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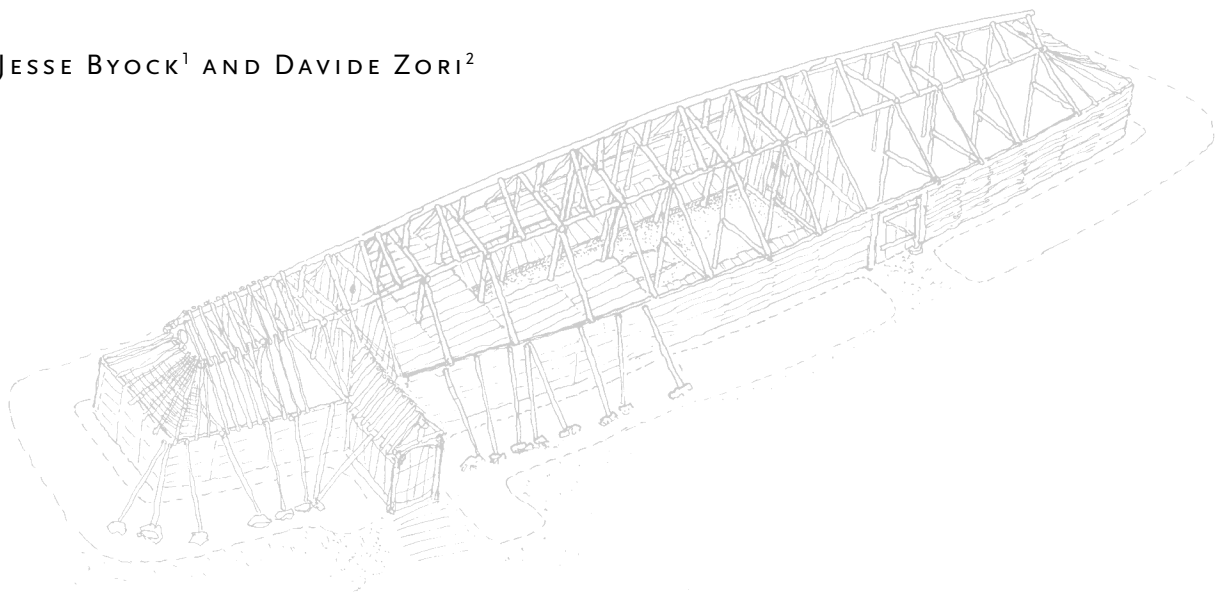
## *Celebrating 40 Years of Discovery*



## Report from the Field

# Viking Archaeology, Sagas, and Interdisciplinary Research in Iceland's Mosfell Valley

JESSE BYOCK<sup>1</sup> AND DAVIDE ZORI<sup>2</sup>



*This article is dedicated to the memory of Phillip Walker, our friend, University of California colleague, and co-director of the Mosfell Archaeological Project*

Working in the glaciated and once-wooded Mosfell Valley (Mosfellsdalur) in southwestern Iceland, the Mosfell Archaeological Project (MAP) is unearthing the prehistory and early settlement history of that region during the Viking Age (ninth to eleventh century C.E.).<sup>3</sup> This article offers an overview of MAP's recent archaeological research at the farm of Hrísbú in the valley. This site was the home of the Mosfell chieftains (the Mosfellsdælingar, "the People of Mosfell's Dale"), a powerful Viking Age family of leaders, warriors, farmers, and legal specialists. Within the context of MAP's findings, this article considers the relationship between modern archaeological methods and Iceland's medieval writings, especially the family sagas.

By applying different sources and research techniques—archaeological, scientific, and humanistic—MAP is constructing a picture of habitation and environmental change in the Mosfell Valley over the course of the Old Icelandic Free State, a Viking Age parliamentary state that continued until the mid-thirteenth century (Fig. 1; Byock 2001). MAP's

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<sup>3</sup> The Mosfell Archaeology Project (MAP) is directed by Jesse Byock, UCLA professor of Old Norse and Archaeology. MAP's field director is Davide Zori, UCLA Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Ph.D., 2010. A joint Icelandic and American project, MAP is interdisciplinary and international with archaeologists, scholars, and students from different countries and universities. For further information, see the forthcoming book, *Viking Archaeology in Iceland: The Mosfell Archaeological Project*, ed. Davide Zori and Jesse Byock (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2014).



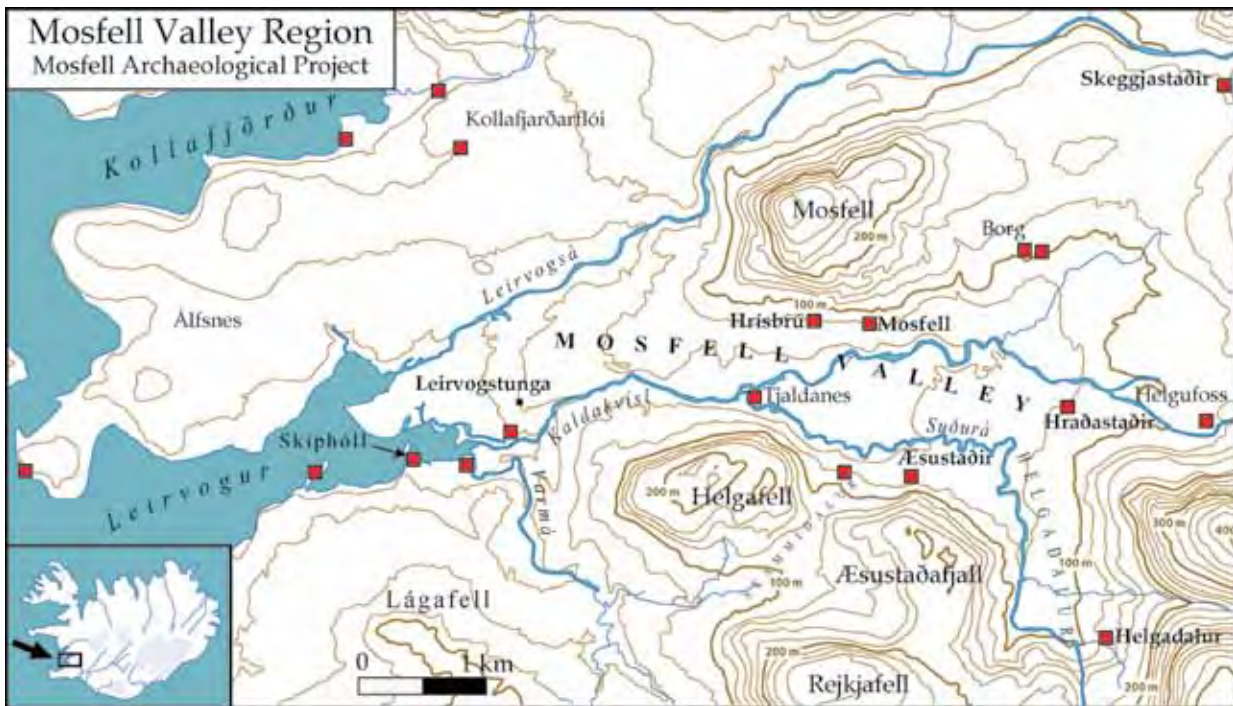


Figure 1. Map of the Mosfell Valley region. The red squares show the locations of MAP's excavation and survey sites. The entrance to the valley lies between Mosfell Mountain to the north and Helgafell Mountain to the south. The farmstead of Hrisbrú sits on the lower slopes of Mosfell Mountain from where it controlled the entrance to the valley and looked down on the Viking Age port at Skiphóll (Ship Knoll) in Leiruvogur Bay.

excavations at Hrisbrú have revealed a large long-house, a timber/stave church from the conversion-age transition from paganism (ca. 1000 C.E.), an early graveyard with mixed pagan and Christian attributes, and a pagan cremation burial site (Figs. 2, 3, and 4). Together these exceptionally well-preserved remains form the core features of a chieftain's high-status farmstead. At this time, we are researching and excavating fourteen sites throughout the valley (see Fig. 1). These excavations are providing a detailed picture of Viking Age life in Iceland and in the North Atlantic. The sites include monumental stone ship settings—stones arrayed to form the outline of a ship—at the inland end of the valley (Fig. 5), and a Viking Age port at the valley's coastal mouth at Leiruvogur Bay, where the rivers of the valley flow into the sea.<sup>4</sup> The extensive assemblage of sites in the Mosfell Valley forms a powerful political, religious, and governmental landscape.

The Mosfell Valley is the type of Icelandic community of the Viking Age that produced the Icelandic sagas, one of the world's great bodies of

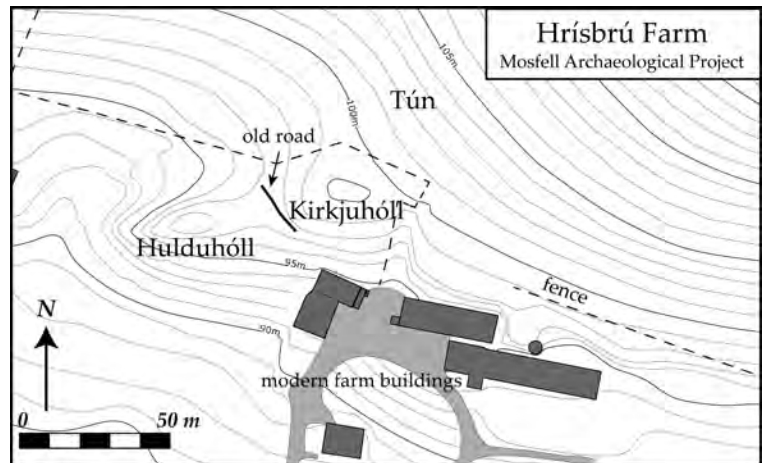


Figure 2. The modern farm of Hrisbrú showing the locations of the major excavation areas of Kirkjuhóll (Church Knoll), Hulduhóll (Elven Hill), and the tún (the ancient homefield) mentioned in this article. The old road leading past Hrisbrú lay between the Christian church on one side and the pagan burial mound on the other.

<sup>4</sup> Leiruvogur, "Tidal Flats Bay," is sometimes spelled "Leirvogur" and may also be translated as "Clay Bay." Both translations make sense as the bay is still today both clayey and muddy.

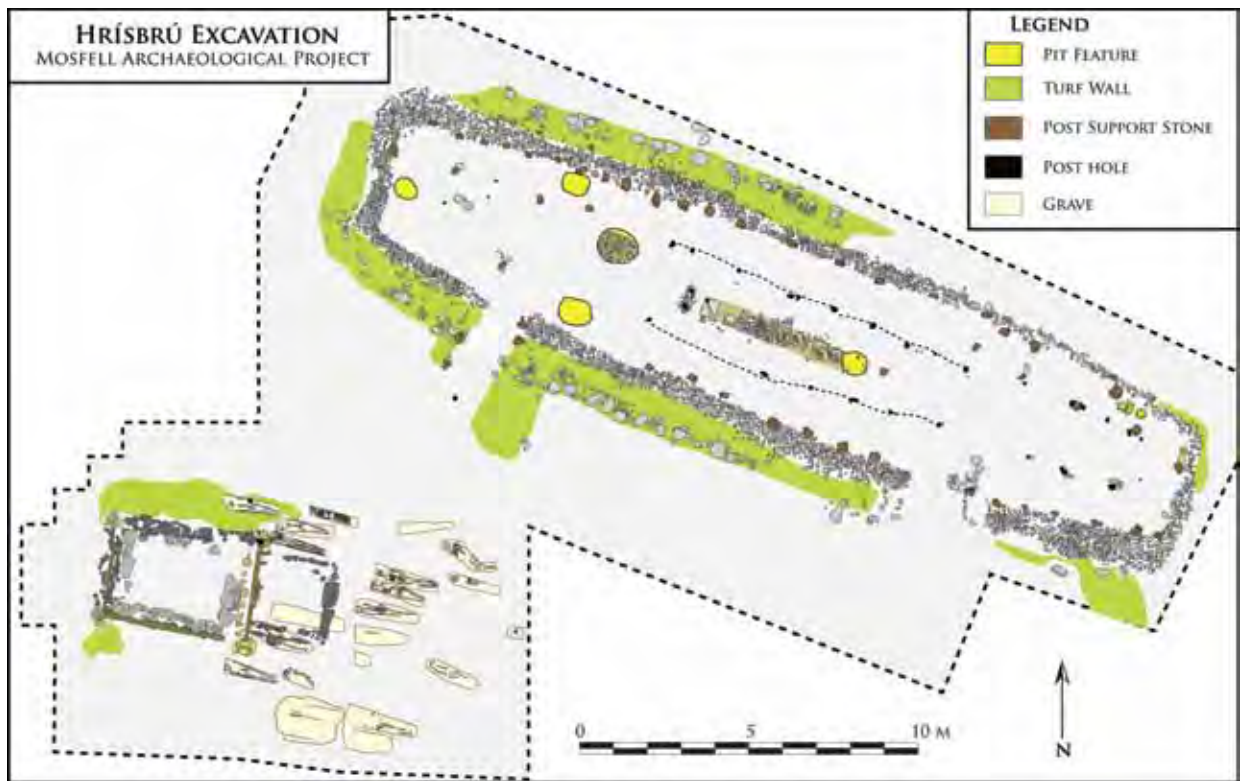


Figure 3. Site plan of the excavated Viking Age chieftain's farm at Hrísbú. The map shows the Viking Age longhouse and the conversion-era church (ca. C.E. 1000) with a surrounding burial yard.

literature. Most archaeologists working in Iceland today avoid the sagas, dismissing them as fictitious writings. We take a different view. We employ Iceland's medieval writings as one of many datasets in our excavations, and the archaeological remains that we are excavating in the Mosfell Valley appear to verify our method. Together, the written medieval sources and the archaeological discoveries offer new information about Iceland's earliest past and about the Viking Age in general.

MAP is also an example of archaeology in transition. When we started in 1995, the valley was rural. It lay beyond the outskirts of Reykjavík, Iceland's capital. But the situation has changed: the Mosfell Valley is rapidly becoming part of sprawling greater Reykjavík, and the Viking Age sites are now threatened by urban development. Since we started our excavations, a large area of the Viking port area at Leiruvogur Bay has been turned into paved housing subsections. Where earlier we herded horses and sheep off our sites, we now compete with bulldozers and larger machinery. With the swift advance of urbanization, our task is to find and document the archaeological remains of turf buildings, ancient

roads, burials, agricultural enclosures, and port facilities before they are destroyed by modern construction.

MAP is highly interdisciplinary in its archaeological approach, using the tools of archaeology, history, anthropology, forensics, environmental sciences, and saga studies in a coordinated methodology. We call our research framework Valley System Archaeology, a concept we developed and which we find well-suited to Viking and North Atlantic archaeology. Guided by this framework, we combine analyses of the Mosfell Valley's cultural, scientific, and environmental landscapes from the coastal regions at the western lowland mouth of the valley up into the highland heaths that rise at the valley's eastern end.

The Mosfell region is a suitable test case for the utility of the Valley System concept. The valley, the surrounding highlands, and the lowland coastal areas are an interlocking system of natural and man-made components. The area encapsulates the major ecologies of Iceland: coastal, riverine, and highlands with volcanic soil; it contains rich archaeological heritage, connected to a broad collection of oral narrative and medieval writings. The time-frame of MAP's research begins with Iceland's earliest



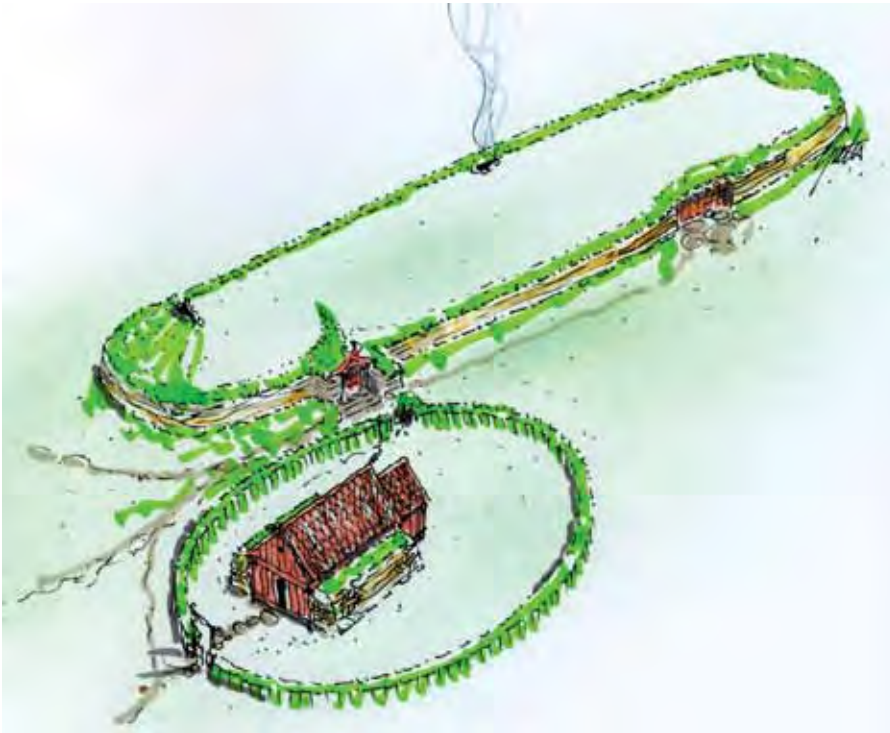
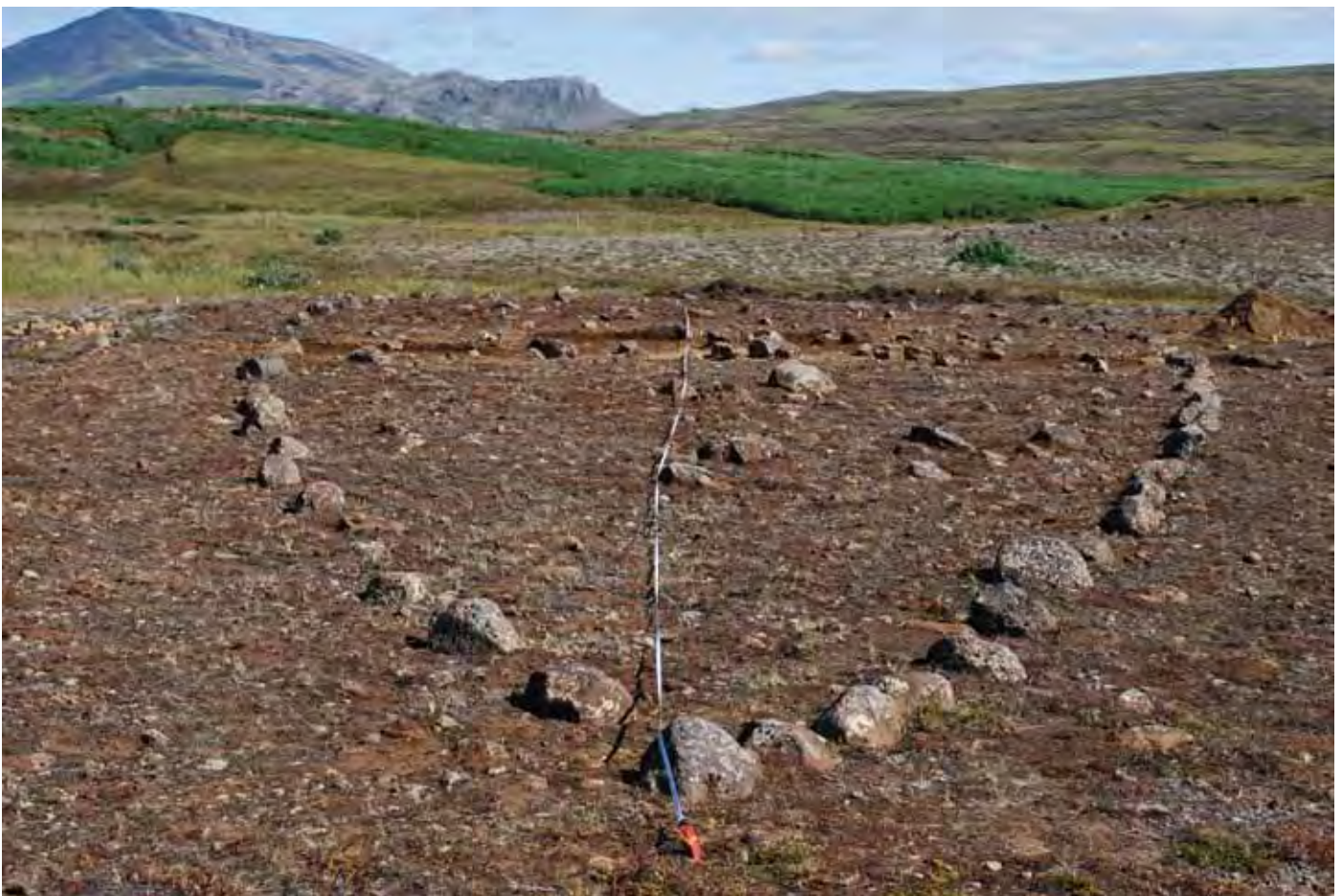


Figure 4. Architectural drawing of the buildings at Hrisbrú in the Mosfell Valley reconstructed from the MAP site plans. The church, which is of timber/stave construction, is approximately 8 meters from the turf-clad longhouse.

Figure 5. A ship setting found in the Mosfell Valley. Such man-made stone settings arrayed in the shapes of ships are widely distributed throughout mainland Scandinavia and are often connected with the rituals of death. This is the first such monument to be found in Iceland. The ship setting, 30 meters long and 10 meters wide, is made up of 69 laid stones.





**Figure 6.** Four “eye beads,” originally from the eastern shores of the Caspian Sea, were found hidden in a pit dug in the floor of the Hrísrú longhouse. More than 30 beads were found within the longhouse, the largest number of such finds recovered within an Icelandic longhouse of the Viking Age. Beads were valuable trade goods in the Viking Age, and these finds are consistent with the wealth and status of the inhabitants of the Hrísrú farmstead.

ninth-century settlement period, called the *landnám* or “landtaking,” when Norse and Celtic settlers first sailed from northern Europe to uninhabited Iceland. The time frame of our current excavations continues through the transformation from paganism to Christianity and into the thirteenth century C.E.

The specialists on the MAP team explore, among other subjects, local power structures in wider Iceland contexts (Byock in press; Byock and Zori in press); the changes over time in subsistence strategies (Erlendsson et al. in press; Zori et al. in press); health and disease (Holck in press; Eng in press); the place of origin of the Norse immigrants (Grimes et al. in press); the role of Leiruvogur Harbor in the international exchange of the Viking Age (Hilberg and Kalmring in press); the integration of texts and archaeology (Erlandson et al. in press; Byock in press; Byock et al. 2005); the organization of the local settlement pattern (Zori in press); cooperation between local municipalities and archaeologists (Thórðarson in press); the paleobotany of early Icelandic settlements (Martin in press) and the development of innovative subsurface survey methods to

locate turf structures (Bathurst et al. 2010). We are analyzing architectural techniques (Byock and Zori in press); trade and exchange as witnessed by the artifact record (Hansen et al. in press); the production, forms, and uses of iron (Zori 2007); usage of smaller activity areas, such as the sel or summer dairy stations; roads and paths (Connors in press); the intra-site artifact distribution patterns in a Viking longhouse (Milek et al. in press); and the role of feasting in an environmentally marginal North Atlantic society (Zori et al. 2013).

MAP’s archaeological findings, including our artifact collection, indicate that the region is culturally representative of early Iceland. The community that evolved in the Mosfell Valley was in many ways a self-contained social and economic unit. It was also connected to the rest of Iceland through a network of roads. Two major east–west roads lead through the valley, one on the north slopes of the valley and the other on the south side. These routes connect into major north-south routes. They also lead to nearby Thingvellir (the “thing or assembly plains”), the meeting place of the annual Viking Age parliament, the Althing, thirty kilometers (about eighteen miles) to the east of the Mosfell Valley. The artifacts, including imported glass beads from the Mediterranean and Central Asia, show that the Mosfell Valley was also in contact with the international trade and travel of the Viking Age (Fig. 6). Leiruvogur Port at the western mouth of the valley provided commercial and cultural contact with the larger Scandinavian and European worlds. The connections went possibly as far as Constantinople (connected historically to Scandinavia and Iceland through the Varangian Guard, the imperial bodyguard of the Byzantine Emperor, composed of Northmen), the Caspian Sea, and Greenland.

MAP’s archaeological work began in the mid-1990s with background research on historical sources, field surveys, and test excavations (published in Byock 1993, 1994a, 1995; Earle et al. 1995). Major excavations began in 2001, and subsequent field seasons have documented a rich Viking Age and *landnám* occupational history (Byock et al. 2005; Holck 2005; Byock 2009). The 2001–2004 excavations at Hrísrú in the valley revealed the presence of significant remains, including an early church, a surrounding cemetery, and an adjacent burial mound containing human cremation remains (Fig. 7). Our subsequent field seasons have expanded the



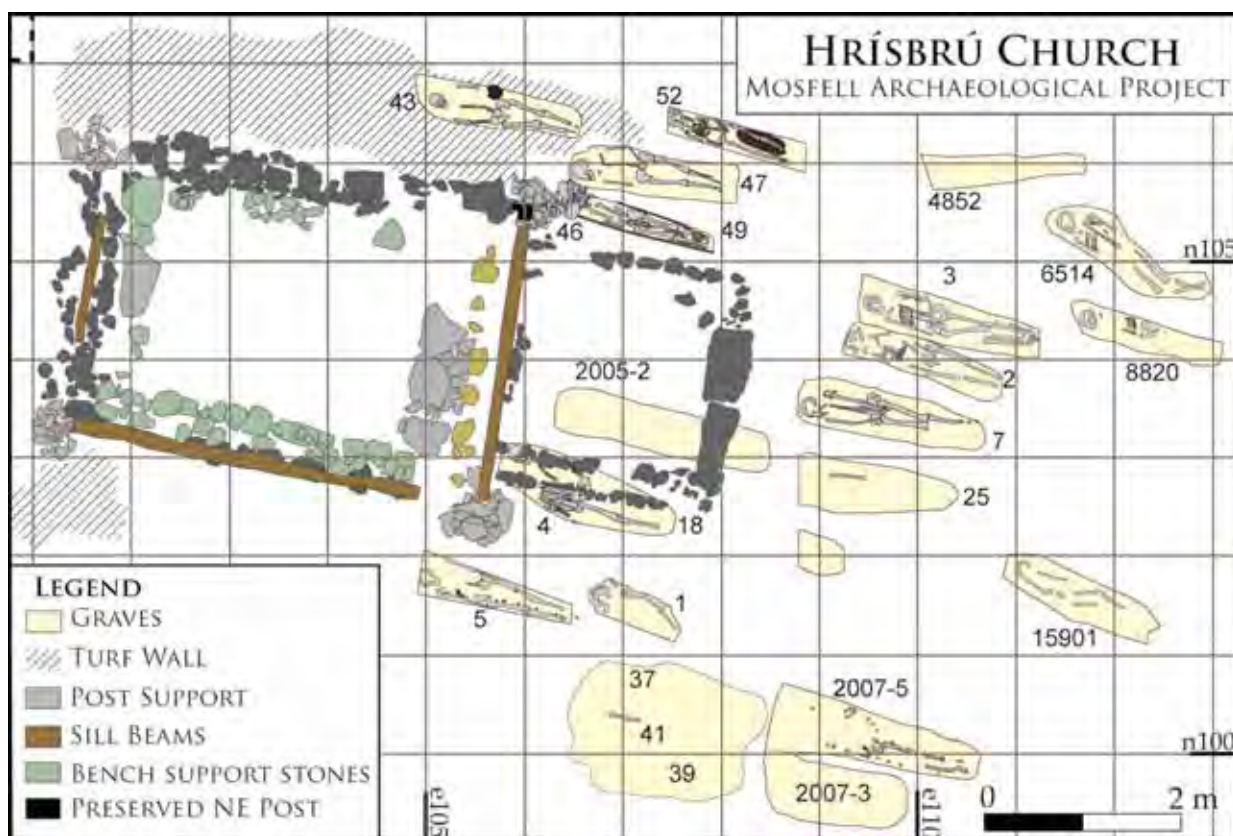


Figure 7. The conversion-age timber/stave church at Hrísbú. The plan shows the two parts of the building, the nave on the left and the chancel on the right. By the end of MAP's graveyard campaign, we had found the remains of 26 burials. A number of the burials appear to have been emptied. Burial Features 4 and 46 on the north and south side of the chancel are reburials containing disarticulated skeletons (see Fig. 14). These bones were moved to the churchyard from earlier graves, probably pagan.

scope of the work, and in recent years, we excavated at Hrísbú a large (28 m long) early tenth-century longhouse (Figs. 8, 9, and 16). In Old Norse/Icelandic, this type of longhouse is called an *eldskáli* or firehall, named for the long fire (*langeldr*) down the center of the hall. In the case of the Hrísbú longhouse, the long fire is 5.8 meters long, making it one of the largest such hearths excavated in Iceland.

Our current excavations on the Hrísbú farm focus on three areas: Kirkjuhóll (Church Knoll), a hillock just behind the modern farm's stable; the *tún* or hayfield just north of Kirkjuhóll; and Hulduhóll (Elfin Hill, Knoll of the Hidden People), the hillock located about 20 meters west of Kirkjuhóll (see Fig. 2). Numerous additional sites are under investigation in the valley. At Skeggjastaðir, in the eastern end of the valley, our recent campaign of subsurface archaeological testing has located the remains of a previously unknown Viking-period farmstead (Fig.

10). *The Icelandic Book of Settlements* or *Landnámabók* preserves the tradition that Skeggjastaðir was the first farm in the valley, established by and named for Thord Skeggi, the first Viking Age settler to claim land in the region. Our work at Skeggjastaðir is just beginning and promises to be another example of fruitful interdisciplinary research (see Zori in press). Two additional sites discussed in this article are ship-like stone settings in the low highlands on the eastern inland end of the valley and the port at Leiruvogur at the western end of the valley.

The stone ship settings in the eastern end of the valley are unusual in Iceland. To date, no other examples of such monuments have been found on the island. The ship settings appear to be remnants of the pre-Christian ritual landscape. Probably they are mortuary sites, but they could also be assembly sites, and the one possibility does not preclude the





**Figure 8.** The longhouse at Hrisbrú in the Mosfell Valley was constructed around the year 900. This picture was taken during MAP's excavation, when the long fire down the center of the sunken central hall was just coming into view. Also coming into view are the raised benches along the sides of the central hall on which people ate and slept. At this point in the excavation, the benches were still partially covered by toppled small stones from the building's side walls. These stones from the collapsed walls were removed during subsequent excavations, revealing the full extent of the meter-wide benches. The door through wall on the left was large enough for livestock. The smaller entrance on the other end of the same wall was the main human entrance. This door looked directly down on the Viking Age harbor at Leiruvogur.

other. Indeed the Mosfell Valley stone ships are comparable to ship settings found throughout the Viking world, which are connected with both burial and assembly sites. The largest Mosfell setting is approximately 30 meters long and 9 meters wide, typical proportions of a Viking Age ship (see Fig. 5). The long axis is oriented east–west, with the prow pointing west toward Leiruvogur Bay and the sea. MAP's excavations, especially of the stones at the prow and in the center, have determined that the ship-settings predate the erosion in the area. These

stone features are not recorded in any medieval or modern written sources, and they came as a surprise to individuals and families who had lived in the valley for generations. The placement of the ship settings at what we believe is the possible boundary of the old Mosfell farm is consistent with the location of burial mounds on land boundaries elsewhere in Iceland (Zori 2010; on pagan burials in Iceland, see Fríðriksson 2009).

From the start of our research, we have incorporated ethnographic components. In particular,



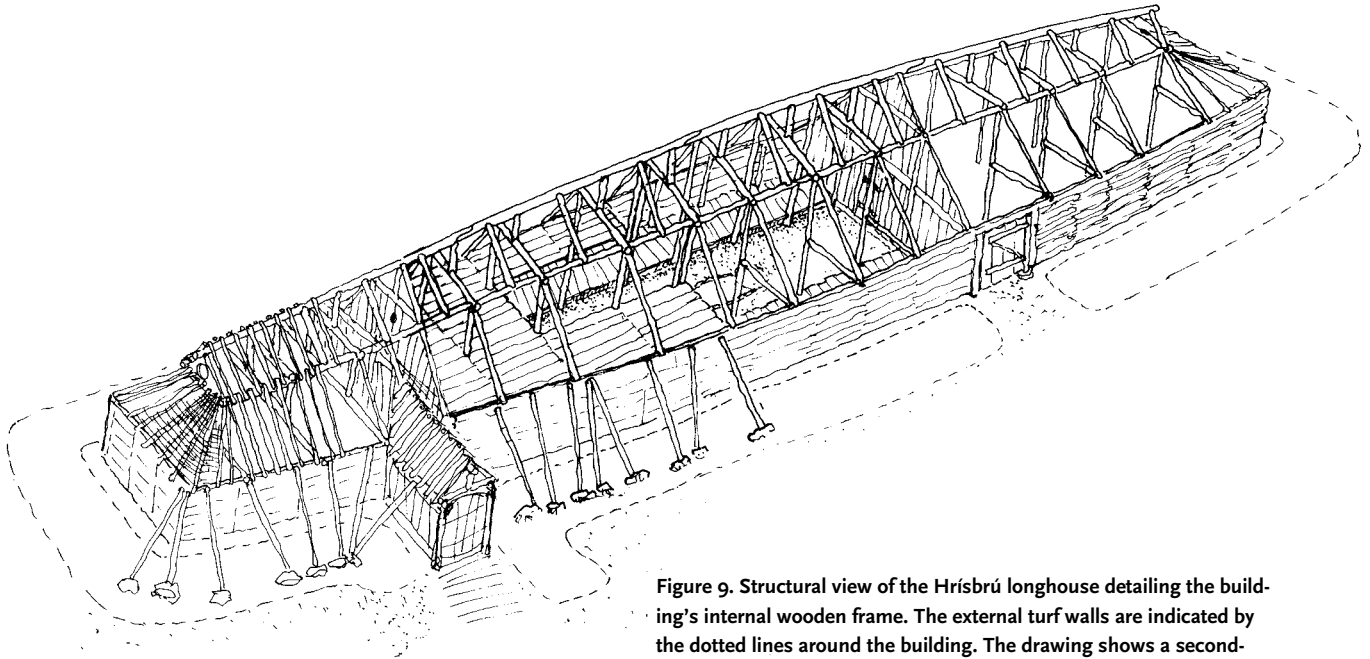


Figure 9. Structural view of the Hrisbrú longhouse detailing the building's internal wooden frame. The external turf walls are indicated by the dotted lines around the building. The drawing shows a second-story loft to the east of the main entrance and partially over the central hall. Note the two entrances on either end of the building.

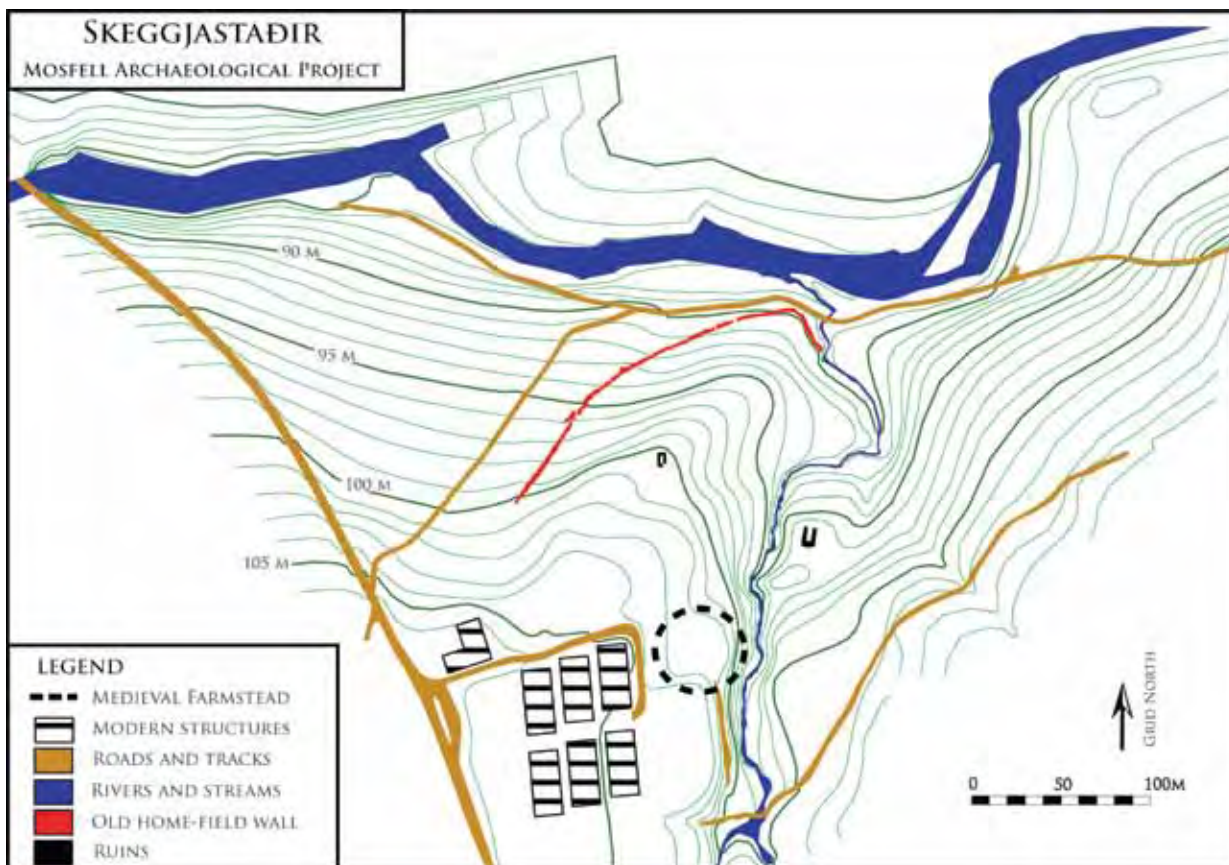


Figure 10. Map of Skeggjastaðir showing the location of the medieval farmstead discovered with subsurface coring. According to the tradition retained in the medieval Icelandic *Book of Settlements (Landnámabók)*, this farm was settled by and named after the valley's first settler, Thord Skeggi.

we pay careful attention to the oral histories of local families. The farmers at Hrísrú—Ólafur Ingimundarson, his son Andrés Ólafsson and their families—are extremely knowledgeable about their valley (see Fig. 17). Their family has lived on the land for many generations, and Ólafur and Andrés spent a great deal of time with us explaining the landscape. When we began excavating in the Mosfell Valley in 1995, the two adjacent knolls of Kirkjuhóll and Hulduhóll were used as pasture. They were covered with grass, and their surfaces were undisturbed except where the trampling of cows exposed small patches of earth. No agricultural machinery was ever used on Kirkjuhóll because of the reverence attached to the knoll in oral memory as the site of an ancient church. This situation is fortunate since most contemporary Icelandic farms are highly mechanized. Hulduhóll, the site of the cremation burial, had also been spared the effects of agricultural machinery. Stories attached an interdiction or taboo to Hulduhóll to leave it alone, because it was inhabited by “the hidden people” or elves, who were dangerous if disturbed. As it turned out, oral memory proved strong. Both knolls were connected with ancient mortuary rites. They contained human remains from the Viking Age, both Christian and pagan.

In addition to modern oral memory, the archaeology of the Mosfell Valley is aided by a wealth of surviving medieval Icelandic writings describing the valley’s sites and people. Listed in the notes, this extraordinarily large and varied collection of writings are rich sources about the Mosfell chieftains.<sup>5</sup> They make the Mosfell Valley an ideal test case for reconsidering the validity of the sagas as historical and archaeological sources. The writings tell that the geographical position of the chieftains’ lands and their area of power allowed them to monitor and benefit from the travel and trade that passed through their port and valley. *Egil’s Saga* (*Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*) and *The Book of the Icelanders* (*Íslendingabók*) recount that in the years before

5 These include *The Book of Settlements* (*Landnámabók*); *The Book of the Icelanders* (*Íslendingabók*); *Egil’s Saga* (*Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*); *The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue* (*Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*); *Hallfred’s Saga* (*Hallfreðar saga*); *The Saga of the People of Kjalarness* (*Kjalnesinga saga*); *The Saga of the People of Floi Bay* (*Flóamanna saga*); *The Tale of Thorstein Bull-Leg* (*Þórsteins þáttur uxafóts*); *Njál’s Saga* (*Njáls saga*); *The List of Priests* (*Presatal*); *The Saga of Thorgils and Hafliði* (*Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*); and *The Short Saga of Orm Storólfsson* (*Orms þáttur Stórólfs*) in *Flateyjarbók*.

and after the conversion to Christianity (ca. 1000), Grím Svertingsson, Law Speaker of Iceland from 1002 to 1004, lived at Hrísrú (Old Mosfell). *Egil’s Saga*, *Gunnlaug’s Saga* (*Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*), and *Hallfred’s Saga* (*Hallfreðar saga*) offer detailed information about the Mosfell chieftaincy (*goðorð*). According to these sagas, the Mosfell chieftains controlled the area known as Nesin (the Nesses), the headlands or promontories of the southern coastal region that stretched out from the valley’s mouth past modern Reykjavík and farther west. In a direct line of sight from the front door of the Hrísrú longhouse, one sees all of Reykjavík and beyond to Seltjarnarnes (Fig. 11). Conversely, standing in the old harbor in the center of old Reykjavík and looking east, one sees the farm of Hrísrú on the slopes of Mosfell Mountain.

In the medieval sources, the Mosfell chieftains are said to have called up armed men from the Nesses to support them in times of armed conflict. So too the Mosfell chiefs are said to have entered into marriage alliances with the chiefs at Borg (Fig. 12). This powerful family was descended from the Norwegian Skalla-Grím Kveldúlfsson, the first settler or *landnámsmaðr* in Borgarfjörður and father of the Viking Egil from *Egil’s Saga*. Given that Borg controlled the coast of a fjord area, a day’s ride to the north of Mosfell, alliance between these two chieftain families would have been quite logical and would have bolstered the power and authority of both families. The two were close enough to support each other, but far enough away not to compete for thingmen (followers) or natural resources.

As archaeologists piecing together the different possibilities of the geographical and political landscapes, we might have speculated on the likelihood of an alliance between these families. Iceland’s sagas made such speculation unnecessary. The following textual example (chapter 81 of *Egil’s Saga*, written around the year 1220) offers insight into the functioning of an ancient alliance between Borg and Mosfell. Egil, for example, was originally from Borg. In his later years, he gave his chieftaincy at Borg to his son Thorstein and moved to Mosfell.

An episode from *Egil’s Saga* makes clear that the connection between the chieftains at Mosfell and Borg remained strong. According to this text, after Egil departed for Mosfell, his son, Thorstein at Borg, found himself in a property dispute with his neighbor. This conflict was especially dangerous, because



the neighbor had secured the alliance of several chieftains, all of whom stood to profit if Thorstein were to lose the dispute. The matter resulted in a showdown of force at the local springtime assembly, the *várping*, where Thorstein found himself outnumbered. If matters went against him, he stood to lose his lands, his chieftaincy, and perhaps his life. The saga describes the dramatic resolution of this crisis at the Borgarfjörður assembly (called the “thing”) as follows:

That day men went to the thing slope and discussed their lawsuits, for in the evening the courts would convene to consider prosecutions. Thorstein was there with his following and had the greatest say in the conducting of the thing, because that had been the custom while Egil was still a leader and was in charge of the chieftaincy. Both sides were fully armed.

From the thing site, men saw a group of horsemen come riding up along the Gljúf River. Their shields shone in the sun and there in the lead, as they came toward the spring assembly, was a man in a blue cape. On his head was a gilded helmet and at his side was a shield worked with gold. He held in his hand a barbed spear, its socket inlaid with gold. A sword was bound to his waist. Egil Skalla-Grímsson had come with eighty men, all well-armed, as if ready for battle. It was a carefully chosen troop. Egil had with him the best farmers’ sons from the Nesses to the south, those whom he thought the toughest fighters.<sup>6</sup>

After his timely journey to Borg, Egil returned to Mosfell. Years later when he died (ca. 990) in the Mosfell Valley, Egil was first interred in a pagan burial mound. Later, after Iceland had converted to Christianity, he was reburied twice in Christian graveyards. His second burial (first reburial) was at Hrísbú (Old Mosfell) in the early eleventh century. His third burial (second reburial) was at Mosfell (New Mosfell) in the mid-twelfth century (see Byock 1995). But for the sagas, we would know nothing of Egil’s posthumous travels, which provide a wealth of information about the local solutions to religious changes from paganism to Christianity.



Figure 11. The Nesses (headlands) with the Mosfell Valley in the center. The people of the Nesses are referred to in the sagas as the *Nesjamenn* (The Men of the Nesses). The farm at Hrísbú overlooks the Nesses, which can also be seen from the main entrance of the longhouse.



Figure 12. Southwest Iceland, showing the two allied centers of chiefly power, Borg in Borgarfjörður and Hrísbú (Old Mosfell) in the Mosfell Valley.

<sup>6</sup> Translation by Byock. The line about the Nesses reads in Old Icelandic: “*hafði Egill haft með sér ina beztu bóndasonu af Nesjum.*”

The sagas also give us a good deal of information about the other sites in the region. For instance, the Leiruvogur Port, at the intersection of the Nesses and the Mosfell Valley, is mentioned in more Icelandic sagas than any other early harbor in this part of the island. According to *The Short Saga of Orm Stórolfsson*, (*Orms þáttur Stórolfssonar*), *Hallfred's Saga* and *The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue*, ships from Norway landed in Leiruvogur. In *The Saga of the People of Floi Bay* (*Flóamanna saga*), a man called Thorgils intends to leave Iceland and establish a new farm in Greenland. He goes to Leiruvogur Harbor to purchase an ocean-going ship although other harbors are closer to his home (Zori 2010, 183). MAP's archaeological coring, geophysical testing, and survey of Leiruvogur Port has shown why Thorgils went there to find a ship (Fig. 13).

Leiruvogur Bay, with its highly sheltered anchorage, offers more protection for anchored or landed ships than any other harbor in this part of Iceland. The bay reaches far inland, and its bays, estuary, and inner lagoon are protected behind an unusual combination of natural barriers. These include an extensive series of small islands and nesses (promontories) at the seaward entrance that serve as breakwaters. In this anchorage, ships could safely wait out winter storms and load cargo and passengers. As the saga suggests, Leiruvogur Harbor was a proper place to keep a ship anchored for resale. And the Mosfell chiefs profited from the money and goods that changed hands at the port.

How important was the port to the Mosfell chiefs? From the archaeological record alone, this would have been difficult to determine. But the sagas record the readiness of the Mosfell chiefs to defend their economic interests in the port. The passage below from *Hallfred's Saga* speaks of the warrior Hrafn, the son of the Mosfell chief Önund, as ready to fight to uphold the family's right to collect port landing fees. Hallfred, a Viking warrior who arrives by ship from Norway, refuses to pay to Önund's servant the landing dues of half a mark of silver, effectively challenging the chieftain's right to collect payments. Hrafn rides to the port and threatens Hallfred, who backs down and agrees to pay not only the usual port toll but a humiliating supplement as well.

In the summer Hallfred sailed out [from Norway] to Iceland, landing his ship in Leiruvogur, south below the Mosfell heath. At the time Önund was living at Mosfell. Hallfred was required to pay half a mark of silver to Önund's house servant, but refused harshly. The servant came home and told of his trouble. Hrafn [Önund's son] said it was to be expected that the servant would get the lower part of the bargain in an exchange between them. And in the morning, Hrafn himself rode to the ship, intending to cut the anchor cable [causing the ship to drift and get stuck on the mud flats of Leiruvogur (Clay Bay)] to make sure that Hallfred and his men did not leave. Then men intervened between them and took part in reconciling them. The result was that Hallfred paid half again more than the servant had demanded. With this they parted.

(Byock trans.)

Ok at sumri fór Hallfreðr út til Íslands ok kom skipi sínu í Leiruvág fyrir sunnan land. Þá bjó Önundr at Mosfelli. Hallfreðr átti at [gjalda] hálfu mörk silfrs húskarli Önundar ok svaraði heldr harðliga. Kom húskarlinn heim ok sagði sín vandræði. Hrafn kvað slíks ván, at hann myndi lægra hlut bera í þeira skiptum. Ok um morguninn eptir reið Hrafn til skips ok ætlaði at höggva strengina ok stöðva brottferð þeira Hallfreðar. Síðan áttu menn hlut í at sætta þá, ok var goldit hálfu meira en húskarl átti, ok skilðu at því (Sveinson 1939, 196).

Having medieval narrative sources, such as those connected with the Mosfell Valley, or any written sources at all, is exceptional in Viking archaeology. While extensive Viking Age sites are found throughout mainland Scandinavia, the British Isles, and northern Europe, there is a paucity of written sources in these regions, so archaeologists, historians, and anthropologists often know little about the inhabitants, their personal histories, or their specific socioeconomic and political relationships.

It is hard to imagine now, in light of the rich archaeological finds in the Mosfell Valley, that at



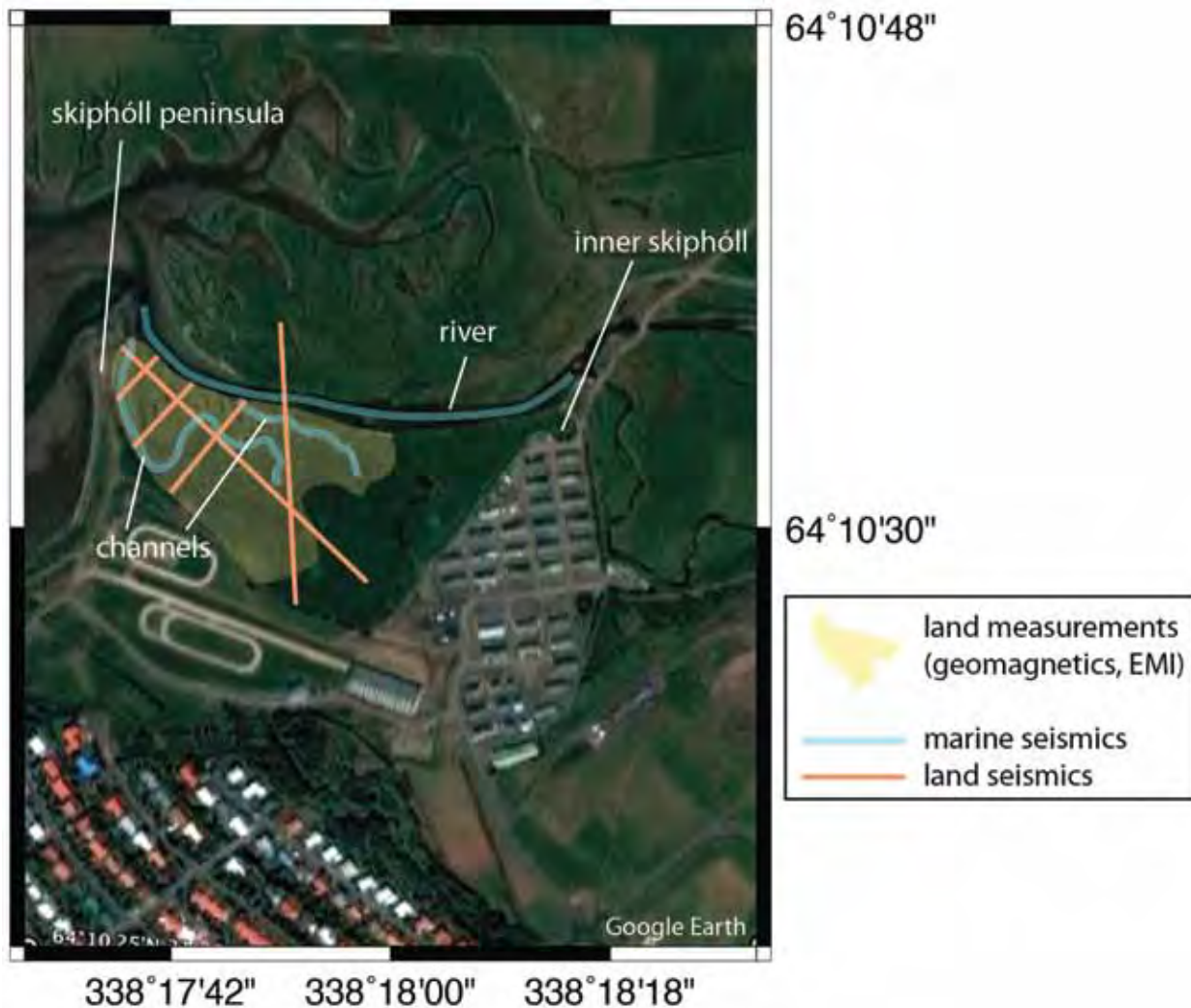


Figure 13. Map depicting the Leiruvogur harbor area. Geophysical and oceanographic surveys were conducted to explore the site. This work is being conducted with a team of geophysicists from the University of Kiel, led by Wolfgang Rabbel, Denis Wilken, and Tina Wunderlich, who have joined our project.

the start of our excavations many archaeologists, historians, and saga scholars thought it was futile to consult the family sagas as sources for locating sites.<sup>7</sup> We take a contrasting view that, because archaeology depends on site discovery, MAP employs—with caution—every tool and clue that could help us with this discovery. Most sites in Iceland have been found accidentally, when they were exposed by wind or water erosion. A large number of sites have been uncovered during road work and construction, both in

towns and on farms. Our goal was to find sites that have not been exposed by erosion or construction projects. To this end, we searched Iceland's medieval texts, including the sagas, for references that could lead to specific sites. The penultimate chapter in *Egil's Saga* is a case in point. It names Hrísrú as the site where a conversion-period church was built in the Mosfell Valley. The saga also supplies information about when, why, and by whom the church was built. The following passage from *Egil's Saga* led us to the site.

<sup>7</sup> Skepticism about the sagas is in part a political legacy. The mid-twentieth-century reinterpretation of the family sagas as thirteenth-century fictional creations was proposed by a group of Icelandic literary scholars known as the Icelandic School (*íslenski skólinn*). This group emerged at the climax of Iceland's struggle for independence from Denmark, which Iceland declared unilaterally 1944, and their theory became institutionalized in the Icelandic educational system. It was and still is the accepted theoretical position among many researchers, particularly archaeologists.

Grím of Mosfell [the chieftain at Mosfell and husband of Thordís, Egil's stepdaughter] was baptized when Christianity was adopted by law in Iceland; he had a church built there. People say that Thórdís had Egil's bones moved to the church, and this is the evidence. Later when a church was built at Mosfell and that church which Grímr had built at Hrísrú was taken down, then the graveyard there was dug. And under the place of the altar, human bones were found; they were much bigger than the bones of other men. People knew because of the accounts of old men that these were Egil's bones. At the time, Skapti the Priest Thórarinsson, a wise man, was there.

(Byock trans.)

Grímr at Mosfelli var skírðr, þá er kristni var í lög leidd á Íslandi; hann lét þar kirkju gera. En þat er sögn manna, at Þórdís hafi látit flytja Egil til kirkju, ok er það til jarðtegra, at síðan er kirkja var gör at Mosfelli, en ofan tekin at Hrísrú sú kirkja, er Grímr hafði gera látit, þá var þar graf- inn kirkjugarðr. En undir altarisstaðnum, þá fundusk man-nabein; þau váru miklu meiri en annarra manna bein. Þykkjask menn þat vita af sögn gamalla manna, at mundi verit hafa bein Egils. Þar var þá Skapti prestur Þórarinsson, vitr maðr (Nordal 1933, ch. 68).

This passage gives considerable information and answers many questions of interest to archaeologists. It tells us that a Viking Age church was to be found on Grím's farmstead at Hrísrú in the Mosfell Valley; that it was built when Christianity was accepted into law (ca. C.E. 1000) by Grím Svertings-son, the chieftain at Mosfell, because he converted to Christianity; that the church included a burial ground containing the remains of the warrior poet Egil Skalla-Grímsson; that his remains were moved there by Thórdís. The sources for this information are also given: "people say" (*sögn manna*) and "the accounts of old men" (*sögn gamalla manna*)—that is, oral memory.

Was there a hindrance to pagan Egil being reburied in a Christian context? It has been argued that a reburial such as this went against Christian

law (Tulinius 2004, Introduction). While this may be true, Christian law and practice are not always the same, and discrepancies were particularly common in the decades immediately following Iceland's conversion to Christianity. The Icelandic narratives of the conversion period detail the tolerance of continued pagan practices on private farms. It is difficult to believe that the first generation of converts to Christianity in Iceland would have adhered closely to the complicated details of Christian law even if they had known what they were. In any case, Egil was entitled to burial in hallowed ground: during his service as a mercenary for the English king Athelstan (895–933), we are told, he had received *prímssigning*. *Prímssigning* is a Norse term meaning "provisional baptism," adopted from the Latin *primum signum* or *prima signatio* (Byock 1993, 30; see also Molland 1968). *Prima signatio* consisted of making the sign of the cross over non-Christians in order to cleanse them of the evil spirit. After being "prime signed," pagans could attend mass and enter into full relationships with Christians.<sup>8</sup>

The saga also tells us what happened to the early church that Grím built at Hrísrú: it was "taken down" (*ofan tekin*) or dismantled and moved. We found it 500 meters further eastward up the valley toward New Mosfell.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore the passage tells us when this occurred: the church was "taken down" while the priest Skapti Thórarinsson was present. From other sources, *Prestatal*<sup>10</sup> and *The Saga of Thorgils and Hafliði*,<sup>11</sup> we know that Skapti was active in the years 1150–60. If we count the years between approximately 1155, when the church was taken down, and approximately 1220, when most saga scholars agree that *Egil's Saga* was written, this time

8 Jón Steffensen considered the issue of the transference of Egil's remains to sanctified ground in light of later twelfth- or thirteenth-century regulations as preserved in *Grágás*. He argues that, in the early years after the conversion, Egil was eligible for reburial in Grím's new church; see Steffensen 1975, 153. See also Byock 2001, chs. 15 and 18.

9 In 1995, we excavated a corner of what appeared to be the twelfth-century church at Mosfell. See Earle et al. 1995.

10 "Nafnaskrá íslenzkra presta," in *Diplomatarium Islandicum: Íslenzkt fornbréfasafn*, vol. 1, edited by Jón Sigurðsson (Copenhagen: S. L. Möller and Hið íslenska bókmentafélag, 1857), 186.

11 Skapti the Priest participated in feuds. In *The Saga of Thorgils and Hafliði*, he is credited with the famous statement: "Costly would be all of Hafliði, if this should be the price of each limb" (*Dýrr myndi Hafliði allr, ef svá skyldi hverr limr*). The statement refers to the large sum demanded by Hafliði for the loss of a finger (*Þorgils saga ok Hafliða*, ch. 31, in Jóhannes-son et al. 1946).



span was within the memory of one long lifetime. If we count years from the building of the church around 1000 to the dismantling of the church around 1155, this period would be within the memory of two or three long lives. Given the stability of the settlement pattern, the visibility of the church site in the Mosfell Valley both before and after the abandonment, the memory of the site retained in the local place names, and the importance of Egil as Iceland's great warrior-poet, it is hard to imagine that the story of the church would have been forgotten. It is worth noting, too, that Egil's burial was not a folkloric event claimed by numerous places. There are no other traditions of Egil being buried elsewhere, not even in his ancestral seat at Borg in Borgarfjörður.

The saga thus led us to the site, but the identification of the thousand-year-old graveyard was a separate archaeological question. We first turned to geophysical testing of Kirkjuhóll and the homefield directly to the north, but the resulting magnetometer and resistivity maps yielded negative results and did not suggest the presence of subterranean architectural features. Nevertheless because of its place name, we decided Kirkjuhóll (Church Knoll) was worth testing with excavations. Once the excavations began, we soon found domestic refuse from a Viking Age farm. Then we found a concentration of graves, all with the east–west orientation of Christian burial, indicating the presence of a churchyard. Next, the excavation revealed the foundations of a small building amid the graves (see Fig. 6; see Byock 2009 for issues surrounding discovery of the Hrísrú church and the first phases of the excavation). The skeletal remains excavated at Hrísrú offer considerable evidence about the health status and living conditions of the tenth- and eleventh-century inhabitants of the Hrísrú farmstead (Walker et al. 2004).

At this point, it was clear to us that archaeology and sagas complemented each other. The texts and archaeology support each other in illuminating the economic life of these Viking Age people centered on a settled pastoral life of livestock-raising, coastal fishing, and the gathering of wild foods in a challenging marginal environment (Byock 2001, 43–62, Zori et al. 2013). The texts helped us to discover the graveyard at Hrísrú that proved rich in bioarchaeological information concerning the Viking Age Icelandic life. From skeletal analysis, we have been able to document a rough and sometimes



**Figure 14.** The reburied skeleton in Burial Feature 4 was found lying up against the southern foundation wall of the church. This individual, who may have suffered from tuberculosis and a fatal brain infection, was moved from a pagan grave into the Christian graveyard after the conversion of Iceland to Christianity.

violent life (Walker et al. 2012). Several individuals in the Hrísrú cemetery show evidence of strenuous physical activity involving the hands and arms, and osteoarthritis was prevalent (Eng in press). The skeletons also show signs of infectious diseases. One young man has lesions on the pleural surfaces of his ribs and another young male's skull shows evidence of lesions associated with chronic ear infection that resulted in a brain abscess (Fig. 14). The lesions in both cases suggest that tuberculosis was present in the Hrísrú population (Holck in press). Our data show that stressful living conditions and heavy labor were common among early Icelanders even at a high-status site such as Hrísrú. Together the different sources are giving us a broad-based picture of life on the Hrísrú farm.

Traumatic injuries have also been found in the Hrísrú cemetery. One person is a homicide victim with two massive head injuries caused by axe or sword (Fig. 15; Walker et al. 2012). Such evidence of



Figure 15. The axed-man of Mosfell found in the Hrísbú graveyard. This man, in his mid-forties, was found close to the eastern wall of the church chancel (Feature 2 in Fig. 7). Reflecting the violence of feuding described in the sagas, he died of head wounds from an axe or sword. Radiocarbon dating places this man's death in the latter half of the tenth century or the early part of the eleventh.

lethal violence at Hrísbú is consistent with the general picture of Viking Age Iceland's feuding society sketched in the sagas (Byock 1982; 2001). The killing at Hrísbú has a parallel in an account from *The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue*. That saga describes the violent culmination of the Mosfell chief Önund's feud with the chief Illugi the Black from Gilsbakki and the attack on Önund's farmstead in the Mosfell Valley. According to the saga:

It is said, that in the autumn Illugi rode from his home at Gilsbakki with thirty men and arrived at Mosfell early in the morning. Önund and his sons escaped into the church, but Illugi caught two of Önund's kinsmen, one named Björn and the other Thórgrím. Illugi had Björn killed and Thórgrím's foot chopped off. Then he rode home and after this Önund sought no reprisal.<sup>12</sup>

What conclusions can we draw at this stage of the Mosfell excavations concerning sagas and

archaeology? While we do not by any means believe everything found in the written materials, the Icelandic sources concerning Mosfell are often informative, detailed, and worthy of consideration. They offer core information about settlers, chieftains, warriors, lawgivers, slaves, and travelers in the Mosfell Valley and the port at Leiruvogur, shedding light on the material culture, social conditions, and site location. They provide details about things such as the interiors of habitation sites, kinship relations, mortuary customs, and economic arrangements. Iceland's medieval writings comprise northern Europe's most comprehensive portrayal of a functioning medieval society, and MAP is using them to develop a novel methodology for archaeological, anthropological, and historical research (Byock 2001, 21–24 and 149–51; Byock 1994b). Taken together, MAP's findings confirm the value of this multidisciplinary approach to the sources for the study of early Iceland and the Viking Age. ✱

<sup>12</sup> *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu*, ch. 13, in *Borgfirðinga sögur: Íslenskt fornrit 3*, edited by S. Nordal and G. Jónsson (Reykjavík: Hið Íslenska Fornritafélag, 1938).





Figure 16. Excavating the Viking Age longhouse at Hrísrú. The stones being exposed here made up the inside of the longhouse walls. In this photograph the collapsed turf roof and side walls still cover the inside features and floors of the house.

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Figure 17. Part of the MAP team at the end of the 2007 season. Andrés Ólafsson, the farmer at Hrísrú, is on the far left.

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