Observations of highly regular oscillations in the overflow plume downstream of the Faroe Bank Channel

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[1] The Faroe Bank Channel (FBC) is the deepest connection between the Atlantic Ocean and the Nordic Seas. This work describes the dynamic properties of the plume of dense overflow water descending from the Faroe Bank Channel using time series data for velocity and temperature from a network of 25 moorings deployed west of the Faroe Bank Channel between July 1999 and February 2001. The cold water plume was identified using mean velocity and temperature data. A regular pattern of strong velocity and temperature oscillations with 88 ± 4 hours period was the most striking feature observed in the FBC overflow plume. These oscillations are initiated in a region where observations indicate supercritical conditions and compare well to recent model results for the FBC overflow plume by Ezer (2006).


1. Introduction

[2] Cold, dense water from the Nordic Seas flows over the system of ridges between Greenland and Scotland eventually to form part of the North Atlantic Deep Water. Thus the exchange of water across the Greenland-Scotland Ridge is a fundamental component of the Meridional Overturning Circulation. For a short summary of the Meridional Overturning Circulation and the Overflow over the Greenland-Scotland Ridge, see Hansen et al. [2004]. The overflow is concentrated at the deep straits across the Greenland-Scotland Ridge, the deepest of them being the Faroe Bank Channel (FBC, Figure 1). Approximately 2Sv (1 Sv = 10^6 m^3/s) of dense overflow water go through the FBC and then descend as a bottom-trapped plume into the deep Atlantic Ocean [Østerhus et al., 2001]. For a review of observations and theoretical studies of the Faroe Bank Channel overflow see Borenäs and Lundberg [2004]. The most recent results of ship-based hydrographic and velocity measurements are presented by Mauritzen et al. [2005]. The overflow descends with a speed up to 1 m/s, thereby entraining adjacent water masses. The properties of the produced North Atlantic Deep Water therefore strongly differ from the original deep water produced in the Nordic Seas. Most ocean models use parameterizations for overflow plumes, see Alendal et al., 1994 for an example. Increasing data coverage during the last years shows high flow variability downstream of the Faroe Bank Channel [Høyer and Quadfasel, 2001]. The cold overflow plume appears to break up into boluses of cold water [Hansen and Østerhus, 2000] with a vertical extension of about 200 m (Figure 2). In the Høyer and Quadfasel study the results had been interpreted as mesoscale eddies similar to those observed in the Denmark Strait outflow.

[3] Data from an extended array of current meter moorings covering the Faroe Bank Channel Outflow provided the opportunity to study the time behavior of the overflow plume in detail. The following section presents the available data; section 3 gives an overview over the different methods used to analyse the data, which are power spectra, singular-spectrum analysis and wavelet analysis. Section 4 presents the results of the data analyses: Mean properties of the velocity and temperature data are used to determine the topographic extension of the dense water plume (section 4.1). Strong velocity oscillations as shown in a typical velocity profile motivate the extensive investigation of the dynamic plume behavior (section 4.2). Section 5 contains a discussion of the plume structure and comparisons to recent model [Ezer, 2006] and laboratory [Cenedese et al., 2004] experiments. Finally, section 6 summarizes the main results of this work.

2. Data

[4] A network of 25 moorings (Figure 1) was in operation west of the Faroe Islands between July 1999 and February 2001 to measure bottom currents in the outflow of the Faroe Bank Channel. The moorings were deployed in three groups, termed A, B, and C, with different deployment times (Table 1). Thus direct comparisons of results are only possible within these groups. As seen in Figures 1 and 3, the depth of the channel remains relatively constant, less than...
900 m, some 25 km northwestward from the sill to the area where the channel exits into the Iceland Basin. Three of the B moorings (B8, B9, and B10) were located in this region in addition to the mooring at the sill (NWFB). The rest of the B moorings were located in the very steeply sloping region, just west of the channel exit. The A moorings were on a north-south line about a 100 km west of the exit with depths exceeding 1300 m and the C moorings were about 200 km west of the exit where the bottom depth had increased to more than 1500 m. The area covers the bottom-trapped

Figure 1. Map of the investigations area with mooring positions and conductivity-temperature-depth (CTD) section. Different symbols denote (a) moorings inside the plume, with oscillation (open circles), (b) moorings inside the plume, but without oscillation (solid circles), (c) stations outside the plume, without oscillations (squares), (d) stations with no data or faulty data (crosses). A: July–November 1999, B: February–June 2000, C: July–November 2000.

Figure 2. Development of the vertical structure of temperature in the overflow plume over a ten day period, measured at a mooring deployed some 100 km downstream of the Faroe Bank Channel, close to later station B2 (see Figure 1). The mooring, containing three thermistor strings with 11 sensors each, experienced severe knockdowns during periods of high current speeds. The actual sensors’ depths were calculated using pressure recordings from a Microcat mounted at the top of the mooring.
plume of cold dense water from the Nordic Seas that traverses the Faroe Bank Channel to descend into the deep North Atlantic Ocean.

[5] Except for the sill mooring, each mooring was equipped with a recording current meter 8 (RCM8) Aanderaa current meter. Most of the moorings also included a Seabird Microcat conductivity-temperature-depth (CTD). The instruments were situated 5 to 6 meters above bottom for the B moorings and 25 to 30 meters for the A and C moorings. The data from these moorings are the main source for this investigation. In addition, data from an upward-looking Acoustic Doppler Current Profiler (ADCP) deployed at the bottom of the Faroe Bank Channel as part of the EU project VEINS (Variability of Exchanges in the Northern Seas) were used [Hansen et al., 2001]. The lowest data bin at 770 meter depth, i.e., 42 meters above bottom, was used for comparison with the current meter data. Additional data were provided by a section of CTD measurements at the exit of the channel from a survey of RV Poseidon in September 2003.

[6] Velocity data from stations B4 and B5 (Figure 1) were not usable because of current meter malfunction. Velocity data from station A4 were distorted by impeded turning of the instrument with respect to the current direction. Therefore velocity data from station A4 were only usable in terms of its time dependency (e.g., to determine the oscillation frequency), but not with regard to amplitude-related information, which also includes current direction.

3. Methods

[7] Power spectrums obtained by windowed Fourier analysis were used to identify stations with significant

| Table 1. Mooring Positions, Time of Deployment, and Used Instruments |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------|--------------------------|--------|--------|--------|
| Station | Latitude | Longitude | Echo Depth, m | Deployed | Recovered | RCM | CTD | ADCP |
| NWFB | 61.4167 | -8.2833 | 812 | 04.07.1999 | 19.06.2000 | x |
| B2 | 61.7356 | -9.9942 | 1081 | 27.02.2000 | 19.06.2000 | x | x |
| B3 | 61.8365 | -9.9965 | 926 | 28.02.2000 | 19.06.2000 | x | x |
| B4 | 61.9375 | -10.0005 | 851 | 28.02.2000 | 19.06.2000 | x |
| B7 | 61.6022 | -9.5998 | 1003 | 28.02.2000 | 19.06.2000 | x |
| B9 | 61.75 | -8.9491 | 769 | 28.02.2000 | 19.06.2000 | x |
| B10 | 61.6005 | -8.6 | 866 | 28.02.2000 | 19.06.2000 | x |
| A1 | 61.5179 | -10.8338 | 1264 | 03.07.1999 | 05.11.1999 | x |
| A2 | 61.5836 | -10.8341 | 1321 | 03.07.1999 | 05.11.1999 | x |
| A3 | 61.65 | -10.8334 | 1294 | 03.07.1999 | 05.11.1999 | x |
| A4 | 61.7167 | -10.834 | 1253 | 03.07.1999 | 05.11.1999 | x |
| A5 | 61.7846 | -10.8317 | 1160 | 03.07.1999 | 05.11.1999 | x |
| A6 | 61.8502 | -10.8336 | 1069 | 03.07.1999 | 05.11.1999 | x |
| A7 | 61.919 | -10.8339 | 1028 | 03.07.1999 | 05.11.1999 | x |
| C1 | 60.8683 | -11.579 | 1228 | 09.07.2000 | 13.02.2001 | x |
| C2 | 61.0432 | -12.885 | 1725 | 09.07.2000 | 13.02.2001 | x |
| C3 | 61.3317 | -13.2983 | 1566 | 09.07.2000 | 03.11.2000 | x |
| C4 | 61.5674 | -13.2506 | 1521 | 10.07.2000 | 03.11.2000 | x |
| C5 | 61.6838 | -13.0998 | 1461 | 10.07.2000 | 03.11.2000 | x |
| C6 | 61.7971 | -12.9488 | 1279 | 10.07.2000 | 03.11.2000 | x |
| C7 | 61.9156 | -12.7874 | 1204 | 10.07.2000 | 03.11.2000 | x |
| C8 | 62.0342 | -12.6368 | 1084 | 10.07.2000 | 03.11.2000 | x |

*RCM is recording current meter. CTD is conductivity-temperature-depth. ADCP is Acoustic Doppler Current Profiler.*
mesoscale oscillations of about 3.5 days period. The criterion was that the spectral peak had to be sharp and statistically significant with respect to both linear (representing the turbulent cascade) and fifth-order logarithmic background fits (representing any smooth background signal). For the windowed Fourier analysis the time series were split into three sections, the mean value of each section was subtracted. The sections were windowed by a Hanning window, which allowed the sections to overlap by half the section length. Then the analysis for each section was carried out and the resulting spectral estimates were averaged. This configuration allowed for good frequency resolution and sufficient reliability of the resulting spectra.

Stations with significant 3.5-day mesoscale oscillation were then further analysed using singular-spectrum analysis (SSA). Singular-spectrum analysis is a model-free algebraic method for analysis of time series. Its aim is to split a time series into different additive components. Typically these components can be interpreted as ‘trend’ components (i.e., smooth and slowly varying parts of the series), various ‘oscillatory’ components (perhaps with varying amplitudes) and ‘noise’ components. Detailed information about singular-spectrum analysis (SSA) can be found in the work of Golyandina et al. [2001]. In this study SSA has been used as a data filter to obtain separate trend and oscillation modes for the time series. The filtering properties of the SSA method proved to be significantly better than simpler methods, for example a running mean filter.

Wavelet analysis was used to investigate the stability of the oscillations with time and to detect changes of oscillation frequency and strength during the investigation period. The wavelet transform is done by convolution of the time series with a scaled version of the chosen basis function (wavelet) as described by Torrence and Compo [1997]. The wavelet chosen for this work was the Morlet wavelet, which is a (complex) plane wave modulated with a Gaussian. The wavelet transform is also complex in this case and the wavelet power spectrum is defined as the squared absolute value of the wavelet transform. It is normalised by the variance of the time series and therefore gives the ratio of signal to (white) noise.

4. Results

4.1. Extension of the FBC Overflow Plume

Mean current and temperature data from the 25 current meter moorings were used to identify the extension of the cold water overflow plume. Figure 3 shows the main current system of the Faroe Bank Channel outflow as measured in this campaign, with the mean currents mainly following the isobaths. Mean temperatures below 3°C were associated with the plume, following the definition of the overflow water in the Faroe Bank Channel by Østerhus et al. [2001]. Low temperatures generally coincide with high average velocities. The plume width is increasing with distance from the Faroe Bank Channel in agreement to hydrographic sections taken by Duncan et al. [2003]. The CTD section for the western exit of the Faroe Bank Channel is shown in Figure 4. The outflowing plume can be clearly identified by its low temperatures. At these stations the plume begins to shift from the trough onto the northern slope. The horizontal temperature gradients are much stronger on the southern than on the northern side of the plume.

Figure 4. Temperature distribution of the Faroe Bank Channel exit section.
Figure 5. Example of raw velocity data and singular-spectrum analysis (SSA) modes, station A3, velocity u component. (bottom) Oscillation mode (solid line) and trend mode (dashed line); (top) sum of oscillation and trend modes (thick black line) fits the raw velocity data.

Figure 6. Power spectrum diagram of station A3, velocity in u direction, with linear and fifth-order logarithmic fit. The vertical black bar gives the 0.9 confidence interval.
4.2. Overflow Plume Dynamics

[11] Many of the stations showed velocity variations with amplitudes from 30 cm/s to about 100 cm/s during a mesoscale range (2–5 days). Temperature varied on the same timescale with temperature changes of 2 to 5°C.

Figure 5, top, shows a typical velocity data set.

[12] Investigations of the spectral power distribution of velocity and temperature revealed that the mesoscale variability is associated with a narrow spectral peak at 83.5 to 88 hours period (Figure 6). This spectral peak was observed in an area extending from the steeply sloping region just west of the channel exit and past the A mooring line some 100 km downstream. Mesoscale variability with a broad frequency distribution was observed at all distances from the channel. Thus stations C1–C8 show mesoscale variability, but not the clear spectral peak observed further upstream. They are briefly discussed at the end of this section. A secondary peak with 120 hours period was observed only within 50 km distance from the sill. On the whole, mesoscale oscillations were clearly associated with the cold water plume descending from the Faroe Bank Channel. However station A2 did not show the characteristic oscillation peak of the other stations despite being inside the plume. On the other hand, stations B1 and B7 showed increased mesoscale variability despite being outside the plume, though to a less extent than the neighboring stations inside the plume. Table 2 shows that the absolute spectral power of the prominent mesoscale spectral peak is decreasing with distance from the Faroe Bank Channel, while the relative power of the spectral peak to the background is increasing. A similar decrease in absolute values with distance from the FBC was also found for the eddy kinetic energy by Høyer and Quadfasel [2001].

[13] The regular oscillations at stations A3–A7, B2, B3 and B6 with the distinct spectral peak at 83.5–88 hours period, allowed further investigation of the current oscillation at these stations. Using the singular-spectrum analysis (SSA) method, an oscillation mode related to the 83.5–88 hour spectral peak was filtered out from the data (Figure 5). Having done that with the velocity components, the obtained data could be used to study the oscillation dynamics in detail to gain information about the amplitude, direction and shape in velocity space for all stations where the oscillation mode was significant. This could be compared with a trend mode filtered out by SSA. The filtered data were also used to obtain exact oscillation periods using the autocorrelation method.

[14] Plotting the filtered velocity data in velocity space reveals the elliptical form of the velocity oscillation similar to tidal ellipses (Figure 7). By determining points of maximal velocity and averaging them, the main axes of the velocity ellipse were calculated. The size and orientation of the major axis of the velocity ellipse then are mean amplitude and direction of the velocity oscillation, respectively. Taking the average of the trend mode this can be compared to the mean velocity and direction of the trend.

![Figure 7. Station A5, plot of velocity oscillation mode (solid line) with points of maximal velocity (open circles) and comparison to trend mode (dotted line). The thick lines denote the major axis of the velocity oscillation and the mean trend velocity.](image-url)
The method described above requires a stable phase relation between the velocity in x and y direction. As this was not the case for some parts of the data set, these parts had to be neglected. The neglected parts are the last month of data at stations A3–A7 and the first one and a half months at stations B2, B3 and B6, making up one fourth and one third of the respective data sets. A special case occurred at station B6, where the axis of oscillation changed during May 2000. Therefore the analysis of that station was split in two parts. With the exception of station B2 the ellipses are elongated with a pronounced major axis (high-ratio major axis to minor axis). The minor axis is highly variable. It is therefore justified to identify the major axis of the velocity ellipse as the main axis of the current oscillation.

The oscillation amplitude is decreasing in absolute values with increasing distance from the Faroe Bank Channel but increasing in relative strength compared to the mean velocity (trend component), see Table 3. The oscillation main axis is oriented to the left of the mean current for stations B2, B3 and B6 and to the right for stations A3–A7 (note the different time of deployment for the two groups of current meters). Generally, while the mean current is following the isobaths, the current oscillation has a strong cross-slope component (Figure 8). The mean oscillation amplitudes and directions within the cross sections change gradually along the section. Note especially the increasing relative angle from station A3 to A7.

Exact estimates of the oscillation periods are obtained using the autocorrelation function of the filtered velocity oscillation. Having determined a main oscillation axis this information can be used to transform the oscillating velocity components into a main oscillation velocity along the oscillation main axis. This velocity is then autocorrelated with itself using time lag as the variable. The period is then found as the first nonzero maximum of the autocorrelation coefficient. The error estimate for the autocorrelation coefficient was used to obtain an error estimate for the oscillation period. In addition the autocorrelation method was used on the oscillation mode of the temperature data.

The average periods are 88 hours for the current and temperature oscillations and agree within the error estimates.
(see Table 4). No significant deviations from these oscillation periods are present. The autocorrelation factor for one period time lag increases with distance from the Faroe Bank Channel indicating an increasingly regular oscillation pattern. In order to clarify the relation between current and interface motions, filtered temperature and current oscillations were cross-correlated with different lags. Table 4 shows the lag at which the correlation coefficient was maximal. For the B moorings, the lags were small, indicating near-simultaneity between high temperature (i.e., low interface) and current in the direction specified. For the A moorings, farther downstream, the analysis, on the contrary, indicated an appreciable lag between strong current oscillations (in the directions specified in Table 3) and temperature.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Station</th>
<th>Current Oscillation</th>
<th>Temperature Oscillation</th>
<th>Cross-Correlation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Period, h</td>
<td>Autocorrelation</td>
<td>Period, h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B6 (u component)</td>
<td>90 ± 4</td>
<td>0.498</td>
<td>90 ± 4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B6 (v component)</td>
<td>85 ± 5</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>85 ± 3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B2</td>
<td>87 ± 3.5</td>
<td>0.526</td>
<td>88.5 ± 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B3</td>
<td>87.5 ± 3.5</td>
<td>0.553</td>
<td>94 ± 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>85 ± 3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A3</td>
<td>87.5 ± 3.5</td>
<td>0.586</td>
<td>86 ± 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A4</td>
<td>87.5 ± 3</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>87.5 ± 2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5</td>
<td>87 ± 2</td>
<td>0.751</td>
<td>86.5 ± 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>A6</td>
<td>87 ± 2</td>
<td>0.731</td>
<td>87.5 ± 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A7</td>
<td>86.5 ± 2</td>
<td>0.794</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As no main oscillation could be defined for station B6, current oscillation periods were calculated separately for u and v components of velocity. Autocorrelation factors for a time lag of one period are given. The last two columns show the lag (in hours) at which the cross-correlation between current and temperature is maximal and the correlation coefficient at this lag. Except for B6, current is represented by the component in the direction of the oscillation main axis (Table 3). Positive lag indicates that current leads temperature.

5. Discussion

[25] The most remarkable feature revealed by our observations is the discovery that a large part of the overflow plume is dominated by highly regular oscillations in both temperature and velocity. In the region from the sill to the channel exit, the oscillations are not seen or only as weak and intermittent signals, but they are clearly present already in the very steeply sloping area just west of the exit and extend west of the A mooring line but not to the C moorings. These oscillations are highly regular with narrow spectral peaks and a fixed period (88 ± 4 hours) over a wide area and in different observational periods. The oscillatory motions are approximately rectilinear (Figure 7; Table 3).

[24] The temperature oscillations should reflect the motion of the interface between the overflow layer and the warmer waters above with a low temperature indicating a high interface, i.e., a thick overflow plume (Figure 2). At the B moorings, just west of the channel exit, the small lag between upslope current and temperature (Table 4) indicates that the thickest plume occurs with maximum current downslope.

[25] At the A moorings, in contrast, the thickest overflow plume occurs about 1/3 of a period before maximal down-
slope current and therefore close to the time of slackest
current. This is also seen in Figure 10, which shows the
current field in relation to the temperature distribution at
section A during a period of 11 days. The two northernmost
stations A6 and A7 are dominated by oscillations in north-
south direction perpendicular to the mean westward current
of the plume. In contrast the oscillation velocity at station
A3 (61.65°N) is mainly oriented along the mean current.
Here the plume speeds up while a cold water core is passing
and slows down in between, when water temperatures are
higher (but still in many cases below 3°C). The superposi-
tion of the two effects leads to the gradual change in the
orientation of the velocity oscillation shown in Figure 8 with
its increasing angle between mean velocity and mean
velocity oscillation from station A3 to A7. A similar plume
structure could also be seen at the section from station B1 to
B4. Because of the coarser arrangement of moorings at this
section, the plume structure was not visible in such detail as
in the A1–A5 section.

[26] We can compare our observations to recent results
from numerical models [Ezer, 2006]. He finds a regime
of wave-like regular oscillations in his model of the FBC at
roughly 100–200 km distance from the FBC sill. Observa-
tions of regular oscillations in this study were at 75 to
140 km distance from the sill. No regular oscillations were
found at 260 km (section C), again in accordance to the
model results; one might speculate if this section was
situated in the transition area to the eddy regime that occurs
downstream of the area of regular oscillations as given by
Ezer [2006], as no clear signatures of passing eddies were
found either. His oscillations have a somewhat longer
period (~5 days) than we observe, but his model was based
on a very idealized topography and a fairly coarse resolution
compared to the real width of the channel. Although the
lack of more quantitative detail makes direct comparison
difficult, the similarity of his Figures 5a and 5b to our
Figure 10 is striking and indicates that the oscillations in his
model are similar to those that we observe.

[27] Ezer [2006] points out the similarity of his model
results to the different flow regimes observed in the labora-
tory by Cenedese et al. [2004]. The regular oscillations
would thus compare to what Cenedese et al. [2004] term as
the “wave regime”. They studied the behavior of a dense
current flowing down a sloping bottom in a rotating tank
and found that the plume consistently exhibited wavelike
behavior when the internal Froude number was close to or
exceeding 1 and the Ekman number is on the order of 1.
Indeed, Duncan et al. [2003] deduce that Fr > 1 and Ekman
numbers on the order of 1 in a wide area downstream of the
channel exit from their observations. The observed oscillat-
ing behavior of the FBC overflow plume thus occurs in the
same region of Froude number/Ekman number space, where
Cenedese et al. [2004] observed it in their rotating tank.

[28] The waves observed in the laboratory were found to
propagate downslope a bit faster than the current and this
seems incompatible with our observations. Our experiemen-
tal setup is not ideal for studying wave propagation, but the time lag from B6 to B2 and B3 (Table 5) would be consistent with a wave propagating in the mean flow direction with a phase speed of about 30 cm s$^{-1}$, as seen from a system referenced to the bottom. If the wave propagates in other directions, the phase speed would be smaller. It should also be noted that the flow in the laboratory experiments relate to lower Reynolds numbers (Re < 300) than occur in oceanic flows. There are more laboratory studies that observed waves in overflow layers [e.g., Lane-Serff and Baines, 1998; Etling et al., 2000]. In these studies the occurrence of waves in the overflow layers appeared simultaneously with intermediate layer eddies.

Apart from the academic importance of identifying such a clear example of this kind of oscillatory motion in nature, our results may help understanding the role of the FBC overflow in the global ocean circulation. As they pass the sill of the channel, the overflow waters form a fairly homogeneous mass of cold water with bottom temperatures well below zero. When this water reaches the area off Greenland and meets the other contributors to the North Atlantic Deep Water (NADW), its temperature has increased by more than 3°C by entraining and mixing with ambient waters along the route. As seen in Figure 3, most of this temperature increase occurs already within our study area, which implies some exceptionally strong mixing process.

6. Concluding Remarks

A regular pattern of velocity and temperature oscillations with 88 ± 4 hours period is observed to dominate a large part of the Faroe Bank Channel overflow plume. These highly coherent oscillations occur in a region where observations indicate supercritical conditions and compare strikingly to recent numerical model results [Ezer, 2006]. Further research is needed to understand how the observed kinematic structure influences the mixing in the Faroe Bank Channel overflow. For further field studies it would be desirable to also have information of the varying vertical extent of the plume, e.g., by using thermistor strings in addition to current meters.

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