðir)	In the Sumba area: the platform (torvlað) and its immediate surroundings from which peat had been extracted
lutur (lutar), torvlutur (torvlutar)	Stack of peat with a grass turf cap (vegetation side down) to protect against rain
torva (torvur)	Individual piece of cut peat
torveyga (torveygu)	A peat cutting
torvlað (torvløð) or lað (løð)	1. Stack; stack of newly cut peat 2. In Sumba area at least, the platform, often of considerable longevity, upon which dried peat was stacked
torvreisa (torvreisur)	Small peat stack in triangular or pyramidal form consisting of 2-5 individual peats
torvskeri (torvskerar)	Peat-cutting spade



Figure 3: Peat cuttings above Akraberg in 2007.

*corarius parasiticus*), amongst other birds, use the mounds as vantage points, resulting in guano-enrichment of the hummocks (cf. Johnston, 1999). The vegetation of the mounds is typically characterized by common bent (*Agrostis capillaris*), red fescue (*Festuca rubra*) and viviparous sheep's-fescue (*F. vivipara*), together with other grasses (*Poa spp.*). The surrounding blanket peat has a flora which includes hare's-tail cottongrass (*Eriophorum vaginatum*) as well as lesser amounts of common cottongrass (*E. angustifolium*), deergrass (*Scirpus cespitosus*) and tormentil (*Potentilla erecta*) (plant nomenclature follows Jóhansen, 2000).

### The phenomenon of *torvløð*

If at first sight the many mounds which stud the hillside above Akraberg seem to be abandoned peat stacks, this might also be thought a strange situation given the value of peat as a resource, even if alternative fuels had become available. A knowledge of peat-cutting practices in certain areas of the Faroe Islands, however, furnishes a rather different explanation.

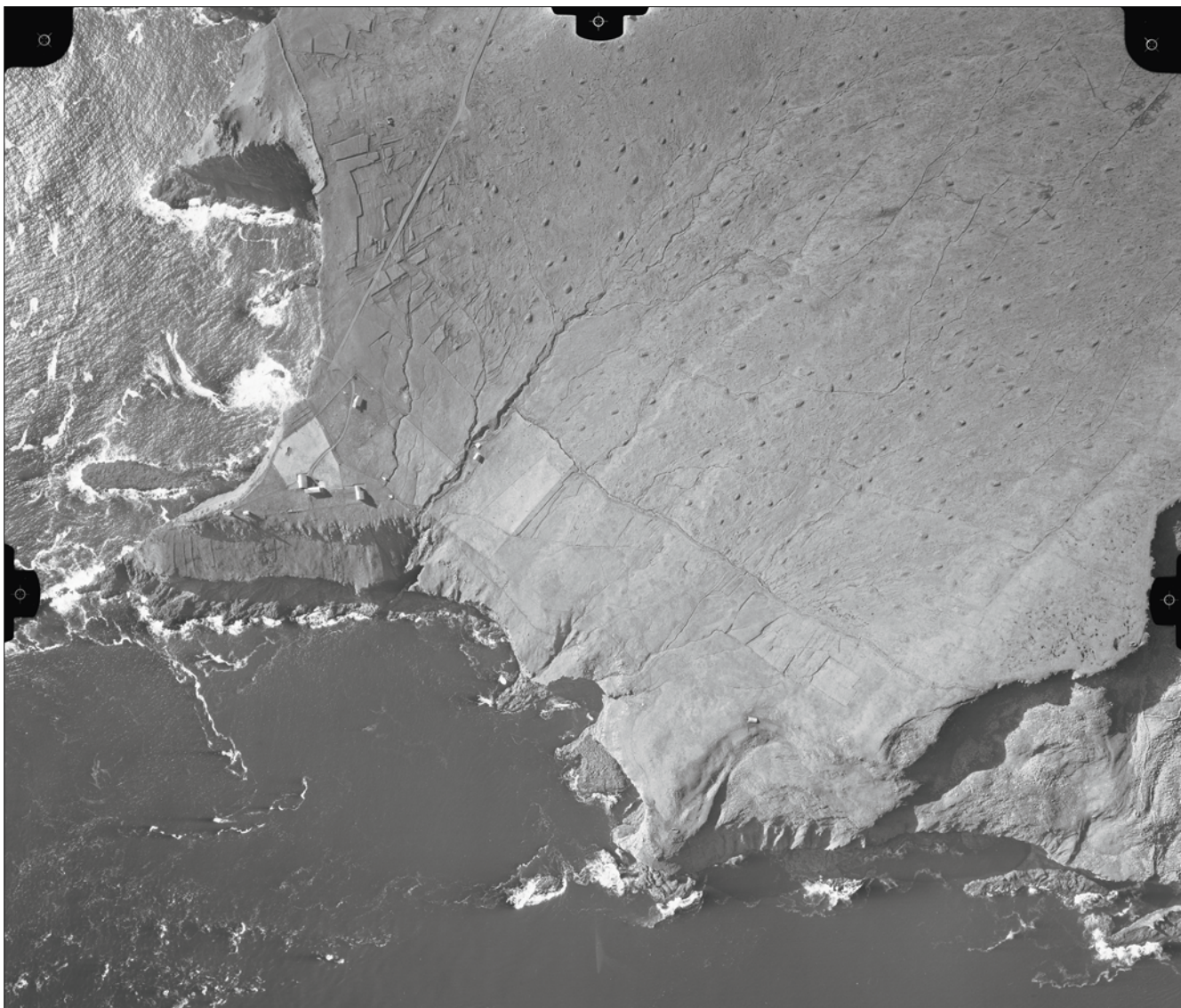
The individual turves or peats (called *torva*; pl. *torvur*) were removed from the cuttings and stacked beside them. This initial stack was called a *torvlað* (pl. *torvløð*). This term can be somewhat confusing - and critically so for this paper - as a *torvlað* is also used as a designation for the platform upon which the dried peat was stacked in the Sumba area (see below). After a few days of drying, the peat was spread over a larger area for further drying. The next step in the drying process followed,

in good weather conditions, some days later, when the peat was gathered in small stacks of peat known as *torvveisur*. These would typically contain 2-5 individual peats stacked in various forms for drying. The *torvveisur* were re-stacked once or several times more, placing the dryer top at the bottom, to promote the drying process (*misskifta* is the verb applied to this work). After this the peats were collected and stacked, as a *torvlutur*, on a platform (*torvlað*) of compacted crumbly or fragmented peat. In the Sumba area, the shortened name form *lað* (pl. *løð*) is often used rather than *torvlað/torvløð* for the platform(s). This sequence - from cutting the peats through to forming the stacks upon the platforms - characterized the process in the study area. The headland at Akraberg is blessed with substantial deep deposits of cohesive peat. In areas with more friable peat and with readily available stone, the peats were often carried to stone-built peat storage structures, *gróthús* and *kráir* (the latter unroofed), rather than being stacked upon platforms.

The remains of the platforms, *løð/torvløð*, constitute the mounds seen at Akraberg. The *torvløð*, essentially speaking, are therefore the discrete surfaces which bore the stacked layers of dried peat. The *torvløð* gradually accumulated crumbled peat material annually, becoming higher over time. Increasing height assisted further drying of the peat by accentuating exposure and distancing the stack from any rises in the local water table. In addition, the more elevated platform also provided a convenient support when loading the peat-filled wooden creel (*leypur*) onto workers' backs.

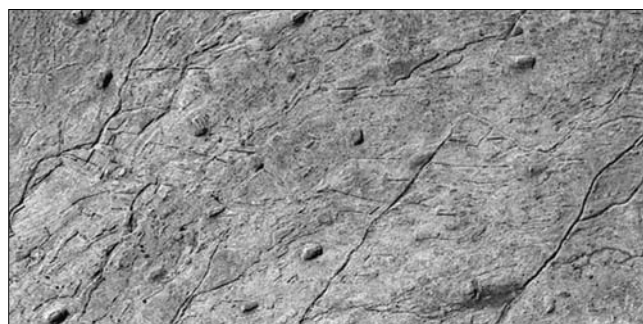
The temporal dimension is also recognised with a further implied use of the word *torvlað*, signifying the use of a platform over perhaps hundreds of years. Each *torvlað* belonged to a household and each household may have had more than one *torvlað*. The spatial setting of the *torvlað*, i.e. the platform and its immediate surroundings from which peat had been extracted, are designated by the terms *lutastaður* or *torvlutastaður*.

In Sumba, the peaty material left in the platforms was still of good quality and if extra peat was ever needed it was sometimes (e.g. during the Second World War) extracted from the *torvløð*, having undergone compaction from the weight of repeated stack construction. It is said that this peat was difficult to cut because it had become dry and hard. Other places known to feature *torvløð* are Porkeri and Froðba on Suðuroy and Dalur on Sandoy (Figure 1). It is interesting to note the southerly location of these places. If this is a significant phenomenon, was it then reflecting cultural patterning? It might be noted that



**Figure 4:** Aerial photograph taken in 1972 of the study area delimited in Figure 2. Note that north is at the right-hand side of the picture. The most recent peat cuttings are seen as linear features to the left of the photograph adjacent to the coast. The platforms (torvløð) occupy the greater part of the picture. Photograph courtesy of Matrikulstovan, Tórshavn.

the southern islanders often see themselves as ‘different’ from those of the north (cf. Weyhe, 1996; Guttesen, 1999).



**Figure 5:** Photograph showing old peat cuttings and torvløð in a detail (area delimited by the smaller dashed rectangle in Figure 2) from the northwestern portion of the 1972 aerial photograph (Figure 4). Note that north is at the right-hand side of the picture. Photograph courtesy of Matrikulstovan, Tórshavn.



**Figure 6:** Platforms (*torvløð*) above Akraberg in 2007.

### Peat mounds elsewhere

No systematic survey of peat mounds from the North Atlantic area or elsewhere has been attempted. Apart from material gleaned from the literature, email contact was made with researchers in the British Isles and Scandinavia known to work in peatland areas, outlining something of the Akraberg situation and attaching a photograph showing the peat mounds. This resulted in a range of responses some of which are mentioned below.

Historically, light mossy turf or 'peaty mould' was collected on Foula in Shetland (Figure 9) and kept in stone-covered mounds or *mooldie-kooses* (Fenton, 1978). This material was used as byre bedding and the mounds were only temporary. On the northern slopes of Ronas Hill, island of Mainland, Shetland, at altitudes of ~90-150 m, Spence (1974) reports elliptical 'peat island' hum-



**Figure 7:** Peat face evident within a platform (*torvllað*) and due to peat extraction and/or sheep erosion.

mocks of macroscopically homogeneous peat with dimensions of 5.0-20.0 (north-south) and 8.0-18.0 m (east-west) and heights of 1.0-3.0 m. Spence offers no explanation for their origin, nor do Goode & Lindsay (1979) for the similar ones on watershed mire in northern Lewis or those in an undisclosed area of Orkney.

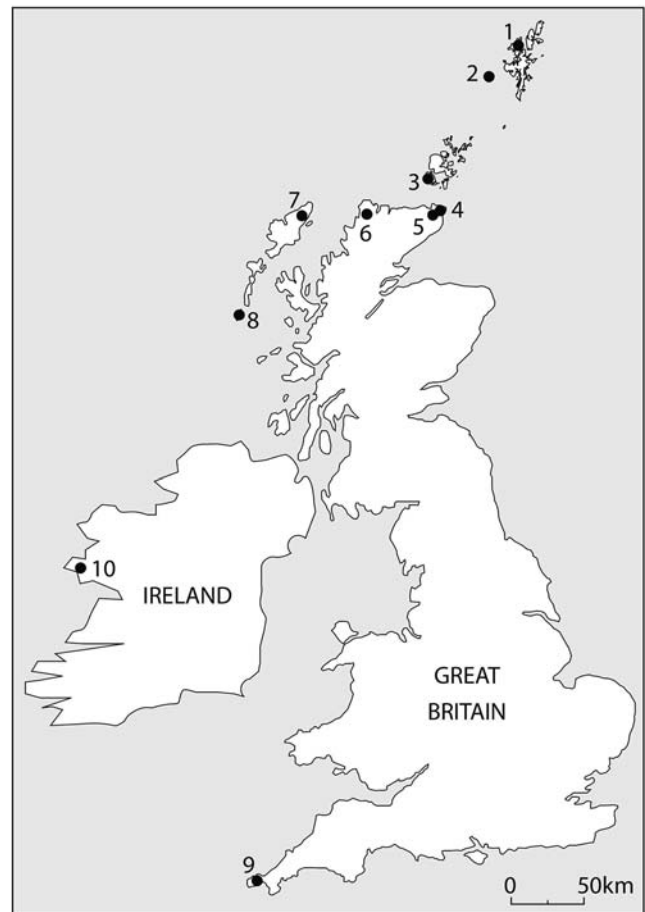
In Caithness, the Aukhorn ‘peat mounds’ (Robinson, 1987) are assumed to be of natural origin, dating to around 5000 BP and arising from ‘a coincidence of local mire stratigraphy or subpeat soil conditions such that water was retained and local peat accumulation rate maintained above that of the surrounding mire surface at a time of increased desiccation. Surface fires are considered to have acted to amplify the effect’ (ibid.: 185). They are located at 45-75 m a.s.l. on level to gently sloping land (a steeper slope nearby has ridges rather than mounds). Unlike those reported from elsewhere, the mounds, 7.0-8.0 m in diameter, 0.3-5.0 m high, are each encircled by a depression.

Also in Caithness, discrete mounds made up of individual turves stripped from the surface of the blanket mire, could be seen in 1990 along roadsides (Keith Barber, pers. comm.), but these are not like the extensive system at Akraberg. In the adjacent county of Sutherland, mounds of what may be abandoned peat are to be found (Des Thomson, pers. comm.). ‘Low piles’ of peat have been seen in Connemara and are assumed to be composed of less dense surface peat (David Shimwell, pers. comm.). Heaps of peat waste have been seen in western Ireland, although not in the ‘organised’ fashion seen in the Faroes (Richard Bradshaw, pers. comm.).

There are also hillocks of peat in northwest Hoy, Orkney, which have been interpreted as being caused by



**Figure 8:** Sheep shelter (ból) built into a torvllað.



**Figure 9:** Sites and general localities in the British Isles where peat mounds and related features have been reported. Key: 1. Ronas Hill, Mainland, Shetland; 2. Foula; 3. northwest Hoy, Orkney; 4. Aukhorn, Caithness; 5. northeast Caithness; 6. northwest Sutherland; 7. northern Lewis; 8. Balnabodach, Barra; 9. Carn Galver, Cornwall; 10. Connemara.

enhanced peat growth as a result of guano enrichment from perching skuas (Bent Odgaard, pers. comm.). In Chile, small mounds (0.2-0.3 m high) can be seen as bright green pillars on the tops of rocks and are assumed to be the result of the local fertilization from skua droppings (Keith Bennett, pers. comm.).

Not considered here is the relict peat stack found in sub-fossil form within a peat section at Balnabodach, on the eastern side of the island of Barra, complete with finger impressions on individual peats (Branigan et al., 2002), and a relict stack at Carn Galver, West Penwith in Cornwall which had been thought to be an in situ blanket peat deposit (Robinson et al., 2007).

None of the examples of peat mounds discussed in this section would appear to signify the ‘swarms’ of humanly-

constructed *torvløð* seen in the Faroe Islands. Individual mounds elsewhere may, of course, consist of waste peat.

## Conclusions

The uniformity of peat hummocks across the study area at Akraberg reinforces the fact that most, if not all the mounds, have a similar human origin. This would be confirmed if radiocarbon-dating of vertical columns of peat produced dates which are out of chronological sequence rather than a conformable succession as seen at Aukhorn (Robinson, 1987).

In the absence of local knowledge concerning *torvløð*, those familiar with the peat stacks of high latitude oceanic areas could be in danger of making a mistake in interpretation. The *torvløð* might well be inferred to be abandoned peat stacks rather than a form which had a different purpose.

The phenomenon of such *løð/torvløð* platforms as outlined in this paper seems to be unremarked beyond the recent compendium of Sigvardsen (2006: volumes 4 and 5). The existence of such entities not only has implications for the ethnography of peat winning, but if they were actually more common than assumed, they would serve as a warning when interpreting relict features in the landscape. Just as cautionary lessons have been reported from other disciplines (cf. Buckland, 1982; Edwards et al., 2005), this '*torvlað* tale' adds an instance of appearances being deceptive.

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