

Orri Vésteinsson:

## ***Icelandic farmhouse excavations. Field methods and site choices***

### *Introduction*

Icelandic archaeology is a small discipline in terms of numbers of practitioners and its institutional basis has long been weak. Only in the last 10 years has there been rapid growth in the field with the number of professional archaeologists more than doubling, and the establishment of new institutions like the Institute of Archaeology (1995), a separate Archaeological Heritage Agency (2001) and an archaeology department at the University of Iceland (2002). The fruits of the last decade's archaeological productivity are only to a limited degree in evidence as many of the projects are still ongoing and others are under publication.

Considering this situation it is somewhat surprising that Iceland's archaeological record contains a relative abundance of information, and what is more this information is to a large extent available in published format. Compared to Norway for instance the number of excavated and published Viking age long houses is staggering – in excess of 20. Iceland is also the only Nordic country to have published (and recently updated) a full catalogue of its Viking age burials and grave goods (Eldjárn 1956, 2000).

This situation is one of the reasons why Icelandic archaeology is currently experiencing such expansion. Iceland is a place where the relative abundance of available data makes possible comparative and countrywide analysis on a scale that would be difficult to duplicate elsewhere. If this sort of work is to be carried out however the data-set as a whole must be scrutinized first in order to make certain that it is *really* comparable. There are two sides to this problem. On the one hand there may be variations in geographical and temporal coverage. It is necessary to know whether all the sites belong to the same period and same part of the country or whether they are more evenly spread. On the other the methods used during excavation and analysis have a significant impact on the degree to which the site in question can be compared to others.

A site which has been superficially dug with limited retrieval of artefacts and faunal remains can only be compared to certain elements of a carefully excavated site. This is easy to recognize when say late 19<sup>th</sup> century excavations are compared to the most recent ones, but there are a number of hazards when it comes to excavations from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These tend to have a scientific character but when analysed more closely are often revealed not to have recorded all the evidence which would be expected today and to include assumptions we would not make today without supporting evidence.

While the study of past methodologies therefore has a practical value for modern researchers who want to be able to use earlier data in a safe and systematic manner, such a study is also interesting in itself, for it can be very revealing about attitudes and assumptions that have shaped the archaeological discourse in the past and continue to influence it to this day.

The present set of papers is the outcome of a postgraduate seminar held at the University of Iceland in 2002-2003. In the seminar these issues were discussed in relation to farmstead excavations and these will also be the focus here. From the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, excavations of farmsteads have overshadowed all other types of archaeological sites in Iceland (e.g. pagan burials, churches, assembly sites, ports of trade) and no other site-category encapsulates as well the development of field methods in Icelandic archaeology. In the seminar each student made a study of a farm site and its excavation history. Two of these reports are printed here, each representing an important stage in the development of field methods in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. The other sites discussed in the seminar were: Fornalá and Sandártunga (Óðinn Haraldsson), Stöng (Guðrún Alda Gísladóttir), Þórarinsstaðir (Birna Lárusadóttir), Sámsstaðir (Anna Rut Guðmundsdóttir), Herjólfssdalur (Guðmundur Ólafsson) and Ytre Moa in Norway (Howell M. Roberts). The results of these studies have informed the discussion below.

The background to the seminar is a growing interest within Icelandic archaeology in early excavation methods. This is to a large degree due to a number of re-excavations of sites dug in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century - Hofstaðir in Mývatnssveit and Eiríksstaðir in Haukadalur being the most notable cases. In these re-excavations care has been taken to understand the progress and rationale of the previous excavations and it has been emphasised that such analysis is a precondition for a successful re-interpretation of the

sites (Lucas?, Ólafsson?). In 2000-2002 a joint Icelandic – Danish – Norwegian project called =*Vestnordisk byggeskikk i vikingtid og middelalder* focused amongst other things on the archaeological expeditions to Greenland and Iceland in the 1920s and 1930s – particularly the Nordic expedition to SW Iceland in 1939 – and how this early research has shaped the current paradigm of West-Norse building customs. Analysis of the field records and limited re-excavation of one of the sites (Skallakot – see below) suggested that the current paradigm is as much shaped by early 20<sup>th</sup> century culture-historical attitudes as empirical fieldwork, and that in fact the fieldwork often served primarily to substantiate previously conceived ideas and was as a rule remarkably limited as an investigative endeavour.

In this introduction a summary of Icelandic farmstead archaeology to date will be presented. First the geographical, temporal and status distribution of excavated farm sites will be discussed, and a brief description given of the state of publication of the excavated material. Following this an outline will be given of the main developments of field methods from the inception of Icelandic archaeology to the present, concluding with a summary of the representativeness of the Icelandic excavation material.

### *The distribution of farmhouse excavations in Iceland.*

	Fieldwork dates	Site status	Notes on dating	Dating methods	References
<b>Multi-period</b>					
Bergþórshvoll	1926-28, 1931, 1950-51	Middle	Viking age to early modern	C14, typology, artefacts	Eldjárn & Gestsson 1952
Bessastaðir	1986-96	High	Viking age to 18 <sup>th</sup> c.	C14, tephra, typology, artefacts, documents	Ólafsson 1991; Amorosi et al. 1992
Reykholt	1987-89; 1998-2003	High	High medieval to 19 <sup>th</sup> c.	C14, typology, artefacts, documents	Buckland et al. 1992; Sveinbjarnardóttir 2001, 2003
Suðurgata	1971-75, 1983	Middle	Viking age to 15 <sup>th</sup> c.	C14, tephra	<b>Nordahl 1988; Sigurðardóttir 1987</b>
Stóraborg	1978-91	Middle	High medieval to 19 <sup>th</sup> c.	typology, artefacts, documents	Snæsdóttir 1989, 1991, 1992
Viðey	1986-94	High	Viking age to	C14,	Hallgrímsdóttir

			18 <sup>th</sup> c.	typology, artefacts, documents	1991; Kristjánsdóttir 1995
<b>Viking age</b>					
Aðalstræti	1971-75, 2001-2003	Middle	9 <sup>th</sup> -10 <sup>th</sup> c	C14, tephra	<b>Nordahl 1988;</b> Roberts et al. 2003
Bólstaður	1931	Low- middle		typology	<b>Þórðarson 1932</b>
Eiríksstaðir	1895, 1938, 1997-2002	Low	10 <sup>th</sup> c.	typology, C14	<b>Erlingsson 1899,</b> <b>Þórðarson 1964,</b> Ólafsson 1998
Goðatættur	1969, 1971	Low- middle		C14, tephra, typology, artefacts	<b>Eldjárn 1989,</b> <b>128-57</b>
Granastaðir	1987-91	Low- middle	10 <sup>th</sup> c.	tephra, C14	<b>Einarsson 1994</b>
Grelutóttir	1977-78	Low	10 <sup>th</sup> c.	C14	<b>Ólafsson 1980</b>
Hvítárholt	1963-67	middle		tephra, artefacts, typology	<b>Magnússon 1973</b>
Hofstaðir í Garðahreppi	1994-99	Middle		Tephra, artefacts	
Hofstaðir í Mývatnssveit	1908, 1992- 2002	High	Between c. 950 and 1158	tephra	<b>Bruun &amp; Jónsson 1909,</b> <b>1911;</b> Friðriksson & Vésteinsson 1997, 1998a-b; Friðriksson et al. 2004
Ísleifsstaðir	1939	Middle- High		typology	<b>Stenberger</b> <b>1943b</b>
Klaufanes	1940	Low		typology	<b>Eldjárn 1943,</b> <b>17-25</b>
Ljósavatn	1896	Low- Middle		typology	<b>Bruun 1928, 47- 48.</b>
Skallakot	1939, 2001	Middle- High		tephra	<b>Roussell 1943a;</b> Gestsdóttir 2002
<b>11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> c.</b>					
Herjólfsdalur	1971-83	Middle		tephra, C14, typology	<b>Hermanns- Auðardóttir</b> <b>1989</b>
Snjáleifartóttir	1939	Low- middle		tephra, typology	<b>Stenberger</b> <b>1943c</b>
Sveigakot	1999-	Low		tephra, C14	Vésteinsson 2001, 2002, 2003
<b>The Þjórsárdalur controversy – 11<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> century?</b>					
Áslákstunga innri	1895	Middle		typology	<b>Erlingsson 1899</b>
Áslákstunga fremri	1939	Low- Middle		typology	<b>Stenberger</b> <b>1943a</b>
Gjaskógar	1949, 1952, 1960	Low		tephra	<b>Eldjárn 1961</b>
Undir Lambhöfða	1895	Middle		typology	<b>Erlingsson 1899</b>

Sámsstaðir	1895, 1971-72	Middle		tephra	<b>Erlingsson 1899, Rafnsson 1977</b>
Skeljastaðir	1939	Middle-High		tephra	<b>Þórðarson 1943</b>
Stöng	1939, 1982-83, 1986, 1992-93	Middle-High		tephra, artefacts	<b>Roussel 1943b, Vilhjálmsson 1989</b>
Þórarinsstaðir	1945	Low-Middle		tephra	<b>Eldjárn 1949</b>
<b>14<sup>th</sup> century</b>					
Gröf	1955-57	Middle	Abandoned in 1362	tephra	<b>Gestsson 1959</b>
<b>15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries</b>					
Forna-Lá	1942	Low		typology, artefacts	<b>Eldjárn 1951, 102-108</b>
Kúabót	1972-76	Middle		Tephra, artefacts, documents	<b>Gestsson et al. 1987</b>
Reyðarfell	1960-69	Low-middle		typology	Grimsson 1976
<b>17<sup>th</sup> century</b>					
Sandártunga	1949	Low	Abandoned in 1693	tephra, documents	<b>Eldjárn 1951, 108-19</b>
<b>18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century</b>					
Aðalstræti	1971-75, 2001-2003	Middle	10 <sup>th</sup> c	tephra, artefacts, documents	<b>Nordahl 1988</b>
Arnarhóll	1993	Low-middle		artefacts, documents	<b>Edvardsson 1995</b>
<b>Uncertain dating</b>					
Erpsstaðir	1895				<b>Erlingsson 1899</b>
Stórhólshlíð	1939				<b>Voionmaa 1943a</b>

**Table 1. Excavated farmsteads in Iceland, by period.** The criteria for inclusion in this table are that the site in question includes a definite dwelling which has been excavated to the extent that its size and shape have been recorded and an illustration exists. The scope of the actual removal of soil is doubtful in some of the earliest investigations. There are a number of other excavations of domestic structures which cannot be claimed to be dwellings or at least not the main dwellings of the farmstead in question. These include Hörgsdalur in 1902 (Bruun & Olsen 1903; Bruun 1928, 48-53); Auðnugil in 1964 (Magnússon 1985), undir Hellisbjargi in 1967, 1971, 1981 (Eldjárn 1989, 112-127), Hjálmsstaðir in 1983-85, pit-house (Ólafsson 1992); Breiðavík in 2000, pit-house (Ólafsson 2001), Lundur in 1939, byre and barn (Voionmaa 1943b). Ongoing excavations include sites such as the Viking age settlements at Hrísheimar and Vatnsfjörður, medieval settlement in Höfðagerði, late medieval and early modern monastic settlements at Skriðuklaustur and Kirkjubæjarklaustur and the early modern episcopal mansions at Skálholt and Hólar.

As no systematic research has been carried out in Iceland to define site status, the status ascribed to individual sites in the table is largely informed guesswork based on the size of the structures, on the artefact collections and to some extent on historical records.

References are given to printed reports and only to grey reports where nothing else has been published. Bold lettering indicates that the reference is a final report.

**=Distribution by period.**

If we begin to look at the distribution of the sites by period it becomes immediately clear that the majority of the sites is from the earliest period. More than half of all Icelandic farm sites that have been excavated are from the Viking age or have Viking age levels. This figure becomes even more striking if the eight Þjórsárdalur sites are considered to be of late Viking age date as traditional scholarship has claimed. If they really are so old – and not from the high middle ages as was originally thought and some recent critics have proposed anew – then the Viking age can claim 28 out of 36 datable sites. The two sites with uncertain dating are also most likely of an early date emphasising this bias even more.

Sites with high- and/or late medieval levels (i.e. AD 1100-1600) are somewhat fewer (11) although if the Þjórsárdalur sites are added to this number it becomes more respectable (19). Early modern sites are the most rare or 8.

While early modern sites are numerically much fewer than the medieval and Viking age ones, they completely overshadow the latter in terms of excavation time and in terms of number of artefacts recovered. In other words much more time has been spent on the relatively few early modern sites than the majority of the early sites and the excavation archives of the recent sites are vastly larger. This is primarily due to trends in site-choice and excavation methods discussed below.

There are distinct trends as to which periods have been most favoured by excavators. The earliest concentrated exclusively on sites considered to be from the Commonwealth period (930-1262), with an emphasis on sites with an association to the Sagas and the heathen period before 1000. Different excavators had somewhat different agendas; Þorsteinn Erlingsson (active in 1895) was primarily interested in constructing a house typology so that Norse remains in America could be recognised; Daniel Bruun (active 1896-1908) prioritised sites he considered to be pagan temples while Matthías Þórðarson (active mainly in 1920s and 30s) dug farms considered to be the abodes of famous saga personages. Conspicuously absent from the target sites of the early fieldworkers are sites associated with initial settlement, the landnám farms. The early fieldworkers obviously selected single period sites where they would not have to spend time or energy on removing more recent deposits. At Bergþórshvoll in 1926-28 Þórðarson was the first Icelandic

excavator who had to deal with more recent remains overlying the deposits he was really interested in. While Þórðarson's excavation methods were neither meticulous or particularly up to date for his time he did excavate the whole farm mound more or less equally badly, giving no less attention to early modern layers than medieval or allegedly Viking age ones.

By the 1930s Scandinavian settlement archaeology had reached considerable maturity, not least with extensive excavations of 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century farmsteads in Norse Greenland. This new field made no distinctions between periods, emphasising in equal measure prehistoric and medieval building customs and making good use of modern ethnographic evidence to inform the new theories. These theories were evolutionist in character, treating the development of domestic architecture as a reflection of social and economic change through the centuries. Thus the theoretical conditions for an interest in more recent archaeology had been created by the 1930s and this, as well as the growing influence of Marxist thought on many Scandinavian historians and archaeologists of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, was the background for a definite shift towards excavations of late medieval and early modern sites in the post-war era.

In Iceland these new currents and theoretical frameworks were suddenly revealed in 1939 with the joint Nordic archaeological expedition to Þjórsárdalur and Borgarfjörður (Stenberger ed. 1943). The majority of the sites excavated were at the time considered to have been abandoned around 1300, neatly filling the gap between the later medieval Greenlandic sites and the largely Viking age settlements from Scandinavia.

While Kristján Eldjárn, who was to become the most influential Icelandic archaeologist of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, received his field training in Greenland and Þjórsárdalur his first independent efforts are more reminiscent of earlier times. His first site, Klaufanes excavated in 1940 (see Hreiðarsdóttir this volume), was selected because of its supposed connection to a personage in one of the sagas of Icelanders. It is however perhaps significant that Eldjárn also suggested that the building was that of a primary settler, this first such claim in Icelandic archaeological literature. In 1942 Eldjárn excavated a ruin at Fornalá on the grounds that it might be a

pagan temple – also a somewhat old fashioned concern by that time. This turned out to be a mean cottage from the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century, a dating which seems to have been a disappointment at first. In the late 1940s Eldjárn's attitudes began to change however and he was to devote much time and effort to excavate humble abodes of both medieval and early modern dates. He may have been influenced in this by the more decidedly Marxist scholar, geologist Sigurður Þórarinnsson, who clearly was the driving force behind the excavation of Þórarinsstaðir in 1945. This was a highland cottage which Eldjárn concluded had failed in a matter of years after its building. This excavation marks the beginning of new thinking on Eldjárn's part. The report shows a keen interest in, and empathy for, the household conditions of a poor medieval farmer. The emphasis is on understanding the domestic arrangements and the economy of the farm – evidenced most notably by the equally careful excavation of several outhouses, including two sheep sheds, the only such excavated in Iceland until 1998. **Fig. 1.** In 1949 Eldjárn began excavations at Gjáskógar, another highland cottage, and in the same year he made short shrift of excavating the hovel of Sandártunga which had been abandoned in 1693. The political implications of this excavation are revealed by the report published already in 1951 (jointly with Fornalá) where Eldjárn explains that the Sandártunga farmhouse “reflects the period of deprivation it dates from and is therefore important as culture historical evidence.” (Eldjárn 1951, 114).

By the 1950s Eldjárn's views had become more fully developed and these were to shape the fieldwork policy of the National Museum in the coming decades. To Eldjárn Icelandic material culture was a testimony to the resilience, resourcefulness and quiet heroism of the common Icelander through the centuries. In the absence of monumental architecture, rich hoards or fine art, archaeology revealed the amazing endurance and dignity of the Icelandic people in the face of an incredibly hostile environment. It was therefore not only permissible, but downright necessary, to excavate sites of variable social status and from different periods. This is clearly reflected in the choice of sites excavated by the National Museum in the following decades. In the 1950s Gísli Gestsson excavated Gröf, a 14<sup>th</sup> century farm, in the 1960s Þorkell Grímsson excavated the 16<sup>th</sup> century farmhouse

Reyðarfell and in the 1970s Gestsson excavated the 15<sup>th</sup> century farm Kúabót. The largest project of all, Stóraborg, was started in this spirit in 1978 and it is fair to say that to this day the concerns developed by Eldjárn in the 1950s remain a powerful force in Icelandic archaeology.

A new trend in fieldwork began in the 1960s which was to dominate archaeological debate in Iceland during the 1970s and 1980s. This is an emphasis on initial settlement, the investigation of the farms of the first generation of Icelanders. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century this had not aroused much interest, no doubt primarily because most archaeologists felt that this process was very adequately described in the rich medieval records. From the 1940s diminishing faith in the historicity of these records, not least those dealing with the remotest past, the beginnings of settlement and Icelandic society in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, created the conditions for archaeologists to claim this subject as their own. The National Museum's excavation of Hvítárholt in 1963-67 may reflect this change but the issue of landnám, and in particular its dating, only became to the fore with the excavations in Reykjavík and Herjólfssdalur which both begun in 1971 – both as a result of intensive local lobbying for many years. The dating of the landnám was to dominate theoretical debate within Icelandic archaeology for more than 20 years and from it sprang the current emphasis on the landnám as a social and economic process, typified primarily by excavations of farm sites in North East Iceland, including Sveigakot and Hofstaðir in Mývatnssveit.

In the 1980s an important development took place where large excavation projects were started by the government and Reykjavík city council, at Bessastaðir and Viðey respectively. Both are sites of historic 18<sup>th</sup> century buildings built on top of extensive farm mounds, Bessastaðir being the Danish governors' residence since the 13<sup>th</sup> century and Viðey the site of a house of canons in the middle ages and later a hospital. At both sites renovation of the historic buildings and considerable redevelopment of their surroundings required rescue excavations and at Viðey the excavations carried on for a number of years as a research project once the construction work had been completed. In both cases public funds were made available for major excavations on a scale until then unknown in Icelandic

archaeology and in both cases the larger part of the remains were from the early modern period.

This lack of bias towards recent archaeological remains has continued and is strongly reflected in the projects supported by the Millennium fund, set up in 2000 to fund amongst other things large-scale archaeological excavations to commemorate 1000 years of Christianity in Iceland. The largest projects are excavations of 18<sup>th</sup> century manors at both episcopal sees, Skálholt and Hólar, and amongst the others is an excavation of an early modern church at Reykholt, including 19<sup>th</sup> century foundations.

There seem however to be limits as to how close to the present archaeological research is considered to be useful by Icelandic archaeologists. In 2003 the newly established Archaeological Heritage Agency decided to allow the removal of a late 19<sup>th</sup> century cottage on the site of a planned aluminium smelter without prior investigation despite having the legal means to enforce full excavation. This no doubt reflects a lack of appreciation of the role archaeology could play in the investigation of proto-urban and proto-industrial phenomena in Iceland.

### **=Site status**

Unlike periods, status has been a much less prominent concern for excavators working in Iceland. For one thing status has often been impossible to gauge until well into the actual excavation and this has resulted in a slightly more even distribution than regarding periods and location.

Before the 1940s there was no conscious interest in site status and sites which now would be ascribed low status were considered important because of their supposed association with high status saga personages (e.g. Eiríksstaðir and Ljósavatn). The change in perspective during the 1930s and 1940s meant that an emphasis was placed on locating “normal” farm sites, the middle class supposedly typifying the conditions of ordinary Icelanders – Gröf and Kúabót being the prime examples. Apart from this, an interest in status or its implications for a site’s interpretation, are not a conspicuous aspect of the archaeological discourse in

Iceland. This is no doubt largely due to the persistent belief in Iceland that differences in status were negligible compared to other countries and therefore not really a concern for scholarly inquiry.

In recent years two developments in regard to status can be detected. On the one hand public funding for the excavation of high status sites like Reykholt, Viðey, Bessastaðir, Hólar, Skálholt, Kirkjubæjarklaustur, Skriðuklaustur and others has been remarkably forthcoming since the 1980s. In fact many of these excavations have been started on the initiative of the government or individual politicians, reflecting a clear bias towards high status sites.

On the other hand increased awareness of status issues has emerged out of the investigations in Northeast Iceland, not least in the comparison of the high status site of Hofstaðir with the low status site of Sveigakot. The latter is the only site excavated so far in Iceland which has been targeted for investigation primarily because of its low status, to provide a contrast to the neighbouring high status site.

### **=Geographical distribution**

As is apparent from Figure 2. the geographical distribution of excavated farm sites in Iceland is very uneven. Most work has been carried out in the South and Southwest with a definite concentration in Þjórsárdalur, reflecting the seminal position of that region in Icelandic archaeology.

Other parts of the country are much more patchily represented, with large gaps in the Northwest and far East. The only region beginning to rival the South is the Northeast where considerable archaeological activity has been ongoing since the early 1990s.

These patterns are to a degree shaped by issues of transport and access from urban areas. Both foreign and native archaeologists have as a rule had their bases in Reykjavík and the number of sites within two hour driving from the city no doubt reflects this. Construction work in and around Reykjavík is also responsible for several rescue excavations and it is noteworthy that all the multi-period sites – along with all the early modern sites – are found in the South and Southwest.

Excavations of Viking age farm sites are the most evenly spread with representatives in all parts of the country except the western part of the Northern quarter where very limited archaeological work of any kind has taken place.

The possible 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century sites are all from one small part of the South while a high proportion of late medieval sites is from the southeast and none from the North.

### **=Publication**

The status of publication of Icelandic farmstead excavations is remarkably good. Some sort of final report exists for all the sites excavated before the 1980s except Bergþórshvoll and Reyðarfell. A summary of the findings at Bergþórshvoll was published in 1952 and it is doubtful if better sense of the records of the structural evidence can be made. A full catalogue of the artefacts found remains however to be published.

The large excavation projects of the 1980s, Stóraborg, Viðey and Bessastaðir have all been briefly reported but final publication is still some time away. These massive undertakings proved a hard lesson for Icelandic archaeologists. In none of these cases was funding secured to pay for the post-excavation and in the case of Viðey no post-excavation work has been funded since the project was dropped by the Reykjavík council after the 1994 season. It was however in Viðey that the publication of annual interim reports was introduced as standard practice and such reports exist from nearly all excavations undertaken in Iceland since the early 1990s.

Other excavation projects are either ongoing or have only recently been completed with post-excavation work in full swing. Recent developments include the publishing of excavation archives – including grey literature – over the internet (e.g. Hofstaðir in Mývatnssveit on [www.instarch.is/arena/hof.htm](http://www.instarch.is/arena/hof.htm)).

### *The development of field methods in Iceland*

### **=Looting**

Iceland is no different from other countries in that the earliest diggings for archaeological remains were characterized by looting rather than scholarly endeavour. Recent examination of pagan burials which were looted in the late medieval period has shown that the looters approached their task with a certain method, exhibiting an awareness of stratigraphy and colour changes associated with different deposits. Nevertheless looting to recover ancient artefacts for their aesthetic or antiquarian value has always been relatively rare in Iceland (more for a lack of aesthetically pleasing artefacts than a lack of evil intentions) and cannot be said to have influenced the development of field methods when archaeological work began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **=Trenching for negative evidence**

It can be an amusing parlour game to identify the earliest archaeological intervention but for Iceland this honour will here be given to Jónas Hallgrímsson, who in 1843 dug a small trench in a ruin at Þingnes, a supposed assembly site not far from Reykjavík. From his excavation Hallgrímsson concluded that as he had not found any signs of dung the structure in question could not be an animal shelter, and was therefore quite likely an assembly booth, a temporary structure to shelter representatives at the assembly. This method which can be termed *=test trenching for negative evidence=* was frequently employed in the 19th century and was the dominant way of excavation until the 1890s. The rationale behind this method can be summarised thus: If one has reasonable grounds (e.g. place name, local tradition, form) to interpret a given structure as X, the demonstrable lack of evidence contradicting this supposition, must strengthen it. Normally the structures being tested were supposed to be assembly booths, temples or dwellings so the absence of animal dung was often considered to be a good indication of the validity of the supposition. A variant of this method is when positive evidence was found, normally ash and charcoal considered to indicate a dwelling or the temple fire.

It is apparent that fieldworkers of this period realised the limitations of this method, but they rarely had the means to conduct more extensive excavations, and what is more were most often quite certain in their identifications. The trenching was therefore carried out more to convince possible doubters, and as a show of the excavators' command of scientific methodology, rather than a really investigative effort. In general

however excavation was not a frequently employed method in Icelandic archaeology in the 19th century. Fieldworkers like Kristian Kaalund (active in the mid 1870s), Sigurður Vigfússon (1880s) and Brynjúlfur Jónsson (1890s and 1900s) concentrated on locating and characterizing sites, describing their physical layout and discussing their function. Of these only Vigfússon used excavation regularly and while most of his interventions are small test trenches there are also examples of more extensive excavations. In a few cases he spent several days digging up a site and at sites like Þyrill and Lundur he at least claimed to have uncovered the buildings in their totality and publishes plans showing the basic layout (Sigurður Vigfússon 1881, 74-76; 1885, 98-100). **Fig. 3.** It is however not clear from his descriptions how fully he uncovered those buildings and from his descriptions of his method elsewhere, e.g. at Þingvellir where he dug narrow trenches along the sides of the walls to establish the size and shape of the building, it seems that this may have been the basic nature of his method. This approach shows however that Vigfússon was concerned to establish the form of the buildings he was investigating more definitely than is possible by observing only the humps and bumps of the surface. With Vigfússon building typology emerged as one of the main investigative tools of Icelandic archaeology and while Vigfússon himself was content to base his discussion on the most basic parameters, i.e. size and shape, it was only a matter of time before investigators began to pay attention to individual features in those buildings, calling for a more complete unearthing of the ruins.

### **=Uncovering**

In 1895 the student Þorsteinn Erlingsson was sent to Iceland to collect archaeological information to assist in the identification of Norse ruins in America. Erlingsson's assignment was to locate, investigate and describe in as much detail as possible a number of different categories of ruins. Among these were dwellings and he carried out several excavations of these, both in the South (mainly in Þjórsárdalur) and in the West. In his report (published in 1899) Erlingsson gives a detailed account of his activities on a day to day basis, as well as describing his findings alongside measured drawings and photographs of the excavations – the first use of photography in Icelandic archaeology. Erlingsson's approach was to select sites with little overburden, in some cases already

partially or completely uncovered by erosion. He then removed the soil from inside the buildings and identified internal divisions, entrances, hearths and benches. He found few artefacts and even when he did he notes them only rarely in his reports.

In 1896 Daniel Bruun did fieldwork for the first time in Iceland. He was a seasoned fieldworker and an accomplished surveyor and draughtsman who left detailed and accurate records of his excavations. Excavation was however not his main method – like Kaalund, Vigfússon and Jónsson, he concentrated on locating sites and describing their physical layout. His basic approach to excavation was much the same as Erlingsson's – to uncover the buildings by removing the soil infilling the space between the normally upstanding walls. Unlike Erlingsson Bruun was undaunted by the removal of large volumes of earth, not doubt because he seems to have had much greater resources and was able to hire workers to carry out the actual physical work. Although descriptions of the fieldwork do not exist it seems that he was able to spend much longer at each site than any of his predecessors. His two main excavations in Iceland, Gásir in 1907 and Hofstaðir in 1908, have both been re-excavated in recent years and Bruun's field methods are as a result quite well understood. The following description is primarily based on observations of his technique made at Hofstaðir.

Bruun began by defining the excavation area, typically a square covering the inside of the building in question. The workers would begin by digging down on to the tops of the walls and once they were certain they had found the turf construction they would follow this inwards until they found the inside-edge of the wall. It is the nature of turfwalls to bulge and collapse and the difference between the actual wall and collapsed material from it can often be very difficult to distinguish. As a result Bruun's workers often cut well into the walls, removing large sections of them before getting to their base. At Hofstaðir the walls at the southern and northern ends of the buildings are very badly truncated by the 1908 excavation whereas in the middle the walls were nearly intact. The long walls of this building curve so that it is considerably narrower towards the ends, suggesting that the predefined excavation area was a square, defined by the apparent width of the building in the middle, resulting in considerable damage to the walls at the ends. Both at Hofstaðir and Gásir the suspicion arises that once Bruun had laid out the excavation area and given orders to his workers, he did not himself supervise the

excavation but returned only when the soil infilling the structures had been removed as per his instructions. At Hofstaðir this is indicated by the fact that the floor layers closest to the walls have everywhere been removed and a horizontal surface created where originally the floor had been on a slight angle. The floor deposits closest to the walls were probably thin and difficult to detect whereas the floor deposits along the central axis of the building are quite distinct. Bruun has clearly instructed his workers not to cut through floor layers or other deposits, nor to remove stones or other internal features. As far as can be seen this was heeded but where the deposits were ephemeral the workers could only take their cue from more distinct features and dig “blindly” the areas inbetween. Once the removal of the soil infilling the structure was completed Bruun will have started his actual investigation. This consisted of a more careful investigation of certain features, hearths, pits and doorways, which were more carefully excavated and recorded. Bruun also established the thickness of the walls by recording the depth of the entrances as well as observing this in a couple of trenches placed through the walls. On the whole however he did not examine the outer sides of the walls or the area surrounding the building. At Gásir several test trenches were dug from the base of the main excavation trench, no doubt mainly to establish the thickness and nature of underlying deposits. These are as a rule quite small, usually rectangular and typically 50-70 cm wide. At both Hofstaðir and Gásir a number of trenches were also dug outside the main excavation areas. At Hofstaðir most of these test trenches were placed adjacent to the main excavation area, where surface irregularities suggested there might be structures underneath. Bruun’s pits and trenches failed to establish if these actually were buildings. These trenches – some of them quite large – are very different from the main excavation area which seems to have been dug in a very orderly manner and with some confidence. The adjacent trenches were clearly not laid out on the expectation that buildings would be found and are in some cases extremely irregular, reaching different depths, with small and large off-shoots and even shallow tunnels showing lateral burrowing. These trenches reflect considerable confusion, more or less indiscriminate digging in search for some foothold to base a strategy on. When none was found the trenches were abandoned and the area got summarily treated in the reports.

Inside the main excavation area, the Hofstaðir long house, Bruun created a detailed plan based on accurate measurements, showing walls, entrances, hearths and pits, surface deposits and the location of artefacts. **Fig. 4.** The retrieval of artefacts was apparently not a major concern – as is evidenced by the substantial number of objects retrieved in later campaigns from Bruun's backfill, but he meticulously described those he did recover and marked their find spots on the plan. In addition to the main plan Bruun drew larger scale plans of individual features, created a schematic elevation showing a cross-section of the long-house, made sketches of the site and took a series of photographs. His excavation archive – preserved at the National Museum in Copenhagen – contains some fieldnotes and preliminary sketches but on the whole most of the information recorded in the field, whether as text or illustration was made available in published form shortly after the excavation was completed (Bruun & Finnur Jónsson 1909, 1911; Bruun 1928).

This method was to remain the basic approach in archaeological fieldwork in Iceland until the 1970s. The principle is that the structure under investigation was considered to be temporally finite, with no history of use, rebuilding or development – or at least not with any such history considered worth studying – and with a clear-cut break between the use of the house and the deposits representing its abandonment and disuse. The archaeologist's task was then simply to peel off those post-abandonment deposits and to plan what was then revealed. The plan was the aim of the exercise and also the principal component of the excavation archive and subsequent publication. Nothing reveals better the limited aims of this approach than the fact that floor layers were as a rule not excavated and as a result relatively few artefacts tended to be retrieved. The non-removal of floor layers meant that excavators rarely encountered evidence for earlier building phases or repairs. It also meant that negative features, like post-holes and under floor drains regularly went unnoticed. When building parts or features were removed it was always because such structures were considered to be much later than the building under excavation and hence of no interest. As a result they were normally removed without plans being drawn or other records made (e.g. Snjáleifartóttir – Stenberger 1943c and Reyðarfell – Grímsson 1976).

Matthías Þórðarson was the first archaeologist to test the limits of this approach in his excavation of Bergþórshvoll in 1926-1928. Here Þórðarson had to dig through multiple phases of a farm mound in order to get at the early 11th century remains he was looking for. To his credit he recorded all the floors he encountered and removed, drew a plan of each, recorded its depth and related the artefacts found to each floor. That said, he chose to limit his analysis of the stratigraphy to recording the level, size and shape of the floor deposits – which were as a rule distinct and easy to define – and large features such as pavements and vat-holes, but ignored everything else, both all other sorts of deposits (walls, roof collapse, middens) and features like post-holes and post pads which presumably were there to record. The fact that Þórðarson never published his results (they were summarised by Eldjárn and Gestsson 1951) meant that others were not able to learn from his difficulties and deep stratigraphies were to remain outside the experience of Icelandic archaeologists until the 1970s.

In 1939 a group of experienced Scandinavian archaeologists descended on Iceland to excavate farmhouses in Þjórsárdalur and Borgarfjörður. In the group were veteran fieldworkers like Aage Roussell and Márten Stenberger who were to have a lasting impact on Icelandic archaeology as well as academic discourse on Scandinavian building custom. Stenberger was no doubt the most accomplished fieldworker in the group. This can be seen for instance from his meticulous recording of post-holes and peg-holes, features which have until recently not received much attention by Icelandic archaeologists. More importantly he was the only excavator in the group to show an understanding of stratigraphy and consider the possibility that a building could have more than one phase. At Ísleifsstaðir he defined three phases of a Viking age long house and at Snjáleifartóttir he excavated two very different structures, one superimposed on the other. In terms of impact it was however the work of Aage Roussell that has been most important. He wrote the chapter on the project's results (Roussell 1943c), and excavated Skallakot and Stöng, the latter achieving almost instant fame as an extraordinarily well preserved example of a high-medieval and later, after a revision of the dating, a late Viking age farm house. The fact that Roussell was an architect by training had a clear impact on both his approach to the excavations as well as to his interpretation of the excavated remains. Stöng and Skallakot, as Roussell presents these structures, are both

logical structural entities, with a clear design and comprehensible structural characteristics. It is hardly a coincidence that the architect Roussell excavated such imminently sensible buildings while archaeologists like Matthías Þórðarson and Juoko Voinmaa – with less experience in building archaeology and probably a more limited interest – excavated buildings that are both incomplete and largely incomprehensible (i.e. at Skeljastaðir and Stórhólshlíð).

At Stöng more recent excavations have shown that underneath the structure excavated by Roussell there is another long-house (Vilhjálmsson 1989) and at Skallakot re-excavation in 2001 (Gestsdóttir 2002) suggests that Roussell not only failed to fully excavate the most recent phase of the building, he also identified rows of stones from different phases as belonging to the same phase – giving the impression that the building is complete where it is not – and added features to his plan in areas which had not been excavated. While the element of fabrication is not extensive or likely to radically alter the interpretation of the building it betrays an attitude to fieldwork which has been pervasive for much of the 20th century. Roussell had encountered a number of well preserved farmhouses in Greenland and had reflected extensively on the nature and development of West-Nordic building custom. His culture-historical and evolutionist approach made him think in terms of ideal types and it was these he set out to find in Þjórsárdalur. It is apparent that he already had a clear idea of what he was expecting and he also had the architect's eye for the structural logic of buildings which made him expect to find evidence, where in some cases there was none to be found.

The excavator therefore has a paradigm in mind before he begins his excavation and his expectations clearly influence what is found and recorded. When the excavation reveals by and large that which was expected, the failure of every detail to fit to that expectation is outweighed by the elegance of the paradigm and such details are then either ignored or simply “repaired” to fit the expected results.

Another aspect of this approach is the lack of interest in the history of the building or the material culture associated with it. The farmhouses excavated in Iceland until the 1970s were primarily given meaning in an typological-evolutionary context, the layout and date being the only aspects that importance was attached to. However increased experience and increasingly meticulous field methods were starting to create an

awareness of other issues from the 1950s onwards. In his report of the excavation of Gröf Gestsson (1959) considers at length a variety of implications of the revealed structures and draws heavily on historical and ethnographic evidence to interpret the function of different structures. This emphasis on function was to become more and more noticeable in archaeological reports of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s and this in turn led to a greater care being taken in the excavation of individual features which could throw light on such considerations. Issues like the identification and function of bathhouses (= *baðstofur*) and the nature and role of pit houses – first identified at Hvítárholt in 1963-67 – were to become prominent in archaeological debate in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g. Ólafsdóttir 1974; Gestsson 1976). Some of the issues raised in such debates required more careful examination of the features under discussion – not least their history of use – making the inadequacy of current excavation methods more and more obvious.

### =Sections

When change finally came it came quickly. In 1971 three excavations were started in Iceland. One was in downtown Reykjavík directed by Bent Schönbäck and later Else Nordahl, both veteran Swedish field archaeologists. One was at Sámsstaðir in Þjórsárdalur directed by Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, an Icelandic archaeologist recently graduated from Sweden and one at Herjólfsdalur, directed by an Icelandic archaeology student from Sweden, Margrét Hermannsdóttir. In all these excavations a similar method was applied, copied directly from current Swedish practice. At all the sites sections were now employed as the principal means of stratigraphic control – to all intents and purposes a new concept in Icelandic archaeology.

Sections were as such not a complete novelty in Icelandic archaeology. In some of the excavations in Þjórsárdalur in 1939 small baulks or islands were left standing for the tephrochronologist to examine (Fig. 5) and in excavations of the late 1940s, 1950s and 1960s short sections were often drawn or just photographed. As a rule such sections were located across narrow corridors or rooms (Fig. 6), and usually only one or two were recorded at each site. Their purpose was limited to recording the relationship between tephra and the archaeological deposits but as such they often contain important evidence

for the abandonment and post-abandonment phases of the sites in question. At Gröf in the 1950s elevations of all the excavated buildings were recorded and published. The elevations show the original surface, walls and floors but no layers in between. During the 1960s the use of sections became more frequent (e.g. at Hvítárholt and Reyðarfell) but they were not laid out in a systematic manner or used systematically in the analysis of the remains.

The first excavation in Iceland where sections were laid out beforehand and maintained in the same locations throughout the excavations was the investigation of a medieval church at Varmá in 1968-69. Here Sveinbjörn Rafnsson (1971) laid out a cross-section over a small mound that turned out to contain three levels of buildings, an uncharacterized outhouse, a smithy and a small church at the base. As the aim of the project was to excavate the church it is significant that Rafnsson chose to record the later levels just as meticulously as the church, drawing plans of each and recording the location and level of nearly all the artefacts. As a result a degree of 3-dimensional control was introduced although the stratigraphy as such was not recorded except in the sections, where deposits are characterized by type rather than stratigraphic relationship – a practice that was to characterize Icelandic sections to the 1980s (Fig. 6). In addition to drawing sections Rafnsson also recorded every stone he encountered on his plans – not only the stones considered to be structurally meaningful. The goal of objectivity had been introduced into Icelandic archaeology.

In the excavations beginning in the early 1970s sections were to play an important part. At Sámstaðir Sveinbjörn Rafnsson continued to employ the methodology he had so successfully used at Varmá, laying out sections across the length and width of the buildings before removing the layers at either sides. At Sámstaðir however the aim was only to excavate the topmost structure so the sections were not really that helpful. At Herjólfsdalur sections were not laid out at the start of the excavations but a number were laid out and recorded later, after the fill of some of the structures had been removed. Most of the published sections from this site are through walls, showing that while the stratigraphy was not deep the excavated structures represented only the last stage of a complex development – a development that was not revealed by the excavations in plan.

Of the 1970s excavations the one in downtown Reykjavík was no doubt the most influential in terms of methodology. Most significantly perhaps, many young Icelandic archaeologists who were to become prominent in fieldwork in Iceland in the following years and decades – including Guðmundur Ólafsson and Mjöll Snæsdóttir – received their field training there. Unlike the other sites being dug at the same time Reykjavík (especially the Suðurgata 3-5 plot) had deep stratigraphies which demanded a more elaborate methodological approach than the single-phase sites. In these excavations some sections were maintained throughout while others were only meant to illustrate stratigraphic sequences inside particular structures. The “long-term” sections were along the limits of the excavation plots as well as across them, whereas “ad hoc” sections were quite unevenly distributed. They were thick on the ground in Aðalstræti 18 where modern trenching cut through the archaeological deposits in many places, but much rarer in the Suðurgata 3-5 plot where two “long-term” sections seem to have been considered to give sufficient stratigraphic control. **Fig. 7.** Plans were drawn of individual features or whole complexes in more or less stratigraphic order but layers or stratigraphic units were not systematically defined. Artefacts were related to structural units, individual buildings or building phases, the characterization of which forms the backbone of the stratigraphic analysis. In these excavations all archaeological deposits inside the predefined plots – also the section baulks – were removed, giving some idea about the outside of the buildings. This however did not become standard practice for some time yet in Icelandic archaeology and was until the 1990s confined to sites where predefined plots were being cleared of archaeological deposits in a rescue context.

The changes in accepted practice can be seen very well in the excavation of Kúabót by veteran fieldworker Gísli Gestsson in 1972-1976. This was a very similar site to Gröf which Gestsson had excavated in the 1950s and the differences between the methodologies are quite revealing. Unlike Gröf sections were recorded through all the buildings at Kúabót, laid out beforehand to give a representative view of individual rooms as well as the whole complex. Like Gröf however the walls themselves were left unexcavated and were not dug through where the sections cut through them. Areas outside and in between buildings were only cleared where features like pavements could be traced. Each building was also clearly more carefully excavated, with greater

attention being given to details – reflected in the publication of larger scale plans of each building in addition to the overall site plan. A very significant difference is that at Kúabót the floors were excavated. This resulted in a much greater number of artefacts and also in observations about the history of use of each building. In some cases more than one floor layer was distinguished and recorded. This represents an important shift in the perceived goal of an archaeological excavation. Instead of aiming to reveal a building at its point of – preferably hasty – abandonment, the emphasis was now on revealing the building at its point of construction, thus including in the excavation the removal of occupation layers and at least minor repairs. From a theoretical point of view this is a significant change. It reflects a growing realisation among fieldworkers that an archaeological site is the result of complicated developments and not a static phenomenon. It is also a more sophisticated approach to the goal of revealing the building as it really was. For the evolutionary archaeologist it certainly makes more sense to try to describe the building as it was originally intended than in its final form, after perhaps decades of wear, and tear, modifications and repairs.

Reading archaeological reports from the 1970s and 1980s it is difficult to see that the sections really did improve the stratigraphic analysis. Conceptually all these sites were dug in plan: the plans are the principal – and most easily comprehensible – evidence of what was found, and it was during the excavations in plan that the main stratigraphic units – always whole buildings or building phases – were defined. The sections – normally drawn towards the end of the process when most of the definitions had already been made – were a back-up, the real significance of which was to give the excavators confidence to proceed through complicated stratigraphy. The sections allowed deposits to be removed without them being fully understood. The section revealed by the removal would clarify the matter. Which in a sense is always true: a section will always tell a story – it is just not certain if it reflects the story of the site formation.

The limitations of this approach were beginning to become visible in the late 1980s. In large scale excavations of sites with deep stratigraphies like Stóraborg, Viðey and Bessastaðir excavators were beginning to worry about a number of issues:

- -(PUNKTUR)The accurate location of artefacts was disproportionately related to meaningful stratigraphic units. Artefacts found in floor layers or fills of buildings

could be ascribed to that stratigraphic unit, whereas those found underneath floor layers or in middens not clearly associated with a particular building could not be given a meaningful locational reference, except at best relative to something else. The records of such relationships were also often only placed in artefact descriptions, not on the plans or sections. At Stóraborg the location of artefacts was to begin with recorded in x, y and z but this accuracy was in no way matched with the accuracy of the stratigraphic record – the co-ordinates of artefacts could not always be related to particular plans or sections – and this time consuming practice was therefore ceased.

- -(PUNKTUR)Increasingly detailed excavation and increasing experience and knowledge of the excavators resulted in more attention being paid to individual features, calling for their separate recording and a clear definition of their relationship to other features. As individual buildings formed the basic stratigraphic units, such features had to be treated as sub-units, often resulting in complex strings of definitions (e.g. “rebuilt drain under third floor of the shortened house no. 9”) which were difficult to keep track of in the records and almost impossible to ensure were uniformly applied, e.g. in locational descriptions of artefacts.
- -(PUNKTUR)In the same vein, increasing attention was being given to features and deposits which did not belong to particular buildings. These had to be given names (e.g. “eastern midden”) outside the numerical order of buildings, and were frequently difficult to relate to the building sequence, not least because they often were treated as single stratigraphic units (although not deserving a number) rather than a series of units.
- -(PUNKTUR)In the early 1980s the first palaeoentomologists and zooarchaeologists started to work in Iceland, mostly in close collaboration with Icelandic field archaeologists. Their need for an unambiguous context for their samples no doubt increased the pressure to revise the excavation methodology.

By the beginning of the 1990s references to “lists of layers” (jarðlagaskrá, mannvistarlagaskrá) begin to appear in interim reports. These are not comprehensive lists of stratigraphic units but primarily deposits and accumulations as opposed to

structural remains and features. In other words this was an attempt to systematically record the “soft” materials in between the stones and slabs which were the primary subject material of the plans. These lists can therefore be seen as an extension of the sections into the space not recorded in the sections, and as such they herald the introduction of the context.

### **=Single context recording and open area excavations**

The concept of the context has been introduced in Iceland from Britain and a number of Icelandic archaeologists educated in Britain started to use it in their excavations in the early 1990s. The first example is an excavation at Hofstaðir in Mývatnssveit in 1992. This was in fact an evaluation trench and the section drawn must be considered the principal record of that intervention. Each context was however separately described on pre-designed sheets and a stratigraphic matrix was recorded. In 1996 open area excavations started at Hofstaðir where they continue to this day and single context recording has been employed there, as well as a number of other recent excavations (e.g. Sveigakot, Aðalstræti, Skálholt). The Hofstaðir excavations are particularly significant in that the immediate vicinity of the buildings has been excavated as well as the inside.

**Fig. 8.** Not all Icelandic archaeologists have adopted this methodology. Some still use the section based approach, digging in spits has been attempted, and some use modified versions of the single context recording approach. None of the excavations of the last 15 years have however reached final publication so a full analysis of developments in this most recent period cannot be attempted at present.

## *Conclusions*

One way of looking at the development of excavation techniques in Iceland in the last century is to see it in terms of increasingly comprehensive destruction. In the earliest period excavators did little more than to scratch the surface – often selecting sites where this was all that had to be done to reveal the form of the buildings. By the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century archaeologists had started to move great volumes of earth, but only from the inside of the buildings and normally not actual occupational deposits. Floors were the

first such deposits to become valid targets and from the 1970s several sites with deep stratigraphies have been excavated, necessitating the complete removal of all deposits and features save those at the very bottom of the sequence. It is primarily those experiences which have stimulated recent developments of excavation methodologies, which in turn call for a comprehensive and complete consideration of all stratigraphic units and therefore their removal.

Another way of viewing this development is to attempt to characterize the aims of the excavators. In the earliest period, when test trenching for negative evidence was the main approach, the excavation was primarily a test of the validity of a hypothesis regarding the identification of the ruin in question: was it a temple? an assembly-booth? the dwelling of a saga personage? The sites were as a rule selected for excavation on the basis of saga references and place names, often supported by local traditions. The sites considered in this way were all supposed to be from the saga period (=EKKISKÁL) Viking age), but are in fact usually difficult to date as dating evidence was as a rule not found in these excavations. The dating, from literary reference, supported by place name and local lore, was the reason for, not the outcome of, such excavations.

When uncovering became the main method of excavation the aims of the archaeologists had become more scientific in the sense that the excavations were meant to produce new evidence, if only new evidence to support established hypotheses. Their aims can broadly be classified as illustration on the one hand and comparative analysis on the other, with a wide degree of overlapping. Some excavations (e.g. Bergþórshvoll, Bólstaður) were explicitly started to unearth pictorial evidence to illustrate saga texts and works of history. In this field the development was away from the particular – the actual farm of a certain personage – to the general – a typical farmhouse of a certain class/region/period. Advances in excavation techniques were to a large degree prompted by a concern to provide increasingly detailed information to accompany the text based history writing. Comparative analysis emerged as an independent aim of archaeological excavations in the 1930s, principally with the goal of defining a typological lineage for Nordic farmhouses from prehistory to present times. While the evolutionist theory behind this approach is now considered obsolete, it is important to recognise that this was

the first tentative step by Icelandic archaeology towards creating its own discourse, more or less independent of historical sources.

The introduction of the section reflects not only a significant methodological advance but also a sense of empowerment among Icelandic archaeologists. They felt empowered to engage in much more complex excavations than previously attempted but also to question long held assumptions based on historical evidence, in particular the dating of the landnám, the initial settlement of Iceland. Dating was to become the principal issue in Icelandic archaeology in the 1970s and 1980s with a small but vociferous group of archaeologists claiming that their scientific methodology made them much more qualified than historians to proclaim on such issues as the dating of the landnám.

While the dating of the landnám emerged from this debate pretty much unscathed its main effect was that by the 1990s Icelandic archaeologists felt liberated from the yoke of the historical record (see Einarsson 1994b and Friðriksson 1994 who both reflect this in very different ways) and were no longer only concerned with illustrating, proving or disproving ideas from the historical sources. Several lines of independent inquiry were beginning to emerge, and relating to excavation methods these have all required a greater emphasis on site formation and more complete recovery strategies.

As for the usefulness of the available archaeological evidence on Icelandic farmhouses it has been demonstrated here that this is at best variable, and care has been taken when using all earlier reports. The only time period which has a representative sample, in terms of absolute numbers of sites and in terms of status variation and geographical coverage, is the Viking age. The sites from the later periods are much fewer. This situation should however be remedied to a considerable degree when the multi-period sites Stóraborg, Bessastaðir and Viðey will be published.

It is hoped that the analysis presented here will be useful as an aid in the use of earlier archaeological literature on Icelandic farmhouses. There is much good evidence that can be brought to bear fruitfully on the lively debate that is currently taking place within Icelandic archaeology – it just has to be used with due care.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Amorosi, Thomas, P.C. Buckland, G. Ólafsson, J.P. Sadler & P. Skidmore (1992): "Site status and the paleoecological record: a discussion of results from Bessastaðir, Iceland." in Morris & Rackham eds 1992: 152-167.
- Bruun, Daniel (1928): =*Fortidsminder og Nutidshjem paa Island*, [2 udg.], Kbh.
- Bruun, Daniel & Björn M. Ólsen (1903): „Hörgsdalsfundurinn.“ =*Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags 1903*:1-16.
- Bruun, Daniel & Finnur Jónsson (1909): "Om hove og hovudgravninger paa Island." =*Aarbøger for nordisk oldkyndighed og historie 1909*: 245-316.
- Bruun, Daniel & Finnur Jónsson (1911): "Finds and excavations of Heathen Temples in Iceland." =*Saga Book 7*: 25-37.
- Buckland, Paul C., Sadler, Jon P. & Guðrún Sveinbjarnardóttir (1992): "Palaeoecological investigations at Reykholt, Western Iceland." in Morris ed. 1992: 149-191.
- Einarsson, Bjarni F. (1994a): =*The Settlement of Iceland; A Critical Approach. Granastaðir and the Ecological Heritage*, (GOTARC, Series B. Gothenburg Archaeological Theses. No. 4), Gothenburg.
- Einarsson, Bjarni F. (1994b): "Íslenskar fornleifar: Fórnarlömb sagnahyggjunnar." =*Skírnir* 168: 377-402.
- Edvardsson Ragnar (1995): "Fornleifar á Arnarhóli." =*Árbók hins íslenska Fornleifafélags 1994*: 17-28.
- Eldjárn, Kristján (1943): "Skálarústin í Klaufanesi og nokkrar aðrar svarfdælskar fornleifar." =*Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags 1941-42*: 17-33.
- Eldjárn, Kristján (1949): "Eyðibyggd á Hrunamannaafreйти." =*Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags 1943-48*: 1-43.
- Eldjárn, Kristján (1951): "Tvennar bæjarrústir frá seinni öldum." =*Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags 1949-50*: 102-119.
- Eldjárn, Kristján (1956): =*Kuml og haugfé úr heiðnum sið á Íslandi*, Akureyri.
- Eldjárn, Kristján (1961): "Bær í Gjáskógum í Þjórsárdal." =*Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags 1961*: 7-46.
- Eldjárn, Kristján (1989): "Papey. Fornleifarannsóknir 1967-1981." =*Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags 1988*: 35-188.
- Eldjárn, Kristján (2000): =*Kuml og haugfé úr heiðnum sið á Íslandi*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. by Adolf Friðriksson, Reykjavík.
- Eldjárn, Kristján & Gísli Gestsson (1952): "Rannsóknir á Bergþórshvoli." =*Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags 1951-52*: 5-75.
- Erlingsson, Þorsteinn (1899): =*Ruins of the Saga Time: Being an account of travels and explorations in Iceland in the summer of 1895*, London.
- Friðriksson, Adolf (1994): "Sannfræði íslenskra fornleifa." =*Skírnir* 168: 346-376.
- Friðriksson, Adolf & Orri Vésteinsson (1997): "Hofstaðir Revisited." =*Norwegian Archaeological Review* 30/2: 103-112.
- Friðriksson, Adolf & Orri Vésteinsson (1998a): "Hofstaðir í Mývatnssveit – yfirlit 1991-1997." =*Archaeologia islandica* I, 58-73.

Friðriksson, Adolf & Orri Vésteinsson (1998b): “Fornleifarannsóknir á Hofstöðum í Mývatnssveit 1991-1992 – Forkönnun.” =*Archaeologia islandica* I, 74-91.

Friðriksson, Adolf & Orri Vésteinsson (1998c): “Fornleifarannsóknir á Hofstöðum í Mývatnssveit 1995 – Gryfja sunnan skála.” =*Archaeologia islandica* I, 92-109.

Friðriksson, Adolf; Orri Vésteinsson & Thomas H. McGovern (2004): “Recent Investigations at Hofstaðir, Northern Iceland.” =*Proceedings of the NABO/AEA Conference in Glasgow March 29<sup>th</sup>-April 1<sup>st</sup> 2001*, 191-202.

Gestsdóttir, Hildur (2002): “Report of the 2001 excavation of the skáli at Skallakot.” In Stummann-Hansen, S. & Vésteinsson, O. eds. 2002: =*Archaeological investigations in Þjórsárdalur 2001*, Reykjavík.

Gestsson, Gísli (1959): “Gröf í Öräfum.” =*Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags 1959*: 5-87.

Gestsson, Gísli (1976): “Fjórar baðstofur.” =*Minjar og menntir. Afmælisrit helgað Kristjáni Eldjárn 6. desember 1976*, Reykjavík, 190-207.

Gestsson, Gísli et al. (1987): “Kúabót í Álftaveri.” =*Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags 1986*: 7-101.

Grimsson, Þorkell (1976): “Miðaldabyggð á Reyðarfelli.” =*Minjar og menntir. Afmælisrit helgað Kristjáni Eldjárn*, Reykjavík, 565-576.

Hallgrímsdóttir, Margrét (1991): “The Excavation on Viðey, Reykjavík, 1987-1988. A Preliminary report.” =*Acta Archaeologica* 61: 120-125

Hermanns-Auðardóttir, Margrét (1989): =*Islands tidiga bosättning*, (Studia Archaeologica Universitatis Umensis 1), Umeå.

Kristjánsdóttir, Steinunn (1995): „Klaustureyjan á Sundum.“ =*Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags 1994*: 29-52.

Magnússon, Þór (1973): “Sögualdarbyggð í Hvítárholti.” =*Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags 1972*: 5-80.

Magnússon, Þór (1985): “Rannsókn fornrustar við Auðnugil í Hrunamannahreppi.” =*Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags 1984*: 183-190.

Morris, Christopher D. & Rackham, James D. eds (1992): =*Norse and later settlement and subsistence in the North Atlantic*, Glasgow.

Nordahl, Else (1988): =*Reykjavík from the Archaeological Point of View*, Uppsala.

Ólafsdóttir, Nanna (1974): “Baðstofan og böð að fornu.” =*Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags 1973*: 62-86.

Ólafsson, Guðmundur (1980): “Grelutóttir. Landnámsbær á Eyri við Arnarfjörð.” =*Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags 1979*: 25-73.

Ólafsson, Guðmundur (1991): “The excavations at Bessasataðir 1987. The Colonial Official’s Residence in Iceland.” =*Acta Archaeologica* 61: 108-115.

Ólafsson, Guðmundur (1992): “Jarðhús að Hjalmsstöðum í Laugardal. Rannsókn 1983-85.” =*Árnesingur* 2: 39-56.

Ólafsson, Guðmundur (1998): =*Eiríksstaðir í Haukadal. Fornleifarannsókn á skálarúst*, Reykjavík.

Ólafsson, Guðmundur (2001): =*Fornt jarðhús í Breiðuvík og fleiri minjar á Tjörnesi. Rannsóknir vegna vegagerðar*, Reykjavík.

Rafnsson, Sveinbjörn (1971): “Kirkja frá síðmiðöldum að Varmá.” =*Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags 1970*: 31-49.

- Rafnsson, Sveinbjörn (1977): “Sámsstaðir í Þjórsárdal.” =*Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags 1976*: 39-120.
- Roberts, Howell M; Mjöll Snæsdóttir, Natascha Mehler & Orri Vésteinsson (2003): “Skáli frá víkingaöld í Reykjavík.” =*Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags 2000-2001*, 219-34.
- Roussell, Aage (1943a): “Skallakot, Þjórsárdalur.” Stenberger ed. 1943: 55-71.
- Roussell, Aage (1943b): “Stöng, Þjórsárdalur.” Stenberger ed. 1943: 72-97.
- Roussell, Aage (1943c): „Komparativ avdelning.“ Stenberger ed. 1943: 191-223.
- Sigurðardóttir, Kristín H. (1987): “Fornleifarannsókn að Suðurgötu 7 í Reykjavík.” =*Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags 1986*: 143-64.
- Snæsdóttir, Mjöll (1989): “Stóraborg. En presentation.” =*Hikuin* 15:53-58.
- Snæsdóttir, Mjöll (1991): “Stóraborg - An Icelandic Farm Mound.” =*Acta Archaeologica* 61: 116-20.
- Snæsdóttir, Mjöll (1992): “Jarðhýsið í Stóruborg undir Eyjafjöllum.” =*Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags 1991*: 53-58.
- Stenberger, Mårten (1943a): “Áslákstunga fremri, Þjórsárdalur.” Stenberger ed. 1943: 113-120.
- Stenberger, Mårten (1943b): “Ísleifsstaðir, Borgarfjarðarsýsla.” Stenberger ed. 1943: 145-170.
- Stenberger, Mårten (1943c): “Snjáleifartóttir, Þjórsárdalur.” Stenberger ed. 1943: 98-112.
- Stenberger, Mårten ed. (1943): =*Forntida gærdar i Island. Nordiska arkeologiska undersökningen i Island 1939*, Kbh.
- Sveinbjarnardóttir, Guðrún (2001): =*Fornleifarannsókn í Reykholti í Borgarfirði. Framvinduskýrsla 2001*, Reykjavík.
- Sveinbjarnardóttir, Guðrún (2003): =*Reykholt í Borgarfirði. Framvinduskýrsla 2002*, Reykjavík.
- Vésteinsson, Orri (2001): =*Archaeological investigations at Sveigakot 1998-2000*, Rv.
- Vésteinsson, Orri ed. (2002): =*Archaeological Investigations at Sveigakot 2001, with reports on preliminary investigations at Hrísheimar, Selhagi and Ytri Tunga*, Rv.
- Vésteinsson, Orri ed. (2003): =*Archaeological investigations at Sveigakot 2002*, Reykjavík.
- Vigfússon, Sigurður (1881): “Rannsókn á blóthúsinu að Þyrli og fleira í Hvalfirði og um Kjalarnes.” =*Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags 1880-1881*, 65-78.
- Vigfússon, Sigurður (1885): “Rannsókn í Borgarfirði 1884.” =*Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags 1884-1885*: 61-138.
- Vilhjálmsson, Vilhjálmur Ö. (1989): “Stöng og Þjórsárdalur-bosættelsens ophær.” =*Hikuin* 15: 75-102.
- Voionmaa, Jouko (1943a): “Stórhólshlíð, Þjórsárdalur.” Stenberger ed. 1943: 137-144.
- Voionmaa, Jouko (1943b): “Lundur, Borgarfjörður.” Stenberger ed. 1943: 171-190.
- Þórðarson, Matthías (1932): “Bólstaður við Álfafjörð. Skýrsla um rannsókn 1931.” =*Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags 1932*: 1-28.
- Þórðarson, Matthías (1943): “Skeljastaðir, Þjórsárdalur.” Stenberger ed. 1943: 121-136, 307-310.

Þórðarson, Matthías (1964): “Eiríksstaðir í Haukadal. Rannsóknarskýrsla 13.-15. IX. 1938.” =*Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags 1963*: 59-64.

Figures:

Fig. 1. Þórarinsstaðir

Fig. 2. Map of Iceland with bars showing no of excavated sites by region

Fig. 3. Lundur or Þyrill

Fig. 4. Original HST site plan

Fig. 5. Section island from Skallakot

Fig. 6. Section from Gröf

Fig. 7. Section from Reykjavík

Fig. 8. Open area excavation in Skálholt 2003 – from the tower