

Knot



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Hand Lining Knots - The Faroe Islands

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Um skamma stund verður torført hjá fólki at fata, hvussu kvinnur og menn í føroyskum bygðum hava maktað at uppihildið lívi øld eftir øld uttan nútímans hentleikar.

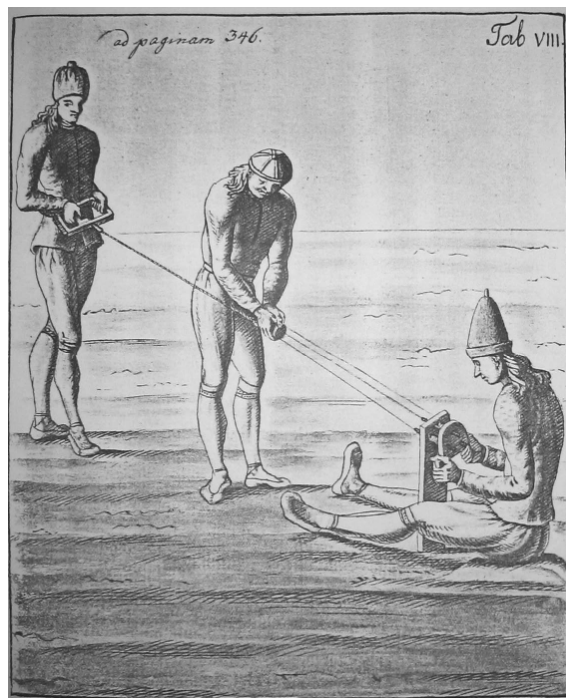
Robert Joensen [4, p9].

Prologue

Writing about various flavors of industrial fishing knots in the foregoing three articles, I felt hand lining had been neglected. Catching fish by means of a hand line, lowered from a small boat, is probably the oldest fish-catching technique to shape itself from primitive cottage industry into big business. As we shall see in the first of two articles on handlinerman knots this fishing technique invariably starts, quite modestly, from small open wooden boats before it partakes in the global fishing industry. The past 50 years, like the rest of the fishing world, small-scale hand lining shows of remarkable developments in both materials and equipments. In the first installment of this article we focus on the materials and the knots occurring during those evolutionary hand lining processes in a special case. We look at the hand lining situation from the Faroe Islands, which represents a geographically relatively isolated population over the past 1400 years. In the second installment we focus on contemporary handlinerman knots stemming from the rest of the world.

Most fishing methods require cordage. Rope-making knowledge surely existed on all of the inhabited North Atlantic islands before they got brushed by Norwegian West Coast culture during Viking visits from 800 onwards. It is safe to assume that cordage making knowledge was reasonably well spread out across the Eastern shores of the North Atlantic

Ocean already 4000 years ago. From about 800 AD for the next 400 years onwards the Scandinavians were the leading maritime power on the European continent. Their ships relied on technology vastly superior to that required for rope making. They brought with them trade and interaction across the entire North Atlantic region and beyond. The Faroe Islands are believed to have become inhabited around 600 AD by Irish hermits [8], [15, p2]. When the marauding Vikings were directed to the Faroes and Iceland, by fellow Irishmen, they found them populated by early Christian recluses. In any case the Viking arrivals marked a compositional change in island population and affected its way of life. From around 900 AD we start this story.



Technological aspects

In a general sense technology rests on two pillars, know-how and materials. In terms of materials ancient hand lining requires fibers to make rope. The earliest cordage is said to be about 19,000 years old, but there is controversy about the validity of this find [9]. Even so, it does raise fascinating questions about the level of rope making technology in very early days. Natural-fibered rope obviously requires fibers, which are usually found in close proximity of the residence. In other words, people will use whatever nature offers them, or is available from elsewhere. It is safe to assume that anything in replenishable supply and which could be twisted into cordage would be used. For example during his excursion into the Netherlands around 47 AD, Roman imperial historian Caius Plinius Secundus speaks of locals making rope and nets of seaweed. It must have surprised him as the Romans were accustomed to high quality hemp cordage. It is believed that logistical problems, in fact, drove the Romans to introduce hemp into Britain and the Northern parts of the European Continent. The Irish hermits, who originally populated the Faroes and Iceland, probably took their flax and or hemp ropes with them. They may well have had other rope-types, as excavations of the early Christian sanctuary on Skellig Michael revealed traces of leather ropes. The Vikings certainly brought along hemp cordage technology when they came to inhabit our part of the North Atlantic Ocean.

The word “technology” may never appear of much when it comes to primitive fishing. However, giving these notions second thought, it rapidly becomes clear that technological developments are by no means trivial. Primitive fishing technology always represents the foundation of contemporary fishing technology and remarkably little structural change to the basic concepts has taken place over time. Hand lining technology is no exception and relies heavily on cordage making technology.

The cordage making technology field is incredibly large. Likewise, the range of cordage-applications is enormous. Perhaps in a later article we can expound further aspects of rural North Atlantic life, but here we shall restrict our study to some of the rope making utensils to be found in the Faroese local museums of Kirkebø, Saksun and Torshavn. Other tools have been found, for example at the 1942 Kvívik excavation of a Viking homestead where spindles and loom weights were found [14, p9]. With respect to hand lining technology we focus on small-scale artifacts. Bringing the hand lining- and cordage-technology thoughts some steps further, one must

conclude that these developments will affect the knots. We shall take a closer look at how the medium and its technological implementation materialized and shaped hand lining fishing solutions.

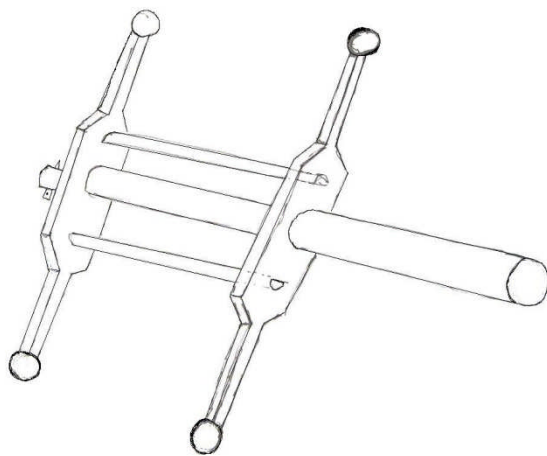
Village life

We are fortunate that, on the one hand, important features of old Faroese village life have survived into our own century. On the other hand philologist and naturalist Jens Christian Svabo (1746-1824) gives an excellent account of what it was like to live on a North Atlantic island 200 years ago. Faroese peasant life in the 17th and 18th century was hard and frequently dangerous, but always plenty variable. Svabo is very informative about many aspects of early island life, hand lining in particular.

Up to Svabo's account of the Faroes in 1781, there has been hemp-import by the Rydberg Handel, which started around 1767 [11, c345]. By this time Scandinavian hemp was probably Russian by origin, which is backed by Dahlman in 1765 [1, p26]. Alternative materials to make rope were horse hair [15, p103] and wool. In the very old days, when fish was nearer the land, the islanders are said to have used wool for fishing lines [11, c348] and making seines [5, p40].



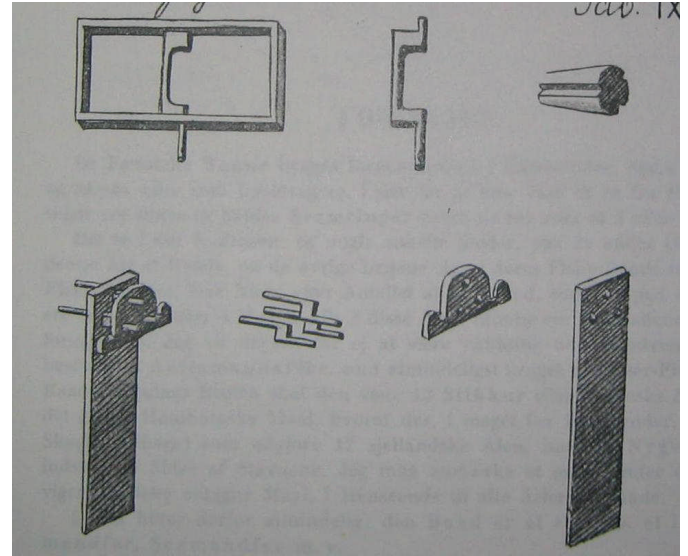
As the islanders had an abundance of time, but lack of money, the manufacture of lines became a wintertime activity on imported and re-used old hemp. The bundles of hemp are first hackled, i.e. passed frequently through a set of fine spikes (hatchel). This combing operation will remove all refuse and short fibers. The next step involves a spinner, a so-called *hampasnælda*, c.f. image below. This is an instrument for spinning fibers into yarns. In one of Svabo's images above we see an islander spinning the yarns. As Svabo was very well-informed on early day peasant life, it may come as a small surprise that he shows a pipe smoking man. In that respect one should read Wahlbeck on the narcotic aspects of hemp [12, p23].



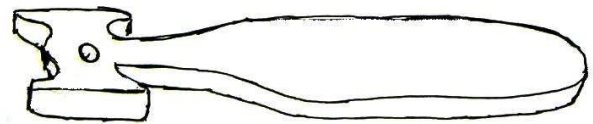
The spinner produces the yarns, which are the actual strand base. The principle behind rope making, as is well-known, relies on twisting an increasing number of strands together to obtain progressively thickening rope.

Rope making Devices

As Svabo puts it, proper fishing line has the thickness of a good swan's feather. Lines, which are used in cod fishing, are thicker and 6-stranded [11, c346]. He mentions that a batch of hemp yields 12-16 fathoms of fishing line. But of course all depends on cordage's diameter, rope maker's craftsmanship, experience and his tools. Like elsewhere in the world, a lot of handymen have been busy in the North Atlantic seeking improvements to their rope making machinery. Primitive tools can be found to be hand-and/or rope-driven. Hilmar Stigum, for example, shows an image of a primitive rope-driven machine [10, fig.3, p85]. The machine illustrated below is hand-driven and requires at least two men to operate. For an impression, see Svabo's illustration of the first page.



The islanders did not only lay up lines, but also required snoods. In Tórshavn's Maritime Museum [17] (Bátasavnið) one can find samples of the so-called *teymaspjaldur*, handgrips which allow coiling of fibers to make 4 strand braided lines according to the well-known telephone cord principle.



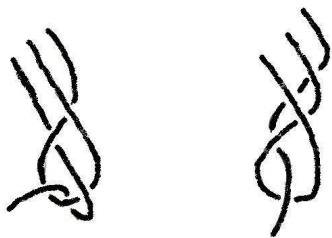
Jirlow and Stigum mention usage of these tools in Faroese and Norwegian farmer life [2, p129, fig.37], [10]. Ragnar Jirlow also discusses straw ropes made with wimbles [2, p112].

Currently the islands have relatively big cordage industries, capable of making in excess of 15,000 fathoms daily [16].

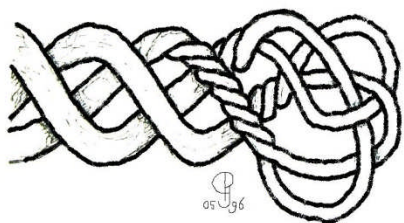
Multistrand Knots

Making rope implies thinking about making rope-knots. Rope is a multistrand medium; it seems obvious that multistrand knots will result. The question is when and under what conditions will they come forth? As a stroll through any ropewalk will learn, there are plenty of interesting constructs in use. Occasionally they are temporary, only showing up during the rope manufacture, others have become permanent in the rope maker's repertoire. Some of the constructs are twisted into the strands. Other times they affect the bitter ends of the rope. Home-made cordage samples from the Faroes appear not much different. There are as many left-laid rope samples to be found in Bátasavnið as there are right-

laid rope samples. In the Tórshavn Maritime Museum you can find an array of rope-starts. Many of them are multifunctional in that they prevent raveling and make Back Splices and seizings redundant.



However, none of the samples I encountered appeared as neat as the one I chanced to find in 1996 on a private small-scale Dutch ropewalk.



The fishing lines were laid up in lengths of 12-16 fathoms and (short-)spliced to acquire a complete length of 60 fathoms.

Útroður

Islanders always seem to have a boat somewhere and, once you own a boat, fishing takes off naturally. In much of Viking Land small boat ownership has always been part of daily life. Hand lining is an excellent way to harvest extremely localized fish patches. And there are plenty of them around the Faroes. Getting further out to sea requires a seaworthy boat. *Útroður* is the Faroese term for open boat fishing. On the Faroe archipelago Robert Joensen has described aspects of *útroður* [3], which means actually rowing away from the land. In the early Faroese economy fishing was no important factor. The export of woolen socks was where the Faroese gold lay. The primitive nature of the employed methods certainly impeded developments in the fishery industry.

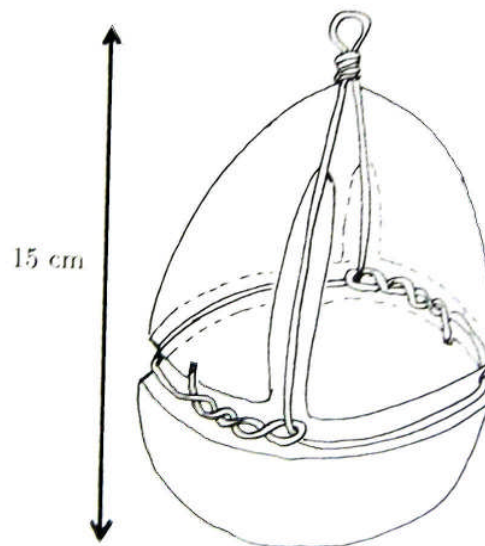
How did hand lining become an industry? There are a number of simultaneous developments. John West points out the historical impact of improvements in the industrialization of Faroe fishery enabling them to deploy new grounds further away [13, p141]. Governor Christian Pløyen (1803-1867) brought long lining to the Faroes after seeing the Shetlanders' success. In a Faroe boat 5 hand lining men would have 5 hooks out whereas 5 Shetlanders would be working a longline with 1200 hooks. By 1870

longlining had become the major fishing method, largely replacing hand lining. Pløyen frequently figures as the primary drive behind innovations into the Faroese fishing technology about 200 years ago.

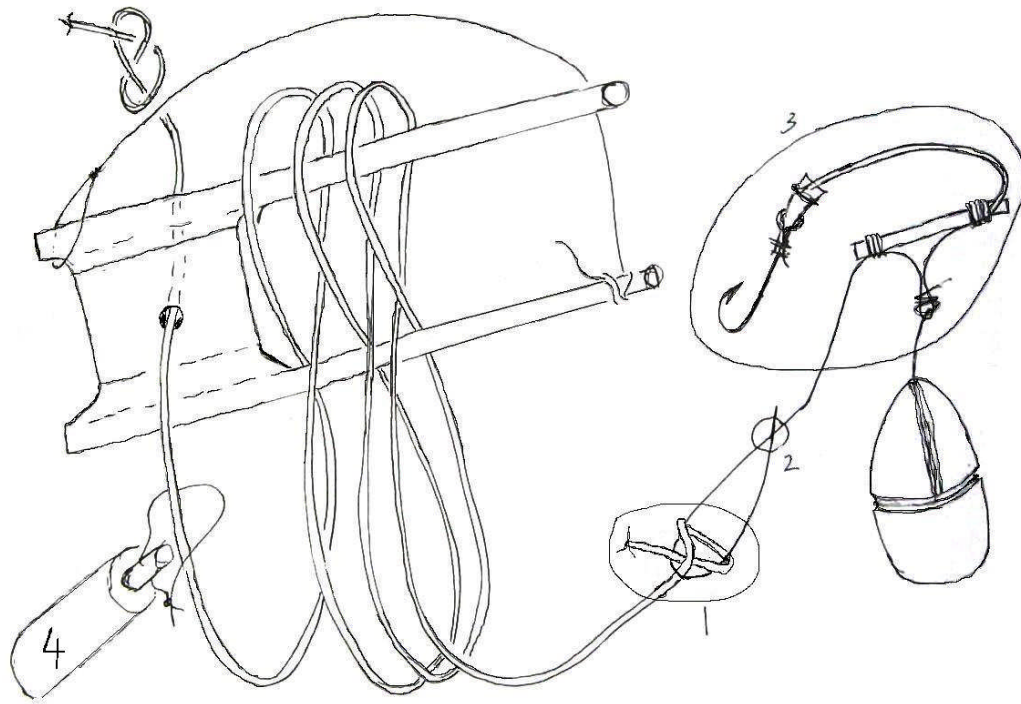
Which types of knot does this bring into the picture? Of course it is all a matter of tools, craftsmanship and experience on how tools are pieced together. The latter is a learning process which revolves around the payoff between knowing (and using) good knot-constructs and not knowing them and losing catches. The observable endgame is that one finds two basic types of fishing gear, the oldest type (*súla*) [3], [4] and a more recent development, one with spreaders (*lodd og teinur*) [3], [6]. Let's look at both.

Súlan

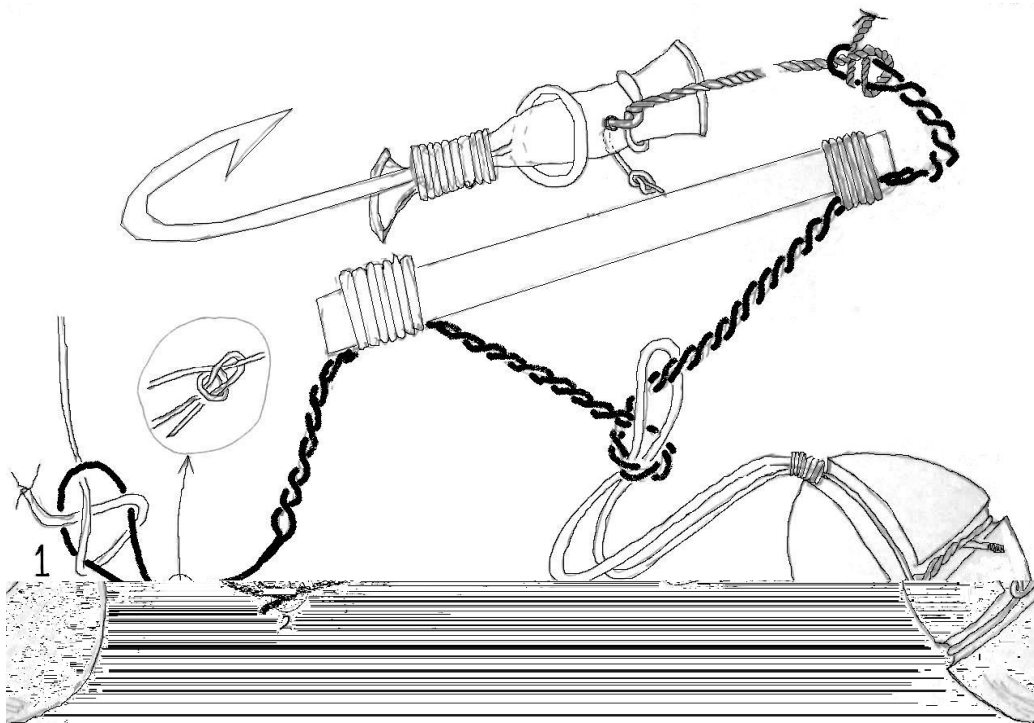
The 60 fathoms of line are flaked in Figure of Eights around the forked wooden frame of the *súla* [3, p9, p43]. The actual operational part of the tackle is the so-called *forsendi*, consisting of a weight and hook. The hook is attached by means of a thong of ox hide, which is called *stunga*. Originally sinkers were grooved stones. During the 1942 excavations in the Kvívík Viking homestead stone sinkers were found, which implies fishing lines and hence rope. Svabo has a discussion on the pros and cons of lead and stone [11]. Lead was expensive and hard to obtain whereas boulders abound. It was not until Pløyen, around 1840, became instrumental in getting the prehistoric sinker, *vaðsteinur*, replaced by lead.



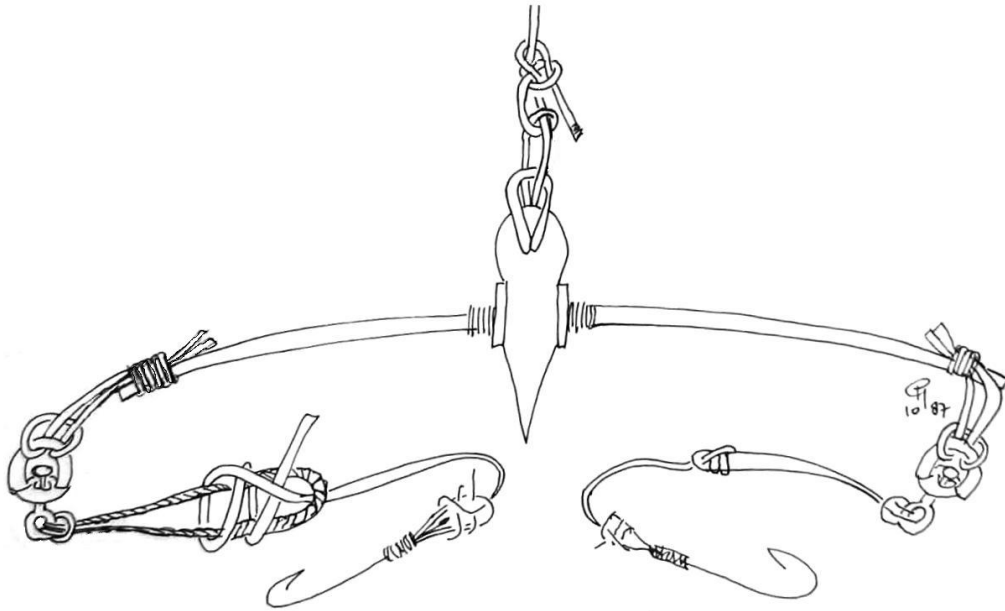
The *bævurhylki*, which is indicated by 4 in the image below, is a small container with manure to keep the large whales at bay. The original superstition is that beaver manure would scare the large whales away. Later any manure to fill this small container would do.



Súla



Forsendi



Lodd and teinur

In the illustration to the right you can not only see how the late 1890's Faroe fishermen went fishing, well-dressed to protect themselves against the elements, but also the type of fishing gear they used [3]. Notably no high sea boots were worn, but rather soft-leather shoes over thick woolen socks. The fishermen didn't care whether their legs or feet got wet. This job is not for the faint-hearted. These guys were real tough eggs, believe me. A picture speaks more than a thousand words and the illustration clearly shows the lines, hooks and sinkers. Note the impressively forged hooks, suggesting whale-size catches. In fact cod up to 25 kilograms and halibut well over 150 kilograms were not uncommon.

North Atlantic sloop life

With this fishing tackle positioned on small boats, the step in 1870 to sloop life for the Faroese was not hard. However, fishing rigs were not exempted from evolution. Lead entered the scene and replaced rock-sinkers. Simultaneously the forsendi evolved into a symmetrical dual-hooked metal crossbar, the so-called *teinur*. The weight gotten incorporated into the crossbar.

These developments witness of an increased dependency on external sources. Homegrown materials are being replaced by more expensive imported parts. However, an absolute minimum of "foreign" stuff is used. Even nowadays islanders take great pride in letting you know that they make things themselves. However, like everywhere else in this



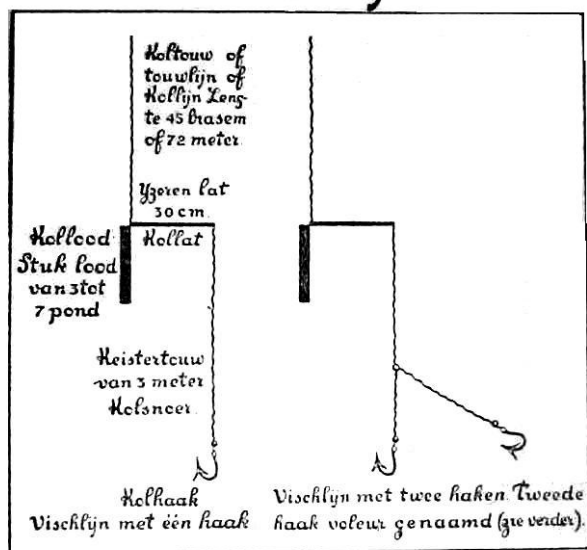
world, oil prices nowadays drive these societies' economies.

In the European economies two centuries ago, there was a strong demand for fish. The richness of the cold waters washing the Faroese, Icelandic and Greenlandic shores was no well-kept secret. Since medieval days innumerable nations have come to work the grounds. Economic reality brought sloop loads full of men to suffer the physical hardship of the North Atlantic climate to hand line. For months on end their sloops lay floating on the ocean off the forbidding Icelandic and Greenlandic coasts. Thousands of men spent years of their lives, hand lining beautiful cod and halibut specimen, under harsh conditions. British fishermen began fishing Faroese waters late in the 16th early 17th century [14, p30]. They were soon followed by the French, Spanish and of course the Dutch.

In his account of the Flemish fishermen's hand lining gear, Filliaert describes how the *kollijn* was created [7, p131]. This rig functions as the Faroese teinur, but it has one single spreader. To have 2 hooks operational, the so-called *voleur* was braided onto the snood (*keistertouw*). As we have seen in the foregoing the *teymaspljaldur* was used in braiding 4 stranded snoods. This is why Filliaert can speak of "*vlechten*", the Dutch word for braiding.

Note that the level of technology is captured in forged hooks, single steel spreader and of course lead to prevent lateral drift. All in all resulting in backbreaking work for the unfortunate soul who had to operate this tackle for some 18 hours daily.

De Kollijn



Unfortunately Filliaert does not mention the type of rope used. Whatever was carried from France and Belgium in terms of tools and materials he left undescribed. However, when sloops became part of the Faroese fishing scene, rope often remained a local produce. Robert Joensen describes how the inhabitants from the isolated village of Árnafjørður constructed rope making tools and laid their own ropes. They made 9-stranded ropes of up to 400 fathoms in length. They did so in fact before they set sail for Greenland way up to 1932 [4, pp3-5].

Epilogue

So far we discussed developments stemming from the Faroese hand lining scene. Our span covered the habitation interval of the Faroe Islands and we homed in on the past 200 years. As indicated at the beginning of this article, our initial focus would be just such a special case. However, all over the world, people of all times have put out to sea in small boats to catch fish by means of hand lines. In the second installment of this article we shall see the effects of continual developments in this industry and meet a selection of the knots which were devised elsewhere in order to solve the resulting rope-problems.

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Training Tables

Clint Funks' table is in front, and has four identical sides. The pink cords are tied up for storage, but typically hang loose. There are not many knots displayed, but all the basic knots that people know or have heard of. There are also four legs that are removable for storage. Underneath is a shelf where Clint stored a box of string. It will stand alone, and we often position it where people have to walk around it as they pass. Since all sides are identical, it doesn't matter what side you approach it from.



Pat Ducey's table is in the background. It will be one-sided, so the bar must face the crowd. It also has removable legs and is a box. The door is on the front and Pat will put the IGKT logo knot (3Lx4B TH) on it with a simple knotted frame. He wanted a box to carry all the stuff that he takes to every show. Its size is designed to carry like a suitcase and not drag on the ground. He still needs to make a bar to display Turk's Heads and various hitches and make name plates.



I found this picture up for auction on eBay. The seller claimed that he is a sailor from the American Civil War. To my eye, though, it looks to be not quite right, I am thinking he is from the time of the Spanish-American War, maybe? I do not recall lanyards this fancy in the Civil War photographs I have seen. What do you think?

