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From Viking Chiefdoms to Medieval State in Iceland:

The Evolution of Social Power Structures in the Mosfell Valley

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by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

From Viking Chiefdoms to Medieval State in Iceland:

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This dissertation presents the results of an interdisciplinary regional study of medieval Icelandic society, beginning with the 9th century settlement of the island and concluding when independent sociopolitical development halted in AD 1262. The nature of the power of medieval Icelandic chieftains has attracted scholarly attention from both historians and anthropologists, who have been drawn to the unusually rich corpus of information in the Icelandic sagas. These chieftains maintained power for several centuries without institutionalized taxation or the development of territorial polities. My research contributes to the understanding of this chiefly power by analyzing separate sources of social power and charting temporal change in the power structures with an interdisciplinary micro-regional study of the Mosfell Valley in southwest Iceland.

Methodologically, I employ multiple lines of evidence, including medieval texts, place names, oral traditions, and archaeological data from regional surveys and excavations. Previous scholarly investigation has relied on textual sources to investigate Icelandic social structure and chiefly power. This is therefore the first regional study of long-term change at the local scale that integrates archaeological and textual sources, providing a detailed and nuanced understanding of the micro-processes in a specific medieval community.

Structured in part by a network of kinship alliances, the settlement of the Mosfell Valley progressed rapidly, with at least three farms established in the first generation. By the early 11th century, the Mosfell chieftains reached their apex of power through the articulation of economic, ideological, military, and political sources of power. The chieftains employed diverse strategies to advance their positions, including mobilization of the subsistence economy for investment in the chiefly political economy, control of a local port and access to prestige goods, and the use of materilialized pagan and Christian ideologies to centralize wealth and authority. Although the Mosfell chieftains shifted their strategies with the increasing stratification of Icelandic society, the region became marginalized as neighboring chieftains consolidated territorial power. Nevertheless, and in contrast to previous interpretations of 13th century conditions, the agency of local leaders caused power in the Mosfell region to remain tied to personal authority and less dominated by territoriality than in neighboring regions.

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Aims of this Dissertation

Norse settlers from Scandinavia arrived in Iceland in the 9th century AD and encountered an unoccupied and virgin landscape. This dissertation focuses on how these Viking Age migrants interacted with the local environment and with each other to develop a new society, and how that society evolved over the following four centuries. Medieval Iceland is an ideal laboratory for studying the phenomena of human adaptation to virgin landscapes and subsequent social evolution because of the availability of high-quality textual and archaeological data that provide complementary insights into the development of the emerging new society. For the first four centuries, chieftains or *goðar* leading coalitions of free farmers dominated the Icelandic political system. There has been a long-standing debate over the nature, stability, and evolution of the power of these medieval chieftains. My research aims to contribute to this debate with an interdisciplinary micro-regional study focusing on the changes in a single medieval community in southwest Iceland. Through this regional approach, I examine Icelandic chiefly power as it changed through the Settlement or Landnám Period (870-930) until the end of the Free State Period (930-1262) at which time Iceland was incorporated into the Norwegian Monarchy. I place particular focus throughout on the strategies that the Icelandic chieftains employed to maintain wealth and concentrate power.

My methodological approach employs various lines of evidence, including medieval texts, local place names, oral traditions, and archaeological data from regional surveys and excavations. This research is the first study of long-term change at the local

scale that incorporates both archaeological and textual sources. Previously, local histories of other areas in Iceland have been written with the textual sources alone. I will bring a fresh approach to the study of Icelandic chiefly power by conducting a detailed analysis of the developments in a single valley community in the Mosfell Valley in southwestern Iceland. This focused study of a manageable geographic area is designed to allow a more detailed and nuanced understanding of the micro-processes at work in a specific medieval community. This dissertation will place the developments observed in the valley into a regional and island-wide context to permit general conclusions about changing conditions for Iceland as a whole.

I have conducted my dissertation work as part of the Mosfell Archaeological Project (MAP), a multi-disciplinary and multi-national project that aims to reconstruct the pattern of human adaptation and environmental change in the Mosfell Valley in southwest Iceland (see Byock et al. 2005). The overall director of this project, Professor Jesse Byock of UCLA, initiated the project in 1995 in part because of the potential of this valley as an ideal region for interdisciplinary research. I joined the project in 2002 as Dr. Byock's PhD student and have served as field director since 2006. The geographical scope and the archaeological data for this dissertation derive from the work of MAP. Over the past 15 years, MAP has conducted field survey, geophysical survey, and subsurface survey throughout the valley, targeted excavations at multiple sites, and a large-scale excavation at the farmstead of the Viking Age Mosfell chieftains at Hrísbrú. I am particularly fortunate to have been involved in this project since many aspects of the Mosfell Valley make it ideal for a regional diachronic study of chiefly power.

The Mosfell Valley, an east-west oriented glacial valley, lies between modern Reykjavík and the Althing (Alþing) at Þingvellir, which was the political center of Viking and medieval Iceland. Today, a main road between Iceland's capital and the old political center runs through the Mosfell Valley, roughly following the medieval route that chieftains from southwestern Iceland, their supporters, and members of their families used to travel to the Althing. The Mosfell Valley, which has developed into a soil-rich basin, was shaped by a glacial melt-water lagoon during the last glacial maximum. At 276 m, the mountain Mosfell, which translates to "moss mountain," dominates the landscape on the northern side of the valley and gives name to the valley. In the center of the valley, two small rivers, Kaldakvísl and Suðurá, run from east to west and meet at mouth of the valley before draining into the Atlantic at the Leirvogur bay.

The Mosfell Valley, an intermediately sized valley in comparison to other Icelandic valleys, is approximately 12 km long from the ocean to the distal end of the valley and 2.5 km wide at the broadest point. This size is ideally suited for a micro-regional study allowing a comprehensive and detailed study while still offering a wide variety of sites and ecological zones. The Mosfell Valley contains several geographic zones from the coastal bays, to the valley lowlands, and stretching up to the low highlands that were used for summer grazing. These varied geographical zones provide archaeological sites that include the full range of Norse adaptations to Icelandic environment from port sites, to large farmsteads, and highland summer dairy stations.

The part of southwestern Iceland where the Mosfell Valley is located is in one of the two regions with the greatest population density in medieval Iceland. The other

population center of the time consisted of the northern fjords of Skagafjörður and Eyjafjörður. The geography of the southwest and northern fjords with broad valleys and plentiful grasslands were particularly suitable for Norse pastoralism. Settlement was less dense in the dramatic fjords of the northwest and east, and the volcanic sands and glacial runoff deltas on the south coast. The interior of Iceland is inhospitable volcanic desert, which resulted in the settlement being almost exclusively limited to the coastal regions and a few fertile interior valleys.

The settlement pattern throughout the Viking and medieval periods consisted of dispersed farmsteads practicing sedentary pastoralism supplemented with wild resource collection and limited barley cultivation. In the Mosfell Valley, this pattern led to farms located on the low slopes of the mountains and highlands. The most productive farms were on the south facing slopes, which due to Iceland's northern latitude benefited from more days of direct sunlight. The wet and boggy center of the valley was not settled until the 20th century when heavy machinery was used to drain the wetlands. In the pre-modern periods, the inhabitants used the wetlands to graze cattle and sheep during the summer months and to cut dense wetland turf ideal for house construction.

The Mosfell Valley has an unusually rich textual record and due to the work of the Mosfell Archaeological Project now has as much archaeological data concerning the medieval period as any other region in Iceland. In addition to the work of MAP, the National Museum of Iceland has conducted a survey of the Mosfell Valley using the local knowledge of ruins and limited field walking to record archaeological remains visible on the surface (Stefánsdóttir et al. 2006). The textual sources for the Mosfell Valley are

plentiful and saga sources from the Viking period are particularly rich. Although narrative sources concerning the inhabitants of the Mosfell region decline in the 12th and 13th century, other documentary evidence becomes available, such as church charters, registers of priests, early treaties, and broad regional contemporary narrative accounts. The decline in narrative sources is a clue in itself and as will be argued, represents the decline in the relative regional power of the chieftains of the Mosfell Valley. The combined richness of the textual and archaeological record of the Mosfell Valley and the strength of each independent data set has made possible the integrated approach pursued in this dissertation.

1.2 Historical Framework: Iceland from Colonization to the Loss of Independence

Iceland was uninhabited until the arrival of the Norse colonists around AD 870. An Irish monk named Dicuil, writing in the early 9th century, speaks of a few Irish monks living in a place that is probably Iceland, but although place names including the Latin element *pap-* supports their presence on the island, no archaeological evidence has been found (Jóhannesson 1974). If Irish monks lived on Iceland any time during the early Middle Ages, they departed immediately after the first Scandinavians arrived and had no impact on the natural environment or subsequent social developments.

From the beginning, the Viking expansion to Iceland was for permanent colonization. The push factors from Norway, the place of origin of most of the settlers, according to the written sources, were associated with Harald Finehair's (885-930) first

attempt at centralizing Norway under one king. He imposed land taxes on formerly free farmers and claimed to have ultimate ownership of the land that the farmers had previously owned as *oðal* or family-owned hereditary land. Harald does not seem to have reorganized the economy, which meant that the Norwegians were left with added expenses to the household without any added production capabilities (Durrenberger 1992). Norwegian households had choices, but for a good number of them, emigration to Iceland was an attractive option. In this manner, the colonization of Iceland was never a centrally planned venture and independent farmers and petty chiefs financed their own voyages (Byock 2001: 7-8). Attached household members and slaves also made the journey.

The first settlers in Iceland appear to have claimed rather large pieces of land such as the settler Helgi the Lean, who claimed all of Eyjafjörður, an area that in the 18th century held 450 farms. The archaeological remains of contemporary but separate turf-longhouses at initial settlements, such as Reykjavík and Bessastaðir suggest that families cooperated when they first arrived before dispersing after finding appropriate places to settle permanently (Vésteinsson 1998). The early Icelanders soon established land claim rules to moderate the size of the land-takings. The first settlers, who maintained control over large land areas, gave land to subsequent settlers and thereby maintained a level of prestige and regional authority based on social obligations.

The initial settlers had an influential cultural “founders effect” on the Icelandic environment as they attempted to bring their Norse cultural package from Norway and apply it in Iceland. As evidenced by the pollen record, Iceland was quickly deforested

primarily to create pastureland for the settlers' sheep and cattle (Hallsdóttir 1987). The Icelandic soils, geologically young and low in nutrients, were different from the Norwegian soils and erosion quickly set in with devastating effects. Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók* records that at the time of settlement, forests covered the island from the sea to the mountains. Pollen research has confirmed that about 25% of Iceland would have been covered by relatively small birch woods (Hallsdóttir 1987). The decrease in biomass on the island and the new conditions left the Scandinavian settlers to adapt their economic package to the Icelandic conditions, and the archaeological record reveals that the Icelanders shifted from cattle to sheep in reaction to the new environmental conditions (Amorosi et al. 1997).

The economy of Iceland centered on the household as the productive unit. Hay harvested in the summer, and needed to feed livestock in the winter, was the limiting factor of subsistence and wealth production. The Icelandic settlers were sedentary pastoralists supplementing their subsistence economy with hunting and gathering, especially of fish, eggs, and various beached sea mammals. Archaeological evidence for the cultivation of grain all over Iceland has been steadily mounting (see e.g. Byock and Zori 2010 and Trigg et al. 2009). Grain was probably never a major food source, but did become a prestige import used for brewing of beer for chiefly feasts.

Iceland was a decentralized, stratified society made up of chiefs, free farmers, attached farmers, and slaves. In 930, the Icelandic settlers first established the Althing, an island-wide governing body that met for two weeks around the summer solstice. Due to the emigrating Norwegian free-farmers' concerns with maintaining household autonomy,

the Icelanders established a system with a cultural focus on law without a king or any form of executive power (Tomasson 1980: 14-17; Byock 2001: 82-83). A Lawspeaker mediated the yearly Althing, recited 1/3 of the laws every year, but had no executive power. The Althing had a legislative branch called the *Lögretta* and a judicial branch that made decisions concerning disputes and conflicts. Enforcement of these decisions was, however, a private matter. This led to a feuding society mediated by the chieftains (*goði*, pl. *goðar*) who themselves profited by taking advantage of the judicial system.

In 960, court reforms to the Althing divided the island into four quarters and gave each quarter a separate court at the Althing. By these reforms, each quarter contained three *várþing* (spring assemblies) and each *várthing* was led by three *goðar*. Under these reforms, each quarter should have nine chieftains or more accurately nine chieftaincies (*goðorð*). Since the chieftains could share a single chieftaincy or own several, the number of chieftains often varied, while in theory the number of chieftaincies remained constant. Since the northern quarter contained four major fjords, it received a fourth *várþing* to facilitate travel to meetings. To maintain political balance, each of the other quarters was given three extra *goðar*. The total number of chieftaincies in Iceland therefore became 48 and they all sat on the *Lögretta* legislative body supported by two advisors each. When Iceland was Christianized, the two bishops received a seat on the *Lögretta* as well. This is the systemic picture depicted in the *Grágás* law codes and to a high degree, this system seems to have worked in practice as well. Jón Víðar Sigurðsson (1999) has suggested the political system depicted in *Grágás* is a crystallized view from the time when the laws were written down. Sigurðsson points out, for example, that the numbers of chieftains

mentioned in the early period of Icelandic history exceeds 36. This discrepancy could be explained, however, by the practice of co-ownership of chieftaincies.

By the 12th century, chieftaincies, which could be traded, bought, or sold, were centralizing into the hands of a few families that appeared to be solidifying as an emergent aristocracy. Among these families, the most powerful were the Sturlungar in the north and west, the Haukdælir and Oddaverjar in the south, and the Svínafellingar in the east (Karlsson 2000: 72-78; Sveinsson 1953: 10-12). These families competed with each other for territorial control and the support of local leaders in increasingly violent confrontations. With the intensification of conflict, a change in warfare occurred in the 13th century as the *Sturlunga Sagas* vividly portray. For the first time, these sagas recount instances of armed bands destroying farms in an effort to weaken the economic base of rival chieftains. In 1258, towards the end of the period of Icelandic independence, a member of the newly emerging aristocracy was named Earl of all of Iceland by the Norwegian king, in exchange for his promise to extract tribute from Icelanders for the King of Norway (Jóhannesson 1974). At this point, the Icelandic political system was undergoing the early processes of state formation, but any indigenous social evolution came to an end only four years later in 1262, as Icelanders at the Althing officially decided to bend to the will of the expansive Norwegian King and accept incorporation into the Kingdom of Norway. Because subsequent social evolution was dominated by Norway, I have chosen 1262 as the closing date for this study in this dissertation.

Further details of the kinship structure, economy, politics, and ideologies of Medieval Iceland are addressed in the section 1.3 where it is tied to the theoretical approach of the dissertation to the sources of social power.

1.3 Theoretical Framework: Approaches to Social Sources of Power and Applications to Medieval Iceland

In this dissertation, power will be defined most generally as "an unequal relationship among people" (Earle 1997: 3; Giddens 1979: 91). Many scholars who discuss social power imply the necessity for wielders of power to use threats or sanctions in order to coerce the compliance of the unwilling common people (Fried 1967; Earle 1997; Mann 1986; Arnold 1996). I find it useful to maintain a wider definition more in agreement with the definition of power formulated by Stanish and Haley (2005: 58) as "the ability of a person or group to coerce or persuade other groups or people to behave in ways that they otherwise would not in the absence of that persuasion or coercion." In this conception, power manifests in a continuum from coercive to persuasive power. I also find it useful to conceive of power as deriving from multiple and interconnected "sources of power" (Mann 1986), "pathways to power" (Hayden 1995) or "media of power" (Earle (1997: 4-5), which theoreticians have divided into different categories for analysis. This dissertation will follow Michael Mann's (1986) conception of economic, political, military and ideological sources of social power, but also consider kinship-based sources of power that remained critical in early Icelandic society. Potential leaders gain power over others through attaining access to these sources of power and limiting

the access of others to these sources. The sum total of the access and restrictions from power sources structures the network of power in a society.

I approach social power within the theoretical framework of social evolution. This framework allows for a dynamic processual view of social change over time. Human societies have organized themselves differently and it is a cross-cultural fact that social organizations change. A socio-cultural evolutionary perspective attempts to explain the process of change as the result of solutions to societal problems (Johnson and Earle 2000), while recognizing that people are pro-social individual agents, who make choices of participating in organized social systems based on their understanding of the costs and benefits of that participation (Stanish 2004: 7-9). In traditional Darwinian biological evolution, natural selection occurs at the level of the individual and biological evolution still occurs in *Homo sapiens*; however, our capacity for social organization and our pro-social tendencies, as well as the competitive nature of human societies means that social evolution takes place at the community level. Proponents of social evolution have long favored multilinear evolution (proposed by Julian Steward in 1955) and rejected notions of 'progress' and unilinear development.

In order to describe the variation displayed by human societies, it is useful to employ a typology that orders societies by the complexity of organizational characteristics. The most widely used typologies are those proposed in the 1960s by ethnographers Elman Service (band, tribe, chiefdom, state) and Morton Fried (egalitarian, rank, stratified). Human societies do not naturally fall into these categories, and typologies create somewhat arbitrary breaks in the social variation that constitutes a

continuum of human societies from the most organizationally simple to the most organizationally complex (Feinman and Neitzel 1984). Typologies, however, are necessary analytical tools that allow scholars to conceptualize variation and to conduct comparative analyses of different societies. Typologies, therefore, should be employed as far as they are useful and discarded when they are not useful.

Medieval Iceland was a chiefdom-level society, meaning that the individual households were not completely autonomous and that the society as a whole featured inherited (ascribed) social status and leadership positions that have the potential to control the productive capabilities of non-kin labor (Arnold 1996). Throughout the 400-year period from 870 to 1262 addressed by this dissertation, Icelandic society remained a chiefly society although significant changes in complexity and chiefly power did take place. Initially, the Icelandic chieftains functioned much as “big-men” competing for prestige and support from local farmers by conspicuous consumption, gift-giving, and legal contests (Byock 2001: 65). In 930, the chieftains in Iceland formed an elite coalition by establishing an island-wide judicial assembly called the Althing. In Stanish and Haley’s (2005: 60-61) model of social evolution, the coalition of farmers under different chiefs and independent chiefs is the equivalent of a simple chiefdom. Following Stanish and Haley’s logic, the formation of a coalition of chiefs over the level of the free farmers at the Althing increases the organizational complexity of the society and transforms Iceland into a two-coalition complex chiefdom. The chiefly coalition at the Althing was maintained through the Free State Period while the control over strategic resources was increasingly concentrated in the hands of an emergent aristocracy.

1.3.1 Kinship-based Power

Kinship relationships were a significant source of social power in medieval Iceland, as they provided natural allies, determined a person's innate prestige, and gave access to other sources of power through such means as inheritance of land, movable wealth, and the political position of *goði*. Fictive kinship bonds established through marriage were also a major source of political and military alliances. Kinship in the early medieval period and in chiefdom-level societies in general plays a significant role in determining the social status of individuals (Johnson and Earle 2000; Hastrup 1985).Despite this fact, Timothy Earle (1997: 6) stresses that "kinship itself is a weak source of power" and describes kinship as the "great equalizer" because asking for aid from kin is a strategy available to all people. Although this is true, different people clearly have access to different kin groups that vary significantly in the aid that they are able to provide. In other words, some kin groups are stronger or more powerful than others. If the discrepancy in power between kin groups is recognized by members of society then the mere association with a powerful kin-group can provide social status, prestige, and discourage aggressors. Kinship in medieval Iceland, natural and established through marriage, will therefore be given treatment in this dissertation as a source of power.

The role of kinship and importance of kinship networks in immigrant societies is an important issue for understanding the formation of early Icelandic society. The process of emigration naturally removes members of kinship groups from the territory and

location of their kin in their homelands. Kinship is therefore thought to figure less prominently in the new societies that form as a result of the immigration (Tomasson 1980). As Byock (2001: 72, 82) observes, medieval Iceland was not a strictly kin-based society, and territorially based tribes or clans, such as those known from medieval Ireland, did not emerge in Iceland. It is less clear whether kinship in Iceland was less important in structuring society than it was in Norway. In either case, it is a cross-cultural fact that immigrants rely on family ties when arriving to a new land and tend to cluster geographically. This dissertation will argue that kinship bonds were formative in the creation of the new social landscape in Iceland

The importance of kinship is easily demonstrated for medieval Iceland by the vast amounts of genealogical information provided in the written sources and a clear focus on the ancestors of saga characters. The following opening lines of the famous *Grettir's Saga* illustrate the Icelandic focus on kinship in a style typical of the sagas.

> *Önundr hét maðr; hann var Ófeigs sonr burlufótar, Ívars sonar beytils. Önundr var bróðir Guðbjargar, móður Guðbrands kúlu, föður Ástu, móður Óláfs konungs ins helga. Ónundr var upplenzkr at móðurætt, en föðurkyn hans var mest um Rogaland ok um Hörðaland.*[1]
>
> *Grettis Saga* Ch. 1 (*ÍF* 8: 3)

This passage provides genealogical relations of Grettir's ancestor, Önundr, and stresses the link to his most powerful relative, in this case, the royal saint Ólafr. The passage also reveals the geographical origin of Önundr's ancestors. Geography and

[1] "*There was a man named Önundr. He was the son of Ófeigr Burlufót (club foot), who was the son of Ívar Beytill. Önundr was the brother of Guðbjörg, who was the mother of Guðbrandr Kula (ball), who was the father of Ásta, the mother of King Óláfr the Saint. Önundr's mother's kin was from Uppland, while his father family was mostly from Rogaland and Hörðaland*." (All translations in this dissertation are by the author unless otherwise stated).

identity were closely tied in the Norse conception of identity, in which people were often defined by their dwelling place or place of origin (Hastrup 1985: 59). As a result, geography and genealogy are always central to a character's introduction into the sagas. Genealogical links and geographic background such as this appear in the beginning of most sagas, providing the reader with the crucial kinship and regional origin information to understand the characters that will be prominent in the sagas. Similar information also introduces important new characters when they appear in the sagas. Several of the people from the Mosfell area have introductions such as this that include both genealogical information and geographical background, and these passages will be examined in this dissertation for the kinship, origins, and alliance information that they provide.

Kinship also determined a person's marriage possibilities, and marriage was one of the key methods to make an alliance or expand one's kinship network (Byock 2001: 188). Samson (1992: 184, 169) stresses that "marrying into the right family brought instant prestige and success," and points out that inheritance and marriage together were the two main processes by which property was obtained in medieval Iceland. This dissertation will argue that that maintenance of chiefly alliance reinforced by marriage was crucial for the success and failure of the chieftains of the Mosfell Valley.

1.3.2 Economic Power

Access to economic power can be restricted through the control of production or the control of exchange. Classical Marxist analysis focuses on production as the dominant force in power relations, while more recently followers of the substantivist economic school have shifted the focus to exchange (see Earle1997:6-7). In Marxist

terms, the means of production in Iceland is almost exclusively limited to grazing land and grazing animals, although the iron tools and storage facilities for harvesting and storing hay were also significant, albeit less limiting. The products of animal husbandry supported the subsistence economy and fueled the production of wealth that could be accumulated by chieftains and *bændr* (free farmers), and used for domestic and international exchange.

In medieval Iceland, the household was the unit of production and a household's land was usually owned by the male head of the household and passed down to his sons. Often the land and other possessions were divided between the sons, as primogeniture had not yet become common in Iceland. Landownership was held exclusively by male farmers and by chieftains, until the 12th century when the institutionalized church and the tithe of 1096 allowed the church to begin to acquire increasing amounts of land.

The Icelandic economy produced mainly livestock and livestock products. The livestock depended on grass. The winter was the most difficult time to provide fodder, making the amount of grass that could be collected and stored through the winter the determining factor for household's pastoral production. Durrenberger (1992: 6) identifies the two limiting factors of production as being grass and labor, at least in the early period when land was more accessible. In his analysis of Icelandic medieval production, Samson (1992: 169) focuses on labor, stressing in good Marxist fashion, that since the wealth of Icelandic society is inherent in the land, it is the labor that produces the wealth. Therefore, Samson holds that understanding how the chieftains control labor is the key to understanding their power. The *bændr* (plural of *bóndi*) and chieftains of early medieval

Iceland joined in laboring on their farms, but the majority of the labor force consisted of attached or seasonal laborers, land tenants, kin living on the farm, and slaves.[2]

The medieval Icelandic exchange economy depended on overseas trade connections with Europe, particularly to supply valuable prestige goods for use by chieftains in the political economy. The trans-Atlantic exchange with Europe may also have provided some grain for use in the subsistence economy (see Gelsinger 1981), but more likely for use in brewing beer consumed in the feasting.[3] Gelsinger's (1981: 14) research on Icelandic exchange from a textual perspective reveals, "the oldest collection of Icelandic law, *Grágás*, first compiled in 1117-1118 from oral laws, stipulated that grain, linen, timber, wax, and tar were the products most essential for Icelanders to import." Gelsinger (1981) believes the Icelandic dependence on this grain import from Norway played the decisive role in the loss of Icelandic independence to the Norwegian Monarchy. It is not completely clear, however, that Icelanders needed grain for subsistence and other scholars believe that grain should be seen as a prestige good that was used for beer production for consumption at chiefly feasts (see Durrenberger 1992). In this vein, Durrenberger (1992: 36) concludes, "[w]ealth was accumulated and lost in social stratagems rather than by means of commerce." Here Durrenberger overreaches, but by stressing that "[t]he major transactions were social ones," he rightly draws

[2] According to most scholars (Byock 2001: 66; Jóhannesson 1976; Karlsson 2000) slaves were common in the first hundred years or so after the initial settlement, but disappeared around the time of the official conversion to Christianity in AD 1000. The reason for the abandonment of slavery, however, had more to do with the dispersed economic organization of production necessary in the Icelandic environment than with any influence of Christian doctrine. Some scholars suggest that, after the labor market became flooded with seasonal laborers who did not have to be supported the entire year, it was simply not economically worthwhile for land-owners to maintain slaves (see for example Durrenburger 1992).

[3] Gelsinger (1981: 14) states "Since they were never able to grow adequate amounts of grain for themselves, large amounts had to be imported."

attention to the social function of objects in a society where gift giving and the resultant social obligations of gift receivers played an essential role in forming of alliances and loyalties (Durrenberger 1992: 34). Prestige goods, therefore, had social value and were indicators of a person's potential social power that could be 'spent' by displaying these objects or giving them away to create social obligation.

Once Christianity was adopted in Iceland, the new religion arrived with a package of prestige goods necessary for Christian service that included wax, incense, wheat flour and wine for the sacrament. These imports were expensive and their cost, as well as the primary access that the chiefs had to the markets, would have helped the wealthier chieftains maintain a dominant role in the new religion. Pagan religious practice was seemingly devoid of such materialized ideological requirements. Conversion to Christianity narrowed the access to the material products necessary for harnessing ideological power since the requisite items for Christian religious practice were so difficult and expensive to procure.

Certain utilitarian products also became valuable import products over which wealthier individuals could achieve privileged access. After severe deforestation during the first hundred years (Amorosi et al. 1990; Byock 2001; McGovern et al 1988; Smith 1995; Hallsdóttir 1987),[4] simple raw materials such as wood and iron became rare in Iceland and were necessary to import. Driftwood was always a valuable resource, but apparently did not satiate the Icelanders appetite for wood as the texts document the

[4] Deforestation of Iceland appears to have been multi-factorial, caused by overgrazing and cutting down trees for iron production and house construction, but possibly most importantly deforestation by burning to create grazing land for livestock. Deforestation led to severe erosion of the light Icelandic volcanic soils and prevented forests from redeveloping (see Amorosi et al. 1990; Byock 2001; McGovern et al. 1988; Smith 1995; Hallsdóttir 1987)

import of wood from Norway and the organization of expeditions to North America to collect wood.

Controlling, dominating, or monopolizing production of export goods might have been a method for generating wealth and assuring access to imported prestige goods. Although access to some exports might be restricted through landownership, these products were too widely available to be monopolized by the elite. Gelsinger's (1981: 12) textual research led to the conclusion that "[t]he most important exports were the sheep products of undyed tweedlike vathmál and cloaks called röggvarfeldir and vararfeldir, made by braiding shaggy tufts of wool to imitate as much as possible the pelts of squirrels or other wild animals." In fact, vaðmál (homespun sheep wool) was used as the standard unit of value in medieval Iceland (Þorláksson 1991; Byock 2001: 44-45). Sheep were ubiquitous and although chieftains and wealthy farmers owned more sheep, the production of wool for export could not be monopolized. Cattle products such as hides, butter, and cheese (Gelsinger 1981: 13) could also potentially be exported, but since cows were rarer in Iceland than on mainland Europe, this is not likely to have been very profitable or common. The unique and valuable exports from Iceland were wild animal products or the wild animals themselves, such as arctic fox, walrus ivory, seal skins, white falcons, and even polar bears. The location and movements of these animals, except probably walrus and seals, were highly unpredictable. Direct control of the acquisition of these wild animals was therefore impossible and access to these trade products was broad-based. Certain islands or coastal areas were sites of walrus colonies or bird breeding grounds, and ownership or limited use-rights over these places, however,

did provide unequal access to valuable goods. The export economy, consisting of bulk goods of low worth and wild game that was difficult to control, offered little potential for power centralization in medieval Iceland.

1.3.3 Political Power

According to Michael Mann (1986: 26) political power derives from the use of "centralized, institutionalized, territorialized regulation of many aspects of social relations." Mann restricts political power to "regulation and coercion centrally administered and territorially bounded- that is to state power." In this dissertation, however, I take a broader view of political power as potentially deriving from any institutionalized political position within a society, even if that society does not exhibit all characteristics and the organizational social complexity of the classic state-level society.

Medieval Iceland was not a state-level society as defined in current anthropological literature and lacked key markers of the state, such as the monopoly of coercive force and a governing body with executive powers. Mann (1986: 27) holds that "political power is necessarily centralized and territorial." The former is true of medieval Iceland, and the latter exists in the boundaries of the island and the authority of the Althing. Territorialization of chiefly power, however, did not exist (see Byock 1988: 114-118).

This dissertation views political power as deriving from any institutionalized position that is widely accepted by a society and that produces an unequal relationship among people in which the holders of the political position have the authority to make

decisions for a group of people. These political offices provide increased prestige for the holder of the position that can translate into authority over others. Often these political positions also have the inherent potential for increasing personal wealth and thereby the economic power of the officeholder. Medieval Iceland had political institutions organized at the island-wide level as well as institutionalized political offices.

The two medieval Icelandic political offices discussed in this section are the Lawspeaker and the *goði* positions. The Lawspeaker exercised power on the island-wide level during the Althing once every year. Outside of the Althing, however, the Lawspeaker held no power to make decisions or exercise authority and therefore possessed no power on the local level. Jóhannesson (1974: 48) states, "lawspeakers came from the most prominent and highly cultured families in the country, but the historical sources do not indicate whether or not the lawspeaker was permitted to hold the office of *goði*. If he owned a chieftaincy, he may have been required to appoint someone else to represent it at the Althing." Gisli Sigurðsson (2004: 64) stresses that holding the position of Lawspeaker was a clear indication of the status and power of the individual and his family connection: "[w]e may suppose that at all periods the choice of lawspeaker was largely determined by the standing and success of particular families in national politics, just as we know happened in the 13th century when the representatives of the Sturlungar and Haukdælir alternated in office."[5]

The *goði* position, on the other hand, was more important for the function of medieval Icelandic society. The *goðar* (plural of *goði*) exercised power at the Althing in

[5] The Sturlungar and the Haukdælir were two of the four or five most powerful families that according to the Sturlunga Saga texts dominated Icelandic politics and large territories in the 13th century.

court cases and at the *Lögretta* legislature, but also at the district and local level, as well as in the everyday lives of medieval Icelanders. All free farmers had to be attached to a *goði*, who represented him at the Althing. All scholars agree that holding a *goðorð* meant access to sources of power, and most now agree that the position, if occupied by an able chieftain, offered significant potential for increasing wealth. The primary methods employed by *goðar* to increase their control over land, which was the most significant basis of wealth in Iceland, are still debated. For example, Byock (1988; 2001) maintains that the *goðar* focused on dispute management as the most lucrative means to centralize wealth, whereas Samson (1992) stresses more traditional economic organization as the engine of wealth, and Durrenberger (1991) sees chiefly wealth emanating from the use of brute force.

The political position of *goði* gave the chieftains exclusive access to the revenue from *þingfararkaup* (the thing-travel-tax) placed on a thingmen who did not accompany their *goði* to the Althing. This tax was not very lucrative as much of the revenue went to pay for other thingmen's cost of travel and stay at the Althing. Concerning the early taxes and *goði* privileges in medieval Iceland Byock (2001: 252) concludes, "[t]he legally prescribed taxes and other sources of income allotted to a chieftain in *Grágás* are noticeably small and irregular. They could not have enabled a goði to amass the wealth necessary to purchase support, pay compensation awards, exchange gifts, make loans, and provide feasts and hospitality."

According to the *Grágás* laws, chieftains also possessed the legal rights to inspect and set prices on the goods of foreign traders in Iceland (Gelsinger 1981: 38). Although it

is unclear how often chieftains exercised this right, the goal of the laws was to limit the profit and greed of foreign merchants rather than to enrich the chieftains (Byock 2001: 255). Since merchants could decide where to land and which chieftain to deal with, "in most instances the Norwegian merchant retained the advantage" (Byock 2001: 256). Instead, Byock (2001: 256) believes that the real value of the chieftain's privilege was the first choice of the imported luxury goods that could be invested in gift-giving and increase prestige and produce social obligations in their followers.[6]

Byock (2001: 255) convincingly concludes, "possession of a chieftaincy offered significant financial rewards, although not through taxation."[7] Rather the *goðar* profited from their unique roles as legal specialists, arbitrators and advocates for farmers in need of support. The *goðar* grew wealthy from the troubles of others, and by enforcing legal victories that often required forceful collection of payment or confiscation of property (Byock 2001). The flow of the obligatory taxes, although reinvested into infrastructure such as temples or church, or in supplying thingmen at the assembly, also made chieftains a nexus through which goods and taxes flowed that therefore invested them with both prestige and the power to spend that wealth.

[6] The value of these imported goods for the prestige good economy and the power of the Mosfell chieftains is discussed in Chapter 4 (section 4.4) from the viewpoint of the textual sources and in Chapter 8 (section 8.4) according to the archaeological evidence from the Mosfell Valley.

[7] See Byock 2001: 385-387 for a succinct summary of the position of current scholarship that holds the pre-Christian taxes available to the *goðar* did not provide surplus wealth. .

1.3.4 Military Power

1.3.4.1 Theoretical Approaches to Military Power

Military power harnesses physical force for the purposes of coercion. The coercive potential of military power comes from the threat and display of force as much as from the actual use of that force. Substantially unequal access to military often negates the need for the use of force and results in the stronger party receiving a coercive advantage and increased social power. In cases where the opposing parties possess the same military technology, the ability to gather support from potential and willing warriors is frequently the deciding factor in establishing military preeminence.

In Michael Mann's (1986: 25) conception, military power derives ultimately from the "necessity of organized physical defense and its usefulness for aggression." Military power depends on mobilizing violence, which Mann describes as "the most concentrated, if bluntest, instrument of human power." Timothy Earle (1997) sees military power as necessary for defending resources and coercing compliance. Earle (1997: 110), holding to the primacy of the economic sphere, believes that the goal of warfare in chiefdoms is the forceful control of economic subsistence staples and wealth finance or prestige goods.

Military power relies on the threat and enactment of warfare. Warfare ranges in intensity and scale in chiefly level societies from raids to territorial conquest. Many scholars, but most notably Robert Carniero, have stressed the role of warfare in social evolution and political centralization (Carniero 1970, 1981; Johnson and Earle 2000; Mann 1986; Allen and Arkush 2006). Warfare has been virtually ubiquitous throughout human history, leaving scholars to formulate the conditions under which warfare leads to

centralization, such as environmental or social circumscription (Carniero 1971; 1980), resource abundance, or the existence of "buffer zones" (LeBlanc 2006).

The victory of one community, village, or polity over another can lead to tribute, slavery, domination, and territorial expansion. But conquering a neighbor is not so easy, and less centralized polities such as many simple chiefdoms, lack the requisite infrastructure, institutionalized leadership, and food surplus for semi-permanent armies necessary for the control of conquered land and subject populations (Allen and Arkush 2006: 5). In societies that lack this "institutional superstructure," warfare engenders reciprocal raids, tributary relationships, and extortion by war leaders. According to Earle, only in more complex chiefdoms, do the organizational capabilities of chiefs appear to allow territorial conquest (Earle 1997: 109). This point is crucial in medieval Iceland, where the character and goals of the warfare fundamentally changes from raiding and small-scale feuding aimed at settling scores and acquiring wealth to economically destructive campaigns motivated by territorial conquest.

Under the appropriate conditions, mobilized military power can forge increasingly large and integrated polities through conquest (Carniero 1981; LeBlanc 2006: 438), but if uncontrolled or used in rebellion or resistance, this same military power can break apart social institutions and political units or prevent centralization (Earle 1997: 106; Allen and Arkush 2006: 13). In chiefdom level societies, Earle (1997: 8) believes military power is "a problematic source of social power," since the warriors necessary to inspire fear and compliance can quickly become a destabilizing force if they cannot be controlled and strategically directed.

Gillman (1991) conceives of the social centralization achieved by leaders in Germanic societies as a mafia-style "protection racket" in which chiefs extract tribute in exchange for protection from other chiefs. Elsewhere, Gillman (1995) expresses his view that the Germanic chiefdoms provide a unified model of increasing centralization and social evolution through elite coercion and forced resource extraction as opposed to the redistribution-centered and integrationist models that form the basis of most recent anthropological explanations for the emergence of social complexity. Warriors instill fear, and as Earle (1997: 106, 107) stresses with the help of Machiavellian theory: "[p]ower feeds on fear..." and "[f]ear makes compliance the only conceivable option..." In my view, Gillman's stress on the "exploitation" of the commoner by leaders (Gillman 1991), casts a negative connotation on these societies that masks not only the multi-faceted function of Germanic chiefs but also the variation, internal stabilities, and individual freedoms present in these societies. Nevertheless, Gillman's pinpointing of the martial ethos and threat of violence present in these societies and the differential access to military power available to Germanic chiefs provides an apt theoretical foregrounding to the situation in the Scandinavian Viking Age.

1.3.4.2 Military Power in Medieval Scandinavia

The fear of violent Viking raids expressed in contemporary historical sources across Western Europe show the potential military power mobilization of local communities and polities in Viking Age Scandinavian society. Although these sources have colored the modern view of the Norsemen as a ruthless and destructive people, the

fact remains that violence, raiding, and martial prowess were prominent aspects in Scandinavian culture. Pagan ideology stressed the virtues of the masculine warrior and fearlessness in the face of battle. Norse myth imagined the most virtuous men would enjoy an afterlife in Valhalla, where they had the pleasure of killing each other anew every day until the end of the world. Peter Sawyer (1994: 52) sums up the evidence, stating, "...we may be sure that violent conflicts in pursuit of more resources and greater fame were a recurrent theme in pagan Scandinavia..."

The importance of the image of martial prowess is also indicated by the prevalence of weapons and armor in the pre-Christian burials. The favored weapons of the Vikings were the sword and the spear, although the axe was also common. For defense, they used chain mail, iron helmets, leather caps, and round shields with a metal shield boss in the middle. Armor and helmets were probably rare, particularly in Iceland, and limited to high status individuals. Swords were also highly prized, with sword quality and decoration serving as distinct status symbols (Graham-Campbell 1994: 52-55; Graham-Campbell 2001: 24). These prestige weapons were militaristic symbols when used in life, but also when deposited in graves, illustrating the interface of military power represented in the ideological realm.

Chiefs in Scandinavia during the early Viking Age were often war leaders, sometimes described as "sea-kings." Organizing and partially financing raiding expeditions provided ideal circumstances for aggrandizing leaders to assert authority and acquire wealth, which they could use to build social obligations with followers. As Sawyer (1994: 144) notes, "the power of a ruler depended in large measure on his ability to

reward his followers." Warfare also played an essential role in the early state formation processes as seen in the textual sources about Harald Finehair who united Norway by force, as well as in the archaeological evidence from the large-scale Trelleborg fortification system in Harald Bluetooth's Denmark (Nørlund 1948; Olsen and Schmidt 1977; Roesdahl 1977). In fact, the Icelandic sagas, clearly and consistently claim that the violent state formation efforts of Harald Finehair in Norway was the main cause of the stream of immigration to Iceland in the late 9th century. Although Icelandic society appears to have been partially organized to prevent the rise of a warrior king, the martial ethos, the military technology, and the importance of military power came as a cultural package to the newly settled island.

1.3.4.3 Military Power and Conflicts in Iceland

The colonization of Iceland resulted in the creation of a decentralized new society founded on the rights of the free landowners. When Icelanders established the Althing in AD 930, they founded a legal and governing system devoid of the royal monopoly of force emerging in mainland Scandinavia. The potential for the mobilization of force was decentralized, as was the political system in general. The nature of colonizing a new open country resulted in a substantial, if temporary, resetting of pressure for group competition over land. This resulting dispersed settlement pattern of single farmsteads also established conditions more likely to limit conflicts to smaller numbers and to the level of the extended family. Conflicts of course still occurred, and the sagas have been recognized as a corpus of literature devoted to these conflicts and their resolution through

feud (Byock 1982; Byock 1988; Miller 1990). Whether these conflicts were generated by inheritance disputes, insults to honor, or competition over economic resources, such as grazing lands, beached whales, and forests, opposing individuals or parties often resorted to the threat or use of small-scale violence.

In some ways, conflicts in Iceland as well as social organization reverted to an earlier stage before the emergence of incipient states in Scandinavia, but because they had experienced the emergent monopolization of force by Scandinavian kings, Icelanders understood very well the realities of royal power and the pitched battles of complex chiefdom-level societies. Byock (2001: 77) describes the early Icelandic martial culture as "split between the military values of the mother country and the more peaceful realities of the new land." The Icelandic *goðar* "lacked the resources necessary to feed, house, equip and pay followers for more than a brief period" (Byock 2001: 125). Although the early Icelanders "postured in the manner of Viking Age warriors," the posturing led only to small-scale battles and few deaths (Byock 2001: 77).

Warfare and conflict in Iceland was largely channeled into a system of feuding that sustained reasonable stability (Byock 1982: 1-3; Byock 2007). According to the general impression from textual evidence, this stability lasted until the middle of the 13th century. Byock (2001: 208) states, "[a]t its simplest, feud involves prolonged animosity leading to exchanges of insults and/or violent acts against property or person, including injury and even manslaughter." As distinguished from violence, feud is a group activity, and involves group culpability for any aggressive actions. Offenses and violent actions, including killings, were calculated and a principle of negative reciprocity with the goal of

achieving a balance was applied in which people alternated aggressive actions (Byock 2007; Þorláksson 2007, Netterstøm 2007). Feud is therefore as much about relationships between groups as it is about direct actions (Miller 1990: 181; Byock 2001: 207-218). In Iceland individuals or groups feuded with individuals or groups with relatively comparable status, resources, and power (Miller 1990: 185). These feuds were often rooted in competition over resources (Byock 2001: 208) as well as status and dominance (Miller 1990: 187). If the power relationship was too unequal, offences could go unavenged or be settled quickly on terms favoring the more powerful group. For example, farmers who were bullied by *goðar* frequently had to gain the support of other *goðar* to take up their case and the potentially resultant feud.

An important point drawn from Andreas Heusler's (1911) work on feud, is that Icelandic feuds were "characterized as much by lawsuits and arbitration as by vengeance" (Miller 1990: 180). In Icelandic feud, blood vengeance, which often plays a central role in other feuding societies (see i.e. Boehm 1984), was not an absolute duty, but became one of several honorable options including material compensation, arbitration, and outlawing the offender (Byock 2001: 207). Icelandic feud was a public matter that was discussed at assemblies and addressed in law courts. *Goðar*, who functioned as specialist legal advocates for disputing parties, were sought to represent farmers in the courts and as arbitrators. The assemblies, law courts, and meetings of arbitrators and mediators served as "moderating arenas" where public pressure helped to limit escalating violence. In these arenas, ideals of consensus, compromise, order and moderation helped shape the

Icelandic feuding system into a cost-effective and largely privatized means of dispute resolution (Byock 2001: 209, 218, 219).

Conflicts and potential cases often did not make it to the courts, but were instead settled out of court through arbitration or direct negotiation. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson (1999: 159-160) studied all conflicts in nine sagas (4 family sagas and 5 contemporary sagas) and concluded that of 102 conflicts that include information about the resolution, only 10% were solved in the courts. Almost 70% of Sigurðsson's conflicts were resolved through arbitration, about 20% through direct negotiation, and approximately 10% through other methods including violent revenge and single combat. Sigurðsson's percentages suggest that the conflict resolution methods in Iceland's feud system work in most cases to avoid direct violence and need for military victory.

At closer look, however, even in cases that were resolved by arbitration or in the courts, the threat of violence and the show of military strength were decidedly influential for the outcome. Competitive and semi-ritualized assembling and public display of armed support and military strength was a pivotal aspect of the feuding system and a common stage before resolution and compromise was reached. These stagings gauged military strength of the parties and allowed each side to threaten the use of force. If the military power was unequal, the side with the greater military strength usually triumphed. In his analysis of saga conflicts, Durrenberger (1992: 58) concludes, "the armed power each side of a case mustered was more significant than any niceties of procedure or argument." Byock (1988: 167) believes the system functioned a bit more on legal compromise, but

still holds that “the resolution of a dispute depended not only on the strength and justice of the case but also on the power and prestige of the *goði* who was presenting it.”

No public apparatus existed to enforce legal judgments (Byock 1988: 167), meaning that privatized force had to be used to enact the justice, which often involved further scenarios of potential conflict such as confiscation of property. Parties or individuals who could not gather substantial military force on their own had to seek support from more powerful individuals. Byock (1988: 167) concludes, “most freemen...turned to chieftains for this service, a service that reinforced the need for advocates.”

The show of force in conflicts and legal suits played a pivotal role in determining the outcomes of prestige, authority, and resource competition. The control over military might that could be displayed and implemented had a decisive impact on disputes over land, honor, and movable wealth, and therefore was a major force in the constellation of social power in medieval Iceland.

1.3.5 Ideological Power

1.3.5.1 Defining Ideology

Ideology is a historically loaded term that is widely used but difficult to precisely define. An ideology is a system of ideas that explains the world and gives meaning to experiences. In anthropological, archaeological, and historical literature the term ideology often includes or is conflated with religion and even with ritual practice. These concepts are not the same, but religious movements are probably the most obvious examples of

ideology. Ritual practices are enacted elements of ideology. Ideologies throughout history have been harnessed for social power at all stages of societal evolution. In their work on pilgrimage centers and shrines in the Andes, Baur and Stanish (2001: 17) express the challenges of analyzing ideology while expressing its importance: “Ideology is at once the most elusive and powerful of tools used by early states to project their authority.” Through unequal access to the creation, maintenance, and control of ideology and its materialized forms people have been able to create unequal social relations well before the emergence of state-level societies.

Most scholars consider ideology to be a broader concept than religion (Mann 1986: 23). Less convincingly, it has been argued, however, that religion can be considered the structuring framework that defines ideology and other “products of the mind” such as cosmology and iconography (Insoll 2004: 97). Parker Pearson (1982: 100) describes ideology as “remarkably hard to define”, before providing a characteristically broad definition, holding that ideology is “a system of beliefs through which the perceived world of appearances is interpreted as a concrete and objectified reality.” Another equally broad definition of ideology that subsumes religion is provided by Baur and Stanish (2001: 244): “One useful definition of ideology is that, as a system of symbols, signs, beliefs, and understandings, it is a theory of the social and physical world that surrounds us.” Ideology as a broader term recognizes that secular ideas often rely on belief and imbue meaning to natural and social phenomena. This recognition is made explicitly in the work of Kenneth Thompson who refers to “hybrid ideologies” that blend religious and secular ideology and are therefore more powerful than “single-discourse

ideologies" (Thompson 1993: 459). The significant point for the purposes of this dissertation is that ideology broadly encompasses systems of beliefs that explain, structure, and give meaning to the material world and human society.

1.3.5.2 Anthropological and Neo-Marxist Approaches to Ideological Power

Anthropological approaches to ideology have tended to lean towards a Marxist understanding, often with a skeptical and suspicious view of ideology as the social glue that justifies inequality. Bruce Trigger (1989: 340-347) analyses the Neo-Marxist approach, concluding that scholars who follow the "idealist position" describe "ritual as a 'discourse' that is designed to reaffirm existing social relations by making them appear to be part of the natural order or to enhance the power of privileged groups or individuals." Matthew Johnson (1999: 94) simplifies the Neo-Marxist view and puts it slightly differently, "while social foundations are creaking and society becomes increasingly unequal and unjust, people's beliefs act to 'paper over the cracks', to make the existing system appear legitimate."

To varying degrees this general conception of ideology as a bandage for economic injustice and a tool of the elite used to oppress the lower classes and naturalize social inequality can be seen in the most prominent social and anthropological theory (see e.g. Wolf 1997: 390; Shanks and Tilley 1982: 130; Johnson and Earle 2000: 252). Embedded within the Neo-Marxist approach lies the implication that the commoners are being fooled or deluded by false ideology and religion (Trigger 1989: 340-347), but this does not have to be the case. Less purist views hold that ideology allows social resistance and

that the “oppressed” individuals are rational agents who understand and react to ideology without naively and passively following the position of the elite.

Many anthropologists tempered by a Durkheimian perspective draw focus away from any judgment of religious “truth” and are less convinced that the elite mastermind the collective brainwashing of society to hide economic and social realities. They stress that there is no reason that elites should not be equally convinced by the explanations offered by ideologies. Ideologies do after all have a function in society beyond justifying inequality, in providing meaning to people’s lives and aiding in social cohesion and conflict avoidance.

Some definitions of ideology have attempted to stress the empowerment of all classes in the realm of ideology. Garth Bawden (2001: 286) offers, “I regard ideology as that specialized formation of social statement that promotes the interests of its advocates in the wider community. Ideology is thus the possession of all interest groups in a society.” The dominant group and ideology may in such a conception attempt to promote cohesion and unity in society while other ideologies emerge that challenge hegemony.

Most scholars and definitions considered above have approached ideology from the point of view of a state level society. It is worth stressing here that medieval Iceland was not a state, but consisted of a decentralized but culturally, ideologically, and politically bonded chiefdom level society. In chiefdoms and in medieval Iceland, ideology would have been less centralized. In chiefdom-level societies the dominant group or class possesses less control over wealth and labor that could be invested in the dominant ideology than in state-level societies.

1.3.5.3 Ideological Sources of Power

Individuals or groups that achieve unequal access to creating, managing, or controlling ideology and its materialized forms gain social power. In Michael Mann's (1986: 22-23) systematization of social power, ideological power derives from three aspects of ideology: 1) "monopolizing a claim to meaning," 2) monopolizing "norms" or "shared normative understandings," which allow mutual trust and stable social cooperation, 3) "aesthetic/ritual practices." These three arenas (meaning, norms, and ritual) do not imply that the ideology is false or that it necessarily masks social and economic domination. Mann points out that ideologies are usually "untestable" in the scientific sense and therefore are beyond truth, and that, in fact, demonstrably false ideologies are usually much less likely to be successful (Mann 1986: 23). Furthermore, in contrast to Neo-Marxist ideas, it seems that when ideology and group interest fall into opposition, the dominant ideology may be discarded quickly (Bawden 2001: 287). This point is demonstrated in medieval Iceland by the chieftains' decision at the Althing in AD 1000 that all Icelanders should publically convert from paganism to Christianity.

Timothy Earle (1997: 8-9), who uses Mann's concept of ideology to analyze chiefly power, broadens and operationalizes the source of ideological power: **"**Ideology derives from routines of compliance." Earle takes a more materialist approach than Mann, noting that ideology "establishes an authority structure and institutionalizes practices of rule" (Earle 1997: 9). Earle's very broad definition of ideology allows him to equate ideology with social order and to a certain extent even with the general concept of

culture. Earle (1997: 9) states, "[t]o the degree that an ideology, the cultural perspective of a ruling segment, can be imposed as the set of ordering principles for the broader society, it facilitates and legitimizes domination." Earle also shows clearly a greater influence from Marxist ideas of ideology as "imposed" by the ruling class to "legitimize domination."

This dissertation uses a narrower definition of ideology, stressing ideology as a belief system in the more traditional sense. Earle's ideology allows him to incorporate political power, kinship, and cultural elements under his sub-category of ideology. I find it more useful to treat political power and kinship relationships separately. I follow Demarrais et al. (1996) and Earle (1997), however, in stressing the importance and analytical potential of materialized ideology. Demarrais et al. (1996: 16) suggest, "…ideology is as much the material means to communicate and manipulate ideas as it is the ideas themselves." "Materialization" as defined by Demarrais et al. (1996: 16) is "the transformation of ideas, values, stories, myths, and the like into a physical reality- a ceremonial event, a symbolic object, a monument, or a writing system." These four materialized forms of ideology can be seen in the case of medieval Iceland. Most importantly, the materialization of ideology is essential for it to serve as a source of power.

1.3.5.4 Ideology in Medieval Iceland

No state hegemony or religious hegemonic control existed in medieval Iceland. As a result the ideological power was disperse, particularly in the pagan period and

during the early years of Christianity. The chieftains who owned land, possessed expendable wealth, and functioned as group-decision makers were best-placed to harness the collective ideology and its materialized forms. The materialization of ideology is a particularly visible aspect of belief systems. This materialization can be manipulated to make ideological statements and create unequal access to ideological power. In medieval Iceland, fewer economic resources were available to invest in this materialization than in most of the rest of medieval Europe. The scarcity of resources, however, meant that smaller investments had a proportionally larger effect.

1.3.5.4.1 Ideological Power in the Pagan Period

Norse paganism was dominant in Scandinavia when Iceland was settled. Although textual sources and all recent scholarship agree that there were Christian settlers among the earliest colonists of Iceland,[8] most of the settlers practiced pre-Christian Norse paganism. Price (2002: 26) describes Norse paganism as "a belief system, a way of looking at the world," stressing that "religion was simply another dimension of daily life" and that the conversion to Christianity "was a clash of perceptions as much as ideologies." Dubois (1999: 4) sees pagan religions as consisting of "decentralized communities of belief" and believes there was substantial interaction between pre-Christian religions. Although these views may overemphasize the difference between pagan and Christian ideologies, it is clear that Norse paganism lacked the

[8] *Landnámabók* mentions several Christians among the initial settlers including Örlygr the Old, Helgi Bjóla, Jörundr the Chrisitian, Ketill Fiflski and Auðr Djúpúpga. *Landnámabók* says that few of their descendants practiced Christianity. See also Aðalsteinsson 1999: 27-28; Vésteinsson 2000; and Kristjánsdottir (2004) for discussion of early Christians in Iceland.

orthodoxy, hierarchical structure, and crystallized religious texts present in a universalizing religion such as Christianity (Price 2002; Dubois 1999; Roesdahl 1998; Lindow 2001). In comparison to organized Christianity, Norse ideology was more diverse, changeable, local, and decentralized. The decentralized nature of paganism presented less potential for control of materialized ideology and centralization of social power.

Addressing specialized roles in Norse religion, Roesdahl (1998: 152, 153) concludes that "…the cult seems to have been decentralized and led by local chieftains or wealthy farmers," while she questions whether even kings in mainland Scandinavia "exercised religious cult functions which differed from those of other leaders." The name of the chieftains in Iceland, *goðar* (sg. *goði*), incorporates the word *goð* meaning god or pagan god, strongly suggesting that the chieftains had a religious function before the conversion to Christianity (Lindow 2001: 6, 34; Byock 2001: 14, 94). Byock (2001: 14, 94) argues that despite "the absence of a recognized priesthood", the *goðar* had an "occupational monopoly" as ritual specialists that they maintained also in the new Christian religion after the conversion, which they helped to bring about. Byock (2001: 14) believes this role translates into social power such that "[w]hether in heathen or Christian times, the *goðar* were a small-scale elite able to exert both ideological and political power." Unfortunately the saga sources, written by Christians, provide virtually no insight into the specialized role of the *goðar* during pagan religious practices, such as sacrifices and ritual feasts.

Burial customs in Viking Age Scandinavia varied considerably in the pre-Christian period (Roesdahl 1998: 156-158), but in most burial types, grave goods were common. Whether these items were meant to be used in the afterlife, to represent occupation or status of the dead during life, or to demonstrate wealth and prestige of the people burying the dead individual, these goods can be analyzed as materialized ideological statements. There is no direct one-to-one correlation between the wealth of the grave goods and the status of the buried individuals. However, elite burials can be recognized in the extreme cases containing unusually high energy and wealth investment, such as the large ship burials of Oseberg and Gokstad in Norway, the burial mound at Jelling, and the 10th century Danish warrior graves with horse gear. The grave goods found in Icelandic graves are similar to those uncovered in the rest of the Norse culture area, but in general "Icelandic burials, as a whole, most resemble the modest types of burial found in Norway" (Friðriksson 2000: 610).

In Iceland, the pre-Christian burial customs are similar to the rest of the Viking World with some notable exceptions. So far no large man-made burial mounds, no memorial stones, and no burials in stone settings have been found in Iceland (Friðriksson 2000: 609). Interestingly, however, large pagan burial mounds in Iceland are described relatively frequently in the Icelandic saga literature. This discrepancy could be a misunderstanding by the 13th century saga writers about 10th century Icelandic burial customs, but it is also possible that the mounds in Iceland were smaller, consisting of modified natural mounds such as the Hulduhóll mound at Hrísbrú (see Byock et al. 2005). This would make these burials more difficult to locate and the possibility remains

that more such burial mounds will be found. The most typical Icelandic pagan burial uncovered archaeologically consists of a shallow pit, big enough for an outstretched body surrounded by stones and covered over by a low mound of large stones and soil (Friðriksson 2000: 209).

Since no towns or villages with concomitant large grave fields existed in Iceland, isolated graves or grave clusters with just a few graves were the most common practice. As of the publication of the second edition of *Kuml og Haugfé* in 2000, 316 pagan burials have been uncovered in 157 different locations in Iceland (Friðriksson 2000: 590-592, 609). The location of the burials in the landscape is of key importance to understanding how these materialized ideological statements were utilized in power relations. For example, Icelandic pagan graves appear to have been positioned in prominently visible locations, such as overlooking roads or at boundaries between properties. The burials are usually not positioned close to the farms, but located in the lowlands on natural low rises at some distance from the farmstead (Friðriksson 2000: 591-592). The placement of the burials in these locations likely reflects the function of the burials in marking territory and making statements of family landownership, as well as linking the prominent individuals from the past to current inhabitants of the farms.

Pagan ritual practice, generally called *blót*, included sacrifices of animals (Lindow 2001: 35, Lucas and McGovern 2007) and occasionally of humans (Ellis Davidson 1988: 58-68), feasting, and veneration of idols that appear to sometimes have been made in

images of gods such as Tyr, Thor and Frey.[9] According to the textual sources, sacrifices occurred in temples or outdoors in groves, and often involved "reddening"[10] a *hörgr*, translated as an altar of stone (Lindow 2001: 34-35; Ellis Davidson 1988: 58). Ever-growing archaeological evidence has clearly demonstrated that ritual activities and sacrifices took place inside domestic structures (see e.g. Lucas and McGovern 2007), although the earlier but controversial claim that temples did not exist (Olsen 1966) has begun to be disputed with new archaeological evidence of separate and specialized ritual structures (see e.g. Nielsen and Lindeblad 1999).

The location of pagan ritual practice has been a source of major debate with significant disagreement over whether Norse paganism was ever practiced in a specialized structure. This point is crucial since specialized ritual structures would have served as prominent loci of materialized ideology. In his seminal book, *Hørg, Hov, og Kirk*e, Olaf Olsen argues that there was no solid evidence for pagan temples in the archaeological record and that pagan cult activities took place in the homes of chieftains. This line of reasoning has been followed by most subsequent scholarship as is apparent in Else Roesdahl's (1998: 239) statement, "[c]hurches—specific buildings for religious celebration—were an entirely new concept, theologically and architecturally." Recently, however, excavations at the sites of Uppåkra and Borg in Sweden (Larson 2007; Nielsen and Lindeblad 1999; Stefan Brink, personal communication) have uncovered

[9] See the account of the Uppsala Temple by Adam of Bremen where idols of Thor, Wodan (Odin), and Fricco (Frey) are present in the temple (Tschan 2002).

[10] *að rjóða*, "to redden"

overwhelmingly convincing evidence pointing to the existence of at least a few genuine pagan temples.

Icelandic Family Sagas express no doubt about the existence of specialized buildings functioning as pagan temples, which are consistently described and treated as a matter of fact. If there was a misunderstanding about the presence of pagan temples whereby the idea of Christian worship in a specialized ritual building was transferred back on the pagan population of pre-Conversion Iceland (Olaf Olsen 1966), then this misunderstanding appears to have been universal. The two most famous descriptions of such temples from *Eyrbyggja Saga* and *Kjalnesinga Saga* are consistent in their description, but differ too significantly in their narrative details to be explained away as literary borrowing of one account from the other.

One aspect of the pagan temple system often mentioned in the sagas is the *hoftollr*, or temple tax. This tax was due to the person who maintained the temple, whether or not they themselves were the pagan priest. Byock (2001: 255) suggests the costs of temple maintenance would negate any tax dues. The question of a potential surplus after temple maintenance is impossible to answer with the available sources. However, the possibility that the temple did not bring in wealth, surely does not mean that these temples could not serve as a source of power. If temples and temple taxes really did exist, then the temples, rituals, feasts, and decisions about the use of temple tax funds surely provided prestige and ritual/ideological authority to the temple priest and the temple owner. Although the sources indicate that *goðar* did not have a monopoly on temple ownership, the etymological connection between the term *goði* and *goð*, Old

Norse for god, suggests that the *goðar* retained a leading role in the religious practices whether they were carried out in temples, at the þing assemblies, or in sacred spots in nature.

1.3.5.4.2 Ideological Power after the Conversion to Christianity

The official conversion to Christianity in Iceland occurred in AD 1000 according to the consistent accounts of the textual sources including *Íslendingabók*, the Icelandic sagas, and the available annals. The reasons for the conversion have been much debated, but clearly the decision was made in the contexts of the general spread of Christianity and the formation of Christian monarchies in Scandinavia. Economic and cultural connections on which Iceland depended were threatened by ideological difference between Iceland and the Scandinavian countries. For instance, the Norwegian King Olaf Tryggvasson was applying pressure on Iceland to convert by threatening to cut off trade connections and by holding prisoner the sons of wealthy chieftains. Besides the external pressures, Iceland also appears to have had a growing number of converts to Christianity, who had encountered Christianity during travels abroad, through missionary activity, or from the minority of Christians that had always lived dispersed among the pagans in Iceland.

The change in ideological system from paganism to Christianity dramatically altered ritual practice, the nature of the materialization of ideology, and the potential of ideology as a source of social power. Orri Vésteinsson (2000: 7, 14) who has conducted the most detailed study of the Christianization process in Iceland, concludes that church

institutions had the innate tendency to augment social organization and lead to centralization as chieftains used churches and church institutions as “non-personal” pathways to power. For Christian ritual practice, Icelanders needed a new kit of ritual objects, new structures for worship, and a reorganized space for the dead. New material goods needed for ritual practice offered potential for unequal access and for control of these resources. Access to the new knowledge required for Christian practice also offered an arena for inequality. This knowledge could be controlled by those who could support ritual specialists or finance training abroad in Christian doctrine for themselves or a dependent.

Individuals, usually *goðar*, built, owned, and managed the churches, which were the preeminent forms of materialized ideology on the island. During the early Christian period, the church owners also clearly controlled the ideological specialists, the priests. Although there was no state-run ideological structure, the ideological system was, as a whole, more unified than during the pagan period. Competing *goðar* attempted to use the system for their own purposes, such that Iceland’s early Christian landscape consisted of numerous local privately owned churches competing for prominence, influence, and devotion.

Imports required for the new religion included wine, books, altar stones, and at least occasionally, timber. Wine was necessary for church services. Bibles and church literature would need to be imported as well, at least until copies could be made in Iceland. Church doctrine prohibited Christian services without an altar stone that had to be blessed by an abbot or a bishop on behalf of the pope. The need for imported altar

stones is supported by the excavation of altar stones made of imported porphyry, marble, and granite at the church sites at Viðey, Stöng, Kirkjubæjarklaustur, and Þórarinstaðir (Kristjánsdóttir 2004: 66-68; Lárusson 1956).

The Christian church provided the most suitable arena for display and control of materialized ideology for medieval Icelanders. People aspiring to build a church needed to own land, possess high quality timber and an altar stone, and have access to labor for construction. Textual evidence indicates that wood was imported from Norway for church construction, while archaeological evidence shows that some of the early churches, including the churches at Hrísbrú and the Þórarinstaðir were at least partially constructed from drift wood (Byock et al. 2005; Kristjánsdóttir et al. 2001). Christian burial in graveyards surrounding churches mandated by Christian doctrine centralized death rituals in distinct areas controlled by the owner of the church. Instead of marking property lines, the dead were now centralized in the backyard of people powerful enough to construct and maintain a church. Church owners thereby gained a higher degree of control over the range of statements made with the ancestral dead.

1.4 Methodological Framework: Archaeology and Texts for the Study of Medieval Iceland

In the study of the past, all available data sets, including textual references and archaeological material, should be used in combination (Trigger 1989: 372-377). As Papadopoulos (1999: 383-384) argues for the Iron Age Aegean, the question is not whether texts should be used in combination with archaeology, but "*how* these sources

should be employed most effectively." Textual and archaeological sources should be treated as independent data sets capable of providing independent conclusions. It is not always practical that they remain completely independent in the process of analysis, but the scholar should strive not to privilege one over the other (Andren 1998). At the same time, we should not be afraid to pursue one source to draw conclusions, nor be disturbed that texts are often used to locate archaeological sites (see Papadopoulos 1999: 386; Friðriksson 1995).

Human messages are transferred through three media: written text, oral messages, and material culture. The relationship between messages from these media and how to employ them together in research is the subject of this section. This section on methodology begins by addressing the scholarly approaches to the method and theory of historical archaeology and establishing the methodological approach of this dissertation. Subsequently, the section turns to a discussion of the Icelandic source material within the framework of theories about social memory as well as oral tradition. Finally, this section discusses the intellectual development of the use of Icelandic sagas in combination with archaeology and concludes by establishing the method of historical archaeology pursued in this dissertation.

The methodological problem of combining information from material culture and text places historical archaeology into a distinct sub-field. Andren (1998) argues that this discipline is characterized by "in-betweennes." Texts and archaeology are not of the same character and are not studied in similar manners. Archaeology is not 'read' despite some claims to this effect, and texts are a distinct type of material culture since they can be read

for an intended verbalized message. Text and archaeology are two independent data sets, which is precisely why they provide such a powerful combination for understanding the past. The sub-field characterized by the combination of texts and archaeology has been given many names. Historical archaeology may be the most common, but this term now has a stigma because of many American archaeologists' insistence that historical archeology is the study of the world after European colonial expansion. Text-aided archaeology is another popular term (Little 1992), but has the problem that it appears to identify text as a crutch for archaeology. Other popular terms for the sub-field include textual archaeology and documentary archaeology (Beaudry 1988). Whatever the sub-field is called, the important point is that research employing both texts and archaeology is a field united by a methodology that brings with it dangers, theories, and different methodologies.

1.4.1 The Dangers of Textual Analogy: Avoiding Tyranny and Tautology

The dangers of textual analogy in historical archaeology can be grouped into two broad categories: tautology and tyranny. The danger of tautology is that archaeology for historical periods will only confirm what is already known from the historical documents. The danger of tyranny of the text is that the written record will be given preference over archaeology, dominate the answers generated by the field, and be the source of all explanations of the archaeological record. The danger of tyranny has been a more serious problem and is therefore addressed here in greater detail.

Archaeologists seek analogies to the material culture they unearth and frequently find such analogies in historical documents. The danger of drawing these analogies is that the explanatory value of the text will be exaggerated. A common method of analogy, called *direct analogy*, uses later texts about a certain place to explain the archaeological record from an earlier period (Lightfoot 1995; Papadopoulos 1999). This method projects realities of one period into another and produces anachronistic conclusions. A second potential pitfall for textual analogy is caused by theory-less archaeology when the analogies drawn from texts are seen as the only potential explanation. This leaves little room for interpretation from the archaeological record and diminishes the potential of archaeology to increase the complexity and nuance of historical understanding.[11]

One example of the subservience of archaeological work to written sources in medieval archaeology is the use by some archaeologists of the Venerable Bede's 8th century account of the 5th century migrations to England from Scandinavia and Northern Germany. Bede identified areas where different population groups settled. Archaeologists attempted to identify these populations in 5th century burial assemblages of the regions mentioned by Bede and then proceeded to study the burial assemblages in Scandinavia for analogous burial practices in order to reach conclusions about the regional origin in Scandinavia for each of the tribes mentioned by Bede. Although such scholarship may not always lead to incorrect conclusions, this method builds on compounded assumptions. As Bailey Young (1992) noted for the archaeology of the migration period,

[11] See e.g. Young 1992 who realized that he was making this mistake during his interpretation of the initial phase of the Psalmodi church.

the reliance and subservience to texts constrained archaeological conclusions and obscured the picture of diversity in such a manner that Young asks if archaeology in this case is not "text-misled" rather than "text-aided."

The importance of controlling the dangers of tautology and tyranny has generated, I suggest, four partially overlapping theoretical justifications for the existence, relevance, and utility of historical archaeology as a field: 1) complementarity of text and material culture; 2) archaeology as long-term history; 3) archaeology as the provider of a voice to the people forgotten by traditional history; 4) historical archaeology as a laboratory to test anthropological models and archaeological methods. These justifications are all convincing in their own right, but the need that historical archaeologists feel to justify their field shows that there is not yet a full appreciation for the potential for this interdisciplinary work. The arguments of each of the four justifications are summarized below.

Complementarity of Text and Material Culture. In this approach scholars stress that archaeology and text are different and have different strengths. For example, texts have a more direct connection with meaning, since they are purposeful messages, whereas archaeology has a direct link to the 'real world' of things that actually existed. This approach seeks "text-free zones" in which archaeology can play a more prominent role. Archaeology has often been said to have a more direct view of the economy whereas texts can more easily offer a picture of ideology. This last assumption corresponds to Christopher Hawkes' (1954) idea of archaeology's "ladder of inference" in which the study of archaeology informs most effectively on the economy, has more trouble with

questions of social structure, and is most deficient in shedding light on ideological systems. The danger of carrying this approach to its logical end is exemplified by Moses Finley's (1954) observation that archaeology varies in importance in an inverse proportion to the amount of textual material available. Although this conclusion may ring true in broad terms, it relegates archaeology to a secondary discipline and assumes that archaeology does not provide any worthwhile conclusions when there are 'enough' texts.

Archaeology as Long-Term History. This approach holds that archaeology is in a unique position to reveal the processes of long-term change in human societies. This approach takes inspiration from the Annales School of social history that developed in France. Braudel (1972) of the Annales School hypothesized that history could be seen as a progression in three temporal lengths: the event, medium-term processes, and long-term history (*longue durée*). The potential of archaeology to stretch back into prehistory and span the gap between prehistoric and historic periods makes it uniquely suited to address Braudel's long-term history. The idea of studying the long-term perspective has led to calls for the end of the 'schism' between prehistoric and historic archaeology so that this long-term analysis will be made easier by mutual understanding and common methodologies (Lightfoot 1995; Papadopoulos 1999).

Archeology Giving a Voice to Forgotten People. This approach sees texts as written by the victors. As an answer to the bias of texts, archaeology can give a voice to portions of society underrepresented in the written record, such as the common people, colonized populations, women, and slaves. Although the careful historian can find these forgotten people (Moreland 2001), archaeology provides a wealth of material on

everyday life of all people. This approach calls on archaeologists to focus specifically on those “invisible people” (Lightfoot 1995).

Historical Archaeology as a Laboratory to Test Models and Methods. This approach holds that periods in which texts and archaeology are available provide ideal laboratories to test anthropological models. These models can then be applied to prehistoric societies to help archaeologists understand societal dynamics. This approach was first suggested by Lewis Binford and has since been used by many American archaeologists. For example, James Deetz (1996) used historic period New England to test the seriation method on historic graves stones. Deetz’ test provided a precise correlation of dates and the seriated ornamental styles on the grave stones.

1.4.2 The Strength of Interdependency for Historical Archaeology

Absolute independence of the textual and archaeological data sets is not desirable as the arenas of interdependency are the distinguishing characteristic of historical archaeology. These interdependencies provide the richness of the stories that emerge from the discipline. The recognition of the realities of the discipline and the manner in which separate data sets aid and enrich each other is a vital part of unbiased scholarship. Unique interdisciplinary insights emerge when historical archaeologists study the encounter of archaeology and text and the new contexts that emerge from this encounter. Andren (1998) organizes these new contexts into three categories. *Identification correspondence* occurs when an object or occurrence mentioned in text is identified in the archaeological record. C*orrespondence correlation* occurs when patterns identified in

the texts are identified as corresponding to patterns in the archaeological record. *Contrast or negative correspondence* is identified when realities portrayed in texts directly contrast with what is gathered from the archaeological record.

This dissertation analyses the textual and archaeological source materials seperately and equally, drawing conclusions from each data set and examining the interfaces between the two sources. I aim to provide a case study for employing these sources together while investigating in detail the emerging contexts from the encounter of text and archaeology.

1.4.3 Employing the Icelandic Sagas for Interdisciplinary Research

The medieval period in Iceland bridges the gap between proto-history and history. In order to study the social processes during this period, archaeology and texts must be used in fruitful combination. The early part of this period, the Viking Age (800-1100), is proto-historic because the available texts were not written in the Viking Age. Rather the sagas were retained in oral tradition for 200 to 300 years before they were recorded in written format. The study of the sagas as a source of history has revolved around two issues: orality and historicity. The first question is whether the sagas derive from a stable oral tradition that stretches back into the Viking Age. The second question is whether they retain historically accurate information. If the sagas were not orally transmitted, then they cannot retain material from the Viking Age. On the other hand, if they contain historically accurate information then this historical material must derive from transmission through a stable oral tradition.

Therefore, the oral transmission of texts, their preservation, and the possibility of using these texts in combination with archaeology are all key methodological issues for this dissertation. This section addresses these issues. First the sagas will be put into the perspective of the scholarship of social memory and the methods for preservation of oral messages. Then, I address the potential for employing the sagas as historical sources in combination with archaeological material.

1.4.3.1 Social Memory and the Transmission of Oral Tradition

Memory exists for social groups as well as for individuals. A growing scholarly literature on social memory stresses the active use of memories in constituting society and in defining society for its members. Social memories as an expression of collective experience provide group identity and collective unity (Fentress and Wickham 1992) while also serving as a means for instruction in social norms. As previously mentioned, messages are transferred through text, oral/aural communication, and material culture. As a result, social memory can also be studied through text, oral tradition, archaeology. Texts and oral traditions are more commonly studied as a means to understand social memory, but the work of scholars such a Susan Alcock (2002) has shown that the study of social memory trough archaeological remains, especially landscapes and monuments, can also be fruitful.

The messages from texts, oral traditions, and material culture are only available through a process of selective preservation (Geary 1994a). This selective preservation is largely dependent on what people in the past considered important and useful for them. In

this sense, the preservation of tradition is political in the broad sense of the word. This may seem more directly applicable to oral tradition and texts, but material remains are also selected and destroyed. The transmitters of oral traditions select and stress certain elements in their stories. In similar fashion, for example, medieval Cluniac monks made changes to written documents by destroying, revising, recopying and reorganizing their received written tradition (Geary 1994a). Material messages have been destroyed by conquerors and revolutionaries, but also by archaeologists who favor one period over another, or curators who preferentially exhibit particular artifacts or cultural periods. The central point is that oral traditions, textual sources, and material remains are similar in their vulnerability to selection.

Oral tradition, as a body of messages transferred orally over time, has been studied extensively ethnographically and in the laboratory to the extent that we today have a reasonable understanding of the process and the preservative capacity of oral tradition (see Vansina 1985; Rubin 1995). The process of oral tradition preservation requires the transmission of messages by word of mouth over time. In the process of oral tradition transfer, the performer relays the message to an audience. The products are oral messages based on previous oral messages, but most often it is impossible to locate the original message. The process of composition takes place as the story is told and this composition preserves as well as (re)-creates the message. Oral tradition has a dual character, being of the present in the sense that it is told in the present, but also of the past in the sense that it is message from the past. As such these stories are valuable documents containing both information about the past and the present.

A final, and for the purposes of this study, the most important observation concerning oral tradition, is that it has been shown to be capable of a high degree of stability over time. 'Traditional' oral traditions have been empirically proven qualitatively much more stable than what we know as 'rumors.' This degree of stability indicates that societies must have developed organizational methods of maintaining stability in their oral messages that were important for their society. These strategies of oral transmission decrease the changes that occur in the casual transmission of verbal material (Rubin 1995).

1.4.3.2 Methods of Oral Tradition Preservation and Recall

The first break-through in understanding the methodology of the transfer, production, and preservation of oral tradition was achieved by Milman Parry and Albert Lord in their attempt to explain the Homeric epic by studying the composition methods of oral performers of the South Slavic Tradition (Lord 1960). Parry and Lord realized that the oral performer did not memorize his story, but had techniques of memory that allowed him to recall the message sequentially as he composed. Lord proposed the "Oral Formulaic Theory," in which oral performers built metrical lines by means of formulas and constructed stories or songs by organically stringing together themes. A formula is a group of words employed under similar metrical conditions to express a similar idea. A theme is a group of ideas routinely combined to make a common active scene. Formulas facilitate composition and recall of specific lines in the narrative while themes ease the task of the singer or story teller by allowing the tale to be recounted through the ordering

of a string of themes. In this way the basic stories can be preserved. At the same time, the changes that occur to these types of stories frequently fall in to certain clear categories that can be recognized as intrusive to the earlier story.

The breakthrough in the understanding of oral composition achieved by Parry and Lord sent scholars around the world looking for formulas and themes in traditions that were believed to be oral. This occurred in the study of Old Norse literature studies as well. In the 1950s Robert Kellogg wrote a dissertation about the formulas in Norse Eddic poems, showing their oral background (see published version in Kellogg 1988). The formulas in Kellog's research, however, did not play decisive roles for the flow of the story in the poem, but rather appeared to provide detail and ornamentation. Most of the preserved Norse literature is not verse poetry, but rather prose with interspersed poetry.

The form of the Germanic narrative tradition progresses temporally from a pure verse narration distinctive of early West-Germanic societies and represented by the Eddic poems to the saga prose form best represented by the Norse Icelandic sagas. By the medieval period when the sagas were written down, prose had taken over the narrative function from poetry. The Icelandic Sagas do not rely on formulas for composition to a degree anywhere near what Lord had observed (Lönnroth 1971). Since the sagas do not feature a large degree of formulaic construction, scholars looking for the oral tradition behind the sagas had to look beyond Parry and Lord for an understanding of the strategies used by the saga authors.

A more recent theory of multiple systems of narrative constraint proposed by a cognitive psychologist, David Rubin (1995), helps expand Lord's theory by drawing

attention to other methods of maintaining narrative stability. Rubin suggests that the performer's sequential recounting of oral tradition is directed by multiple constraint systems that limit his/her choice of what comes next in the story. As the sequence of the story progresses, it provides constant new clues for recall that also limit the transmitter's verbal choices. Rubin's system revolves around four constraints: 1) theme/meaning ("local clues" similar to Lord's themes help structure the story from line to line, while action sequences and causal chains provide a "global structure"); 2) visual imagery; 3) rhythm of poetic devices and music that limit narrative choices; 4) personal and social context that work as constraints in stories told about the story-teller's own society such that each event has to be plausible for the audience. Different genres focus on a certain relationship of these constraints such that each story or story group is a unique solution to the constraints. In Rubin's theory, Lord's formulae are simply a specific unique solution to the genre of heroic epic and cannot be universally applied to all oral traditions.

Moving beyond Lord's themes and formulae, Jesse Byock (1982) has proposed a specific solution for the oral retention, recall, and construction of the genre of Icelandic sagas. Byock sees the sagas as a native Icelandic tradition that served the function of teaching the knowledge of conflict resolution. Channeling conflict into the unique Icelandic feud system was essential for the society's survival. The sagas themselves were put together by blocks of narrative action that are similar to Lord's themes. In the sagas, these blocks of narrative action all relate to feuding and Byock calls them "feudemes." Variants of the three groups of feudemes (conflict, advocacy, resolution) combine to form feud clusters. These feud clusters are separated from each other by narrative shifts (i.e.

location, season, time) and are tied together in feud chains that flow logically from each other to form the larger saga. In Byock's theory, there is no fixed sequence in the feudemes or feud chains and no necessary narrative climax. A saga teller can thereby make the saga shorter or longer as the situation demands. The saga narrator was constrained by the need to keep the story plausible for an informed audience that understood their history through the combined network of the saga tradition. This theory provides a methodological explanation of the saga teller's recall process and the potential stability of historical material in the saga tradition.

1.4.3.3 Sagas, History, and Archaeology

The use of the Icelandic Sagas in scholarly research is a contentious issue for historians and anthropologists. Various factions in the scholarly community have attempted to measure the historical value of the material preserved in these texts. Traditionally there was a divide between adherents of "Bookprose" who believed that the sagas were fictional and of literary origin (see e.g. Nordal 1958; Clover 1982), and adherents of "Freeprose" who held that the sagas contained historical facts maintained in tact in oral tradition (see e.g. Jónsson 1907, 1921). This section examines the changing scholarly views on the nature of the sagas, and how these views have affected the role of the sagas in the fields of history and archaeology. I suggest that enough data has now been accumulated to indicate that the sagas preserved a stable oral tradition that has often been shown to contain memories of actual historical events and processes. As holders of

historical material, the sagas are an invaluable source for the interdisciplinary study of this dissertation.

The written sources employed most extensively in this dissertation are the Icelandic Family Sagas, the Sturlunga Sagas, and *Landnámabók*.[12] The Family Sagas, which are the most expansive, are the most important textual source for Viking Age Iceland. The Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*) address events from the initial settlement of Iceland around AD 870 until the early 11th century, while the Sturlunga Sagas (*Sturlungasögur*) deal with the period from the late 12th to the end of the 13th century. Arngrímur Jónsson, who wrote the first history of Iceland in the middle of the 17th century, treated all these sagas as accurate historical accounts. As part of the Romantic view of the sagas popular at the time, Jónsson viewed the sagas as history and told the political history of Iceland from the point of view of successful chieftains mentioned in the Family and Sturlunga Sagas. In the 18th century, scholars continued the Romantic approach and with a growing antiquarian interest in archaeological remains, they interpreted sites and archaeological remains with direct reference to saga names, places, and events.

In the 19th century, antiquarian research reached its height. Sigurður Vigfússon became the first official antiquarian in Iceland by 1875 and began large-scale research and publication of archaeological remains in Iceland. Vigfússon followed the literary tradition of the day, which believed in historical reliability of the sagas. This position had

[12] The Family and Sturlunga Sagas are just two of many types of sagas that also include the King's Sagas (*Konungasögur*), the Mythic/Legendary Sagas (*Fornaldarsögur*), the Lying Sagas (*Lygisögur*), the Bishops' Sagas (*Byskupasögur*), and the Chivalric Sagas (*Riddarasögur*).

begun to solidify in the 19th century into what is known as Freeprose Theory, which articulated the theory that the sagas were orally composed and transferred intact into the their current written form.

In the first half of the 20th century, a new theory, later called Bookprose Theory, emerged from the Icelandic School of saga scholars. This theory can be traced to the German scholar Konrad Maurer, but it flourished in the hands of Icelanders who were motivated in large part by a new nationalism in Iceland that sought independence from Denmark (Byock 1984, 2001). The main proponent of Bookprose was Sigurður Nordal whose essay about the fictional nature of *Hrafnkels Saga* (Nordal 1958) had a lasting effect on the academic view of the saga literature.

By the 1950s, Iceland's most prominent archaeologist, Kristján Eldjárn changed his methodology for the study of old pagan remains and began to study the archaeology independently of the sagas. Within the field of archaeology, this trend reached its height with Olaf Olsen's 1966 thesis *Hørg, Hov, og Kirke* in which he declares that the accounts of pagan practice in the sagas and *Landnámabók* yield no valuable information about actual Viking Age pagan practices. To a certain extent, Bookprose was liberating for archaeologists as they were able to claim the value of their field separate from textual history, but neglect of historical analogy led to the exclusion of data and decreased potential for drawing conclusions.

Recent breakthroughs in the understanding of the stability of oral tradition derived from ethnographic field work (Lord 1960; Vansina 1985), the laboratory work of cognitive psychologists (Rubin 1995), the study of preservation of oral traditions in

Icelandic Sagas (Byock 1982; Kellogg 1988; Lönnroth 1971; G. Sigurðsson 2004), as well as independent verification of saga stories from archaeological research (Ingstad and Ingstad 2001; Byock et al. 2005) have led to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between orality and historicity. As a result, most modern scholars agree that the sagas do retain information from oral tradition, and that they have been shown to hold historical realities. A growing number of scholars employ the sagas as historical texts that provide social and anthropological insights into medieval Icelandic society (Byock 1982, 1988, 2001; Miller 1990; Durrenberger 1992; J. V. Sigurðsson 1999; G. Sigurðsson 2005). These scholars agree that the most important element of saga historicity lies not in their retention of specific historical events or characters, but rather in their preservation of anthropological information regarding societal patterns and social memory of historical conditions.

The oral background of the 13th century prose sagas can be illustrated by the correspondence of saga stories with mythological scenes from much earlier picture stones and rune stones across the Viking World. For example, multiple monuments depict scenes described in the Icelandic saga legend of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer, including such distinct scenes as the roasting of the dragon's heart, the otter's ransom, and the horse Grani loaded with treasure.[13] The Sigurd legend of the sagas is supported by poetic stanzas that helped to retain the story in oral tradition from the at least the 9th to the 13th century. The story in the Icelandic *Prose Edda* of Thor's fishing trip to catch the Midgard

[13] See e.g. the famous Ramsund stone in Sweden from approximately AD 1000; a cross at Halton in Lancashire, England (Bailey 1980: fig. 15); and four Manx crosses found at Jurby (119), Malew (120), Andreas (121) and Maughold (122) on the Isle of Man, most of which date to the 10th century (Wilson 2008: 82-84, fig. 40-42).

Serpent, however, describes a scene recorded only in prose where Thor's foot sticks through the boat as he braces himself against the sea floor to reel in the hooked serpent. This scene with Thor's foot thrust through the boat is depicted on several Viking Age stone monuments in the Scandinavia, including a stone at Altuna in Uppland, Sweden, a stone in the Hørdum church in Denmark, and a stone on the Swedish island of Gotland.

The historicity of sagas in the general sense that they depict societal realities of the Viking Age is supported by both textual and archaeological correspondence, while even some very fantastic accounts in the sagas have been shown to hold historical truth. The 13th century *Heimskringla* records the travels of Harald Harðraði to Russia in the early 11th century after the death of his brother King Olaf and his role as the head of the Varangian Guard that served the Byzantine Emperor. This story is corroborated by a Greek Byzantine source from the end of the 11th century, *The Emperor's Counsel*, that describes the deeds of a captain of the Varangian Guard named Araltes (Harald), the brother of King Julavos (Olaf) of Norway, who served the Emperor from AD 1034 to 1043. Probably the most dramatic support for the historical tradition maintained in the sagas, however, came from the archaeological discovery of the Scandinavian Viking Age site at L'Anse aux Meadows on Newfoundland. This discovery confirmed the seemingly fantastic voyages of Norsemen to the New World recorded in *Grænlendinga Saga* and *Eiriks Saga Rauda*.

I approach the Icelandic sagas as ethnographic accounts recorded by and for medieval Icelanders. These ethnographic accounts include invaluable information concerning the roles of chiefs and internal political processes, including wealth transfers,

alliance building, conspicuous consumption at feasts, and elite gift exchange. The evidence for the oral origins of the sagas is overwhelming, while the historicity of the social patterns and occasionally even particular events in the sagas is now also clear. In Iceland, a stable cultural landscape, an informed saga audience, and the role of the sagas as instructional stories helped to retain saga stability over time. The sagas are both historical sources from the period in which they were written down as well as messages about society in the Viking Age. The unintended messages that are incidental to the story and record common knowledge about the period often contain the exact kind of ethnographic information that helps to illuminate social conditions in the Viking Age. It is with this understanding of the saga material as a powerful data set that I mine the sagas for information about social structure and cultural history in the Mosfell Valley and the surrounding region.

1.5 The Structure of the Dissertation

The chapters of this dissertation between the introduction and the conclusion are divided into three sections based on source material: place names, texts, and archaeology. The goal with this division is to ensure equal and independent analysis of each data set from the sources.

Section I, consisting of Chapter 2, analyzes place name evidence from the Mosfell Valley. Chapter 2 employs the place name evidence to derive a model for settlement order and hierarchy of medieval farmsteads in the Mosfell Valley including primary, secondary, and tertiary sites. The chapter includes a methodological discussion of how to

use place names for understanding settlement patterns and power relationships. The examination of place names also functions to introduce the important geographical and cultural features of the valley.

Section II, including Chapters 3, 4, and 5, treats the written sources in chronological order beginning with the Settlement Period, followed by the Saga Age, and the 12th–13th centuries. Each chapter in Section II focuses on a different type of textual source. Chapter 2 on the Settlement Period (AD 870-930) approaches the textual view of the settlement of the wider Mosfell region with particular attention to the genealogical material in *Landnámabók* and the saga material about the earliest history of Iceland. Study of geneaological relationships between early settlers reveals that a kin-based alliance network structured the settlement of the wider Mosfel region, and suggests that kinship bonds were a formative source of power during colonization. Chapter 4 employs material from the Family Sagas covering the period between 930 and 1030 to examine the ability of the Mosfell chieftains to secure unequal access to the five sources of social power. The richness of these sources allows for a detailed case study of the manner in which Saga Age Icelandic chiefs aspired to intertwine the sources of power to form a mutually supportive power network. Chapter 5 uses largely contemporary sources including the *Sturlunga Sagas*, church charters, and early treaties for the 12th and 13th centuries to broaden the geographical lens and illuminate the strategies used by the people of the Mosfell region to retain a high degree of autonomy during a period of rapid political centralization.

Section III, including Chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9, employs the archaeological evidence recovered from the Mosfell Valley, focusing on the surveys and excavations of the Mosfell Archaeological Project. These chapters are divided according to the sources of power, beginning with the economic foundation, then moving to chiefly political power, and finally to the ideological power across the transition from paganism to Christianity. Chapter 6 presents the history of the settlement pattern in the Mosfell Valley by using a combination of information from large-scale excavations, surface survey, sub-surface core sampling, historical landscape research, aerial photographs, historic maps, and 19th century records of archaeological remains. Chapter 7 reconstructs the subsistence economy of the Mosfell Valley and the chieftains' establishment by combining the archaeological evidence from zooarchaeological material, ancient pollen, botanical samples, and human skeletal remains. This chapter finds dramatic changes over the medieval period as well as evidence of planning in the local subsistence economy to produce products for investment in the chiefly political economy. Chapter 8 analyses the political power of the Mosfell chieftains, focusing on the location and function of regional assemblies and particularly on the feasting potential and prestige good access possessed by the chieftain's household at Hrísbrú. Chapter 9 examines how the people of the Mosfell Valley employed materialized forms of ideology to signal claims to territory, status, and regional authority across three successive phases of paganism, ritual system syncretization, and institutionalized Christianity.

Chapter 2 Place Names: Oral and Written Memory in the Mosfell Valley Landscape

2.1 Place Names and the Study of Medieval Norse Toponymy

The place names of farms, roads, fields, mountains, valleys, rivers, fjords, and other cultural and natural features in the Icelandic landscape hold an unusually rich potential for the understanding of early Icelandic society. Cross-culturally people name both natural and cultural features in the landscape. The value of place names for studies of historical geography, settlement patterns, and belief systems is widely recognized and is based on the principle that the original meaning of a place name often sheds light on the inhabitants and the function (economic, ritual, and/or political) of that site at the time the site was named (Bühnen 1992: 65). These names therefore retain information about settlement hierarchies, landownership, usufruct rights, as well as a wealth of other social uses of the landscape and the significance of specific locations.

Place names are proper names of locations in the landscape, ranging from micro-topography such as individual field or single structures, to large geographic features such as fjords and valleys. These proper names are as a rule conservative, and once an appellative has become a commonly accepted place name their shapes tend to "petrify, turning into language fossils" that frequently remain the same despite changes in the local language (Bühnen 1992: 60). Since landscape nomenclature retains old memories and the landscape itself serves as the site and retainer of social memory (Hastrup 2008: 57) place names are in essence "small fragments of text" tied to the landscape (Gammeltoft 2004:

88). As Hastrup puts it, “words carry the message of antiquity, as attached to little knolls, rocks, ruins, and cairns that are often barely visible” (2008: 63). Particularly in Iceland, place names are often the most significant remains of the old human occupations consisting of turf structures that have melted away into the landscape.

Place names can be broadly divided into two types: topographical names and habitative names. Topographical names (or nature names) are a description of a topographical feature, almost always natural, but also possibly cultural. Habitative names (or culture names) from their conception denote inhabited places, such as farms, villages, enclosures, and settlement clearings (Cameron 1996: 25; Bühnen 1992: 62; Tetzschner 2006: 17-19). Place names can be simplex names containing only a single indivisible name, but are usually compound names consisting of more than one element joined together (Cameron 1996: 27). In compound names, the elements can consist of an adjective followed by a noun (e.g. Great Britain), or of a combination of two nouns, often with the first noun element in the genitive case (e.g. St. Petersburg). In the Norse World, compound names often contain topographical generics consisting of names for natural features, such as –fell (mountain), –vík (bay), and –hlíð (slope). Also common are habitative generics consisting of words for human settlements, like –toft (building plot), -bý (settlement), and -þorp (dependent settlement). Compound place names can derive from a people (e.g. England, “land of the Angles”), but groups of people (families, clans, corporate groups, state citizens) can also take their name from a place name (e.g. Americans).

Names of natural features in the landscape are often extremely stable, and in general, the larger the feature the more stable is the name. As peoples move into a landscape that is inhabited by another population they frequently continue using the previous names for macro-landscape features such as large rivers, bays, and mountains, even if the languages are not mutually intelligible. On the other hand, smaller features, such as individual habitations, fields and other names for micro-topography, often change when a new culture and language becomes predominant. Place name studies in Britain indicate that the closer the language of the newcomers is to the language of the indigenous population, the more likely it is for the place names of smaller features from the indigenous language to be transferred in some form into the language of the newcomers (Townend 2002). When entering an uninhabited area, colonizers provide new names to landscape features, and these names usually remain stable as long as the culture is stable in the use of the landscape. In uninhabited Iceland, the Viking colonizers found a typonymically empty island in which they would provide entirely new Viking Age names to their natural and social landscape.

An important consideration in place-name studies is the relationship between the place names and the "user group(s)" of these place names (Kruse 2004: 98). The articulation of this relationship for any particular set of place names provides a starting point for understanding the historical and social background of the names. All people hold a set inventory of place names in their memory. Within any given area, an individual will know the place names according to the use they have for the names (Olsen 1971: 13-15). Based on the user-group concept, the Norwegian place name scholar Magnus Olsen

divided place names into three types contingent upon the creator/user of the names: 1) names connected to the farm ("gårdens navne"), 2) names connected to the local community ("bygdens navne"), 3) names known and used even by people merely travelling through a region ("veiens navne").

In Olsen's first type, people living on a farm have names for micro-topography within the landscape of the farmstead, only some of which may be familiar to the local community. In the second place name type, the local community shares names for features that are used by the community, such as farms, shared grazing areas, local roads, burial mounds, hills, ravines, and other significant local cultural or natural resources and features. Olsen's third type, consisting of names known also by travelers, include names for larger landscape features important for navigation, such as mountains, fjords, rivers, and valleys, but also human habitation sites of special note, such as large farms. Olsen developed this typology for the conditions and settlement pattern in Norway, but a similar typology is applicable to the Icelandic place names. Olsen stresses the role of travelers in providing names to areas, but this notion has since been successfully challenged and it is now generally accepted that the local inhabitants are usually the creators of place names.

The place name analysis in this chapter will address all the Icelandic place names in the Mosfell Valley, including micro-topography and natural features, but particular focus is placed on the names of farms. The similarity between the Norwegian and Icelandic settlement patterns and toponymic traditions, means that Magnus Olsen's reason for focusing on Norwegian farm names holds true for my work as well: "bostednavnene, *spesielt gårdnavnene, [er] de beste bærere av kontinuitet ned igjennem*

tidene, fordi like så fast som gårdsinstitusjonen er, like så fast er sammenhengen i gårdnavnenes overlevering."[14]

2.2 Icelandic Places Names

2.2.1 Stability and Potential of the Icelandic Place Names

The meanings and origins of Icelandic place names are comparatively easy to understand and therefore readily reveal a vast amount of information about the earliest settlers. The names are easily comprehensible because they all derive from the Norse settlers who arrived as a single cultural group with a single language in a relatively recent and single-period migration. Since then Icelandic society has been a stable, monolingual, and monoethnic society, meaning that the place names have also remained unusually stable. Reinforcing this stability is a large corpus of early written documents recording these names and a spectacularly stable settlement pattern.

The Icelandic language has changed very little since the Viking Age colonization and Iceland has experienced no language shifts that could disrupt the stability of the place names. Place names often survive new migrations and language shifts, because "names, contrary to words, need not carry meaning" (Kruse 2004: 101). Such language shifts, however, often cause adaptations and changes in place names when they are accommodated into a new language, and this can process can obscure the original meaning (Townend 2001). In Iceland, however, there has been no such language shift and

[14] "*…the settlement names, especially the farm names, [are] the best retainers of continuity through the ages, because just as permanent as the farmstead institution is, just as permanent is the consistency of the farm names preservation.*"

the place names therefore remain comprehensible to modern Icelanders. The consistently comprehensible nature of the Icelandic place names has helped further to conserve the original form of the place names.

Furthermore, contrary to most places in the world, written documents from only 200-300 years after the initial settlement of the uninhabited land record a very large number of the place names. Most-notably, *Landnámabók* records the names that many of the original settlers gave to the natural features and farms in their area. Several historic documents demonstrate the stability of the Icelandic place names since the initial settlement, including the sagas, a large number of medieval charters, and historic maps (Sigmundsson 1968: 21-22). Sigmundsson (1991: 192) also argues that the sagas reinforce the stability of the place names by incorporating them into popular narrative stories, which were orally recounted for centuries before being written down.

The stability of the Icelandic farms and settlement pattern and the very recent and limited scope of urbanization have left a social landscape in which almost all of the farms mentioned in *Landnámabók* still exist today in the same place. The large-scale industrial reorganization of the agricultural economy that happened in most parts of Europe in the 19th and 20th century was particularly devastating to the place names of small features belonging to the individual farms (Olsen 1971: 19). In Iceland, however, the limited extent of this development means that even the micro-topographical names have been preserved from the very earliest period, as MAP has demonstrated at Kirkjuhóll (Church-knoll) in the Mosfell Valley where recent archaeological excavations uncovered an early conversion period church (see Chapters 6 and 9).

Dating place names is a rather delicate process that, in the absence of historical documentation of the names, relies on discernible and datable phonetic and lexical language changes and an understanding of changing name-giving styles (Bühnen 1992: 69-70). Place names are often unique to a particular time in history and can be dated by their type. The situation for Icelandic names is more straightforward than in many places. Firstly, having been occupied by humans for only just over 1000 years, the time depth in Iceland is much shallower than in most areas of the world. Moreover, since only a single language group arriving in a single wave of migration is responsible for naming the Icelandic topography, most large landscape features and primary farm sites were named in this period. Nevertheless, as the population grew and the island filled, new farmsteads appeared and the larger old farmsteads were divided into several separate holdings that were each given new names. The temporal order and hierarchical farmstead stratification are directly related. As addressed in this chapter concerning the Mosfell Valley, Icelandic place names yield high quality information for the determination of temporal order and settlement hierarchies.

Finally, the vastness and open visibility of the Icelandic landscape has engendered in Icelanders, even today, a keen interest in the names of topographical features. Anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup (2008: 59, 61) notes, “there is remarkable presence of the past tied to the landscape,” and observes, “virtually every top and turn, every rock and cave, had a name, and on my inquiry the names could all be explained.” This aspect of modern Icelandic culture means that a great wealth of oral tradition is still held by the

local farmers and land owners who live on farms located in the same place and with the same name as the farms of the Viking Age settlers.

2.2.2 Place Name Research in Iceland

Paradoxically, the fact that the Icelandic place names are so readily comprehensible has meant that scholars have made relatively little use of these names. Possibly the task was not seen as scholarly enough. Many of the answers usually sought in place-name research were already obvious in the Icelandic case. For example, in Britain place names shed light on the population migrations of pre-Gaelic, Gaelic, Anglo-Saxon, Norse, Norman people and the replacement, hybridization, and continued use of place names as these peoples interacted. In Iceland, however, there was only a single wave of settlers who were clearly culturally and linguistically West Norse. Subsequently, Icelandic place names have undergone no real transformations. Nevertheless, the collection and recording of the place names for each farm in Iceland has been extraordinary and has resulted in the preservation of even the micro-topographical names in exhaustive reports stored at the Icelandic Place Name institute in Reykjavík. The comprehensive collection of the Icelandic place names and the subsequent categorization and of the various name-types by scholars such as Finnur Jónsson, Þorhallur Vilmundarson, and Svavar Sigmundsson in the last century has created a foundation upon which further analysis, including this chapter, is now possible.

Early place name research in Iceland in the 19th century was often driven by interest in the Icelandic sagas and efforts to identify sites associated with saga events

(Vilmundarson 1999: 133). As such place names were employed in early research as the link between saga stories and archaeological material (Sigmundsson 1968: 25). The first ground-breaking work on Icelandic farm names was Finnur Jónsson's 1915 *Bæjanöfn á Íslandi*. Finnur Jónsson compiled a list of old Icelandic place names that included 7100 farm names. In 1948 Hans Kuhn made further contributions to Icelandic place name studies when he held a series of lectures in Iceland in which he proposed that the first settlers in Iceland had named their farms after themselves. Kuhn also theorized that the –staðir place names referred to abandoned farms named after the people who lived there previously (Kuhn 1972; Vilmundarson 1999: 135). As a response to Kuhn's focus on place names containing personal names, Þorhallur Vilmundarson articulated his "Nature-name Hypothesis," which holds that many of the place names that have been assumed to contain names of individuals actually refer to natural features and their appearances (Vilmundarson 1995: 136-137). Vilmundarson's critique is valid and Sigmundsson (1968: 20-21) has argued that this tendency extends to prefixes that do not necessarily refer to nature (e.g. Ófriðarstaðir, "un-peace-staðir," has been reinterpreted as deriving from Jófríðarstaðir, which includes the female name Jófríð). This tendency holds true for the Helgadalur farm in the Mosfell Valley, which was thought to contain the possessive personal noun form of an unknown man named Helgi rather than the adjective "holy." In the last decades Sigmundsson (1979; 1991; 2002; 2005; 2006) has been the most prolific place name scholar in Iceland. Sigmundsson has expanded the Icelandic place name research to address a number of social questions and bring the detailed Icelandic inventory to bear on broader discussions of Nordic place names in Northern Europe.

On three current debates in particular Icelandic place names have been brought to bear: 1) the presence of Irish monks in Iceland before the arrival of the Norse, 2) the cultivation of grain in Iceland in the medieval period, 3) the existence of pagan temples. The Norse place names in Iceland with the element *pap-* (monk or priest) of which there are five, have been used to argue for the presence of Irish monks on the island before the Norse colonists arrived (Byock 2001:11; Sigmundsson 2005a: 231). This is a possible explanation, but Sigmundsson (2005a: 231) believes that although these names refer to religious people, they do not necessarily have to be Irish or refer to people present before the arrival of the Norse. A number of place names in Iceland and particularly in southern Iceland include the element *akr-* (cultivated field), suggesting that grain was grown there. Similarly, farm names with the element *hof-* (temple) have been interpreted in combination with saga accounts as being sites with pagan ritual structures. This debate over temples still continues, with the opposing side following Olaf Olsen's (1966) thesis that pagan ritual was conducted in the farmhouse and not in separate temples (see e.g. Friðriksson 1995). These three examples do not directly pertain to the issues of social power in the Mosfell Valley that this dissertation proposes to address, but they demonstrate the potential of place name studies to contribute to modern historical and archaeological scholarship about the Viking Age. Most importantly, place names contribute to the understanding of social ranking and settlement hierarchies, and as will be seen in the next sections, this contribution offers clear models useful to the goals of this dissertation and the exploration of social power.

2.2.3 Social Ranking as Revealed in Icelandic Place names

Scandinavian place name scholars have developed a powerful body of theory that allows place name types to be employed for the reconstruction of settlement order and social ranking. The most important observations are that the first Scandinavian farms in an area are almost always named after a natural landscape feature, while secondary settlements frequently contain habitative generic suffixes. Arne Kruse (2004: 103) describes the primary settlement in Norway,

> In Norway today simplex primary topographical names without the definite article like Dal, Nes, and Vik designate settlements. Many of these simplex topographical farm names are likely to have come about during the transition to permanent settlement…The earliest farms were 'super-farms' which actually occupied whole valleys or whole headlands. One can easily understand why neighbors within an area could best refer to these early settlements by indicating their location, and that with names like Dal and Nes the descriptive appellative side to the name and the address location of the settlement were semantically inseparable.

Kruse (2004: 103) explains that the Norse settlers who moved out of Scandinavia in the Viking Age brought the naming tradition as well as the social connotations of these names to their new settlements: "[t]he most prestigious of all would certainly be the topographical names for settlements. As a rule, even today in Norway, the early type of topographical names designate the largest farms, positioned on the best and most central land within an area. It is likely that the Norse settlers in the Viking Age would have chosen to use prestigious names for the very first names of new settlements."

Several scholars have recently begun to recognize a pattern in which, just as topographical names are associated with primary settlements of the Norse Viking Age

expansion, the place names including habitative generics, such as the –staðir, are associated with secondary farms (Olsen 1971: 45; Kruse 2004). In general, Kruse (2004: 105) concludes, "[t]he primary sites are named after the most prominent, mostly coastal, topographical features." Jennings (2004: 114) agrees with Kruse, stating "[t]hroughout the Norse world, habitative settlement names tend to be secondary to those bearing topographical names" and provides the following explanation: "The need to call one's farm '…farm' becomes paramount when the local landscape has already been used to designate a settlement." On the Scottish west coast, where a number of Norse place names remain today, the settlements that seem to have been only primary and coastal all have topographical generics while habitative generics are absent (Kruse 2004: 104-105). In an early study of farm names in Orkney, Marwick (1952: 248) also recognized that the topographical names were among the "very earliest settlements" although he does not explicitly state that these names also carry significance for the recreation of settlement hierarchies. In sum, across the Viking World, primary settlements were named after large topographical features, while secondary settlements often include habitative generics.

2.2.4 -Staðir Names and Icelandic Settlement Hierarchies

One of the most popular generic place-name elements of the Viking Age that appears across the Norse North Atlantic colonies and frequently in the Mosfell region is –*staðir*, meaning simply "place or settlement" (Kruse 2004: 104; Gammeltoft 2001). In Iceland, 1165 –staðir farms have been identified (Andersen 1995: 18) of which approximately 9% are recorded in *Landnámabók* (Sigmundsson 1979: 240). –Staðir

names are one of the best indicators of West Norse (Norwegian) as opposed to East Norse (Danish, Swedish) settlement (Gammeltoft 2001: 286), but the –staðir names also hold great potential for recognizing settlement hierarchies. The element –staðir is part of a class of name elements called habitative generics, discussed above as being secondary in the Norse settlement hierarchy to the topographical names referring to natural features in the landscape. Magnus Olsen (1971: 36-39) noted that the use of the –staðir generic in the formation of names began in the Viking Age and, at least in Norway, became very rare already by the 11th century. More recent Norwegian scholarship has made the distinction that –staðir names containing personal appellatives as the first element appear to date the Viking Age, whereas –staðir names with a first element referring to natural topography are more likely to date to the pre-Viking period (Andersen 1995: 17). Regardless, the –staðir place name largely went out of style in the 11th century, which means for the case of Iceland, that we can be fairly certain of the Viking Age origin of the –staðir names. This section gives special attention to this particular habitative generic because four farms in the Mosfell valley contain this name element

In Iceland, Sigmundsson (1979) argues that the generic –staðir was used for secondary farms established in areas originally inside the borders of the primary settlement farms. This is consistent with the findings of the Norwegian Magnus Olsen (1971: 45) who believes that the –staðir farms consisted of parts of or splinters from the farms of primary importance and that they still therefore are of reasonably high status. In her research on the Western Scottish Isles, Barbara Crawford (1995: 109) agrees with the

secondary status of these farms and states that –staðir names represent the "infilling of colonized areas." Also, MacGregor (1986: 97-99) observes, "[i]n Shetland, staðir-names were applied to secondary but favorable sites, separate from primary farms," and that these name types are completely absent in the Faroes because of the landscape constraints that limited secondary settlements to the –staðir type and thereby made the descriptive use of –staðir irrelevant and redundant.

Most commonly habitative place name generics are preceded by a specific noun modifier such as personal name or a common noun (e.g. Hraðastaðir = Hraði's farmstead). Approximately 4 out of 5 Icelandic place names containing the –staðir element have a personal name as the first element, while one of five include a topographical prefix. Scholars have often assumed that the name preceding the habitative is the name of the occupant of the farm, however, Sigmundsson (1979) theorizes that the personal name used in these constructions could be either the name of the owner of the land or of the occupant/tenant of the farm. In analogous cases in Norse England, Kenneth Cameron (1996: 75) suggests that the personal names in the famous name type in Danelaw called Grimston-hybrids or Toton-hybrids that combine a Scandinavian personal name with the Old English habitative suffix –tūn (village, estate) were the names of Scandinavian overlords who did not actually live in the village or estate. In Iceland, the primary settlers would have gifted the property and subsidiary –staðir farms to followers, dependents, or new-comers, indebting these inhabitants to the primary settlers (Sigmundsson 1979: 240). The –staðir farms are therefore evidence of early divisions of large land claims. Sigmundsson (1979: 241-243) finds it likely that –staðir

originally meant “land parts” and that the usage of the plural form *staðir* rather than the singular *staðr* may be due to the fact that there were several divided parts from each original farm. The importance of these observations for the study of the Mosfell Valley lies in their strength in helping to model a settlement order and hierarchy for the region.

2.3 Place Names in the Mosfell Valley

The remainder of this chapter analyzes the place names of the macro-topography, micro-topography, and particularly the farmsteads in the Mosfell Valley. This analysis applies the theoretical implications of the research on the correlation between Norse toponymy and settlement order to the assemblage of names in the Mosfell Valley in order to model the settlement history and evolution of the local settlement hierarchy. Place names containing word elements referring to trade, travel, and animal husbandry are used to shed light on the pre-modern exchange and production economy in the valley. The place name data for this analysis derives from a number of historical sources about these places, the rich oral tradition about place names collected by the Icelandic Place Name Institute (Örnefnastofnuun), and a series of historic maps showing the location of the pre-modern farms.

In the modern period after the drainage of swampy area in the Mosfell Valley and the mechanization of agricultural equipment, more land has come under cultivation and more farms have sprung up in the valley. The growing urbanization from Reykjavík and the town of Mosfellsbær has also brought non-farming residents into the valley. These recent arrivals settled mostly on the wet and recently drained valley floor. The land

registers from the pre-modern period identify the old farms that pre-date 20th century industrialism and population growth. These sources are used as starting point for discussing the medieval farms. Medieval narrative sources and early modern land charters are less exhaustive, but help to identify the age, history, and importance of the farms and place names.

Before addressing the individual farms in the Mosfell Valley, it is worth reviewing the names of the larger geographical features in the area. A single mountain, Mosfell (moss-mountain), marks the northern extent of the lower Mosfell Valley. Three mountains delimitate the southern side of the valley: Helgafell, Æsustaðafjall, and Grímmannsfell. The two names for mountain, fjall and fell, are virtually interchangeable although a fjall is sometimes thought of as being steeper and wilder (Kålund 1877: 47). Helgafell is the most interesting of the mountain names as the prefix Helga means "holy." Considering the distinctive appearance and prominence of this mountain, the presence of a large number of other place names containing the element helgi, -a, -u in the southern portion of the valley, and the multiple medieval saga references to pagan holy mountains, the association of this mountain with holiness surely dates to the pre-Christian settlement period. Æsustaðafjall takes its name from the farmstead Æsustaðir, the implications of which is addressed below in the section on Æsustaðir (section 2.3.3.3.). Grímmannsfell, or Grímarsfell as it is referred to in some sources (Kålund 1877: 47), takes its names from an unknown man named Grímr.

Two rivers run through the Mosfell Valley towards the sea. The northern river, Kaldakvísl ("cold-river") is the larger of the two, and after the rivers merge in the western

end of the valley, the resultant river is called Kaldakvísl as well. The river to the south, often called just Suðurá (south-river) has multiple names determined by and depending on the closest farmstead. As a result the river is called Æsustaðaá ("Æsustaðir's river") as it passes Æsustaðir, but Norður-Reykjaá ("Norður-Reykir's river") as it passes Norður Reykir. This river has also been referred to as Varmá/Reykjaá ("Hot-river/Smokey-River," see e.g. Kålund 1877: 47), but this is probably a confusion with another river named Varmá south of the valley. Nevertheless, the name is apt since this southernmost river in the valley is fed partially by hot springs along the southern slopes of the Helgafell mountain and the inhabitants of the valley were clearly referring to the temperature difference between the two rivers when they called the northern river, cold river (Kaldakvísl). These hot springs, which would have been a great resource to the inhabitants of the valley, are all dry today because of drilling to provide hot water to Reykjavík. The hot springs are still recalled in the place names Norður-Reykjahver ("Norður-Reykir-hot spring"),[15] Lukkupollur ("Happiness-pool"), Brenndihver ("Burning hot spring"), or Brenndulaug ("Burning-bath"), and Gvendarlaug ("Gvendr's bath") (Stefánsdóttir et al. 2006: 56, 146).

Among the pre-modern land registers recording the farms of the Mosfell Valley by far the most comprehensive and most useful for establishing the pre-modern farms of the valley is *Jarðabók Páls Víðalíns og Árna Magnússonar*. The Danish King had this compilation made by Páll Víðalín and Árni Magnússon in 1704 because he wanted a full account of his Icelandic lands for taxation purposes. Specifically, the records in this land

[15] *Hverr* (*pl. hverar*) meant a cauldron or a boilder in Old Norse, but this word was used in the new volcanic landscape of Icelandic to refer to naturally occuring hot springs.

register consist of the name of a farm followed by the estimated worth of the farm, the identification of the owner and the inhabitant (tenant), a description of the kind and number of animals, the possessions of the farm, and frequently a maximum livestock capacity of the lands owned by the farm. These entries range from about half a page to two pages of modern print. In addition, some entries have notes that estimate taxable value of the farms. Table 2.1 below lists the farms in the Mosfell Valley in 1704 when the register was made and their estimated contemporary value (Table 2.1).

Farm Name		**Worth (in hundreds)**
Backakot (Bakkakot)		recorded with Mosfell
Helgadalur		10
Hladgierdar kot (Hlaðgerðarkot)		10
Hradastader (Hraðastaðir)		10
Hrijsbru (Hrísbrú)		28
Laxnes		15
Leirvogstunga (Leirvogstúnga)		28
Minna Mosfell		10
Mosfell		30
Nordur Reykier (Norður Reykir)		10
Skieggiastader (Skeggjastaðir)		5
Æsutader (Æsustaðir)		10

Table 2.1 The farms in the Mosfell Valley as recorded in the *Jarðabók Páls Víðalins og Árna Magnússonar* from 1704. The spelling of the modern farm names is provided in parenthesis if different from the 1704 form. The column on the right records the total worth of each farm in the long-hundred system (i.e. one "hundred" is 120).

The twelve farms listed in the *Jarðabók* form the basis of the place name analysis presented in this chapter. All these farms still exist today, except Bakkakot, which was a small tenant farm owned by the Mosfell farm, established in the 17th century, and abandoned by the middle of the 19th century. The use of the habitative generic –kot in farm names began relatively late in Iceland and first appears in the sources in the 14th century after which they become popular in names of crofts (i.e. small attached tenant

farms; Sigmundsson 2005b: 213). Of the twelve farms in the *Jarðabók*, five appear in medieval sources pre-dating AD 1400: Helgadalur, Hrísbrú, Hraðastaðir, Mosfell, and Skeggjastaðir. This does not mean that no other farms could have existed in the valley during the medieval period, but strongly suggests that these were the five most important farms. Hrísbrú, Mosfell, and Skeggjastaðir are mentioned in the sources concerning the Free-State Period. *Landnámabók* holds that Skeggjastaðir was the valley's first farm, established by and named after the landnámsmaðr Þórðr Skeggi (see Chapter 3 for a detailed analysis of the textual record of this first settler). In several sagas, including *Egils Saga*, *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu*, and *Hallfreðar Saga*, and in *Landnámabók* the Mosfell farm is the seat of the Mosfellingar chieftains and the center of power in the region. Helgadalur and Hraðastaðir first appear in a charter from 1395 of the lands owned by the Viðey monastery, situated on an island in the bay west of the Mosfell Valley (*Dipl. Ís.* III: 598). The last major land register prior to the 1704 *Jarðabók* is *Fógetareikningar* 1547-1552. *Fógetareikningar* consists of the king's magistrate's account of the lands owned by the king after the Reformation during which the Danish King took control of lands previously owned by the Catholic Church, including the rich Viðey monastery (*Dipl. Ís.* XII). Laxnes, Leirvógstunga, and Minna Mosfell first appear in this land register.

These documents provide *terminus ante quem* dates for the establishment of the farms in the Mosfell valley, but the farms could of course be older. In fact, some farms that are not recorded until 1704 may be older than farms that appear in the 1395 Viðey charter or the 16th century *Fógatareikningar*, since these latter two are not comprehensive

land registers and include only the lands owned by the monastery and the Danish King, respectively.

Closer analysis of the individual farm names provides more information on the relative and absolute dating of the Mosfell Valley farms, as well as the settlement order and hierarchy among the farms. The farms in the Mosfell Valley that have topographical names are 1) Mosfell, 2) Minna-Mosfell, 3) Hrísbrú, 4) Laxnes, 5) Leirvogstunga, 6) Helgadalur, and 7) Norður Reykir. The farms with habitative names are 1) Hraðastaðir, 2) Æsustaðir, 3) Skeggjastaðir, and 4) Hlaðgerðarkot. The presentation of these farms which follows here is divided into primary farms, secondary farms, and tertiary farms.

2.3.1 Mosfell: The Primary Farm in the Valley

Mosfell, meaning "moss-mountain," is the name of the mountain and the farm that lies at the foot of the mountain's southern slope. The Mosfell name also provides the basis for most regional names in the area, including Mosfellsdalur (Mosfell Valley), Mosfellsveit (Mosfell region), Mosfellsheiði (Mosfell heath), and the modern Mosfellsbær (Mosfell town). The mountain is a distinct and clear landmark in the landscape that is prominently visible from the sea, where it stands out isolated between two valleys. The first element (Mos-) refers to the green moss that would have covered the mountain when the Viking Age settlers first arrived (Kålund 1877: 47). The green mountain would have stood out in contrast to the rockier and steeper Esja and Helgafell mountains to the north and south. The shape of the Mosfell mountain with fanning slopes to the east and plentiful green vegetation would have been more easily usable

economically for the pastoral Norsemen at the time of settlement. As has been generally theorized (Olsen 1971) and unquestionable demonstrated for the Scandinavian Norse (Kruse 2004; Jennings 2004; Olsen 1971), settlers in a new land name their first and primary farm after a prominent topographical landmark in the vicinity of their settlement. This theory alone strongly suggests that the Mosfell farm was the first farm in the valley.

Demonstrative evidence that Mosfell is the primary farm in the region is provided by the use of Mosfell as the appellative base in almost all the regional place names that fit into Magnus Olsen's broadest place name type. In Olsen's terms, the user group for these larger geographic place names stretched far beyond the Mosfell Valley, showing the importance of the Mosfell farm and the people of Mosfell in the Icelandic cognitive landscape. The fertile valley to the south of the mountain, Mosfellsdalur (Mosfell Valley), takes its name from the mountain and/or the farm. The important large heath that lies between the valley and the Þingvellir plains where the Althing met is called Mosfellsheiði (Mosfell's heath). The old communal area is known as Mosfellshreppur (Mosfell's district), and the whole larger region as Mosfellsveit (Mosfell's region). In the sagas, the people from the region are called Mosfellingar (the people of Mosfell). This last point is important, because it shows clearly that the name of the geographical feature, the farmstead, and the people became linked conceptually from the earliest time. Olsen (1971) and Kruse (2004) both discuss such conceptual equivalencies for primary settlements. Therefore, the broad geographic place names that include the possessive of Mosfell (Mosfells) take their names not after the mountain, but after the primary farm in the region and the people associated with this farm.

2.3.1.1 Mosfell in an Example of Analogical Place Name Formation

Another indication of the primacy of the Mosfell site in the settlement order and hierarchy of the Mosfell Valley is use of this place name as the basis for the analogical name formation of a high status site also called Mosfell in the Grímsnes region to the east. In addressing "analogical formations" of place names, Fellows-Jensen (2004) explains that settlers often apply the names of their previous home to their new homes although these new homes may not fit the descriptive terms included in the original name. Fellows-Jensen (2004: 146) finds several examples of analogical formations of Norse place names brought from Danelaw to Wales, the Isle of Man, and the Central Lowlands of Scotland. There are of course numerous examples of this in the United States in names such as Oxford, Cambridge, and Hastings that were brought from Britain.

Sigmundsson (1991: 193-194) has studied analogy in Icelandic place names and concludes that formations of names by analogy did occur, but that it was rare and is difficult to identify, particularly since the Icelandic place names containing descriptions of topography appear nearly always to be suitable matches for their location in the landscape. Nevertheless, *Landnámabók* contains a description of an early Icelandic settler Ketilbjörn the Old and his visit to Þórðr Skeggi, the first settler in the Mosfell Valley. He lives with Þórðr for a while and marries Þórðr's daughter, before moving to Grímsnes and establishing a farmstead there called Mosfell at the foot of an isolated mountain also called Mosfell (see Chapter 3 for a detailed discussion of these settlers and the relationship between them). There are only two historical farms with the name Mosfell in

Iceland, making it almost certain that the historical tradition of Ketilbjörn is evidence of a link between the two Mosfell farms and that the name of the farm in Grímsnes refers to the Mosfell in the Mosfell Valley. That these naming traditions are also a record of an alliance between these two farms will be addressed further in the Chapter 3. The important point for this section is that the use of Mosfell as a source for early analogical name formation provides further evidence that Mosfell was the primary farm in the Mosfell Valley.

2.3.1.2 Land Division and the Shift of the Mosfell Place Name

The Mosfell farm originally utilized the entirety of the southern slopes of the Mosfell mountain, but later in the medieval period this productive land was divided for more intensive use between three farms: Mosfell, Hrísbrú, and Minna-Mosfell. The modern farm of Mosfell is located between Hrísbrú to the west and Minna-Mosfell to the east, but this may not have been the location of the original Mosfell. Scholars have long disagreed over where the original Mosfell farm stood, particularly as the earliest textual record, *Egils Saga*, suggests the primary farm and the Mosfell farm name was transferred from the location of the Hrísbrú farm to its current location in the 12th century:

> *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 þat til jartegna, at síðan er kirkja var gör at **Mosfelli**, en ofan tekin at **Hrísbrú** sú kirkja, er Grímr hafði gera látit, þá var þar grafinn kirkjugarðr. En undir altarisstaðnum, þá fundusk mannabein; 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 prestr Þórarinsson, vitr maðr...*[16]
>
> *Egils Saga* Ch. 86 (*ÍF* 2: 298-299)

This wonderfully informative passage will be addressed extensively in later chapters, but for the purposes of this chapter, the important point is that the saga recounts Grímr of Mosfell building a church "þar" (there, i.e. Mosfell). When Grímr's church is taken down, the location has had its name changed to Hrísbrú and a new church is erected at a new location called Mosfell. The implication is that when the primary farm moved, the place name Mosfell moved with it and that the name Hrísbrú was given to the location of the old farm. This is particularly likely as the name of the farm and the identity of the farm's inhabitants were inexorably linked. The saga also provides a pointer to the date of the movement of the Mosfell farm by stating that movement of the church took place when the priest Skapti Þórarinsson lived at Mosfell. The same Skapti is recorded in *prestatal*, a list of important Icelandic priests in AD 1143 (*Dipl. Ís.* Vol. 1: 86), as well as in *Þorgils Saga ok Hafliði* during an episode taking place in 1121 (Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1946: 50; see Chapter 5 for a thorough treatment of Skapti Þórarinsson and the Mosfell Valley in the 12th century).

Although the saga passage does not directly say that the main farm was moved, the first modern scholar, Magnús Grímsson, who was also the priest at Mosfell, had no doubt that the original Mosfell was situated where Hrísbrú is now and that the movement

[16] "*Grímr of Mosfell was baptized when Christianity was adopted by law in Iceland; he had a church built there. And people say that Þorðis had Egill moved to the church, and this is evidenced by the fact that afterwards when a church was built at Mosfell, and the church that Grímr had had built at Hrísbrú was taken down, then the old churchyard was dug up. And under the location of the altar, human bones were found. Men thought that they knew from the stories told by old people that these must be the bones of Egill. At that time Skapti the priest Þórarinsson, a wise man, lived there…*"

of the farm took place between 1130 and 1160 (Grímsson 1861: 255, 260). However, the famous early antiquarian Sigurður Vigfússon (1885: 62-63), who was known for taking saga accounts absolutely literally (Friðriksson 1994: 55-63) disagreed with Grímsson's interpretation because,

> *…hvorki Egil's saga eða nokur önnur saga nefnir þenna bæjarflutning... Eg held blátt áfram, að bærinn á Mosfelli hafi frá upphafi staðið þar sem hann stendr nú, og að Grímr Svertingsson hafi búið þar, enn hann hafi þá bygt kirkjuna nokkru fyrir utan bæinn þar sem síðar var kallað á Hrísbrú, og hún hafi staðið þar til um miðja 12. öld, sem síðar mun sagt.*[17]

Vigfússon's proposition of the placement of the original church approximately 900 m away from the original farm house is very improbable because, as Kålund (1877:49-50) points out, early Icelandic churches were as a rule located close to the farm houses, not least because churches were the only widely respected places of sanctuary from violence. Moreover, even Vigfússon observed a partially anthropogenic knoll called Kirkjuhóll (Church Knoll) behind the 19th century Hrísbrú farm, which Grímsson (1861) and Kålund (1877: 49) held as a candidate for the location of Grímr's original church. Despite this micro-topographical clue concerning the presence of an old church, Vigfússon (1885: 64-65) believed that since he could see no old farm remains at Hrísbrú, that it was unlikely to have had a large original farm. The Mosfell Archaeological Project's excavation of a conversion era church and a large 10th century high status longhouse at Hrísbrú has now proved Vigfússon wrong (see Chapter 6).

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[17] *...neither Egils saga nor any other saga mentions that farm movement…I continue to believe that the farm of Mosfell has from the beginning stood there where it stands now and that Grímr Svertingsson lived there, but that he built the church some distance outside of the farm in the place later called Hrísbrú, and that it stood there until about the middle of the 12th century, as is later said.*"

Finally, the location of the Hrísbrú farm appears to be the most suitable and likely choice for settlement by the first settlers to the valley. Hrísbrú is located at the bottom of the highest point of the Mosfell mountain, in the place where the mountain's grass-covered slopes are the widest and would have provided the best grazing land. Kålund (1877: 49-50) observed these qualities of the Hrísbrú location already in the 19th century, despite the fact that the primary power center of the valley had shifted to the current Mosfell farm . The prominent location of the Hrísbrú farm also dominates the mouth of the valley and from Hrísbrú it is possible to look straight down to the bay at Leirvogur where ships landed during the Viking and medieval periods. The landscape and place name evidence as well as the textual sources strongly suggest that the original Mosfell farm stood at the site of the modern Hrísbrú farm. Particularly in light of the archaeological excavations at Hrísbrú, this conclusion appears fairly certain.

2.3.2 Helgadalur and Leirvogstunga (Tunga): Two Topographical Farm Names of Probable Early Origin

The farm names Helgadalur and Leirvogstunga have the construction and character of early primary settlement names. Helgadalur (Holy-valley) contains the interesting adjectival prefix helga- (holy) associated with pre-Christian religion and carries the name of the large subsidiary valley that extends south of the east-west axis of the Mosfell Valley. Leirvogstunga (Clay-Bay-promontory), originally called Tunga (Promontory) in the earliest documents, is a spit of land jutting out into the bay to the north of the Kaldakvísl river. The promontory is clearly visible from the sea. The top of

the promontory where the farm was situated has a commanding view of the bay below. The locations of these two farms would not have been as productive for grazing or grain cultivation as the Mosfell farm located on the sunny south-facing slope of the Mosfell mountain. Mapped together with the Mosfell farm (located at the current Hrísbrú), however, the three farms are evenly distributed across the valley landscape, maximizing distance between the farms within the productive areas of the valley (see distribution of these sites in Map 2.1). Helgadalur and Leirvogstunga may also have had specialized functions or roles in the earliest cultural landscape of the valley. Specifically the place name evidence suggests Helgadalur held special ritual or religious importance whereas Leirvogstunga (Tunga) appears to be oriented towards maritime resources and possibly connected to the monitoring of ocean-going trade to the Mosfell region.

2.3.2.1 Helgadalur and Clues from an Early Pagan Landscape

The Helgadalur farm is located in the southwest corner of the similarly named Helgadalur valley, a subsidiary valley branching off to the south of the larger Mosfell Valley. The first mention Helgadalur farm in the textual record comes from the Viðey monastery charter from AD 1395. The equivalency of topographic name for the Heladalur valley and the farm links the identity of this farm and its inhabitants with the valley. According to the convincing model of place names and settlement order in the Viking world, the place name therefore indicates that Helgadalur was the first farm in the subsidiary valley and most likely one of the first settlements within the larger Mosfell Valley.

The place name Helgadalur, which translates either as “Holy-valley” or as “Helgi’s-valley,” is fascinating for the likely connection with the pre-Christian religion. It is much more plausible that the site name should be interpreted as “Holy-valley,” particularly since several other features in the landscape of the Mosfell Valley have similar place name prefixes that are consistent with the adjective “holy,” but not always with the possessive form of the male name Helgi. These features include Helgafell, Helgusel, and Helgufoss. Helgafell (holy-mountain) is also the name of a farm on the southern slope of this mountain, but this farm is outside of the Mosfell Valley. The prefixes in both Helgusel and Helgufoss could derive from the adjective holy, but cannot be possessives of the personal name Helgi (Helga). For these names to contain possessives, they would have to include the possessive of the female name Helga (Helgu). The most logical explanation is that the names of all these proximate places contain the single adjectival prefix “holy,” rather than imagining that the names of these features derive from two separate individuals, a man named Helgi and a woman named Helga.

The distinctive appearance and prominence of the Helgafell mountain, the presence of a large number of place names containing the element helgi, -a, -u in the southern portion of the valley, and the multiple medieval saga references to pagan holy mountains, suggests that the association of the Helgafell mountain with holiness surely dates to the pre-Christian settlement period. Today there are eight mountains and four farms named Helgafell in Iceland (Sigmundsson 1991: 191). Kålund (1877: 49) points out that the mountains in Iceland named Helgafell drew the attention of the settlers

because they had a similar distinctive shape and were freestanding away from other mountains. The most famous example of such a holy mountain and the connection with the pagan religion comes from *Eyrbyggja Saga* in which a local chieftain and worshipper of Thor perceives the holy mountain as destined to serve as his abode in the afterlife:

> *Þórólfr kallaði Þórsnes milli Vigrafjarðar ok Hofsvágs. Í því nesi stendr eitt fjall; á því fjalli hafði Þórólfr svá mikinn átrúnað, at þangat skyldi enginn maðr óþveginn líta ok engu skyldi tortíma í fjallinu, hvárki fé né mönnum, nema sjálft gengi í brott. Þat fjall kallaði hann* ***Helgafell*** *ok trúði, at hann myndi þangat fara, þá er hann dæi, ok allir á nesinu hans frændr.*[18]
>
> *Eyrbyggja Saga* Ch. 4 (*ÍF* 4: 9)

In the Mosfell Valley, to the east of Helgadalur, there is a beautiful grassy hollow tucked up against Grímmansfell mountain that retains a number of "holy" place names and a story from oral tradition that mirrors the story of an afterlife inside a holy mountain presented in *Eyrbyggja Saga*. The grassy hollow, called Helguhvammur (Holy-grassy hollow), is located alongside the upper Kaldakvísl river and beside a waterfall called Helgufoss (Holy-waterfall). This grassy hollow is sheltered from the wind and has excellent grass (Stefánssdóttir 2006: 134). This must be the reason for the establishment in the hollow of a large dairy station called Helgusel (Holy-sheiling). The association of this location with the supernatural is corroborated by the adjacent mountain outcrop called Huldufólksrani (Hidden-peoples' mountain outcrop). The grassy hollow contains a round crag or rocky outcrop called Helguklettur (Holy-crag) as well as a hill called

[18] *"Þórolfr gave the name Þórsnes (Thor's Nes) to the headland between Vigrafjörðr and Hofsvágr. On that headland stands a mountain; Þórolfr held this mountain to be so sacred, that no man should look upon it unwashed and no living thing should be harmed on the mountain whether it was livestock or man, before it left on its own. He called this mountain Helgafell and believed that he would go into the mountain when he died along with all kinsmen."*

Helguhóll (Stefánssdóttir 2006: 134-135). Oral tradition holds that a woman named Helga, the daughter of Bárðar Snæfellsáss, walked into this knoll to die when she was old and never came out again (Grímsson 1861: 272). Grímsson believes the dairy station may be named after this woman Helga. The preponderance of place names containing the adjectival element "holy," the adjacent Huldufólksrani, and the story of woman's pagan entry into the afterlife, however, makes it far more likely that the whole area was considered holy. The name of the woman who went into the mountain was probably a later supposition based on the possibility that the place names contained the possessive form of the female name Helga.

The southern side of the Mosfell Valley has a series of names that suggest a connection to pagan beliefs that could possibly have been sites of pre-Christian religious practices. The most probable scenario is that the earliest settlers recognized the distinctive shape of the Helgafell mountain, which was prominently visible from the sea, and considered it to be holy. Thereafter, the secondary valley, which was tucked behind the Helgafell mountain and not visible from the sea, probably acquired a similar association with holiness as did the beautiful nearby grassy hollow with special grass-rich and windless properties. These place names have implications for the interpretation of the status, function, and role of the Helgadalur farm and provide the strongest toponymic case for a pre-Christian ritual site in the valley.

2.3.2.2 Leirvogstunga: Orientation to the Sea

Leirvogstunga (Clay-Bay-promontory) takes its name from the spit of land between the Leirvogsá and Kaldakvísl rivers that empty into the Leirvogur bay. The farm is first recorded as Tunga in the Danish King's tax records preserved in *Fógetareikningar* (1547-1552), but Stefánsdóttir et al. (2006: 86) suggest that the farm must have been owned by the Viðey monastery for some time before then. By 1704 Árni Magnússon and Páll Vídalín's *Jarðabók* refers to the farm as Leirvogstunga. The names could have been interchangeable from the beginning. It is also possible that the Leirvogs- prefix was added later to specify the location as the landscape filled. In either case, the place name Tunga/Leirvogstunga supports an early date for this farmstead according to the theory that primary settlements were given topographical names of prominent landscape features (Olsen 1972; Kruse 2004). The promontory of Leirvogstunga is easily visible from the sea as the landscape rises quickly from the bay to the flat and dry promontory, which levels out to the floor of the Mosfell Valley. Nevertheless, the lack of any medieval sources referring to this site indicates that the Leirvogstunga farm was not a local power center. It is possible, particularly in light of the saga literature in which the Mosfell farm wields control over the medieval port in Leirvogur, that the Leirvogstunga was an early establishment from the Mosfell farm meant to exploit marine resources and monitor trade.

The placement of this farm close to the sea would have been ideal for the exploitation of marine resources, such as fish, sea birds, shellfish, and marine mammals, and for the collection and use of driftage that played an important role in provisioning

meat-rich beached whales and wood suitable for building.[19] This site would also have been ideal for monitoring and taking advantage of the naturally favorable ship-landing place in the Leirvogur bay. Multiple medieval sagas mention this port and that the people of Mosfell exerted a level of control over the harbor that allowed them to charge a ship-toll (see Chapter 4 for detailed discussion of the saga evidence). Although the port can be seen from the site of the old Mosfell farm at Hrísbrú, Leirvogstunga would have been much more adequately placed to monitor arriving and departing ships. Both *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* and *Hallfreðar Saga* include stories of the Mosfell chieftains placing a man down by the Leirvogur port in the early 11th century (*ÍF* 3; *ÍF* 8). Although the time depth of this practice is unknown, the location and place name of Leirvogstunga makes this farmstead an ideal candidate for the placement of such monitoring activities.

2.3.3 The Secondary Farms: Farms Containing the –Staðir Suffix

Three farms in the Mosfell Valley contain the habitative element –staðir, suggesting that they were secondary farms dating to the early period soon after the initial settlement of the valley. These farms are Skeggjastaðir, Hraðastaðir, and Æsustaðir. As outlined above, the Icelandic –staðir farms were as splinter farms from primary settlements. This means that the –staðir farms in the Mosfell Valley were subsidiary foundations from one of the three primary farms in the valley. The Mosfell farmstead as the primary farm in the valley is by far the most likely source of the three –staðir splinter farms. The names of the three farms all have a personal name as the first element and

[19] see Chapter 6 for archaeological evidence from the Leirvogstunga farm excavation that supports this idea.

therefore do not reveal much about the reasons for the establishment of the farms in these specific areas. When viewed on a map of the valley together with the primary farms, the three secondary –staðir farms distribute evenly across the landscape (see Figure 2.2). The location of these farms therefore appears to be predicated on the availability of grazing land and maximizing settlement spacing in the landscape. A noteworthy aspect of the personal names in the –staðir farms is that Æsustaðir contains the feminine personal name Æsa, a clear reminder that in the Norse society women were also capable of running households and claiming and owning land.

A farm called Ketilstaðir appears in local oral tradition. Although the exact location of this place is unknown, it is supposed to have been located along the Leirvog river not far from Skeggjastaðir (Steffánsson 2006: 166-167). This farm may have been the valley's fourth –staðir farm, but its location so close to Skeggjastaðir as well as the absence of any written records about this farm makes the antiquity and even the existence of the Ketilstaðir farm dubious. The Ketilsstaðir name may in fact date from the early modern period when using the final element –staðir for farms briefly came back into fashion as a revival of and reference to the old tradition (Sigmundsson 2006).

2.3.3.1 Skeggjastaðir

According to *Landnámabók*, Þórðr Skeggi, the first settler in the Mosfell region settled at Skeggjastaðir in the far eastern end of the Mosfell Valley. Some scholars have doubted whether the first settler would have chosen to establish his primary farm in this location (Grímsson 1861), since it is relatively far from the ocean and the Viking Age

port, and since the site appears to have several potential environmental disadvantages. Skeggjastaðir is exposed to strong northern and eastern winds. The area around Skeggjastaðir is also a snow catch basin that retains snow earlier in the winter and later in the spring than other locations in the valley. On the other hand, some environmental factors, such as the proximity to a very good salmon river and easy access to highland grasslands in a valley initially covered with birch trees would probably have been attractive (Bjarnason and Guðmundsson 2005).

The place name evidence presented above in the section on the Mosfell farmstead provides strong evidence that the Mosfell farm and not Skeggjastaðir was the first settlement in the valley. Furthermore, Sigmundsson's (1979) studies of Icelandic place names suggest that farms with the suffix –staðir were subsidiary farms given out by the main farmer to his supporters. Rather, the secondary settlement name Skeggjastaðir makes it highly unlikely that the Skeggjastaðir farm was the first settlement of the first settler in the region. Skeggjastaðir appears instead to be an early secondary settlement established at the border of the original settler's lands to take advantage of the riverine resources of the Leirvogsá river and the well-drained grassy slopes of an isolated dip in elevation from the low highland landscape otherwise unsuitable for permanent farms.

In Sigmundsson's theory (1979), the first element of the –staðir farm place names reflects either the name of the farmer who owned the farm or the name of the subsidiary farmer who worked the farm. In the case of Skeggjastaðir, the original settler's name Þórðr Skeggi, could have provided the prefix to the farm name, while the farm was occupied and farmed by someone else. The place name evidence suggests that the textual

record in *Landnámabók* may be accurate about the first settler and even his name, but that the author(s) mistakenly assumed that Skeggi lived at Skeggjastaðir, an understandable mistake considering the use of his personal name in that farm's appellelative. The location of Skeggjastaðir on the border of Þórðr Skeggi's original land claim as recorded in *Landnámabók* provides a plausible explanation for the incorporation of the owner's rather than the occupant's name. The inclusion of an appellative marker of ownership in the farm name Skeggjastaðir at the border of the original land claim would have clearly signaled the limits and extent of Þórðr's lands.

2.3.3.2 Hraðastaðir

The first textual reference to the farm Hraðastaðir appears in the Viðey monastery charter from 1395 (*Dipl. Isl.* III: 598). The first element of this place name is the genitive of the male name Hraði. Magnús Grímsson (1861), a priest from the Mosfell farm believed based on his textual and oral tradition research that the earliest farms in valley were Mosfell, Hraðastaðir, and Skeggjastaðir. The –staðir suffix in the place name Hraðastaðir suggests that the farm has an early origin as a subsidiary farm to the main farm, presumably Mosfell/Hrísbrú (Sigmundsson 1979). *Landnámabók* mentions a man named Þorbjörn Hraðason from Mosfell. Some scholars believe this mention in *Landnámabók* refers to the other farm named Mosfell in the Grímsness region (see e.g. Benediktsson 1968: 487).[20] Sigurður Vigfússon (1885: 67, 74), however, believes *Landnámabók* is referring to the Mosfell farm in the Mosfell Valley and that Hraðastaðir

[20] See Chapter 3 for a discussion of this other Mosfell farm and its derivation by analogy from the Mosfell place name in the Mosfell Valley.

was established by Hraði, the father of Þorbjörn: "*Hraðastaðir sýnast vera landnámsjörð og snemma bygðir; eru þeir líklega kendir við Hraða þann, er Landnámabók nefnir…*"[21]

A local oral tradition recorded in the first years of the 19th century corroborates the antiquity of the Hraðastaðir farmstead. This oral tradition holds that a low mound between the Hraðastaðir, Æsustaðir, and Mosfell farms is called Hraðaleiði or "Hraði's burial mound" (Rafnsson 1980: 258-259; Stefánsdóttir et al. 2006: 57). The border between two farmsteads is a common place for pagan burials in Viking Age Iceland (Friðriksson 2009: 11).[22] The possibility of a pagan burial mound on the historical border between Hraðastaðir and Æsustaðir (Stefánsdóttir 2006: 57) is consistent with the establishment of both of these farms prior to the advent of Christianity in Iceland.

2.3.3.3 Æsustaðir

The first textual reference to the Æsustaðir farm appears in 1704 in Árni Magnússon and Páll Vídalín's *Jarðabók* (Magnússon and Vídalín 1926.318-319). The place name, however, with the –staðir suffix indicates that the farm has a much earlier origin as a secondary farm in the valley. As previously described, Sigmundsson's (1979) theory concerning –staðir names holds that these lands are old subsidiary farms that were originally dependent upon the large farms set up by the original leading settlers of Iceland (*landnámsmenn*). The place name indicates the original owner or occupant of the farm was the woman Æsa. Interestingly, the mother of Skapti Þórarinsson, the priest at Mosfell

[21] '*Hraðastaðir appears to be a settlement period farm and established early; it is probably named after that Hraði named in Landnámabók.*'

[22] See Chapters 6 and 9 for a discussion of the archaeological remains of the Hraðaleiði mound

in the middle of the 12th century, was named Æsa, possibly suggesting a connection between her and this farmstead (Bjarnason and Guðmundsson 2006: 25).[23] If this connection is true then it provides support for the link between the primary farm Mosfell and the secondary Æsustaðir settlement. The –staðir type place name, however, implies that Æsustaðir was founded before the 12th century and probably not long after the initial settlement of the valley. Based on his understanding of the valley, Grímsson (1861: 263) suggested without specifying his evidence that Æsustaðir was the original farm occupying the northern slopes of the Helgafell and Æsustaðafjall mountains and that this farm was later split into three: Æsustaðir, Norður Reykir, and Hlaðgerðakot. Several indications from the valley toponymy point to Æsustaðir pre-dating both Norður-Reykir and Hlaðgerðarkot.

An oral tradition about a pagan burial mound called Æsuleiði in which the presumed owner of the farm, Æsa, had been laid to rest, provides hints that the farmstead predates the island's conversion to Christianity. The tradition about the Hraðaleiði burial mound described above and its location on the border between Æsustaðir and Hraðastaðir also supports the antiquity of both these farms.

The larger topographic appellative of the mountain to the south of Æsustaðir, Æsustaðafjall ("Æsustaðir's-mountain"), derives from the name of the farm. The order of naming from settlement to mountain is reversed from the naming order of the primary farms of Mosfell, Helgadalur, and Helgafell, which take their names from the topographical features. The Æsustaðafjall mountain, which is tucked behind Helgafell

[23] See Chapter 4 for a more on Skapti Þórarinsson and textual record of Mosfell in the 13th century.

when seen from the sea, is less prominent in the landscape than the Helgafell and Mosfell mountains. The landscape therefore dictated that the Æsustaðirfjall was named only after the establishment of the Æsustaðir farm. Since the mountain would not have remained unnamed for several centuries, the farm Æsustaðir must have been established early in the settlement history of the valley. Furthermore, names of large geographic features such as mountains are very conservative, making it unlikely that Æsustaðafjall originally had a different name. Æsustaðir must therefore have predated the other two farms in the southern side of the valley (Norður-Reykir and Hlaðgerðarkot). If either of these farms were established before Æsustaðir we would expect the mountain to be named after one of these two farms rather than Æsustaðir.

Based on the place name evidence, Æsustaðir was the first farm in lower southern half of the Mosfell Valley and utilized the grazing land stretching across the northern slopes of the Æsustaðafjall and Helgafell mountains. Subsequently, the land was divided between the three farms Æsustaðir, Norður-Reykir, and Hlaðgerðarkot, just as the southern slopes of the Mosfell mountain were divided in the medieval and post-medieval period between the Mosfell, Hrísbrú, and Minna-Mosfell farms.

2.3.4 Tertiary Farms: Hrísbrú, Minna-Mosfell, Norður Reykir, Laxnes, Hlaðgerðarkot

The tertiary farm names in the Mosfell Valley, with the possible exception of Laxnes, resulted from divisions of older farms in the medieval or early post-medieval period. Based on their names alone and on the historical records of these farms, they were

established as part of the gradual intensification of the agricultural production in valley. Minna-Mosfell, Norður Reykir, Hrísbrú, and Laxnes are topographical farm names, but they are not primary topographical names. Both Minna-Mosfell and Norður Reykir include modifiers (Minna- and Norður-) in reference to earlier and more important farms. Hrísbrú (Reed-bridge), the name given to the farm location of the original Mosfell after the division of the original farm, is a humble name referring to a man-made topographical feature. Laxnes (Salmon-promontory) is a natural topographical name referring to a small tongue of land between the Kaldakvísl river and a small tributary stream. In the landscape, this tongue is not a prominent topographical feature such as the Helgadalur valley or the Mosfell mountain and the Leirvogstunga promontory, which are both visible from the sea. Hlaðgerðarkot is a habitative with the inclusion of the final generic element –kot ("cottage, hut, or small farm") that refers to a small attached settlement. The –kot element is a relatively young generic in Iceland that is first mentioned in the 14th century (Sigmundsson 2005b: 213) The first element in Hlaðgerðarkot is the genitive of the female name Hlaðgerður, making this the second settlement in the valley named after a female occupant or owner.

2.3.4.1 Hrísbrú

Hrísbrú is the oldest of the tertiary farms, and its establishment is recorded in *Egils Saga*. The textual sources do not mention Hrísbrú again until 1547-1548, when the farm was in the possession of the Danish King (*Fógetareikningar*, *Dipl. Isl.* XII). The name Hrísbrú (Hrís meaning "reed or brushwood"; brú meaning "bridge or causeway")

must refer to a causeway that extended south from the farm, across the boggy land that is now drained fields, and down to the old road that ran along the Kaldakvísl river. The Hrísbrú name is a good example of a topographical appellative derived from a man-made feature. This type of topographical name is not a primary settlement name such as those named for natural macro-topographical features. The name Hrísbrú also lacks a habitative suffix such as –staðir, which is common in secondary settlement names. The name Hrísbrú, which was named subsequent to the construction of the causeway, is classified here as a tertiary settlement name. The causeway through the bog would nevertheless have been a noteworthy accomplishment and would be a distinguishing feature for this farmstead.

Hrísbrú is mentioned in *Egils Saga* as the place where Grímr Svertingsson, the chieftain of the Mosfell region, built his church after Iceland converted to Christianity. *Egils Saga* recounts that the priest Skapti Þorárinsson moved the church and probably also the main farm of Mosfell to the site where the modern Mosfell farm is located. At that point the place name Mosfell moved with the main farm and the old Mosfell farm was renamed Hrísbrú. Therefore, the current farm of Hrísbrú was probably the original seat of the Mosfell chieftains and probably the location chosen by the original landnámsmaðr as his place of residence.[24]

2.3.4.2 Minna-Mosfell

Minna-Mosfell, meaning "Little-Mosfell," first appears in the textual record in the *Fógetareikningar* document from 1547-1552 (*Dipl. Isl.* XII). The name of this farm,

[24] see Chapters 6 and 8 for the archaeological evidence that supports this theory.

which references the Mosfell farm and adds the diminutive first element, shows Minna-Mosfell's subsidiary role and indicates that it was established on land divided from the original Mosfell lands. Of the three farms on the southern slopes of the Mosfell mountain (Mosfell, Hrísbrú, and Minna-Mosfell), Minna-Mosfell has the smallest slope area of grazing lands and the least prominent position in the landscape. The relatively poorer hay yields from the homefield at Minna-Mosfell when compared with Mosfell and Hrísbrú is exemplified in the 1704 *Jarðabók* land register compiled by Árni Magnússon and Páll Vídalín, in which the Mosfell farm is worth 30 hundreds, the Hrísbrú farm 28 hundreds, and the Minna-Mosfell farm only 10 hundreds (see Table 2.1; *Jarðabók* 1704, vol. 3: 323-325; Bjarnason and Guðmundsson 2005: 77). The derivative farm name, Minna-Mosfell, and the founding of this farm so close to the Mosfell farm, should only be expected after a series of other farms and farm names had been established in the valley. The textual record of the farm in the 16th century nevertheless makes is probable that Minna-Mosfell is a tertiary farm settled in the late medieval period.

2.3.4.3 Norður Reykir

The farm Norður Reykir, which means "North Smoke or Steam", is first recorded in a land register from 1695 (Lárusson 1967: 130-131). Norður Reykir, like Minna-Mosfell, is a derivate topographical name, which references the farm called Reykir located south of the Mosfell Valley. The reference to Reykir makes sense since both of these farms are located next to concentrations of natural geothermal hot springs. In Iceland the plural reykir (from sg. reykr) in various case forms was commonly used in the

names of farms located next to hot springs (Cleasby and Vigfusson 1874: 496). The hot springs by Norður Reykir are dry today but remembered in the place names Norður-Reykjahver ("Norður-Reykir-hot-spring) and Lukkupollur ("Happiness-pool") (Stefánsdóttir 2006: 146). Norður Reykir is located on a small hill beside below the Helgafell mountain and just west of Æsustaðir. The derivative form of the Norður Reykir place name and the placement of this farm close to the secondary farm Æsustaðir indicate that Norður Reykir is a tertiary farmstead.

2.3.4.4 Laxnes

The farm Laxnes, meaning "salmon-promontory," appears in the Danish King's *Fógetareikningar* tax records from 1547-1552 (*Dipl. Isl.* XII). Laxnes, situated on a tongue of land between the Kaldakvísl river and the tributary stream named Laxnestungulækr ("Salmon-promontory-tongue-stream").[25] The name Laxnes has generated interest among scholars because there are no salmon in the Kaldakvísl river. The large Tungufoss waterfall that lies down the river by the Leirvogstunga farm probably always prevented salmon from swimming up the Kaldakvísl river (Grímsson 1861: 273; Bjarnason and Guðmundsson 2006: 284). The poet Halldór Laxnes, who was born on this farm and adopted the farm's name as his own, believed that the Laxnes farm name had evolved from the original name Lagðsnes (Laid-[thing]-promontory), referring to the wool tufts left behind there by sheep (ullarlögðu; -lagðs being the genitive singular)

[25] The stream name Laxnestungulækr contains the redundant noun elements –nes and –tungu, which both mean promontory or headland. This redundancy serves the purpose of distinguishing it from another stream called Laxneslækr that lies east of the Laxnes farm, but also shows that this stream was named after the farm Laxnes.

(Bjarnason and Guðmundsson 2006: 284). Although possible, this seems unlikely considering the rarity of Lagðs- as a first element in place names and the general stability of the Icelandic place names.

The older oral traditions from the early 19th century hold that salmon once did swim in the Kaldakvísl river. In 1817 Markús Sigurðsson records an oral tradition of salmon in the river, but says that the fish ceased swimming up the river because of "natural causes" (Stefánsdóttir et al. 2006: 74). Magnús Grímsson (1861: 273) recounts an oral tradition from an unknown period that explains the lack of salmon in the river with a story of two old women, one at Laxnes and the other at Leirvogstunga, who both fished in the Kaldakvísl river. Not wanting to share the salmon of the river, the old woman from Leirvogstunga performed sorcery to prevent salmon from ever again swimming up the Kaldakvísl river and into the Mosfell Valley. This story is interesting for the purposes of this dissertation because it is a record of the antiquity of the puzzle over the place name Laxnes that does not seem to suit its natural environment.

Although it is possible that Laxnes was settled earlier, it is grouped with the tertiary farms because of a combination of several factors: 1) Laxnes takes its name from a small topographical feature meaning that is not a primary settlement farm, 2) the place name contains no habitative appellatives such as –staðir to provide clues for an early settlement, 3) the farm is absent from textual records until the post-medieval period, 4) the location of the farm in the center of the valley without the benefits of the well-drained grassy slopes of hills or mountains suggests a tertiary settlement.

2.3.4.5 Hlaðgerðarkot

Hlaðgerðarkot ("Hlaðgerður's cottage") occupies a small piece of land west of Norður Reykir. The name Hlaðgerðarkot connotes a subordinate and tertiary settlement. The habitative generic element –kot was commonly used in traditional Icelandic place names to denote small outlying farms originally attached to or owned by larger farms. The –kot names first appear in the written sources in the 14th century after which they become popular as names for attached tenant farms (Sigmundsson 2005b: 213) This same element was also used in the small 17th-18th century tenant farm Bakkakot owned by the Mosfell farm. The first textual mention of Hlaðgerðarkot is in the 1704 *Jarðabók* by Árni Magnússon and Páll Vídalín (1923: 317) at which time the farm was owned by the Suður Reykir farm located south of the Mosfell Valley. The place name, location, and textual record of Hlaðgerðarkot suggest that this was a tertiary farm, probably always owned by a larger nearby farm, such as Mosfell, Æsustaðir, or Suður Reykir.

A distinctive rocky hill on Hlaðgerðarkot's land named Víghóll ("Slaying-knoll") has an interesting oral tradition that implies the farm may be older than otherwise expected. Local legend as told in 1980 by Guðjóna Benediktssdóttir and Einar Jakobsson from Norður Reykir and Guðmundur Skarphéðinsson from Minna-Mosfell holds that the place name derives from a lethal duel fought on the knoll between two women, Æsa from Æsustaðir and Hlaðgerður from Hlaðgerðarkot. Guðmundur says that he heard this story many times and that both women perished in the duel (Stefánsdóttir 2006: 56). The details of this story are not very believable and particularly the names of the participants in the duel are surely derived from the place names of the two nearby farms of Æsustaðir

and Hlaðgerðarkot. According to the settlement order in the valley proposed in this chapter, Æsustaðir was founded before Hlaðgerðarkot and the women are therefore not likely to have been contemporaries. The oral tradition of the two dueling women is put into further doubt by the much earlier account by Magnús Grímsson (1861: 273), who lived at Mosfell and was very knowledgeable about oral traditions, in which Grímsson mentions Víghóll, but says that he knows of no stories explaining the origin of the name.

2.3.5 Micro-Topographic Names in the Mosfell Valley as Records of Traditional Economic Uses of the Landscape

The place names of the Mosfell Valley contain memories of the most important economic activity in pre-modern Iceland: animal husbandry. Most of the traditional farms in the Mosfell Valley have micro-topographical place names that refer to use of the landscape for pasturing, milking, and stabling animals. These names are very descriptive, recording the purpose the places served in the pastoral economy. Many of these names contain the element *sel*, meaning “sheiling” or “summer dairy station.” Also relatively common is the word element *rétt*, meaning “sheep-gathering corral.” Others place names contain or consist solely of the words *stöðull*, an outlying place on the farm where the sheep and cows were milked, and *stekkur*, which is a specific kind of sheep house with a separate lamb fold. The use of the stand-alone simplex generic place names stekkur and stöðull, in the same form on several farms is predicated upon the generic alone being a sufficient location identifier for the users and indicates that these sites were meant for use of the individual farms and not for the whole community. The following place names

documenting animal husbandry have been recorded on the land of the farms in the Mosfell valley (Stefánsdóttir 2006; Bjarnason and Guðmundsson 2005: 124-130):

Primary Farms

Mosfell: 1) Mosfellssel ("Mosfells' sheiling") on Selflá ("Sheiling-sloping-flats"); 2) Jónssel ("Jon's sheiling); 3) Markúsarsel ("Markus' sheiling") by Selvangi ("Sheiling-field), 4) Helgusel (Holy-sheiling; possibly originally associated with the Helgadalur farm); 5) Selflatir ("Sheiling-grassy-plain"), which includes Selás ("Sheiling-ridge). Located on Minna-Mosfell land, but according to local tradition belonged to the Mosfell farm.

Helgadalur: 1) Selhóll ("Sheiling-knoll"); 2) Helgadalsrétt ("Helgadalur's sheep-gathering corral"); 3) Lambabyrgi ("Lamb-shelter"); 4) Helgusel ("Holy-sheiling"; on land traditionally owned by Mosfell, but possibly originally associated with the Helgadalur farm)

Leirvogstunga: 1) Fjós ("Cow-sheed"); 2) Stöðull ("Outlying-milking pen"); 3) Sauðhústún ("Sheep-house-homefield"); 4) Magnúsarstekkur ("Magnús' sheep-house-with-lamb fold"), a name also associated with Stekkjarbrekkur ("Sheep-house-with-lamb-fold-slopes); 5) Stekkjarmýri ("Sheep-house-with-lamb-fold-bog).

Secondary Farms

Hraðastaðir: 1) Stöðull ("Outlying-milking-pen"); 2) Stekkur ("Sheep-house-with-lamb-fold"); 3) Selhlið ("Sheiling-slope).

Skeggjastaðir: 1) Stöðull ("Outlying-milking-pen)

Æsustaðir: 1) Stekkur ("Sheep-house-with-lamb-fold"), a name also associated with Stekkjarflöt ("Sheep-house-grassy-plain) and Stekkjarholt ("Sheep-house-hillock). 2) Lambahúsaholti ("Lamb-house-hillock")

Tertiary Farms

Hrísbrú: 1) Stekkur ("Sheep-house-with-lamb-fold") ; 2) Stöðull ("Outlying-milking-pen"); 3) Fjós or Fjósahóll ("cowshed" or "Cow-shed-hill)

Laxnes: 1) Rétt ("sheep-gathering corral"); 2) Selás ("Sheiling-ridge)

Minna-Mosfell: 1) Selflatir ("Sheiling-grassy-plain"), which includes Selás ("Sheiling-ridge) and according to local tradition belonging to the Mosfell farm and not Minna-Mosfell.

Norður Reykir: None

Hlaðgerðarkot: None

Most of the large farms have place names that retain the memory of the pastoral economy. Although there may not be an absolute correlation, the farms that have the largest number of these names are also the farms that this chapter suggests were the primary farms in the valley. In general, the secondary farms retain less of these names, while the tertiary farms have few or none of these place names on their land. The exception among the tertiary farms is Hrísbrú, which is likely to have been a very early and successful tertiary farm. Too much should not be read into this, and the number of locally retained place names concerning animal husbandry should not be used as an direct indicator of historical status of a farm. Nevertheless the correlation is interesting.

The traditional ownership and location of the *sel* (“sheilings or summer dairy stations”; sg. sel, pl. sel) is potentially more revealing of the traditional economic power of the farms. By far most of the sel are on land owned from the earliest pre-modern records by the Mosfell farm, and oral tradition holds that the sel supposedly located at Selflátir on the northern slope of the Mosfell mountain and owned by Minna-Mosfell today was traditionally owned by Mosfell. According to the distribution of sel place names the lower portion of Mosfellsheiði (Mosfell's Heath) east of the Laxnes and Hraðastaðir farms and west of the Leirvogsvatn lake was the most important area in the region for summer dairy stations. This is consistent with the landscape since this area in the grassy low-highlands has the most open grazing land (Bjarnason and Guðmundsson 2005: 124). No permanent year-round farms were established in the low highlands before the modern period, and the area has only recently been occupied by a permanent farm that is, not surprisingly, called Seljabrekka (Sheiling-slope). The nearby farms Hraðastaðir and Laxnes have one sel-containing place name each in this area, Selhlíð and Selás, respectively. But it is the Mosfell farm that has held the traditional grazing rights in this area and the following place names in the area containing the element sel are linked to the Mosfell farm: Mosfellssel, Jónssel, Markúsarsel, and Helgusel. The Mosfell farm’s ownership of the vast majority of the productive summer dairy station lands in the low highlands is yet another indication of the historical preeminence of the Mosfell farm.

2.3.6 Names of Travel, Trade, and Transport in the Mosfell Valley

Several place names in the Mosfell Valley retain the memory of early patterns of travel and trade. These places include locations where Viking Age and medieval travelers and merchants would have landed from trips abroad, spots along the roads and streams remembered as overnight camping sites, as well as paths with local community-based names witnessing the travel patterns of pious church goers.

2.3.6.1 Skiphóll and Travel by Sea

According to several medieval sagas, a Viking Age and medieval port was located in Leirvogur (Clay Bay) at the western end of the Mosfell Valley. These sources record memories of the port being controlled by the Mosfell chieftains who treated it as an asset worth defending.[26] The geography of Leirvogur makes an attractive location for a ship-landing. Leirvogur is one of two fjords located at the bottom of the larger bay that opens between the Kjalarnes and Seltjarnarnes peninsulas. The other bay, Kollafjörður, lies just to the north and has no natural protected harbors. The islands west of Leirvogur bay, including Viðey, Engey, and Vesturey, and the peninsulas of Gufunes and Langitangi, provide shelter from the open ocean.

The exact location of the port or ships-landing is not recorded in the medieval texts, but multiple oral traditions compiled by Stefánsdóttir et al. (2006: 198-200) remember a hill name Skiphóll, meaning "ship stony-hill (or ridge)," although the traditions do not agree on its location. One oral tradition identifies the place name

[26] See Chapter 3 for analysis of the medieval saga accounts about the port and Chapter 8 for a discussion of the archaeological research in the Leirvogur bay.

Skiphóll with a low mound located just south of the confluence of the Varmá and Kaldakvísl rivers. However, another tradition calls this knoll Hestaþingshóll (Horse-meeting-knoll) and supposes that traditional horse-fights were held there. A more likely tradition that fits the topography and was recorded earlier believes Skiphóll to be located on a spit of land further out in the Leirvogur bay. Kålund (1877: 45), who preserves the earliest account of this name, states that the name Leirvogur in Old Icelandic is plural (sg. Leirvágr)[27] because the peninsula called *Skibshol* (Danish for Skiphóll) sticks out into the bay, dividing the bay into two parts. Local tradition remembers that this peninsula used to have a large boulder on top, and while this boulder has now toppled over to the east of the peninsula, it is still visible. The boulder would explain the place name "stony-hill," and could have been used to secure ships. In terms of geography, this Skiphóll peninsula is a better candidate for a medieval port, since it provided shelter and water deep enough for ocean going vessels.

2.3.6.2 Names Preserving Memories of Land Travel

Travel over land in the Mosfell Valley in the pre-modern period has left its mark in place names along old roads. 19th and early 20th century maps of the pre-modern valley including Björn Gunlaugsson's map from 1831 and a Danish royal survey map from 1908 indicate that there were two main east-west roads through the Mosfell Valley (see Figures 2.4 and 2.5). One road followed the lower slope of the Mosfell mountain passing directly past the farms of Hrísbrú, Mosfell and Minna-Mosfell before continuing over the

[27] In modern Icelandic, however, vogur is the masculine singular and vogar is plural.

low highlands to Skeggjastaðir. The other road snaked its way along the Kaldakvísl stream.

Two place names, Tjaldanes (Tenting-ness) and Tjaldhóll (Tenting-knoll), are relics of travelers staying the night in these locations and setting up tents (Grímsson 1861: 259). Both these names are located along the river road where the travelers would have had easy access to fresh running water. Tjaldanes, located south of the Hrísbrú farm at the confluence of the Kaldakvísl and Suðurá rivers, is named in *Egils saga* as the place where Egill Skallagrímsson, the great warrior-poet, was buried in a pagan burial mound. The Tjaldanes place name clearly dates to the middle ages since *Egils saga* was written before 1230 (Nordal 1933: LIII-LXX), but it probably also pre-dates AD 1000 as the placement of Egill's burial mound around AD 990 in a location that would be prominently visible for passing travelers can hardly have been accidental. Tjaldhóll is located on the southern bank of the Kaldakvísl river east of the Hraðastaðir farm where a small stream called Stekkjargil joins Kaldakvísl. The antiquity of this name is unknown, but it recalls a resting place associated with the same travel route along the Kaldakvísl river.

Another name that indicates travel, or more precisely the purpose or destination of travel, is Kirkjugil (Church-ravine) on the Leirvogsá river at the northwest foot of the Mosfell mountain. At this ravine the people from the Kjalarnes district to the north crossed the river when heading to church at Mosfell (Stefánsdóttir 2006: 87, 92). The act of travelling to church is called Kirkjuferð (Church-journey). This location also marks the northern corner of the traditional farm boundary between the Hrísbrú and Leirvogstunga

farms (Stefánsdóttir 2006: 87), while the Leirvogsá river marks the boundary with the neighboring district, Kjalarneshreppur. This travel path would have been part of the high road that followed the slopes of the Mosfell mountain leading to the Hrísbrú and Mosfell farms and eventually on to Skeggjastaðir. The age of this name is unknown, but is equally applicable to journeys with a destination at the modern Hrísbrú farm where the old Mosfell farm and the original church stood.

2.4 Conclusion: A Place Name Model for Settlement Hierarchy

The place names of the Mosfell Valley recorded in medieval sagas, church charters, tax registers, early modern maps, and the rich local oral tradition reveal a wealth of information about the economy, cultural history, and the evolution of power structures subsequent to the arrival of the Norse settlers in the late 9th century. Most significantly, this chapter has used the toponymic evidence from the Mosfell Valley to provide a model for the settlement order and hierarchy that identifies the primary, secondary and tertiary farms of the valley. Mosfell was the first farmstead in the valley and the power center of the first settler's land claim that included the entire valley and the surrounding region. Helgadalur and Leirvogstunga, also primary settlements, appeared soon thereafter in opposite ends of the valley and possibly with respective specialized functions associated with ritual practice and the utilization of marine resources and trade (see Figure 2.1). The secondary settlements, Skeggjastaðir, Hraðastaðir, and Æsustaðir, were established within the boundary of the original land claim before the 11th century and probably in the first generation or two of the cultural history of the valley. These secondary sites fill in

landscape with an even settlement distribution aimed at maximizing the utilization of the valley's pasture land and other natural resources, such as the riverine resources of the Leirvogsá river next to Skeggjastaðir (see Figure 2.2). The tertiary farm sites, including Hrísbrú, Minna-Mosfell, Norður Reykir, Laxnes, and Hlaðgerðakot, were products of the intensification of land-use in the valley that resulted in the division of the larger primary and secondary farms (see Figure 2.3). The tertiary farms are more difficult to date, but besides Hrísbrú, which appeared in the 12th century, and possibly Laxnes, the establishment of these farms occurred in the late medieval and early modern period.

Chapter 3 Landnám in the Mosfell Valley Region: Textual Evidence of the First Settlers and the Formation of a Regional Kin-group Alliance Network

3.1 Introduction: The Colonization of the Mosfell Region and the Role of Kinship in Nascent Icelandic Social Structure

This chapter presents and analyzes the textual evidence concerning the first settlers and earliest inhabitants of the Mosfell Valley and surrounding region. A wider geographical view looking beyond the valley is employed in order to address the social relationships that determined the settlement pattern and power relationships created through the early colonization process. The genealogical information contained in *Landnámabók* and the Family Sagas present a coherent picture of the familial relationships of the inhabitants of this region and provide information about their settlement locations. Shedding light on the social processes of the settlement of Iceland and the early period of Icelandic history, the texts include anthropologically relevant data on the power relationships and alliances during the settlement period. Specifically, this chapter addresses the family alliance group of Þórðr Skeggi, the first settler of the Mosfell Valley, and discusses how the *landnámsmenn* (land-taking men) built and maintained coalitions.

The classic view held by most scholars and supported by the textual sources sees the settlement of Iceland as an aristocratic colonization organized by chieftains and rich farmers from Norway (see e.g. Rafnsson 1999: 118). These people, mostly men but also

some women, led expeditions with one or several ships that contained their families, loyal followers, and often slaves. Upon arrival in Iceland, they claimed large tracts of land and gifted land to their followers. The *landnámsmenn* even granted land to manumitted slaves as they soon realized that the labor investment provided by slaves did not significantly increase productivity/hay yield in the pastoral economics of Iceland. The early settlement of Iceland thereby led to a social "leveling process" whereby many attached laborers from the homelands became landowning farmers in Iceland (Byock 2000: 85-87). The right of the *landnámsmenn* to claim enormous pieces of land in Iceland became restricted as the colonization process proceeded. According to the *Hauksbók* version of *Landnámabók* (*H* 294), the Norwegian king helped to negotiate an agreement whereby no man could claim a larger area than he and his crew could carry fire over in a single day. By this time, early settlers had already redistributed many of the large land claims to their followers and kin, creating politically powerful families with broad alliance networks. Although significant in structuring the social system and settlement distribution of the colonists, these families did not become a dominant elite class.

Close familial relationships are just one of the kinds of relationships that medieval Icelanders used to build alliances and create social obligations. For example, at least two forms of friendship are documented in the saga literature. *Vinfengi* is a contractual form of friendship that functioned as a formal contract between partners who agree to support each other for a specific goal or a certain period. *Vinátta* appears to have been a 'truer' form of friendship that denoted a personal affinity between two people (Byock 1988: 130-133; Sigurðsson 1995). These types of friendship as well as chieftain\supporter

relationships that emerged as the initial social structure solidified in Iceland often came into conflict with familial relationships and obligations and it is clear that family relationships did not always emerge as the most important social ties. This chapter will argue, however, that in the initial social construction of Icelandic society, the basic strategy for acquiring land, building alliances, and creating debt obligation was negotiated with the language of kinship.

According to what we know of the laws of medieval Iceland from the *Grágás* law book and the sagas, familial relationships determined not only inheritance, but also obligations of revenge in feuds as well as the beneficiaries and payees of legal settlements. The Sagas and other early Icelandic texts have an often-noted 'obsession' with genealogical information. This prevalence of kinship details in the medieval source material derives from the significance of family background and familial relationships to the status and prestige of individuals. Because of the importance of kinship relationships in medieval Iceland and particularly during the initial settlement period, this chapter builds on the assumption that evaluating the role of kinship in the colonization process role will lead to fruitful conclusions about individual and group strategies for land acquisition and the formation of social power structures.

3.2 The Settlement, Resource Use, and Structure of the Extensive Settlement Farms

The textual source material about the early land claims indicate that the first settlers claimed large tracts of land and ran a form of extensive farmsteading where small

satellite farms or workshops were established to utilize the various resources within their territory (Karlsson 2000: 15; Rafnsson 1974: 166-181). Sigurðsson et al. (2005: 128) sum up the traditionally accepted view when they categorically state, "[*d]ei fleste landnåmsgardane kan vi truleg karakterisere som ekstensive storgardsdrifter*."[28] This is also borne out in the *Landnámabók* and Ari Fróði's *Íslendingabók*, in which Ingólfr Arnarson was the first settler to reach Iceland and the first to claim a large extensive area as his land (Figure 3.1). Ingólfr claimed the entire southwestern peninsula in Iceland, Reykjanes, and the land east to the Þingvallavatn lake and the Ölfusá River and north to Hvalfjörður (Whale-Fjord). The Mosfell Valley was therefore part of Ingólfr's initial land claim. Many other early settlers portrayed in *Landnámabók* and the sagas, such as Auðr Djúpauðga (the Deep Minded) in Dalir, Helgi Magri (the Lean) in Eyjafjörður, and Skallagrímr (Bald-Grímr) Kveldúlfsson in Borgarfjörður followed the same strategy and claimed large tracts of land while the land was still uninhabited and unclaimed. Before addressing the settlers of the Mosfell region, this section examines the land claim and settlement organization of the *landnámsmaðr* Skallagrímr Kveldúlfsson in order to present the settlement model of the extensive farmsteading and provide a possible analog for the settlement of the Mosfell Valley.

The land claim of Skallagrímr in Borgarfjörður, described in similar fashion in both *Landnámabók* and *Egils Saga*, is one of the most detailed accounts of the early extensive farmstead organization. These descriptions of Skallagrímr's land claim and the farms he founds corroborate each other, but *Egils Saga* describes the processes in greater

[28] "*We can surely characterize most of the landnam farms as extensive, large farmstead operations.*"

detail. In the saga, Skallagrímr redistributes his large land claim to followers and dependents, keeping direct control over a number of farms while exerting indirect control over others.

Skallagrímr established five permanent farms besides his own main farm at Borg and set up dependents at these outlying farms to utilize the various resources. These farms are described as being under his direct control. Skallagrímr established and ran a second farm called Álftanes (Swan Promontory), which he situated to take advantage of the resources from the sea and coast: "*...lét þaðan sækja útróðra ok selveiðar ok eggver, er þá váru gnóg föng þau öll, svá rekavið at láta at sér flytja. Hvalkvámur váru þá ok miklar...*" (*Egils Saga* Ch. 29, *ÍF* 2: 75).[29] At Akrar (Grain Fields) Skallagrímr set up a farm to sow crops. A sheep farm was set up at Grísartunga to take advantage of the summer pasturage in the highlands and another farm at Einubrekkur was oriented towards salmon in the Gljúfrá (Ravine River). Finally, he established an ironworking post close to the wood resources at Raufarnes.[30]

From the account of Skallagrímr's resource utilization, it appears that the place names associated with the individual places of resource extraction often reference the different resources. Therefore, the site established for crops was named *Akrar* (Grain

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[29] "*...from there he had his men go out fishing and seal-hunting, and collecting bird eggs, since there was plenty of all of these. Driftwood was also available for collection. Whales also got stranded there in great numbers...*"

[30] Raufarnes means something like Rift or Hole Promontory, but today there is a farm on this location called Rauðanes (Red-iron ore promontory), a place name used for iron working sites. The name derives from rauðr (red) from the reddish color of bogs that was a sign of bog iron in the soil (Cleasby 1874). Jónsson (1908) notes that bog iron is present on the promonstory and believes that Rauðanes was the original and correct name rather than Raufarnes. Clearly the two names are very close in spelling and pronunciation, suggesting a simple process of change from one to the other.

Fields), while *Álftanes* (Swan Ness) was so named because his men caught swans there, and the Hvalseyjar (Whale Isles) received their name from the whales often found there.

Skallagrímr also gives a higher degree of independence to some of his followers who he allows to set up indirectly controlled farmsteads. The saga explains, "*Skalla-Grímr gaf land skipverjum sínum*" (*Egils Saga* Ch. 28, *ÍF* 2:73),[31] before listing a series of nine farms established by his ship's crew. Skallagrímr does not manage these farms directly, but the men running the farms surely owed their allegiance to him. There is no geographic distribution difference between Skallagrímr's directly and indirectly managed farms, and two of his directly managed farms are further away from Skallagrímr's main farm than are all of the independently managed farms recorded in the saga (*ÍF* 2: 72-76; see also *ÍF* 2: map of Borgarfjörður). The independent farms feature a large number of farms with the final place name generic element –staðir: Grímólfsstaðir, Grímarsstaðir, Granastaðir, Þursstaðir, and Jarðlangsstaðir. These farm names are interesting in light of the suggestions from the place name analysis of the farm toponyms in the Mosfell Valley in Chapter 2, where four –staðir farms were interpreted as being early secondary settlements. If there is a parallel between the Mosfell Valley names and the names from Skallagrímr's Borgarfjörður, then this may suggest that the –staðir farms in Mosfell Valley are first generation establishments set up by dependents of the *landnámsmaðr* in the Mosfell region. According to the texts, this would be Þórðr Skeggi.

[31] "*Skallagrímr gave land to his ship's crew*."

3.3 The Earliest Inhabitants of the Mosfell Region

Landnámabók introduces the first settler of the Mosfell Valley, Þórðr Skeggi, his land claim, and the building of his farm. As the story goes, Þórðr Skeggi arrived in Iceland and settled first in northern Iceland for about a decade. Subsequently, he moved his household to southwestern Iceland and received a portion of Ingólfr Arnarson's original land claim. Ingólfr, the first settler of Iceland, settled in modern-day Reykjavík and claimed a large area in southwest Iceland, including the Mosfell Valley. Ingólfr and Þórðr were related through the famous Björn Buna and this familial relationship provides an explanation for Þórðr seeking and receiving land from Ingólfr (Figure 3.2). Although Ingólfr was not a blood relative of Björn Buna, he was Björn's grandson through the marriage of his mother to Björn's son Helgi. [32] Ingólfr's act of giving land to a number of Björn Buna's grandchildren and the fact that these grandchildren sought land from Ingólfr, show Ingólfr's active cultivation of this lineage. As noted above, the first settlers of Iceland who had claimed large land areas gave land to kin as common strategy to solidify their standing in the new society and gain loyal supporters. These gifts came with a social debt that in most cases included political support. The power of this social

[32] Ingólfr's ancestry has been much debated and is somewhat clouded by inconsistent genealogical information in the texts. Ingólfr's patronymic is said to be Arnarson, from his presumed father Örn, in *Egils Saga* and in the *Sturlubók* version of *Landnámabók*. Most scholars, however, find it more likely that the oldest tradition is preserved in the *Þórðarbók (originally from Melabók)* version of *Landnámabók* in which his father's name is recorded as Björnólfr (see Benediktsson 1968: LXXI-LXXIV; Jóhanesson 1974: 13). This mix-up in the later sources may be due to Björnólfr having had the nickname Örn (Eagle) (Benediktsson 1968: LXXIII). Nevertheless, in modern Icelandic culture and history, Ingólfr is always referred to as Arnarson. Another Irregularity with Ingólfr's genealogy is the disagreement in the sources over whether the Helgi who married Ingólfr's mother was the son or grandson of Björn Buna. Some sources including *Landnámabók S* maintain that Helgi's father was a man named Helgi who in turn was the son of Björn, but this is less likely as it would make Ingólfr a generation younger than the other land-takers (Benediktsson 1968: LXXII). The genealogical tree shown in (Figure 3.2) therefore includes only one Helgi between Ingólfr and Björn Buna.

obligation is illustrated by Ingólfr's gift of land to his relative Steinnun Gamla (Steinnun the Old), which she refuses to take as a gift, preferring rather to pay for it so that it would be considered a purchase and thereby free her from further social obligation (*Landnámabók S* 394, *ÍF* 1: 392).

By charting the kinship relationships of the *landnámsmenn* who came to own the land around Þórðr Skeggi it becomes clear that the area of Ingólfr's original land claim became centralized in the possession of Ingólfr's male kin group and specifically the grandchildren and descendents of Björn Buna. Whether Ingólfr gave land to his relatives to consolidate his political support and control of the area, or his kin members were drawn to the region for the sake of mutual support is unclear, but the effect was the same in creating a consolidated kin group area stretching across much of southwest Iceland. Ingólfr's direct descendents appear to have maintained the leadership role in this kin group. Ingólfr's son Þorsteinn is said to have been in charge of the establishment of the first *þing* (assembly) in Iceland known as the Kjalarnes Assembly because it was located at the foot of the Esja mountain on the Kjalarnes peninsula (*Landnámabók S* 9: *ÍF* I: 46).[33]

This consolidated kin group consisted of Ingólfr Arnarson, Helgi Bjóla, Örlygr Hrappsson, Hallr Goðlauss, Ásbjörn Össurarson, and Þórðr Skeggi (see the map of the kin group's land claims in Figure 3.1 and their genealogical relationship in Figure 3.2). Three of the men Ingólfr gave land to were grandchildren of Björn Buna: Þórðr Skeggi Hrappsson, Örlygr Gamli Hrappsson, and Helgi Bjóla Ketilsson. These grandchildren of

[33] These assembly sites are often referred to in the English language literature as Things. See Chapter 8 for the archaeological attempts to locate Kjalarnes Assembly site.

Björn are addressed individually below, followed by the other kinsmen of Ingólfr and Þórðr Skeggi who settled around the area of the Mosfell Valley. *Landnámabók* also mentions an early settler named Þorbjörn who appears to have lived at the Mosfell farm during the settlement period. Although most of his genealogy is lost, the final part of this section discusses the possibility that Þorbjörn became the leading man in the valley after Þórðr Skeggi.

3.3.1 Þórðr Skeggi Hrappsson: *Landnámsmaðr* of the Mosfell Region

Ingólfr gave Þórðr Skeggi the entire Mosfell region and according to several entries in both the *Hauksbók* and *Sturlubók* versions of *Landnámabók*, Þórðr chose to settle in the Mosfell Valley, and build his farm at a site called Skeggjastaðir (Skeggi's Farm). According to a timeline recreated from relational dating presented in the sagas and *Landnámabók*, Þórðr Skeggi arrived in the Mosfell Valley around AD 900 (Vigfússon, G. 1856: 273; Bjarnason and Guðmundsson 2005: 13). Besides *Landnámabók*, Þórðr is mentioned in *Njáls Saga*, *Kjalnesinga Saga*, and *Þorsteins Þáttr Uxafóts*. Since Þórðr Skeggi's land claim included the entirety of Mosfell Valley that is the focus of this dissertation, the sources about him are treated in detail even when information in these sources overlap or appear redundant. This is done in order to glean information from the intertextual analysis and comparison of parallel passages. Often there is much to learn from absent or lost information in these texts.

The textual sources depict Þórðr as a man of distinguished high-status Norwegian ancestry and prestigious marriage alliances, whose descendents became powerful

chieftains in Iceland. The historicity of the status of his Icelandic descendents and the names of his ancestors are the most likely to be accurate, while the importance his ancestors may have been exaggerated. Nevertheless, Þórðr and a number of his relatives led colonial expeditions to Iceland and took leadership roles in the newly settled land, which would have required substantial wealth. Þórðr arrived early enough in the colonization process to claim land twice and obtain moveable wealth from the sale of his first land claim before moving to the Mosfell Valley to join and benefit from a regional kin-based alliance centered in Ingólfr's original land claim. As part of an early proto-elite of *landnámsmenn* in Iceland, he secured alliances with other settler families by marrying his daughters to powerful settlers and became the forefather of a number of Icelanders that feature prominently as powerful chieftains in medieval texts.

Before Þórðr settled in the Mosfell Valley he had claimed land and established a farm to the east in the region of Lón. He held this farm for about a decade before selling his land claim there and claiming a new piece of land encompassing Mosfell Valley. A short account of Þórðr Skeggi's earliest land claim in region appears in *Þorsteins Þáttr Uxafóts*, which focuses on events in the Lón area. The opening lines of this short saga are,

> *Þórðr skeggi hét maðr. Hann nam lönd öll í Lóni fyrir norðan Jökulsá, millum ok Lónsheiðar, ok bjó í Bæ tíu vetr. En er hann frá til öndvegissúlna sinna í Leiruvági fyrir neðan Heiði, þá seldi hann lönd sín Úlfljóti lögmanni, er þar kom út í Lóni.*[34]
>
> *Þorsteins Þáttr Uxafóts* Ch. 1 (*ÍF* 13: 341)

[34] "*There was a man named Þórðr Skeggi. He took all the land in Lón north of the Jökulsá river to Lónsheiðar (Lón Heath), and lived at Bær for ten winters. But when he heard that his high-seat pillars had come ashore in Leiruvágr below the Heath (Mosfell Heath), then he sold his land to Úlfljótr the lawman, who had come out to Lón.*"

The introduction from this tale directly parallels a chapter in the *Hauksbók* version of *Landnámabók*, suggesting to Vilmundarson and Vilhjálmsson (1991: 341) that the *Þorsteins Þáttr* passage derives from *Landnámabók*. The direction of intertextual borrowing is very difficult to prove with these early texts, but with a somewhat dubious assumption of the preeminence of *Landnámabók* over the sagas, literary scholars tend to presume any shared material comes originally from *Landnámabók*. In this case the *Landnámabók* version includes a bit more information, stating that subsequent to the sale of his land to Úlfljótr, "*[b]jó Þórðr nökkura vetr síðan í Lóni, síðan han spurði til öndugissúlna sinna.*"[35] The source does not explain the reason Þórðr stayed in Lón or the significance of this fact, but this information provides supporting evidence for the rough timeline presented in other sections of *Landnámabók*, such as *Sturlubók* Ch. 307, which also names Þórðr's farmstead in the Mosfell Valley.

> *Þórðr skeggi son Hrapps Bjarnarsonar bunu, hann átti Vilborgu Ósvaldsdóttur ok Úlfrúnar Játmundardóttur. Þórðr fór til Íslands ok nam land í Lóni fyrir norðan Jökulsá milli ok Lónsheiðar ok bjó í Bæ tíu vetr eða lengr; þá frá hann til öndvegissúlna sinna fyrir neðan heiði í Leiruvági; þá rézk hann vestr þannig ok bjó á Skeggjastöðum, sem fyrr er ritat. Hann seldi þá Lónlönd Úlfljóti, er lög flutti út hingat. Dóttir Þórðar var Helga, er Ketilbjörn enn gamli átti at Mosfelli.*[36]
>
> *Sturlubók* Ch. 307 (*ÍF* 1: 312)

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[35] "*Þórðr continued to live in Lón for some years after he learned about his high-seat pillars.*"

[36] "*Þórðr Skeggi the son of Hrappr, the son of Björn Buna, married Vilborg, daughter of Ósvaldr and Úlfrún, the daughter of Játmundr. Þórðr went to Iceland and took land in Lón north of the Jókulsá river and to Lónsheiðar (Lón Heath) and lived at Bær for ten years or more; when he heard that his high-seat pillars had come ashore below the heath (Mosfell Heath) into Leiruvágr, then he moved west to there and lived at Skeggjastaðir, as was written previously. He sold the Lón-lands to Úlfljótr, who moved out there. The daughter of Þórðr was Helga, who Ketilbjörn the Old from Mosfell married.*"

In *Þorsteins Þáttr Uxafóts* and both the *Hauksbók* and *Sturlubók* versions of *Landnámabók*, Þórðr moves from Lón to the Mosfell region because of the discovery of his high-seat pillars in the Leiruvágr bay at the western end of the Mosfell Valley.[37] The discovery of high-seat pillars (*öndvegissulur*) is a common narrative theme in medieval Icelandic literature used to explain and provide a supernatural validation to settlers' land claims. These pillars supported the seat of honor (high-seat or *öndvegi*) in Viking Age houses and represented the authority of the head of the household as well as the continuity of the family, the household, and their prosperity (Page 1995: 67). In the written sources, colonists often bring these pillars to Iceland from their homes as symbols of the household, but also as the materialization of household or ancestor deities who could help settlers choose their new homes. In the medieval Icelandic texts, the first colonists often throw their high-seat pillars overboard when approaching land, believing that they are meant to settle in the location where the pillars come ashore. Although this tradition is fascinating, it is more likely that Þórðr had a more practical reason for moving from Lón to the Mosfell Valley. From the clues provided by the texts, Þórðr could have been motivated by the material wealth he gained in the sale of his land to Úlfljótr, particularly since he did not have to pay for either his Lón or his Mosfell land claims. Þórðr was probably also drawn to settle in the Mosfell Valley in part of Ingólfr Arnarson's original land claim by the prospect of joining a regional alliance with other members of his kin-group. Ingólfr's role in Þórðr's decision to settle in the Mosfell region is directly stated in the *Sturlubók* version of *Landnámabók*.

[37] Leirvogur in modern Icelandic

> *Þórðr skeggi hét maðr; han var sonr Hrapps Bjarnarsonar bunu. Þórðr átti Vilborgu Ósvaldsdóttur; Helga hét dóttir þeira; hana átti Ketilbjörn enn gamli. Þórðr fór til Íslands ok nam land með ráði Ingólfs í hans landnámi á milli Úlfarsár ok Leiruvágs; hann bjó á Skeggjastöðum. Frá Þórði er mart stórmenni komit á Íslandi.*[38]
>
> *Sturlubók* Ch. 11 (*ÍF* 1: 48)

The *Hauksbók* version of this same chapter also states that Ingólfr advises Þórðr to settle in the Mosfell Valley, but includes more detail on his settlement and particularly on his kinship background.

> *Björn buna hét hersir ríkr ok ágætr í Nóregi; hann var <son> Verðrar-Gríms hersis ór Sogni; Grímr átti Hervöru, dóttur Þorgerðar Eylaugsdóttur konungs. Björn átti Vélaugu, systur Vémundar hins gamla; þau áttu þrjá sonu; var einn Ketill flatnefr, annarr Helgi, þriði Hrappr; þeir váru ágætir menn, ok er frá þeira afkvæmi mart sagt í þessi bók, ok frá þeim er flest allt stórmenni komit á Íslandi. Hrappr átti Þórunni græningarrjúpu; þeira son var Þórðr skeggi; hann átti Vilborgu Ósvaldsdóttur konungs ok Úlfrúnar hinnar óbornu, dóttur Játmundar Englakonungs. Þórðr byggði fyrst í Lóni austr tíu vetr eða fimmtán; en er hann frá til öndvegissúlna sinna í Leiruvági, þá seldi hann lönd sín Úlfljóti; hann var son Þóru Hörða-Káradóttur. En hann fór vestr með allt sitt ok nam land at ráði Ingólfs millim Úlfarsár ok Leiruvágsár ok bjó síðan á Skeggjastöðum. Hans dóttir var Helga, er átti Ketilbjörn hinn gamli at Mosfelli. Frá Þórði er mart stórmenni komit á Íslandi.* [39]
>
> *Hauksbók* Ch. 11 (*ÍF* 1: 49)

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[38] "*There was a man named Þórðr. He was the son of Hrapp, the son of Björn buna. Þórðr married Vilborg, the daughter of Ósvald. Helga was the name of their daughter. She married Ketilbörn the Old. Þórðr went to Iceland and claimed land with the advice of Ingólfr inside Ingólfr's landclaim between Úlfarsá (Ulfar's River) and Leiruvágr (Clay Bay). He lived at Skeggjastaðir. Many great men in Iceland were descended from Þórðr.*"

[39] "*Björn Buna was the name of a rich and accomplished military chief in Norway. He was the son of the military chief Verðrar-Grímr from Sogn, Grímr married Hervara, the daughter of Þorgerðr, who was the daughter of King Eylaugr. Björn married Véluga, the sister of Vémundr the Old and they had three sons. The first was Ketill Flatnose, the second Helgi, and the third Hrappr. They were accomplished men, and about their descendents much is said in this book, and from them more than anyone else, more of the important men of Iceland have descended. Hrappr married Þórunn Græningarrjúpa and their son was Þórðr Skeggi. Þórðr married Vilborg, daughter of King Ósvaldr and Úlfrún Óborna, the daughter of Játmundr Englakonugr. Þórðr settled first at Lón in the East for ten to fifteen winters, but once he heard*

The *Hauksbók* version of Þórðr Skeggi's ancestors attributes the title of *hersir* (chief) to both his grandfather (Björn Buna) and his great-grandfather (Grímr). The position described by the title *hersir* in this early period is not completely clear as the title seems to have changed gradually to mean a "liegeman of the king" after the Norwegian Monarchy consolidated power in the late 9th century (Cleasby and Vigfusson 1874: 259). Before the emergence of the Norwegian state, the *hersir* was an independent local military and political chief. This position was hereditary and probably somewhat like the political *goði* position in Iceland, although with a more militaristic role as opposed to the historical religious role of the Norwegian *goðar* (pl. of *goði*).

The tradition of high status ancestry in Norway for Þórðr Skeggi no doubt carries some historical truth, but even just as a later medieval conception of the truth, the tradition still would have been valuable for Þórðr's descendants in building their own prestige, making alliances, and securing advantageous marriages. The last lines in both *Hauksbók* Ch. 11 and *Sturlubók* Ch. 11 supports this probability by stating that many of the most important and powerful men in Iceland were descended from Þórðr. This is illustrated further in the next section concerning Þórðr's daughters, their marriage alliances, and their offspring (see section 3.3.2).

A divergent tradition regarding Þórðr's ancestry is worthy of note here in the discussion of Þórðr's genealogy, particularly as a clear illustration of the type of knowledge that can be lost in oral traditions and the manner in which oral traditions

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that his high-seat pillars had washed up in Leiruvágr (Clay Bay), he sold his land to Úlfljótr, the son of Þóra, the daughter of Hörða-Kári. Then Þórðr moved west with all his farmstead and claimed land with the advice of Ingólfr between Úlfarsá ok Leiruvágsá and afterwards lived at Skeggjastaðir. His daughter was Helga, who married Ketilbjörn the Old of Mosfell. Many important men in Iceland are descended from Þórdr."

attempt to recreate such lost knowledge. *Kjalnesinga Saga*, which focuses on the people from the Kjalarnes peninsula northwest of Þórðr Skeggi's land claim, refers to Þórðr when one of his daughters marries a man from Kjalarnes: "*Þetta sumar var ok heitit Þorgrími Helgasyni Arndísi, dóttur Þórðar Skeggjasonar af Skeggjastöðum, ok váru brullaupin bæði saman at Hofi*" (*ÍF* 14: 6).[40] In this passage, Þórðr is remembered as Þórðr Skeggjason rather than Þórðr Skeggi Hrappsson, supposing him to be the son of a man named Skeggi (Beard) rather than a man known for his beard. The significance of this in terms of the oral and written tradition is that it is a clear example of divergent oral traditions, one of which appears to have lost the original genealogical knowledge of the Þórðr's ancestral background.

The tradition recorded in *Landnámabók* carries substantially more authority as it contains extensive information about Þórðr's ancestors, while *Kjalnesinga Saga* mentions only his father's name. Further support for the *Landnámabók* tradition comes from *Njáls Saga* (Chapters 26 and 46 *ÍF* 12: 72 and 199), which mentions Þórðr Skeggi twice in passing as the father of Helga who married Ketilbjörn the Old, and both times Þórðr's full name, including his nickname is said to be Þórðr Skeggi Hrappsson. The theory of divergent traditions and the lost genealogical information is supported by a closer look at the actual manuscripts that preserve *Kjalnesinga Saga*. The saga exists in four manuscripts named A, B, C, and D, three of which preserve Þórðr's patronymic as Skeggjason. The latest of the manuscripts (D), however, appears to have been corrected,

[40] "*That summer Arndís, the daughter of Þórðr Skeggjason of Skeggjastaðir, was promised to Þorgrímr Helgason. Both of the weddings were celebrated together at Hof, and the feast was celebrated with the utmost enthusiasm. A great number of guests attended.*"

possibly with reference to the genealogical material in another written source such as *Landnámabók*, so that Skeggi is Þórðr's nickname. The tradition from *Kjalnesinga Saga* lost the memory of Þórðr's father's name. Instead, this tradition interpreted his father's name from Þórðr's nickname, the place name Skeggjastaðir, and the memory of Skeggjastaðir's association with Þórðr.

Skeggjastaðir is universally remembered as Þórðr Skeggi's farm in all texts that record the name of his farm, including *Kjalnesinga Saga* (Ch 2) and the *Hauksbók* (Ch. 11) and *Sturlubók* (Ch. 11 and Ch. 307) versions of *Landnámabók*. Considering the divergence of the material in *Kjalnesinga Saga* and *Landnámabók* (both *H and S*) regarding Þórðr genealogy, these two traditions should be considered independent corroborating sources. Skeggjastaðir is located over 7 km from the sea in the northeast corner of Þórðr's land claim. As discussed in Chapter 2, scholars consider this an unlikely choice for the primary settlement in the Mosfell Valley because of its unfavorable geographic location. The place name evidence also indicates that Skeggjastaðir was a secondary farm. Nevertheless, the location did offer a few key resources such as the fishing in the Leirvógsá river and easy access to the low-highlands for summer grazing.

Here the historical sources and the analog of Skallagrímr's land claim presented above may provide an answer to the contradicting evidence for the identification of Þórðr's farmstead. Skallagrímr set up his primary farm at Borg, but then founded two other farms that he personally managed and called his own. It seems likely that Þórðr Skeggi, as the first settler in the Mosfell Valley, would have established more than one farm in order to take advantage of the full range of the natural resources. Skeggjastaðir

might have been Þórðr's own secondary farm named after himself as the owner of the property and the occasionally present managing farmer. The oral traditions preserved in *Landnámabók* and *Kjalnesinga Saga*, remember Skeggjastaðir as his farm because of the association with his name, while the record of his other farm or farms disappeared from the oral tradition. The primary farm in the valley was Mosfell as has been argued in Chapter 2, but this prominence is not recorded in *Landnámabók*, which only makes passing mention of this farm (see section 3.3.7 on Þorbjörn Hraðason of Mosfell).

3.3.2 Þórðr Skeggi's Three Daughters and Their Marriage Alliances

Þórðr's prestige as one of the initial settlers and his participation in the kin-based alliance of Björn Buna's descendents in Ingólfr's original land claim establish Þórðr's descendents as members of the proto-elite class in early Iceland. Looking closer at the spouses of Þórðr's children's will support this general observation and lend insight into the strategies Þórðr's family pursued in the formation of marriage alliances. The fact that Þórðr only had daughters is significant in patrilocal Norse cultural for the understanding of his family history as well as the subsequent textual record of the Mosfell Valley and the identity of the Mosfell chieftains.

Helga was the most famous of Þórðr's daughters and is also the only daughter mentioned in the three previously cited passages from *Landnámabók* concerning Þórðr Skeggi (*S* 11, *H* 11, and S 307). Helga's prominence among Þórðr's daughters is confirmed by her mention in four chapters of the *Sturlubók* version of *Landnámabók* (*S* 11, 195, 307, and 385) and three chapters of the *Hauksbók* version (*H* 11, 163, and 338).

The reason for Helga's prominence appears to be that she was the most successful daughter in terms of the status of her marriage partner, Ketilbjörn inn Gamli (the Old), a *landnámsmaðr* (original land claimer) who stayed with Þórðr before claiming land further east in Grímsnes. In fact, Helga Þórðardóttir (daughter of Þórðr) is only mentioned in connection with her husband Ketilbjörn the Old and does not stand alone as a character of importance without the association with her marriage alliance.

Helga and Ketilbjörn the Old had particularly successful progeny. Their great-grandson became the first Bishop of Iceland, a powerful position in his time that became even more important for later Christians such as the compilers of *Landnámabók*. *Landnámabók* (*S* 385, *H* 338; *ÍF* 1: 384-386) has the following to say about Ketilbjörn's settlement of Grímsnes:

> *Ketilbjörn hét maðr ágætr í Naumudal; hann var Ketilsson ok Æsu, dóttur Hákonar jarls Grjótgarðssonar;*[41] *hann átti Helgu, dóttur Þórðar skeggja. Ketilbjörn fór til Íslands, þá er landit var víða byggt með sjá; hann hafði skip þat, er Elliði hét; hann kom í Elliðaárós fyrir neðan heiði. Hann var enn fyrsta vetr með Þórði skeggja, mági sínum. Um várit fór hann upp um heiði at leita sér landskosta...Ketilbjörn nam Grímsnes allt up frá Höskuldslæk ok Laugardal allan ok alla Byskupstungu upp til Stakksár ok bjó at Mosfelli. Börn þeira váru þau Teitr ok Þormóðr, Þorleifr, Ketill, Þorkatla, Oddleif, Þorgerðr, Þuríðr...Ketilbjörn var svá auðigr at lausfé, at han bauð sonum sínum at slá þvertré af silfri í hofit, þat er þerir létu gera...Teitr átti Álöfu, dóttur Böðvars af Vörs Víkinga-Kárasonar. Þeira son var Gizurr hvíti, faðir Ísleifs byskups, föður Gizurar byskups...Mart stórmenni er frá Ketilbirni komit.*[42]

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[41] There is a small difference in the geneaologies presented in the *H* and *S* version here. The *S* version (quoted above) records Æsa as the dauther of Earl Hákon, who in turn is the dauther of Grjótgarðr. However, the *H* version states that Æsa is the daugher of Grótgarðr and the sister of Earl Hákon.

[42] "*Ketilbjörn was the name of an excellent man in Naumudal. He was the the son of Ketill and Æsa, the daughter of Earl Hákon, the son of Grjótgarðr. He married Helga, the daughter of Þórðr Skeggi. Ketilbjörn went to Iceland, when the land by the sea was already widely settled. He had a ship called Elliði (a specific kind of ship) and he arrived in Elliðaárós (Ship-River's Mouth) below the heath. He stayed the*

According to this passage, Ketilbjörn was closely related to an earl, owned his own ship, was wealthy later in life, and just as Þórðr, had many important Icelanders who claimed descent from him. Among these descendents were the famous bishops, but also lesser-studied individuals such as his grandson Önundr the Wealthy who would come to play a large role in the political prominence of the Mosfell farm in the Mosfell Valley (see Figure 3.2).

Þuríðr was Þórðr's second daughter and of secondary importance, as reflected both in her marriage alliance and in the frequency of her name's appearance in the written sources. Þuríðr Skeggjadóttir, who married Eiríkr Hróaldsson, is only mentioned once in each of the *Sturlubók* and *Hauksbók* versions of *Landnámabók* (*S* 195, *H* 163). The two versions of Eiríkr and Þuríðr's story from *Landnámabók H* and *S* are virtually identical.

> *Eiríkr hét maðr ágætr; hann fór af Nóregi til Íslands; hann var son Hróalds Geirmundarsonar, Eiríkssonar örðigskeggja. Eiríkr nam land frá Gilá um Goðdali alla ok ofan til Norðrár; hann bjó at Hofi í Goðdölum. Eiríkr átti Þuríði, dóttur Þórðar skeggja, systur Helgu, er Ketilbjörn átti enn gamli at Mosfelli.*[43]
>
> *Landnámabók S* 195, *H* 163 (*ÍF* 1: 231)

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first winter with Þórðr skeggi, his father-in-law. In the spring he went up over the heath to look for land to claim... Ketiljörn claimed Grímsnes (Grim's Promontory) all the way from Höskuldslækr (Hoskuld's Brook) and all of Laugardalr (Hot-Spring Valley) and all Byskupstunga (Bishop's Tongue) up to Stakksá (Hay Stack River) and lived at Mosfell. His and Helga's children were Teitr and Þormóðr, Þorleifr, Ketill, Þorkatla, Oddleifr, Þorgerðr, Þuríðr... Ketilbjörn was so rich in movable wealth that he bade his sons forge a crossbeam of silver in the temple that he had built... Teitr married Álöf, the daughter of Böðvar of Vörs, the son of Kári the Viking. Their son was Gizurr the White, the father of Bishop Ísleifr, the father of Bishop Gizurr... Many important men are descended from Ketilbjörn."

[43] "*Eiríkr was the name of an excellent man, he left Norway for Icleand. He was the son of Hróaldr, son of Geirmundr, son of Eiríkr örðigskeggja (Stiff-beard). Eiríkr claimed land from Gilá (Gil River), including all of Goðdalr (God Valley) and north to Norðrá (North River). He lived at Hof (Temple) in Goðdalr. Eiríkr married Þuríðr, daughter of Þórðr skeggi and sister of Helga, who married Ketilbjörn gamli (the Old) of Mosfell.*"

Both the *H* and *S* versions address Þuríðr only in the section dealing with her husband Eiríkr. It is possible the that her absence from the *Landnámabók* sections concerning the settlers of the Mosfell region is due to the lesser significance that Þuríðr and her marriage alliance had for the descendents of Þórðr Skeggi. On the other hand, the story of Eiríkr Hróaldsson, who takes land in northern Iceland south of Skagafjörður, stresses his wife Þuríðr's father's identity and draws attention to her more famous sister Helga, suggesting that Eiríkr's descendents believed that the marriage alliance with Þórðr's family was important for their prestige and status.

Landnámabók mentions no other children of Þórðr, but according to *Kjalnesinga Saga*, he had one additional daughter named Arndís. In the saga, Arndís marries Þorgrímr *goði* (the chieftain), the most powerful man on the peninsula of Kjalarnes. Þorgrímr is the son of Helgi Bjóla, the initial settler on Kjalarnes (see section 3.3.3 below on Helgi Bjóla). According the *Kjalnesinga Saga* tradition, Þorgrímr was also in control of the Kjalarnes Assembly and possibly responsible for its establishment.[44] The saga introduces Arndís as one of the four young people undertaking a double wedding at the hall at Hof.

[44] There has been a long-standing debate about Kjalarnes Assembly (Kjalarnesþing) because of the early date of its establishment according to the written sources. The establishment of the Kjalarnes Assembly predated the founding of the Althing and may have had more than a regional importance in settling disputes in the early period. For example *Grettir's Saga* states that a legal case from Northwestern Iceland over the murder of Ófeigr Grettir by Þorbjörn Jarlakappi was brought to the Kjalarnes Assembly for resolution because the Althing had not yet been established (*ÍF* 8: 23-24). Because of the primacy and prominence of the Kjalarnes Assembly in the written sources, historians and archaeologists have vigourously debated the location of the Kjalarnes Assmbly. Iceland's famous poet Jónas Hallgrímson even joined the debate after digging up some remains at Elliðavatn that he claimed were the site of the assembly (Bjarnason and Magnús Guðmundsson 2005: 34-36; Smith, R. 1872). Most recently, Guðmundur Ólafsson conducted excavations at Elliðavatn to unearth the remains of the possible assembly site. See Chapter 8 for a detailed analysis of the archaeological evidence of location of the Kjalarnes Assembly.

> *Þessar konu* [Þuríðr] *bað Helgi til handa Andríði, ok þessi konu var honum heitit. Þetta sumar var ok heitit Þorgrími Helgasyni Arndísi, dóttur Þórðar Skeggjasonar af Skeggjastöðum, ok váru brullaupin bæði saman at Hofi, ok var veitt med inu mesta kappi; var þar ok allfjölmennt.*[45]
>
> *Kjalnesinga Saga* Ch. 2 (*ÍF* 14: 6)

This passage describes the union of two important lineages in the region of Ingólfr's original land claim. Arndís is mentioned once more in *Kjalnesinga Saga* in the description of her and Þorgrímr's male child Þorsteinn: "*Þau Þorgrímr ok Arndís gátu son saman, sá hét Þorsteinn; hann var snemmindis uppivözlumaðr mikill ok þótti allt lágt hjá sér*" (*ÍF* 14: 8).[46] If it occurred as related by the saga, the marriage between Arndís and Þorgrímr united two branches of the descendents of Björn Buna and consolidated the regional kin-based alliance network in the region (see Figure 3.2).

3.3.3 Helgi Bjóla

Helgi Bjóla's land claim is addressed in *Landnámabók*, while his land claim, family, religion, and chiefly position are discussed also in *Eyrbyggja Saga* and *Kjalnesinga Saga*. Helgi was bound by kinship to both Ingólfr and Þórðr Skeggi. According to *Landnámabók*, Helgi and Þórðr were first cousins, and Helgi solidified this kin connection by marrying Ingólfr's daughter Þórnýiu and by marrying his son Þorgrímr to Þórðr's daughter Arndís (see Figure 3.2). Helgi's land claim consisted of a large

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[45] "*Helgi asked for the hand of this woman [Þuríðr] in marriage for Andríði, and the woman was promised to him. That summer Arndís, the daughter of Þórðr Skeggjason of Skeggjastaðir, was promised to Þorgrímr Helgason. Both of the weddings were celebrated together at Hof, and the feast was celebrated with the utmost enthusiasm. A great number of guests attended.*"

[46] "*Þorgrímr and Arndís begot a son together who was named Þorsteinn; he was a very aggressive from youth and thought everything lay below him.*"

portion of the Kjalarnes peninsula between the Mógilsá and Mýdalsá rivers. *Landnámabók* (*H* 14, *ÍF* 1: 50) informs, "*Helgi bjóla, son Ketils flatnefs, fór til Íslands af Suðreyjum. Hann var með Ingólfi hinn fyrsta vetr ok nam með hans ráði Kjalarnes allt millim Mógilsár ok Mýdalsár; han bjó at Hofi*."[47] This quote suggests that Helgi cemented his ties to Ingólfr during his first winter by staying with Ingólfr when he first arrived to Iceland and by taking Ingólfr's advice on where to settle. This relationship must have indebted Helgi to Ingólfr significantly enough to establish an unequal relationship that may have laid the foundation for Helgi's political loyalty to Ingólfr.

The previous quote from *Landnámabók* also indicates that Helgi's path of migration to Iceland led him through the Hebrides, a Norse dominated island chain off the northwestern coast of Scotland. The Norse in the Hebrides came into more direct contact with the Christianity of the British Isles, and as *Eyrbyggja Saga* tells from the disdainful perspective of Helgi's brother (Björn the Easterner), Helgi and their sisters converted to the new faith (*ÍF* 4: 10). In addition, *Landnámabók* lists Helgi as one of the six noteworthy settlers who had been baptized before coming to Iceland (*S* 299 and *H* 356, *ÍF* 1: 396). This information disagrees with the story in *Kjalnesinga Saga*, which opens by stating, "*Helgi bjóla, son Ketils flatnefs, nam Kjalarnes millum Leirvágs ok Botnsár ok bjó at Hofi á Kjalarnes. Han var nytmenni mikit í fornum sið, blótmaðr lítill,*

[47] "*Helgi Bjóla, the son of Ketill Flatnose, went to Iceland from the Hebrides. He stayed with Ingólfr the first winter and with Ingólfr's advice he took all of Kjalarnes between the Mógilsá and Mýdalsá rivers; he lived at Hof (Temple).*"

spakr ok hægr við alla" (*ÍF* 14: 3).[48] The place name of Helgi's farmstead, Hof ("Temple"), has long been considered indicative of a pagan place of worship. It is possible that a settler like Helgi who had spent time in the British Isles would be baptized in name as was common with Viking Age Scandinavians abroad, out of belief or convenience, but would not treat the baptism as an exclusive contract with Christianity or pledge to worship only the Christian God. The religious beliefs of Helgi and the other settlers around the Mosfell Valley are interesting in light of the large number of Christian or non-pagan settlers that supposedly settled among the kin-group consolidating the area of Ingólfr's original land claim. The saga material, particularly *Kjalnesinga Saga*, preserves the story of religious conflict between pagans and Christians, as well as the ambiguities of the settlers' religious beliefs. For the understanding of the power relationships in this region during the early period, the record of a dynamic ideological contest carries more sociologically significance than the particular religion of a single saga character. The early presence and knowledge of Christianity in this area may in fact have been an advantage to the inhabitants and leaders as they adapted quickly to the new religion and the opportunities it presented.[49]

The boundaries of Helgi's land claim also vary between the texts, in that Helgi claims Kjalarnes between the Mógilsá and Mýdalsá rivers in *Landnámabók*, but

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[48] "*Helgi Bjóla, the son of Ketill Flatnose, took Kjalarnes between the Leirvogsá and Botnsá rivers and lived at Hof on Kjalarnes. He was a very worthy man in the old religion, but he rarely made sacrifices. He was wise and gentle with everyone.*"

[49] See Chapter 4, section 4.5, on the textual evidence of the ideological sources of power available to the Mosfell chieftains. See Chapter 9 for a discussion of the materialized ideology visible in the archaeological record of the Mosfell Valley and the archaeological evidence of the Mosfell chieftains' early Christian conversion.

Kjalarnes between the Leirvogsá and Botnsá rivers in *Kjalnesinga Saga*. The general agreement between these texts, with small variances in details such as the religious belief of a non-zealous settler or the exact boundaries of a land claim is consistent with what should be expected from different texts carried down in slightly different versions through oral traditions.

In all sources, however, Helgi is remembered as a powerful chieftain. *Kjalnesinga Saga* calls Helgi a *goði* (chieftain) and states that he passes the *goðorð* (chieftaincy) down to his oldest son, Þorsteinn. *Landnámabók* remembers him as one of the small number of outstanding settlers in the Southern Quarter of Iceland: "…*en þessir landnámsmenn hafa göfgastir verit í Sunnleningafjórðungi: Hrafn enn heimski, Ketill hængr, Sighvatr rauiði, Hásteinn Atlason, Ketilbjörn enn gamli, Ingólfr, Örlygr gamli, Helgi bjóla, Kolgrímr enn gamli, Björn gullberi, Önundr breiðskeggr*" (*ÍF* 1: 394, 396).[50] Four of these eleven men (Ketilbjörn enn gamli, Ingólfr, Örlygr gamli, and Helgi Bjóla) belonged to the kin group that settled in and controlled the area around the Mosfell Valley, making this group the most powerful in the area and an early power center in the Icelandic political landscape.

[50] "*…and these men were the most notable in the Southern Quarter: Hrafn enn heimski, Ketill hængr, Sighvatr rauiði, Hásteinn Atlason, Ketilbjörn enn gamli, Ingólfr, Örlygr gamli, Helgi bjóla, Kolgrímr enn gamli, Björn gullberi, Önundr breiðskeggr.*"

3.3.4 Örlygr Gamli (the Old) Hrappsson

Örlygr Gamli Hrappsson, Þórðr Skeggi's brother and therefore also Helgi Bjóla's first cousin, received a piece of the land from Helgi Bjóla and settled at Esjuberg on Kjalarnes where, according to *Kjalnesinga Saga* and *Landnámabók*, he built Iceland's first church. Örlygr was the final *landnámsmaðr* to settle on Kjalarnes. Örlygr's son Valþjófr further solidifies the kin group's control of the area by settling at Medalfell and taking possession of the Kjós district to the northeast (*ÍF* 1: 56). The story of Örlygr indicates that although he arrived to Iceland as a Christian, he was still well received and given land and a position in the consolidating kin-based alliance building up around Ingólfr Arnarson. This shows that kinship relationships far outweighed ideological differences in the establishment of the political landscape of this region and the consolidation of the regional alliance network.

Concerning Örlygr's early life and Christian upbringing *Landnámabók* states,

> *Örlygr hét son Hrapps Bjarnarsonar bunu; hann var at fóstri með enum helga Patreki byskupi í Suðreyjum. Hann fýstisk at fara til Íslands ok bað, at byskup sæi um með honum. Byskup lét hann hafa með sér kirkjuvið ok járnklukku ok plenárium ok mold vígða, er hann skyldi leggja undir hornstafina. Byskup bað hann þar land nema, er hann sæi fjöll tvau af hafi, ok byggja undir enu syðra fjallinu, ok skyldi dalr í hvárutveggja fjallinu; hann skyldi þar taka sér bústað ok láta þar kirkju gera ok eigna enum helga Kolumba.*[51]
>
> *Landnámabók S* 15 (*ÍF* 1: 52, 54)[52]

[51] "*Örlygr was the name of the son of Hrappr, the son of Björn Buna; he was fostered by the holy Bishop Patrik in the Hebrides. He wanted to go to Iceland and asked the bishop to advise him. The bishop gave him church timber, an iron bell, a plenarium, and consecrated earth, which he was to bury under the church's cornerposts. The bishop bade him take land, where he saw two mountains jutting into the ocean, and to settle below the southern of the two mountains. There should also be a valley beside both mountains. He should build a farmstead and have a church raised and dedicate it to St. Kolumba.*"

[52] The *Hauksbók* version of *Landnámabók* (H 15) contains a parrallel and similar passage.

The events happen as Bishop Patrik foretold, and after troubles at sea and prayers to Bishop Patrik, Örlygr finds the prophesied second mountain on Kjalarnes, where his cousin Helgi had already claimed land. *Landnámabók* continues, "*Örlygr var með Helga enn fyrsta vetr, en um várit nam hann land at ráði Helga frá Mógilsá til Ósvífrslækjar og bjó at Esjubergi. Hann lét þar gera kirkju, sem mælt var…Þeir Örlygr frændr trúðu á Kolumba*" (*ÍF* 1: 54).[53]

Kjalnesinga Saga also records the Christianity of Örlygr, the advice of St. Patrik, and his reverence for St. Kolumba. The saga, however, is inconsistent in some facts. The two mountains from *Landnámabók* are three mountains in *Kjalnesinga Saga*, and the saga remembers Örlygr as an Irishman. But the story remains essentially the same. One added point from the saga worthy of note is that St. Patrik tells Örlygr that at the foot of the southern-most mountain he will encounter a *formaðr* (chieftain) who will welcome him as a Christian because "*hann er lítill blótmaðr*" (*ÍF* 14: 4).[54] The stress here is on the tolerance of the local chieftain, a tolerance of the religious beliefs of the settlers that may have been a feature of the Ingólfr's kin group.

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[53] "*Örlygr stayed with Helgi for the first winter, and in the spring he took land with the advice of Helgi from Mógilsá river to Ósvífrslækjar brook and lived at Esjuberg. He had a church built there as was promised...Örlygr and his descendents kept their faith in St. Kolumba.*"

[54] "*he seldom makes pagan sacrifices*"

3.3.5 Ásbjörn Össurarson

Ásbjörn Össurarson, the nephew of Ingólfr,[55] received the land around modern day Garðabær, Hafnarfjörður, and Bessastaðir hreppur (*Landnámabók S* 396 *H* 353, *ÍF* 1: 394, 395). This is just south of Ingólfr's own land in modern day Reykjavík and therefore some distance from the Mosfell Valley (see Figure 3.1), but Ásbjörn was part of the powerful kin group centered in Ingólfr's original land claim.

3.3.6 Hallr Goðlauss (the Godless)

With Ingólfr's approval, Hallr Goðlauss claimed land adjacent and to the north of Þórðr Skeggi's claim. Hallr established the farm called Múli and his land claim was bounded by the Leirvogsá river to south and, to the north, by the Mógilsá river that empties into the Kollafjörður bay. The Leirvogsá river would have provided a clear geographic boundary between Hallr's and Þórðr's land. Hallr's aunt had the same mother as Þórðr Skeggi, and Hallr's son, Helgi, would later marry Þórðr Skeggi's granddaughter**,** Þuríðr Ketilbjarnardóttur (*Landnámabók S* 12 and *H* 12, *ÍF* 1: 48-51).

Concerning Hallr's religious beliefs, *Landnámabók S* (Ch. 12) states, "*Hallr goðlauss hét maðr; hann var son Helga goðlauss. Þeir feðgar vildu ekki blóta ok trúðu á mátt sinn*" (*ÍF* 1: 48).[56] The tradition of Hallr being "godless" holds significance in the wider suggestion from *Landnámabók* that a high percentage of Christians or non-

[55] Ásbjörn was the son of Ingólfr's brother Özurr (*ÍF* 1: 394, 395).

[56] "*There was a man named Hallr the Godless; he was the son of Helgi the Godless. Father and son would not make sacrifices to the gods and believed [only] in their own strength*."

practitioners of the pagan faith made up the group of settlers who claimed land around the Mosfell Valley and particularly on Kjalarnes.

3.3.7 Þorbjörn Hraðason and Þórvör Þorbjarnardóttir: Early Inhabitants of the Mosfell Farm

In the *Hauksbók* version of *Landnámabók* (*H* 23), a man named Finnr inn Auðgi marries Þórvör, daughter of Þorbjörn who lived at Mosfell. Jakob Benediktsson (1968: 487) assumes in his index to the *Íslenzk Fornrit* version of *Landnámabók* (*ÍF* 1) that this is the Mosfell on Grímsnes, but it is unclear why and he provides no reason in the notes. On the other hand, Guðni Jónsson, who was responsible for the *Íslengingasagnaútgáfan* edition of the Icelandic Sagas, compiled an index volume in which he connects Þorbjörn's Mosfell with the Mosfell in the Mosfell Valley (Jónsson 1953: 352). This is also the conclusion reached by Sigurður Vigfússon in his 1885 analysis of the Mosfell region where he does not even entertain that *Landnámabók* could be referring to the Mosfell on Grímsnes (S. Vigfússon1885: 63). Neither Þórvör nor her father Þorbjörn are mentioned in any other sagas or early Icelandic sources, meaning that the following passage from *Landnámabók H* is the main basis from which to approach this question.

> *Finnr hinn auðgi, son Halldórs Högnasonar, fór ór Stafangri til Íslands; hann átti Þórvöru, dóttur Þorbjarnar frá Mosfelli, Hraðasonar; hann nam land fyrir sunnan Laxá til Kalmansár; hann bjó í Miðfelli. Hans son var Þorgeirr faðir Hólmsteins, föður Þórunnar, móður Guðrúnar, móður Sæmundar, föður Brands byskups.*[57]
>
> *Landnamabók H* 23 (*ÍF* 1: 65, 67)

[57] "*Finnr the Wealthy, the son of Halldór Högnason sailed from Stavanger to Iceland; he married Þórvör, the daughter of Þorbjörn from Mosfell, the son of Hraði; he claimed land south of the Laxá River to the*

The date of Finnr's arrival to Iceland according to *Landnámabók* is not clear from the text, but he arrives later than others that settled in the region around the Laxá river, but early enough to be considered among the original *landnámsmenn*. Mosfell on Grímsnes, which is extensively documented in the early period, was established and settled by Ketilbjörn around 930, according to the internal chronology of *Landnámabók*. Since *Landnámabók* informs that the Mosfell on Grímsnes was established by Ketilbjörn the Old and none of his immediate descendents were named Hraði, Þorbjörn, or Þórvör, it appears that *Landnámabók* must be referring to another Mosfell (*ÍF* 1: 385). The only other known Mosfell in Iceland is the farmstead in the Mosfell Valley, from which the one on Grímsnes took its name.[58] *Landnámabók* does not record any other early settler at Mosfell in the Mosfell Valley, indicating that the only logical conclusion is that *Landnámabók* preserves a tradition of Þorbjörn Hraðason living at Mosfell in the Mosfell Valley.

The passage above therefore contains a glimpse of the first recorded farmer at the Mosfell farm in the Mosfell Valley. Although the passage does not provide a wealth of detail, the marriage alliance with the *landnámsmaðr* Finnr the Wealthy, suggests that Þorbjörn was a man of significant social standing. From this passing mention of Mosfell, it can be judiciously gathered that the textual record remembers Mosfell as a farm settled and used from the earliest period of Icelandic settlement. This is consistent with the place name evidence discussed in Chapter 2, indicating that Mosfell was the primary farm in

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Kalmansá River; he lived at Miðfell. His son was Þorgeirr, the father of Hólmsteinn, the father of Þórunn, the mother of Guðrún, the mother of Sæmundr, the father of Bishop Brandr."

[58] See section 2.3.1.1 in Chapter 2 for a discussion of the formation of the name of the Mosfell farm on Grímsnes by analogy from the earlier Mosfell farm in the Mosfell Valley.

the Mosfell Valley. Section 3.3.1 about Þórðr Skeggi, suggested that Þórðr probably settled at the Mosfell farm and established Skeggjastaðir as a secondary farm. As has been discussed, however, Þórðr did not have any sons, meaning that in the Norse patrilocal society none of his offspring remained to live on his land claim. Other than Þorbjörn, his daughter and conceivably his father, no inhabitants of the Mosfell Valley are mentioned in the period immediately following Þórðr Skeggi. The relationship of Þorbjörn Hraðason to Þórðr Skeggi, if there was any, is unknown. Since *Landnámabók* records no sons of Þórðr, however, it is possible that Þorbjörn received or inherited the authority in this region after Þórðr. This is of course conjecture, but without having to assume the complete historicity for these written sources, it is worth noting that the texts retain internal consistency and plausibility in the tradition of Þórðr and Þorbjörn both inhabiting the Mosfell Valley.

The name of Þorbjörn's father, Hraði, is also interesting in light of the presence of the farm name Hraðastaðir (Hraði's Farm) in the Mosfell Valley. Chapter 2 argues that the –staðir farms were early secondary farms in the valley that carry the names of the owners or the inhabitants of the farms as their prefixes. The written tradition in *Landnámabók* of a man named Hraði associated with the Mosfell Valley is congruent with the Hraðastaðir place name, bolstering the credibility of both sources. Together these two independent sources of evidence suggest that the tradition of the father and son, Hraði and Þorbjörn, in the Mosfell Valley may hold historical truth.

3.4 Conclusion: The Wider Mosfell Region in the Settlement Period

In a new uninhabited landscape and in the absence of entrenched social structure, kinship relationships were a key determinant in the settlement patterns and alliance formations during the early period of Icelandic settlement. The genealogical information discussed in detail is the backbone of understanding the kinship patterns of the early settlers. The various independent texts concerning the early settlement of the wider Mosfell region agree on the major points about the settlement and even the individuals involved, suggesting that a strong oral tradition preserved this information. This stable oral tradition is particularly important for the earliest period in Icelandic history because it is the furthest removed temporally from the 12th-14th century Icelandic written sources that record the oral traditions. The information concerning the early *landnámsmenn* and their descendents in *Landnámabók* has been questioned as partially legendary accounts meant to justify 13th century power structures (Rafnsson 1974). Although some bias and exaggeration is likely, the consistency of the saga sources with the *Landnámabók* account is not the result of a far-reaching 13th century conspiracy, but the simple product of the strong oral tradition maintaining a substantial amount of historical material.

The broader regional perspective of the Mosfell region pursued in this chapter and the focus on genealogical material from the texts has revealed the presence of a kin-based regional alliance centered on the direct descendents of a famous ancestor, Björn Buna, and the original land claim of Ingólfr Arnarson. Ingólfr cultivated his kinship connection with the descendents of Björn Buna by settling three of Björn Buna's grandchildren in his land claim, including Þórðr Skeggi, who settled in the Mosfell Valley, and Helgi Bjóla

and Örlygr Gamli, who settled on Kjalarnes. These early settlers reinforced their network by marriage alliances such as Helgi Bjóla's marriage to Ingólfr's daughter and Þórðr's daughter Arndís' marriage to Helgi's son Þorgrímr. In this region, settlers prioritized kinship relationships as determinants for alliances and settlement patterns. The religion of the individuals appears not to have been a factor since both pagans and Christians were prominent in this alliance. The tolerance for early Christians and the experiences of the potential advantages of this ideological system for chiefly power was probably an advantage to this region when Iceland officially converted to Christianity in AD 1000.[59]

Kinship relationships were a particularly important source of power in the initial settlement of Iceland, as kin-relations often determined the location of settlement and the availability of land. The early expeditions brought social inequality from Norway in the form of leaders, followers, and slaves. This power originated from the hierarchical organization of the large extended Norse households. Particularly in this early period when settlers claimed large areas identifiable relationships between the first *landnámsmenn* shaped the island's political landscape. Further economic power was yielded to the leaders of the colonial expeditions in the form of the first choice for their settlement farm and the power to determine which of his or her followers or kinsmen should be given land and where they should settle. The ability to give vast amounts of land as gifts provided the *landnámsmenn* with latent power to indebt others and the potential to centralize political power. The mobilization of such early political power is

[59] See Chapters 4 and 8 for a textual and archaeological view, respectively, of the ideological sources of power possessed by the Mosfell chieftains after the conversion to Christianity

exemplified by Þorsteinn Ingólfsson's establishment of the first *þing* assembly on the peninsula of Kjalarnes (Kjalarnesþing).

Leveling processes in the new land, however, particularly the wide availability of land and a landscape and an economy that functioned best with a dispersed settlement pattern, prevented the *landnámsmenn* from becoming an entrenched elite (Byock 2000: 84-88). Furthermore, the kin-based alliances such as the one formed by the descendents of Björn Buna may have formed areas of solidarity during the early period, but these regional alliances appear to break down after the influx of potentially threatening new settlers slows, probably before 930, and as the competition for local resources becomes a more predominant concern. These conditions militated against the emergence of territorial chiefs such as those that dominated in much of contemporary Scandinavia. Nevertheless, according to the written sources, the most successful later Icelandic chieftains were direct descendents of the most important land-claiming settlers. For Instance, in the Mosfell Valley, Þórðr also made alliances beyond his kin-group, marrying his daughters to other leading men in Settlement Period Iceland. His great grandson, Önundr the Wealthy, would return to the Mosfell Valley and become the chieftain there in the early 11th century.

Chapter 4 The Mosfell Chieftains and their Sources of Power in the Saga Age

4.1 The Saga Age Literature and Sources of Social Power

The written texts concerning the Saga Age (AD 930-1030) provide a different sort of information about the Mosfell Valley than does the genealogically focused material in *Landnámabók* and the sagas about the settlement period (AD 870-930). The stories change from centering on genealogy and settlement location to focusing on social processes such as disputes over land, rights to driftage on the beaches, and feuds over both issues of love and power. These Saga Age descriptions frequently concern the specifics of power struggles between both local chieftains and free-farmers that reveal information about the social ties and relationships within the Icelandic chiefly society. These sources can be more fruitfully used to investigate the sources of power available to and used by the Icelandic chieftains and farmers. By the time of the Saga Age, the Icelandic population had grown, the economic system had become more entrenched, and an Icelandic social structure had developed. Political chieftaincies had emerged, a national assembly formed at the Althing, and in the middle of this period, Christianity was officially adopted in Iceland. In the initial settlement period covered in the previous chapter, kinship relationships and alliances helped structure the settlement process. In this Saga Age, however, other sources of power become more visible as the structuring principles of the medieval chiefly power networks.

This chapter addresses the kinship-based, economic, political, ideological and military sources of power employed by the inhabitants of the Mosfell Valley as indicated by the saga sources. The chapter follows the division of power into the interconnected sources of power addressed in Chapter 1. To reiterate briefly, it is useful to conceive of power as deriving from multiple and interconnected "sources of power" (Mann 1986), "pathways to power" (Hayden 1995) or "media of power" (Earle (1997: 4-5), which theoreticians have divided into different categories for analysis. This chapter follows Michael Mann's (1986) conception of economic, political, military and ideological sources of social power. Potential leaders gain power over others through attaining access to these sources of power and limiting the access of others to these sources. The sum total of the access and restrictions from power sources structures the network of power in a society.

An unusual number of sagas shed light on the Mosfell Valley, making it one of the best-documented regions in the saga literature. The Mosfell Valley and its inhabitants appear in the following sagas: *Egils Saga (Egill's Saga)*, *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* (*The Saga of Gunnlaugr Serpent-Tongue*), *Hallfreðar Saga* (*Hallfreðr's Saga*), *Kjalnesinga Saga* (*The Saga of the People of Keelness)*, *Njáls Saga* (*Njáll's Saga*), *Flóamanna Saga (The Saga of the People of Flói Bay)*, *Orms Þáttr Storolfssonar* (*The Tale of Orm Storolfsson*), and *Þorsteins Þáttr Uxafóts* (*The Tale of Þorsteinn Bull-Leg*). Since these sources all fall into the same genre of literature as Family Sagas, as opposed to the *Landnámabók*, Ari's *Íslendingabók* or the later *Sturlunga Sagas*, any observed changes in saga depiction of society and the uses of social power are likely to represent

actual historical social changes. This chapter uses these saga texts to analyze the ways the people of the Mosfell Valley employed the sources of social power. The Mosfellingar[60] secured access to all five types of social power and used them efficiently throughout the Saga Age to create a network of power in which the individual sources were mutually supportive. The chieftains were at the center of this constellation of power and are therefore also at the core of this chapter. The saga evidence analyzed here provides detailed information on the power sources of two chiefly households that lived at the Mosfell farm, and whose authority stretched across the Mosfell Valley from the uplands to the shore and beyond.

4.2 Kinship and Social Relationships as Sources of Power for the Mosfellingar

This section on kinship stresses kinship and marriage alliances established by the Mosfellingar, and shows the importance of these alliances for insuring prestige and inheritance, and furthering ambitions of social power. The written sources reveal information about two families that lived in the Mosfell Valley during the Saga Age (930-1030). Both of these families lived at the site of Mosfell. The saga accounts explain the kinship ties that the Mosfellingar possessed and the family alliances they pursued. By combining the information from the Family Sagas with the kin relationships noted in *Landnámabók*, this section illuminates in significant time depth the families that occupied

[60] The term Mosfellingar means "the people of Mosfell." The term is used specifically to refer to the chiefly family that lived at the Mosfell farm and sometimes more extensively to refer also to those people who associate with or show allegiance with the chiefly family of the Mosfell farm. As Chapter 2 shows, Mosfell was the primary farm in the Mosfell Valley.

the Mosfell site. Particularly interesting for charting kinship relationships are the introductions of the people from the Mosfell area provided in the saga texts that include both genealogical information and geographical background. These passages will be examined here for the information they provide on kinship, origins, and alliances.

4.2.1 Grímr Svertingsson of Mosfell, His Kin, and His Alliances

Egils Saga introduces Grímr Svertingsson at the point in the saga where the people of Mosfell become a focus in the narrative as Grímr of Mosfell forms a marriage alliance with Egill's family by marrying Egill's niece Þórdís.[61] In the passage introducing Grímr to the audience, the saga provides genealogical information to situate Grímr in the kinship system and illustrate that he is a worthy match for Þórdís.

> *Grímr hét maðr ok var Svertingsson; hann bjó at Mosfelli fyrir neðan Heiði; hann var auðigr ok ættstór. Rannveig var systir hans sammæðra, er átti Þóroddr goði í Ölfusi; var þeira sonr Skapti lögsögumaðr. Grímr var ok lögsögumaðr síðan. Hann bað Þórdísar Þórólfsdóttur, bróðurdóttur Egils ok stjúdóttur. Egill unni Þórdísi engum mun minna en sínum börnum; hon var in fríðasta kona; en fyrir því at Egill vissi, at Grímr var maðr göfugr ok sá ráðakostr var góðr, þá var þat at ráði gört. Var Þórdís gipt Grími; leysti Egill þá af hendi föðurarf hennar; fór hon til bús með Grími, ok bjuggu þau lengi at Mosfelli.*[62]
>
> *Egils Saga* Ch. 77 (*ÍF* 2: 241-242)

[61] *Hrafnkels Saga* (Ch. 4) says Þórdís Þórólfsdóttir married Þormóðr Þjóstarsson from Álftanes (*ÍF* 11: 112). This seems to contradict the marriage information provided here, but it is also possible that the marriage to Grímr was her second marriage.

[62] "*There was a man named Grímr Svertingsson and he was the son of Svertingr; he lived at Mosfell below the Heath. He was wealthy and came from a good family. Rannveig, his half-sister from the same mother, married Þoroddr the chieftain from Ölfus; their son was Skapti the Lawspeaker. Grímr became the Lawspeaker after the events described here. He asked to marry Þórdís, daughter of Þórólfr and Egill's niece and step-daughter. Egill loved Þórdís no less than his own children; she was the most beautiful of women. Because Egill knew that Grímr was a high-born man and well off, the offer of marriage was accepted. Þórðis was married to Grímr; Egill paid her inheritance from her father. She went to live with Grímr, and they lived for a long time at Mosfell.*"

The saga notes that Grímr was highborn, accomplished, and wealthy. His knowledge of law and his island-wide influence must have been strong since the saga also recounts that he held the formal position of Lawspeaker, the highest and only island-wide political position. Sigurður Nordal (*ÍF* 2: XLIX) calculates, according to internal evidence in the sagas, that Grímr Svertingsson was born in AD 935 and was 67 when he became Lawspeaker in 1002. This title, discussed in detail in section 4.4, was held by chieftains or men whose family possessed a chieftaincy (*goðorð*). Jóhannesson (1974: 48) states, "lawspeakers came from the most prominent and highly cultured families in the country..." Gísli Sigurðsson (2004: 64) stresses that holding the position of Lawspeaker was a clear indication of the status and power of the individual and his family connection: "We may suppose that at all periods the choice of Lawspeaker was largely determined by the standing and success of particular families in national politics, just as we know happened in the 13th century when the representatives of the Sturlungar and Haukdælir alternated in office."[63]

This passage above does not state, however, that Grímr possessed a chieftaincy in the Mosfell area. No medieval written sources mention Grímr as a *goði* by title, which has led most scholars to disregard Grímr as a chieftain.[64] Although Grímr may not have

[63] According to the *Strulunga Sagas*, the Sturlungar and the Haukdælir were two of the four or five most powerful families that dominated Icelandic politics from their large territorial chieftaincies in the 13th century (see Chapter 5 for interaction of the Mosfell chieftains with these regional powers).

[64] See Ingvarsson (1986: 319-320) who is troubled by the idea of a *goðorð* in the Mosfell region as it interferes with the generally accepted view that this area was dominated by the chieftain of the Allsherjargoðorð possessed by the descendants of Ingólfr Arnarson. See also Karlsson (2004: 404), who only mentions Grímr once in connection with his passing of the Lawspeaker position to his nephew, and J.

owned a *goðorð*, he behaved in all manners as a chieftain as will be shown in this and the following sections on the sources of power possessed by the people of Mosfell. In recent publications, Jesse Byock and the Mosfell Archaeological Project tacitly assert that Grímr was a chieftain himself, calling him a "prominent chieftain" (Byock et al. 2005: 198). This dissertation supports the view of Byock et al., and provides an explanation and justification for the use of this term by providing examples of Grímr's authority, kinship, and alliance building.

The fact that both Grímr's maternal and paternal ancestry is preserved in the *Landnámabók* highlights the prestige of his family and justifies Grímr's description as "*ættstór"* (literally a 'grand pedigree' i.e. having prestigious kin) in the passage introducing him in *Egils Saga*. This passage provides parts of Grímr's ancestry: the reader learns his father's name, Svertingr, and the name of his half-sister from his mother Arnbjörg's second marriage, Rannveig, as well as the name of Arnbjörg's son Skapti.[65] *Landnámabók* contains further information concerning Grímr's ancestry beginning with his grandfather Hrolleifr's late arrival to Iceland when much of the land had already been claimed and settled.

> *Hrolleifr son Einars Ölvissonar barnakarls kom í Leiruvág, þá er byggt var allt með sjó; hann nam lönd til móts við Steinrøð öll fyrir útan Øxará, er fellr um Þingvöll, ok bjó í Heiðabœ nökkura vetr. Þá skoraði hann á Eyvind í Kvíguvágum til hólmgöngu eða landsölu, en Eyvindr kaus heldr at þeir keypti löndum. Eyvindr bjó nökkura vetr síðan í Heiðabœ ok fór síðan á Rosmhvalanes til Bœjarskerja, en Hrolleifr bjó síðan í*

V. Sigurðsson (1999), who does not discuss Grímr at all (see section 4.4 for a discussion of the views of these scholars and an argument for the Mosfellingar possessing a chieftaincy that included the Mosfell region and the Nesses).

[65] See Figure 3.2 showing the genealogy of the people of the Mosfell Valley.

Kvíguvágum ok er þar heygðr. Hans son var Svertingr, faðir Gríms lögsögumanns at Mosfelli.[66]

Landnámabók H 346 (*ÍF* 1: 389-391*)*

According to this account, Grímr Svertingsson's paternal grandfather landed at Leirvágr (modern Icelandic Leiruvogur or Leirvogur) at the mouth of the Mosfell Valley and lived on Steinröðr's land before using the threat of physical violence through the tradition of dueling[67] to wrest the previously claimed land away from the settler Eyvindr. This action put Hrolleifr in possession of the land west of Þingvellir (the Thing Plains) and the Þingvallavatn lake. This land is just northeast of the Mosfell region and adjacent to the land of the *landnámsmaðr* Þórðr Skeggi who settled in the Mosfell Valley. Svertingr, Grímr's father, is more obscure and no information about him is preserved in the sources except for the genealogical material from *Landnámabók*. *Landnámabók* (*S* 365, *H* 320, *ÍF* 1: 367) does recount, however, that Svertingr married Arnbjörg, the daughter of Ráðormr, who claimed land to the east between the Þjórsá and Rangá rivers. Grímr was therefore born of the union and likely alliance of two prestigious landowning families.

Grímr's mother, Arnbjörg, re-marries into another powerful family descendent from the *landnámsmaðr* Molda-Gnup, who claimed land on the south side of the

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[66] "*Hrolleifr, son of Einar Ölvisson Barnakarl, landed in Leiruvágr at the time when all the land along the sea had been claimed. He took land by the advice of Steinröðr beyond Öxará River, around Þingvellir, and lived at Heiðabær for a few winters. Then he challenged Eyvindr of Kvíguvágr to duel or to sell his land, but Eyvind chose rather to sell his land. Eyvindr lived some winters after that at Heiðabær and then went to Rosmhvalanes to Bæjarsker, while Hrolleifr lived thereafter at Kvíguvágr and is buried in a mound there. His son was Svertingr, the father of Grímr the Lawspeaker of Mosfell.*"

[67] The duel in medieval Iceland often took place on small islands, restricting the movement of the duelers and resulting in the name of this tradition as *hólmganga*, literally "island-going" (see 'Hólmganga' entry by Byock in Pulsiano 1993: 289-290).

Reykjanes peninsula (*Landnámabók S* 329, *ÍF* 330, 332). This re-marriage of his mother seems to have provided one of the key alliances for the Mosfellingar with the chieftains of the Ölfus region. *Egils Saga* reveals the importance of his kinship with the progeny of his mother's second marriage by emphasizing Grímr's relationship with his half-sister and nephew. The emphasis on his half-sister and nephew indicate that they are Grímr's most important and prestigious kin, at least from the perspective of the 13th century author of the saga.

The sagas provide evidence that the Mosfellingar achieved an alliance with the chieftain closest to the southeast in the Ölfus region and the chieftain closest to the north in Borgarfjörður. As a result, the Mosfell chieftain, Grímr, may have been able to capitalize on his strong regional support to be elected Lawspeaker. The genealogical information in the passage from *Egils Saga* establishes the saga author's understanding that Grímr's most important alliance and most prestigious connection was with the family of Skapti the Lawspeaker, probably because Skapti came to possess the *Ölfusinga goðorð* (Karlsson 2004; Ingvarsson 1986: 280-310) and held the office of Lawspeaker for 27 years after Grímr (Ingvarsson 1986: 285; *Íslendingabók* Ch. 8 *ÍF* 1: 19). Skapti's chieftaincy was centered in the Ölfus region located about 25 km south-southeast of the Mosfell Valley and east of the Ölfusá river that runs south from Ölfusvatn lake (also called Þingvallavatn).[68] Skapti's farmstead, Hjalli, was a prominent place and one of the power centers in southwest Iceland during the Saga Age (Figure 4.1).

[68] The yearly Althing was held on the northern shores of this lake.

The marriage between Grímr and Þórdís produced an alliance between Egill's family, which possessed the *goðorð* of the Mýramenn in Borgarfjörður and Grímr's family, which had a *goðorð* in the Mosfell region (Figure 4.1). Egill's father, Skallagrímr, had claimed the entirety of Borgarfjörður during the Settlement Period and Egill's family continued to be dominant in this area.[69] In fact, according the geographic information provided by *Landnámabók*, Skallagrímr's land claim was one of the largest of any of the initial settlers in Iceland (see Chapter 3, section 3.2). The Mýramenn, the men from the coastal and swampy area north of Borgarfjörður, were in possession of the *Myramanna goðorð* and appear in many sagas including *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu*, *Hallfreðar Saga*, *Egils Saga*, and *Grettis Saga* as an influential coalition under the leadership of the chieftains living at Borg.

Significantly, *Egils Saga* does not mention that Grímr and Þórdís had children—this is unusual for a saga and following this description, Egill's daughter Þorgerðr's union with Óláfr is described and their children are identified and treated in detail (*Egils Saga* Ch. 78, *ÍF* 2: 242). Grímr and Þórdís' childless marriage probably helps to explain the relationship between Grímr and his nephew Skapti, which might have enabled Skapti's inheritance of the Lawspeaker position. *Íslendingabók* explains that after Grímr had been Lawspeaker for only two years (1002-1003) he was able to pass the position on to his nephew because he had lost his voice. The slightly unusual situation and explanation is worth quoting directly from Ari's *Íslendingabók*:

[69] See Chapter 3, section 3.2 for a description of Skallagrímr's land claim.

> *Grímr at Mosfelli Svertingssonr tók lögsögu eptir Þorgeir ok hafði tvau sumur, en þá fekk hann lof til þess, at Skapti Þóroddsonr hefði, systurson hans, af því at hann vas hásmæltr sjalfr. Skapti hafði lögsögu sjau sumur ok tuttugu...*[70]
>
> *Íslendingabók* Ch. 8 (*ÍF* 1: 19)

This passage gives the impression that Grímr was able to pass power to a relative in a manner that suggests predetermined inheritance of a political position. Medieval Icelandic law clearly states that the Lawspeaker position was an elected office (*Grágás K* 116, Dennis et al. 1980: 187; Jóhannesson 1974: 47-48). The passing of a powerful and supposedly elected position within a family is also seen for the first two bishops of Iceland, Ísleifr Gizurarson and his son Gizurr Ísleifsson in the late 11th century (Byock 2001; Johannesson 1974). But the passing of the Lawspeaker position from Grímr to Skapti predates the bishopric transfer and is the first time an island-wide political position is inherited rather than achieved through popular consensus. Since Grímr did not have a son he probably chose his closest younger male relative to replace him.

As Gísli Sigurðsson (2004, 68) observes, "Skafti Þóroddsson is the first Lawspeaker who is identified not by place of origin but by his relationship to his predecessors." Sigurðsson interprets this inheritance as an indication of the breakdown of an earlier system that alternated Lawspeakers between the four regions of Iceland and a sign that "kinship connections had taken over as the overriding factor in the choice of

[70] "*Grímr Svertingsson at Mosfell became the Lawspeaker after Þorgeirr and held the position for two summers, and then he was allowed to arrange that Skapti Þóroddson, his sister's son, got the position because he had a sore throat himself. Skapti was Lawspeaker for twenty seven years…*"

Lawspeaker" (G. Sigurðsson 2004, 68).[71] Sigurðsson's supporting evidence is tenuous, but Grímr's ability to pass the title to his nephew clearly demonstrates the political influence possessed by this kin group and the status of both Grímr and Skapti. In this instance, Grímr is clearly acting as a powerful chieftain with significant authority over people (*mannaforráð*), one of the distinguishing characteristics of a *goði*. The transfer of the Lawspeaker position also indicates that the kinship alliance between the Mosfellingar and the Ölfusingar (the people of the Ölfus region), revolving around Arnbjörg, constituted a real and powerful force in the first years of the 11th century.

If the transfer of power to Skapti occurred as suggested here, then this is a prime example of the medieval Icelandic practice of charting kinship and enabling inheritance both through the paternal and the maternal lines of descent. One of the Mosfellingar's two primary alliances in the late 10th and early 11th centuries was built through Arnbjörg, Grímr's mother and the maternal grandmother of Skapti the Lawspeaker. Grímr established the second main alliance, with the Mýramenn of Borgarfjörður by his marriage to Egill's niece Þórdís. Another branch of the Grímr's kin alliance network revolving around his mother Arnbjörg appears to be responsible for bringing Önundr Eilífsson, the next owner of the Mosfell farm, to the Mosfell Valley. Through Arnbjörg, the Mosfell farm seems to have transferred from her son Grímr to her daughter Geirný and Geirný's husband Önundr Eilífsson (see the genealogy in Figure 3.2).

[71] Sigurðsson takes this point further to suggest that this is part of a breakdown of the political ideals of the founders and the increasing concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few families.

4.2.2 Önundr Eilífsson of Mosfell, His Kin, and His Alliances

Önundr is the second of the two owners of the Mosfell farmstead about which the Family Sagas provide valuable information. From the saga evidence, it is apparent that Önundr's family cultivates three separate family alliances by drawing on common kinship and establishing new marriage bonds. The alliance with the Ölfusingar led by Skapti the Lawspeaker appears to be the most important in terms of the support that the family receives. The sources about Önundr's father also show a family marriage alliance with the people from Mosfell on Grímsnes. Finally, Önundr's family tries to reinforce the alliance that the Mosfellingar from the Mosfell Valley under Grímr's leadership had formed with the Mýramenn from Borgarfjörður.

As discussed in the previous section, Önundr and Grímr were kinsmen through Grímr's mother, who was also Önundr's mother in law (see Figure 3.2). The timing and possible overlap of these two heads of the Mosfell farmstead has been debated, and it has even been suggested that the two men lived at Mosfell at the same time, each with their own household (see Maurer 1997: 384). The reason for this debate is that multiple sagas place both men at Mosfell within a short period, although Grímr was clearly there first and Önundr lived there after Grímr's death.

As Nordal and Jónsson note (*ÍF* 3: LVI, 61), the internal chronologies presented in *Egils Saga* about Grímr and in *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* about Önundr imply an overlap. According to *Egils Saga*, Grímr is alive at least until 1003 AD when he gives up

his Lawspeaker position,[72] while *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* suggests that by 1004 AD when Gunnlaugr and Hrafn meet at the court of the Swedish King Olaf, Hrafn's father is already living at Mosfell. When Hrafn returns to Iceland that same year, the saga states, "*kom skipi sínu í Leiruvág fyrir neðan Heiði.*" (*Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* Ch. 9, *ÍF* 3: 81). [73] When Önundr is first introduced in *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* four chapters before Gunnlaugr and Hrafn's meeting in Sweden, the sagas says he lives at Mosfell, but the tie of Önundr to Mosfell probably reflects a temporally collapsed tradition about Önundr's most famous residence rather than his particular geographical whereabouts at the chronological time in which he is first introduced. Years later, when Önundr plays a major role in the saga he is living at Mosfell.[74]

The possibility of a period of overlap would have significant implications for farm organization and could indicate a higher level of cooperation between co-habitating free-farmers at large medieval farmsteads than is considered the norm during this period. Although this type of double-household was not the norm in medieval Iceland, large households were normal and the sagas present other cases of farmsteads split between two independent farmers, often involving a formal agreement.[75] It is at least conceivable

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[72] *The Flateyjar Annals* mention the death of Grímr Svertingsson in the year 1003, but Nordal and Jónsson (*ÍF* 3: LVI) believe that he could well have lived for a few years after abdicating as Lawspeaker. Their reasoning is not clear, but seems to be derived from a suspicion that the entry in *The Flateyjar Annals* assumed Grímr's death to coincide with the year he gave up the Lawspeaker position.

[73] "*his ship lands in Leiruvágr, below the [Mosfell] Heath*"

[74] Nordal and Jónsson (*ÍF* 3: 61) note at the point of Önundr introduction into the saga that Önundr could only have moved to Mosfell later, since in their view, Grímr's continued habitation of the Mosfell farm at least up until AD 1003 excludes the possibility of Önundr's presence there.

[75] See for example *Sturlu Saga* (Ch. 19, Jóhannessson, Finnbogason and Eldjárn 1946a: 87) where Oddr Jósepsson and Sturla Þórðarson decide to to live as part of the same household: "*En Sturla kvað eigi mundu annat vænna en þeir gerði félagsbú. Oddr kveðst þess búinn, ok var þat ráðit, at Oddr skyldi eiga í búi i*

that Grímr and Önundr entered into such an agreement in the last years of Grímr's life, particularly if Grímr was having trouble running the Mosfell farm in his sickness and old age.

Most scholars, however, have concluded that Önundr only moved to Mosfell after Grímr's death (Grímsson 1861; Vigfússon 1885; Bjarnason and Guðmundsson 2005). The acceptance of this scenario appears rooted in the generally held assumption that farmsteads in medieval Iceland were headed by a single *bóndi* and this is certainly the most common depiction from the sagas. This is a norm, however, to which there must have been exceptions. Most scholars also interpret Grímr's throat sickness and his passing of the Lawspeaker position to his nephew Skapti as signs that Grímr was approaching his final years. The best argument against the co-habitation possibility, which is not explicitly stated by previous researchers, seems to be the simple fact that neither the sources about Grímr nor the sources about Önundr mention the other man.

How Önundr came to own the Mosfell farmstead is another issue of debate, but as suggested in the previous section, most scholars have pointed to family connection between Grímr and Önundr through Önundr's marriage to Grímr's half-sister, Geirný (Nordal and Jónsson 1938: 61; Ingvarsson 1985: 319). Geirný was also Skapti the Lawspeaker's aunt and an alliance between Skapti's kin in Ölfus and the people of Mosfell may have provided the Ölfusingar some influence over the inheritance of the

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Hvammi." ("*And Sturla said that nothing else would be more likely to succeed than their establishing a partnership-farmstead. Oddr he was ready for this, and it was decided that Oddr should own a share in the farmstead at Hvamm.*"). The use of the term *félagsbú* indicates that there was a recognized tradition of sharing ownership and operation of a farmstead between two independent land-owning farmers.

Mosfell farmstead. This possibility is made more likely by the prospect that the Mosfellingar and the Ölfusingar were sharing of a chieftaincy (*goðorð*).[76]

The importance of the alliance of the Mosfellingar with the Ölfusingar is stressed when Önundr and his son Hrafn are introduced in *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* with genealogical information that centers on Hrafn's mother Geirný's kin, ignoring completely Önundr's ancestry.

> *Önundr hét maðr, er bjó suðr at Mosfelli; hann var auðmaðr inn mesti ok hafði goðorð suðr þar um nesin. Hann var kvángaðr maðr, ok hét Geirný kona hans, Gnúpsdóttir, Molda-Gnúps sonar, er nam suðr Grindavík. Þeira synir váru þeir Hrafn og Þórarinn ok Eindriði. Allir váru þeir efniligir menn, en þó var Hrafn fyrir þeim í hvívetna. Hann var mikill maðr ok sterkr, manna sjáligastr ok skáld gott; ok er hann var mjök rosknaðr, þá fór hann landa á milli ok virðisk hvervetna vel, þar sem hann kom. Þá bjó suðr á Hjalla í Ölfusi þeir Þóroddr inn spaki Eyvindarson ok Skapti, sonr hans, er þá var lögsögumaðr á Íslandi. Móðir Skapta var Rannveig, dóttir Gnúps Molda-Gnúpssonar, ok váru þeir systra synir Skapti ok Önundarsynir; var þar vinátta mikil med frændsemi.*[77]
>
> *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* Ch. 5 (*ÍF* 3: 61)

Here *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* presents Geirný's kin as more significant than Önundr's for the status and support network of the Mosfellingar

[76] The possibility that the Mosfellingar shared a *goðorð* with the Ölfussingar will be discussed in the section below concerning the political sources of power.

[77] "*There was a man named Önundr, who lived to the south at Mosfell. He was the richest of men and owned the goðorð over the headlands to the south. He was a married man, and his wife was named Geirný, the daughter of Gnúp, the son of Molda-Gnup, who claimed the land south around Grindavík. Their sons were Hrafn, Þórarinn, and Eindriði. They were all promising men, but nevertheless Hrafn was foremost among them in all things. He was a large and strong man, very good looking, and an accomplished poet. When he was reasonably grown-up, he travelled abroad between several countries and was well respected everywhere he went. At that time, to the south at Hjalli in the Ölfus region lived Þóroddr the Wise Eyvindarson and Skapti, his son, who was then Lawspeaker of Iceland. The mother of Skapti was Rannveig, the daughter of Gnúp, son of Molda-Gnúp, which made Skapti and the sons of Önundr cousins* [i.e. 'son's of sisters']. *There was great friendship between these men in addition to their kinship.*"

Önundr's genealogy is more difficult to reconstruct from the sources, particularly since neither *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu*, nor *Hallfreðar Saga*, in which Hrafn and Önundr also play a part, even mention Önundr's father's name. Through cross-referencing saga characters, names, and dates, scholars have come to a consensus that the Önundr who lived at Mosfell in his later life is the same Önundr mentioned in *Njáls Saga* as the son of Eilífr the Wealthy (Ingvarsson 1985: 319; Jónsson 1953: 242). Önundr, following his father, also has the nickname "the Wealthy" in both *Njáls Saga* and *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* (*ÍF* 3: 61). If we can believe this relationship then much more genealogical material becomes available concerning Önundr. For instance, *Landnámabók* recounts that this Önundr's paternal grandfather, Önundr Bild, was one of the early settlers of Iceland, who claimed land west of the Þjórsá river (*Landnámabók S* 375 *H* 330, *ÍF* 1: 374). Önundr's paternal grandfather being a *landnámsmaðr* provides Önundr with a prestigious ancestry. More importantly, Þórðr Skeggi, the initial land-taker in the Mosfell Valley, then appears to be Önundr's great-grandfather (see Figure 3.2). This kinship with the *landnámsmaðr* of the Mosfell Valley connected Önundr with the Mosfell area and made his claim to the Mosfell farmstead more viable.

The saga sources also provide insight into the social alliance network of Eilífr, Önundr's father, connecting him to the chiefly family from the Mosfell farm on Grímsnes. This information comes partially from *Landnámabók* and partially from one of the most famous scenes in *Njáls Saga*, in which a band gathered by Gizurr the White of Mosfell on Grímsnes attacks Gunnar's house at Hliðarendi.[78] According to *Landnámabók*

[78] See section 4.6.2 below for more on this attack and Eilífr and Önundr's role in the overall conflict.

(*S* 387: *ÍF* 386-387), Önundr's father married the daughter of Ketilbjörn the Old of Mosfell on Grímsnes, and received in dowry the lands of Höfði,[79] where the married couple set up their farmstead.

In *Landnámabók* Eilífr the Wealthy and Sigmund, recruit the help of their maternal uncle, Mördr Gígja (the Fiddle), to get revenge on their father's killers. Mördr, who is a powerful chieftain and a famous lawman in the Rangavellir region, successfully accomplishes this by having one of the murderers outlawed, thereby allowing the brothers to kill him with impunity (*Landnámabók S* 348). Legal trouble ensues, but Mördr makes peace and aids Eilífr again by arranging his marriage to Þorkatla, the daughter of Ketilbjörn the Old, which brings land and more wealth to Eilífr (*Landnámabók S* 348). The key role that Mördr the Fiddle played in making Eilífr successful reveals the presence of a kinship alliance and suggests a sort of patronage relationship in which Eilífr was indebted to Mördr.

Njáls Saga (Chapters 75 and 77) suggests that Önundr and his father Eilífr cultivated the alliance with the Mosfellingar on Grímsnes that was formed when Eilífr married Ketilbjörn's daughter and cemented by the dowry of the Höfði land that Eilífr received. This alliance again becomes visible when Gizurr of Mosfell on Grímsnes draws Eilífr and his son Önundr into the band that attacks and kills Gunnar of Hliðarendi at his home.[80] This conflict is addressed in section 4.6.2 below on the conflicts engaged in by

[79] The modern farm of Hofði, which is thought to be the site of the medieval farm, is located on a small peninsula between the Hvítá and Brúará rivers. The Mosfell on Grímsnes where Ketilbjörn settled is close by, just west of the Brúará river.

[80]Einar Ó Sveinsson (1954: LXI), following the research of Guðbrandur Vigfússon and Finnur Jónsson on the internal chronology of *Njáls saga*, says that the slaying of Gunnar took place in 992.

the Mosfellingar. The important point to stress here in this section about power potential derived from social ties is that Önundr's family was allied with one of the most powerful families of the time. In fact, the family of the Mosfell on Grímsnes included some of the key power-players in the faction that successfully supported Iceland's conversion to Christianity (see Figure 3.2 for the relationship between the families of the two Mosfells). Gizurr the White, the grandson of Ketilbjörn the Old who inherits the Mosfell farm on Grímsnes, was one of the four main proponents of this conversion and his son and grandson would become the first two bishops of Iceland (see Jóhannesson 1974; Vésteinsson 2000; Aðalsteinsson 1999). An alliance and kinship relationship with this family would bring substantial status and prestige to Önundr and the Mosfellingar from the Mosfell Valley.

Eilífr's marriage to Þorkatla creates the first familial relationship between Önundr's family and the inhabitants of the Mosfell Valley, since Ketilbjörn the Old had stayed with Þórðr Skeggi and married Þórðr's daughter Helga before settling on Grímsnes.[81] The sources do not yield information about any continued connection between the two Mosfells, but a persisting alliance is possible and it may have been further cemented when Önundr took charge of the Mosfell farm in the Mosfell Valley.

The last of the three principal kinship alliances pursued by Önundr's family becomes visible when Önundr moves to Mosfell in the Mosfell Valley and tries to continue the connection Grímr Svertingsson had established with the chieftains of the Mýramenn in Borgarfjörður. Önundr's family attempts to cement this alliance with the

[81] See Chapter 3.

Mýramenn by seeking the marriage of Önundr's son Hrafn to Þorsteinn Egilsson's daughter, Helga the Fair.

> *Ok um sumarit á alþingi fundusk þeir frændr, Skapti lögsögumaðr ok Skáld-Hrafn. Þá mælti Hrafn: 'Þitt fullting vilda ek hafa til kvánbænar við Þorstein Egilsson, at biðja Helgu, dóttur hans.' Skapti svarar: 'Er hon eigi áðr heitkona Gunnlaugs ormstungu?' Hrafn svarar: 'Er eigi liðin sú stefna nú,' segir hann, 'sem mælt var með þeim? Enda er miklu meiri hans ofsi en hann muni nú þess gá eða geyma.' Skapti svarar: 'Gerum sem þér líkar.' Síðan gengu þeir fjölmennir til búðar Þorsteins Egilssonar. Hann fagnaði þeim vel. Skapti mælti: 'Hrafn, frændi minn, vill biðja Helgu, dóttur þinnar, ok er þér kunnig ætt hans ok auðr fjár ok menning góð, frænda afli mikill ok vina.'* [82]
>
> *Gunlaugs Saga* Ch. 9 (*ÍF* 3: 81)

This passage reinforces the primary significance of the alliance with the Ölfusingar for the Mosfellingar. Hrafn seeks support from his family's most powerful ally, Skapti of the Ölfusingar, who has at this point become the Lawspeaker, specifically because of the importance of this potential alliance. Skapti agrees to help in spite of the dubious legality of the request and persuades Þorsteinn to marry his daughter to Hrafn after giving Gunnlaugr one more summer to return from abroad and claim his bride.

The narrative of the event in *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* is presented more from the point of view of Gunnlaugr's family than from the perspective of the Mosfellingar, and therefore, the author depicts the Mosfellingar as antagonists behaving slightly less

[82] "*And that summer at the Althing the kinsmen Skapti the Lawpseaker and Hrafn the Skald met. At that time, Hrafn said: 'I want your assistance in asking Þorsteinn Egilsson for a marriage with his daughter Helga.' Skapti answers: 'Is she not already the promised woman of Gunnlaugr Serpent-Tongue?' Hrafn answers: 'Has not the time passed now,' he says, 'that they agreed to? And also, his overbearing nature has grown so much that he would now not take note or hold onto this.' Skapti answers: 'We shall do as you like.' Afterwards they went together with numerous others to Þorsteinn Egilsson's booth. He received them well. Skapti said: 'Hrafn, my kinsman, wants to ask to marry your daughter, and you know his family background, his wealth and good upbringing, and the great power of his relatives and his friends.'*"

honorably. The main drive of the saga is the tragic love triangle between Helga, Hrafn, and Gunnlaugr. However, in trying to unravel the potentially valuable information concerning social power and competition over the most favorable marriage alliances, the significant point is that the Mosfellingar vie as equals with other powerful chiefly families for a kinship alliance with one of the most prestigious families in southwestern Iceland.[83]

As further discussed below, this marriage alliance is short lived, surely disrupting if not ending the alliance between the Mosfellingar and the Mýramenn. This failure to reinstate a marriage alliance between Borg and Mosfell, no doubt, adversely affected the Mosfell chieftains' regional power and political support. Furthermore, the attempt to re-forge the alliance with the Mýramenn brings the Mosfellingar into a legal battle and direct violent conflict with Gunnlaugr's powerful chiefly family in the Borgarfjörður region. This rivalry over an alliance with the Mýramenn and the ensuing feud, as well as the eventual consequences for the power of the Mosfellingar is addressed in detail below in the section about conflict and military power.

[83] Similarly, Sigurður Nordal also stresses the many connections between the Mýramenn and the relatives of Hrafn (Nordal and Jónsson 1938, *ÍF* 3: LI). Nordal suggest that it is natural that Hrafn's relatives would seek a wife for him among the Mýramenn.

4.2.3 Concluding Remarks on the Kinship-Based Social Power of the Mosfellingar

The sagas show the two owners of the Mosfell farmstead, Grímr Svertingsson and Önundr Eilífsson, to be descendents of prominent early settlers of Iceland. These two chieftains of the Mosfell region employed kinship bonds and marriage alliances to pursue regional alliances with the other chiefly families from adjacent areas. Grímr of Mosfell and his family maintained alliances with the Mýramenn in Borgarfjörður and the Ölfusingar in the Ölfus region. Önundr, who took over the Mosfell farm after Grímr, had alliances with the Ölfusingar and the family from the Mosfell farm on Grímsnes, and tried to maintain his predecessor's alliance with the Mýramenn. The regional alliances in the Saga Period still clearly rely on kinship relationships similar to the alliance networks addressed in the previous chapter on the first settlers of Iceland. The Mosfellingar employed kinsmen to advance their ambitions such as the forging of new marriage alliances as evidenced by Skapti the Lawspeaker's representation of Hrafn in his marriage with Helga the Fair from Borgarfjörður. Kinship relations were also mobilized for vengeance in feuds as seen in Eilífr's use of his kinsman Mörðr to avenge his father, and for gathering forces for military operations, as exemplified by Eilífr and Önundr's support of the attack on Gunnar of Hliðarendi. However, by this period the economy and social structure of Iceland had developed, political chieftaincies emerged, and a new religion begun to gain influence. These developments resulted in the sources of social power beyond kinship becoming more prominent in the constellations of power in Icelandic society.

4.3 The Economic Power of the Mosfellingar: the Organization of Production and the Control of Exchange

The written sources provide insight into two households in the Mosfell Valley during the Saga Period, and both of them inhabit the Mosfell farm. According to the sources, these households consisted of extended families, attached laborers, and slaves. In general, the medieval Icelandic household was run by a male head of the household and his wife. In the case of Mosfell, the head of the household was also a local chief (*goði*) whose power extended well beyond the household and into political and ideological matters reaching into the households of other farmers in the area.[84] But the *goði* was also a farmer and as a farmer, he was involved in everyday economic activities. This section presents first the textual evidence from the Mosfell Valley on production and household organization before focusing on the rich evidence of long distance exchange and the domination of this exchange by the people of the Mosfell farm. The most valuable passages about the organization of the Mosfell household and the household economy come from *Egils Saga*. The section on production focuses on land and labor with the assumption that the accumulation of land and laborers as seen in the sagas is an indication of power centralization. The more plentiful evidence on the exchange economy is found in numerous sagas, of which *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* provides the most far-reaching insights into the direct economic benefits that this exchange brought to the Mosfell chieftains.

[84] See the sections below on political and ideological power of the Mosfellingar (sections 4.4 and 4.5).

4.3.1 Household Organization and Production

The saga narratives about Mosfell are focused on the conflicts of the leading men among the Mosfellingar, meaning that at first glance, the written sources seem to provide limited direct evidence on labor, food production, and farm organization. By carefully observing the characters in saga accounts and the activities in which they engage, however, we learn a great deal about the attached labor, farm production, and household organization at the Mosfell farm.

Egill, the central figure of *Egils Saga*, first comes to Mosfell in his old age and becomes part of Grímr's household as indicated in *Egils Saga*: "*...en Egill fór þá suðr til Mosfells til Gríms, mágs síns, því at hann unni mest Þórdísi, stjúpdóttur sinni, þeira manna, er þá váru á lífi*" (Ch. 79, *ÍF* 2: 275).[85] Already here a picture begins to emerge of the size of the Mosfell household, which includes members of the extended family. Egill does not do much, if any, farm labor as an old and high-status male, and the saga mostly depicts him lying around composing poems and suffering from physical ailments.[86] Egill's influential role and status become most clear during the conflicts in which his son and the people of Mosfell become embroiled (see section 4.6 concerning the conflicts and military power of the Mosfellingar). The household at Mosfell clearly includes Grímr, Þórdís, and Egill, but the saga quickly reveals a much larger household.

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[85] "*..and Egill then moved south to Mosfell to Grímr, his his son-in-law, because he loved Þórdðis, his step-daughter the most of all people who were still living.*"

[86] For a discussion of Egill's symptoms and the possibility that he suffered from Paget's Disease see Byock 1993, Byock 1995, and Harðarson 1984.

The main portion of the labor force at Mosfell consists of attached laborers and slaves. These workers are never the focus of the saga narrative, but become visible in the sphere of interaction around the main characters. In this fashion, working women of the household appear as an amused audience to Egill's maladroit movements:

> *Þat var einn dag, er Egill gekk úti með vegg og drap fæti ok fell; konur nökkurar sá þat ok hlógu at ok mælti: 'Farinn ertu nú, Egill, með öllu, er þú fellr einn saman.' Þá segir Grímr bóndi: 'Miðr hæddu konur at okkr, þá er vit várum yngri.'* [87]
>
> *Egils Saga* Ch. 85 (*ÍF* 2: 294)

The female workers are circumstantial to the saga action and their inclusion must have seemed normal in the medieval audience's perception of late 10th century high-status households. The number of women is unclear and their roles are not described, but the saga clearly considers these women to be workers at the Mosfell farm. *Egils Saga* also reveals a measure of specialization in the laborers of the Mosfell farmstead. In another instance of Egill's inactive old age, a member of the Mosfell household mocks Egill, provoking him to compose a lamenting poem about old age.

> *Þat var einnhvern dag, er veðr var kalt um vetrinn, at Egill fór til elds at verma sik; matseljan ræddi um, at þat var undr mikit, slíkr maðr sem Egil hafði verit, at hann skyldi liggja fyrir fótum þeim, svá at þær mætti eigi vinna verk sín. 'Ver þú vel við,' segir Egill, 'þótt ek bökumk við eldinn, ok mýkjumsk vér við um rúmin,' 'Statt þú upp,' segir hon, 'ok gakk til rúms þíns ok lát oss vinna verk vár.'*[88]
>
> *Egils Saga* Ch. 85 (*ÍF* 2: 295)

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[87] "*It happened one day, when Egill walked outside along the wall he stumbled and fell; some women saw this, laughed and said: 'You are finished now Egill in all ways, when you fall all on your own.' Then Grímr the farmer says: 'The women laughed less at our expense when we were younger.'* "

[88] "*It occurred a certain day in the winter when the weather was cold that Egill went to the fire to warm himself; the cook began saying that it was a shame for such a man as Egill had been that he should lie at*

In this passage, Egill gets in the way of the cook, who states that he is also in the way of other workers in the household. The title of the cook, *matseljan*, is a good indicator of a member of the household that has a specialized duty, and we may imagine that to need a specialized cook, the household should be of considerable size, perhaps around 15-20 people. The attitude of the female cook suggests that she is a free laborer. Moreover, this short passage sheds light on the saga's image of the general layout of the house. There is only one fireplace, as Egill tries to warm himself by the same fireplace that is being used for food preparation. This must be the long-hearth located in the center of the hall.

There are also un-free members of the Mosfell household. The un-free labor comes into focus as the moody and blind Egill carries out his plan to bury his treasure rather than let his descendents inherit his wealth. The saga states,

> *Þat var eitt kveld, þá er menn bjuggusk til at rekkna at Mosfelli, at Egill kallaði til sín þræla tvá, er Grímr átti; hann bað þá taka sér hest, - 'vil ek fara til laugar.' Ok er Egill var búinn, gekk hann út ok hafði með sér silfrkistur sínar…En um morgininn, er menn risu upp, þá sá þeir, at Egill hvarflaði á holtinu fyrir austan garð…En hvárki kom aptr síðan þrælarnir né kisturnar…*[89]
>
> *Egils Saga* Ch. 85 (*ÍF* 2: 297)

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their feet so that they could not do their work. 'Go easy on me,' says Egill, 'even if I bake myself by the fire, and we should make space for each other in the room.' 'Stand up,' she says, 'and go to your bed and let us do our work.'"

[89] *"It happened one evening, when people were preparing to go to bed at Mosfell that Egill called to him two of the slaves that Grímr owned. He bade them get his horse- 'I want to go to the bath.' And when Egill was ready, he went out and had with him his chests of silver…And in the morning, when men got up, they saw that Egill was wandering on the low ridge east of the farm…But neither the slaves nor the treasure chests were ever seen again…Egill said he had killed Grímr's slaves and hidden the treasure."*

Although this is the only mention of the slaves at Mosfell, the passage implies there are more slaves than these two. The un-free labor working in Grímr's establishment and the relatively expendable nature of slaves in this period must have been believable to the 13th century audience. These slaves would have been the property of Grímr. The slaves could be set to perform various tasks, but their specific work at Mosfell is not further illuminated. Other saga accounts suggest that they were in general treated reasonably well and integrated into regular farm tasks.[90]

Besides information on labor, passages such as this also provide insights into the infrastructure possessed by the Mosfellingar and the means of production with which the laborers worked. The word *laugar*[91] in the passage above is translated as a "bath-house" by Pálsson and Edwards (1976: 237) and as a "pool" by Scudder (2004: 203). This "bath" is probably not a separate house, but most likely a natural hot spring that the people of Mosfell had access to. Springs such as these would not have brought direct economic benefit, but were still a desirable possession for relaxation, washing, and socializing. The number of farms in medieval and modern Iceland that have names such as Laug, Laugar, Reykir (smoke/steam), or employ these words as prefixes or suffixes (e.g. Reykjaholt, Reykjavík, Grettislaug, Snorralaug) show the value and importance of such hot springs.

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[90] According to the saga evidence and the opinion of most historians of early Icelandic history, slaves began to be freed soon after the beginning of the settlement of Iceland as an adaptation to the situation in Iceland where labor needs were disperse and land was readily available. These freedmen, as the manumitted slaves were called, remained politically and economically dependent on their former masters as þingmen and/or tenant farmers. If these freed slaves did not produce offspring, then the former master inherited the freedman's land and possessions (Jóhannesson 1974; Byock 2001; Karlsson 2000; Durrenburger 1992).

[91] genitive form of feminine noun *laug*

The sedentary pastoral economy of Mosfell is also glimpsed in *Egils Saga* (Ch. 85, *ÍF* 2: 297), which informs, "[*a*]*t Mosfelli var höfð selför, ok var Þórdís í seli um þingit.*" [92] Owning a shieling (*sel*) required means to construct and operate a summer dairy station as well as the land-ownership and grazing rights to the area. Most large medieval Icelandic farmsteads owned such a shieling and possessed the means and land to operate extensive summer grazing. The Mosfellingar were no exception.

The farmstead of Mosfell also invested in infrastructure not directly related to production of agro-pastoral products, a fact most clearly exemplified in the church that Grímr had built at Mosfell at the end of *Egils Saga* (Ch. 86, *ÍF* 2: 298). This construction, which required access to costly wood, is an economic investment in a potentially strong ideological source of power. The early owners of churches would have collected payments from the local population for use of the church and possibly also for burial in the churchyard (see Vésteinsson 2000). The investment in materializing the new ideology in the form of a prominent Christian church would have yielded economic benefits, increasing the wealth to the Mosfellingar (see section 4.5).

In the period where Grímr and Önundr lived at Mosfell, the church tithe had not yet been made law and it is unclear how much the chieftains or farmers could benefit economically from their churches.[93] Later in the medieval period after the tithe came into effect in AD 1096, ¼ of the tithe belonged to the owner of the church, while an additional ¼ was to be paid to the acting priest, who might also be the church owner (Vésteinsson

[92] *"At Mosfell the cattle were kept at a shieling and Þórdis was there during the Althing."*

[93] The sources of power available from church ownership is addressed in detail below in section 4.5.

2000). In the pre-Christian period, the sources mention a pagan temple tax, but the historical accuracy of such taxes is debated (see Vésteinsson 2000; Byock 2001; Sigurðsson 1999). Other taxes, such as the "sheep tax" mentioned several times in the *Sturlunga Sagas*, probably were not instituted until the 13th century and may have been only sporadically collected. In sum, no reliable information exists on a tax that the Mosfellingar or other Icelandic chieftains could have benefited from in the time before the tithe.

The church at Mosfell still existed when Önundr lived at Mosfell, a fact that *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* reveals as the Mosfellingar flee into the church to seek sanctuary from the attack from Borgarfjörður. Although *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* does not provide as much insight into the organization and production at Önundr's Mosfell as *Egils Saga* yields about Grímr's farm, it appears that much remains the same. Önundr's household appears to be a large one that includes both his oldest son Hrafn and attached laborers. The saga relates, for example, that one of Önundr's men is stationed down by the sea in Leirvogur bay to monitor the arrival of ships. In this case, the saga descriptions of Önundr's farmstead reveals more than the descriptions of Grímr's farmstead about the control the Mosfellingar wielded over the Leirvogur port and the economic sources of power derived from the exchange economy.

4.3.2 Exchange and Economic Control of the Leirvogur Port

The saga sources describing Önundr's farmstead's organization show that Önundr and his family manage and control the local and trans-Atlantic exchange at the port at

Leirvogur. Numerous Icelandic sagas refer to Leirvogur, located at the mouth of the Mosfell Valley, as a port of trade and a natural ship-landing place. *Landnámabók* describes the Leirvogur bay as a natural place for ships to anchor:

> *Hrollaugr fór til Íslands með ráði Haralds konungs… Hann kom austr at Horni...en hann rak undan ok vestr fyrir land; fekk hann þá útivist harða ok vatnfátt. Þeir tóku land vestr í Leiruvági á Nesjum; var hann þar enn fyrsta vetr.*[94]
>
> *Landnámabók S* 310/*H* 270 (*ÍF* 1: 316-317)

In this passage, the Leirvogur bay serves as a natural refuge for Hrollaugr and a safe place to pull up his ship after a rough trip. It was most likely these natural characteristics of the bay, sheltered by the nesses and islands to the west, which made Leiruvágr (modern sp. Leirvogur or Leiruvogur) a logical choice for a ship-landing and a port of trade. Leirvogur also appears in *Þorsteins Þáttr Uxafóts* (Ch. 1, *ÍF* 13: 341) as the location where Þórðr Skeggi's high-seat pillars washed ashore, prompting him to move his household to the Mosfell Valley.[95]

The sagas also recount planned and organized ship landings in Leirvogur. In *Orms Þáttr Stórólfssonar* (Ch. 6, *ÍF* 13: 408), the saga's hero Ormr returns to Iceland from Horðaland in Norway around the year AD 1000: "*Fór Ormr til Íslands með Özuri*

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[94] "*Hrollaugr went to Iceland with the advice of King Harald…He arrived in the east at Horn…but he drifted down south and to the west of the land; he had a hard trip and lacked water. They landed on the west coast in Leiruvágr in the Nesses; he stayed there the first winter.*"

[95] "*…í Leiruvági fyrir neðan Heiði"* ("*into Leirvogur below the Heath*"). See Chapter 3 section 3.3.1 describing Þórðr Skeggi's early settlement in the Mosfell Valley.

hörzka; urðu vel reiðfara, kómu skipi sínu í Leiruvág fyrir neðan Heiði."[96] In *Orms Þáttr*, where the actions, particularly the actions abroad, are sometimes fantastic and magical, the places and actions occurring in Iceland are meant to anchor the tale in the real and believable world for the medieval audience.

The saga literature recounts several examples of ships setting out from Leirvogur for trans-Atlantic journeys and depicts various types of trade taking place at Leirvogur, including the purchase of ships. The following passage from *Flóamanna Saga*, which takes place around AD 1000, provides an example of the purchase of a ship at Leirvogur for a journey to Greenland:

> *Þorgils talar við konu sína, ef hon vildi fara til Grænlands…Þórný hét dóttir þeira Þorgils ok Þóreyjar; hon var átta vetra. Þorleifr skal fara með þeim, Kolr ok bróðir hans, Starkaðr, ok Guðrún, systir þeira, Snækollr ok Özurr, þrælar hans, ok tíu aðrir þrælar ok ráðsmaðr hans, Þórarinn, því at Þorgils ætlaði bæ at reisa, þá er kæmi til Grænlands. Jósteinn ór Kálfholti réðst til ferðar með Þorgilsi við tólf menn, Þorgerðr, kona hans, ok sonr. Þorgils kaupir nú skip í Leiruvági…Þorgils gisti at Þórodds at Hjalla.*[97]
>
> *Flóamanna Saga* Ch. 20 (*ÍF* 13: 275-277)

This section of *Flóamanna Saga* describes an undertaking involving the trans-Atlantic movement of at least 39 people. The purchase of a ship shows that the ship-

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[96] "*Orm sailed to Iceland with with Özurr from Horðaland; the trip went well and they brought their ship into Leirvogur below the [Mosfell] Heath.*"

[97] "*Þorgils talks with his wife about whether she would want to go to Greenland…Þórný was the name of Þorgils and Þórey's daughter; she was eight winters old. Þorleifr was going with them, as was Kolr his brother, Starkaðr, Guðrun their sister, Snækollr, and Özurr, his slaves, and ten other slaves and his household manager Þórarinn because Þorgils intended to establish a farmstead once he arrived in Greenland. Jósteinn from Kálfholt took part in the journey with Þorgils with twelve men, Þorgerðr his wife, and their son. Þorgils then bought a ship in Leirvogur…Þorgils stayed as a guest at Hjalli…*"

landing at Leirvogur is more than just a place to pull up ships, and actually functions, at least in the saga literature, as a center where Icelanders could acquire trade goods of the largest and most expensive kind. Leirvogur is not only a port site, but also a site where one can buy a ship for trans-Atlantic transport. The ship bought in *Flóamanna Saga* sails to the west coast of Greenland, arriving at the farm of Erik the Red at Brattahlið.[98] This story presents a scenario where the port of trade at the mouth of the Mosfell Valley is connected directly to the larger Norse world and illustrates the popular memory of Leirvogur as an important port around AD 1000.

In *Flóamanna Saga*, Þorgils, intending to establish a new farm in Greenland, purchases a ship in Leirvogur to start his journey. In this saga account, other ports are closer to Þorgils' home on the south coast of Iceland, such as Einarhöfn (Eyrar) at the mouth of the Ölfusá river and Knarrarsund at Grímsaróss, which are both used by Þorgils and the men of his district (see Figure 4.1).[99] When Þorgils wants to buy an ocean-going vessel to cross the Atlantic, however he travels to Leirvogur to do so.

The passage from *Flóamanna Saga* also reveals economic benefits of the alliance network of the Mosfellingar. Þorgils interacts simultaneously with the people of Mosfell through his purchase of the ship and with the people of Ölfus living at Hjalli, where he spends the winter after his purchase. Although the connection is somewhat obscured in

[98] Vilmundarson and Vilhjálmsson (1991: CLVII) express some doubt that Þorgils ever went to Greenland.

[99] See *Flóamanna Saga* Ch. 9 Þórðr Atlason buys a ship in Knarrarsund; Ch. 10 Þorgrímr Örrabeinn (Scarleg) arrives at Knarrarsund; Ch. 12 Þorgils sails from Knarrarsund to Norway; Ch. 18 Helgi Ólafsson tries to go abroad from Eyrar; Ch. 18 Þorgils Þórðarson arrives at Eyrar from Norway. The point is that something different is going on now that Þorgils decides to travel from his farm Traðarholt, located just miles from Knarrarsund, past Einarshörn to Leirvogur for this voyage. The saga does not provide this information explicitly, but Þorgils' is chooses to depart from Leirvogur because this is the port of trade where he can acquire a ship for his journey.

the text, it seems likely that this account holds unexpressed information concerning the power and personal ties of the Mosfellingar. Skafti the Lawspeaker, son of Þóroddr goði, plays a large role in *Flóamanna Saga* and lives at Hjalli in Ölfus where Þorgils stays after buying a ship in Leirvogur. As discussed in section 4.2, Skafti is related to and allied with both Grímr and Önundr of Mosfell. Skafti also shares kinship with Þorgils. To push the saga account to its full potential, it is possible that Skafti, as a relative of both the Mosfellingar and Þorgils, set up Þorgil's ship purchase at Leirvogur, a port controlled by the Mosfellingar.

Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu provides the clearest evidence for the Mosfellingar using Leirvogur as a port of arrival and departure when travelling abroad. In one instance, Hrafn, the son on Önundr of Mosfell, returns to Iceland from Norway: "*Hrafn fór austan um várit ok kom til Þrándheims ok bjó skip sitt ok sigldi til Íslands um sumarit ok kom skipi sínu í Leiruvág fyrir neðan Heiði, ok urðu honum fegnir frændr ok vinir, ok var hann heima þann vetr með föður sínum*" (Ch. 9, *ÍF* 3: 81).[100] Leirvogur is the port of choice for Hrafn for his stay at Mosfell. When Hrafn readies this same ship to leave for Trondheim once again, the saga recounts, "*Nú er at segja frá Hrafni, at han bjó skip sitt í Leiruvágum*" (Ch. 9, *ÍF* 3: 98). [101] The story implies that Hrafn kept the ship that he appears to own in the Leirvogur cove. Whether Hrafn and the Mosfellingar actually owned a ship is impossible to know, but ownership of a ship with trans-Atlantic

[100] "*Hrafn went east during the spring and arrived to Trondheim, prepared his ship and sailed to Iceland in the summer. He brought his ship into Leirvogur below the [Mosfell] Heath, and his family and friends received him joyfully. He stayed home with his father that winter.*"

[101] "*Now there is to say about Hrafn, that he prepared his ship in Leirvogur.*"

capabilities was reserved for the wealthiest Icelandic families by AD 1000,[102] and the saga clearly remembers the Mosfellingar as having that sort of status.

The wealth of the Mosfell chieftain Önundr and his son suggested by the previous passage from *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* and the ownership of a trans-oceanic ship seems to have derived at least in part from the Leirvogur port. Chieftains had the right to first choice and price setting at ports that were under their authority. These rights would have allowed primacy of access to prestige goods and raw materials from Europe. The access and import of such prestige goods is illustrated in a separate text, *Egils Saga*, where Egill who is living at Mosfell, receives a worthy gift from abroad:

> *Þat var eitt sumar at skip kom út í Leiruvági, ok stýrði sá maðr, er Þormóðr hét; hann var norrænn ok húskarl Þorsteins Þórusonar; hann hafði með at fara skjöld, er Þorsteinn hafði sent Agli Skalla-Grímssyni, ok var þat ágætagripr… eptir um vetrinn orti Egill drápu um skjaldargjöfina, er kölluð er Berudrápa…*[103]
>
> *Egils Saga* Ch. 79 (*ÍF* 2: 275)

This passage illustrates that the port at Leirvogur was also active in the time when Grímr the Lawspeaker lived at Mosfell before Önundr and his son Hrafn. The gift to Egill comes from a *hersir* (one of the King's chieftains) in Norway. The social value of such a

[102] The ships used to sail back and forth from Iceland to Europe were called Knörr. According to Jóhanesson (1974) very few Icelandic families owned ships in the 11th century.

[103] "*It happened one summer that a ship arrived in Leirvogur, and it was steered by that man who was called Þormóðr; he was Norwegian and one of Þorstein Þóruson's men. He had with him on the trip a shield that Þorsteinn had sent to Egill Skallagrímsson, and it was an excellent and valuable treasure…Later during the winter Egill composed a drápa* (a laudatory poem) *about the gift of the shield, which is called Bera's Drápa.*"

gift far outweighed the real economic value of the shield, and this gift provides an excellent example of the prestige good-driven economy in medieval Iceland.

The control of the port of Leirvogur by the Mosfell chieftain is clearly expressed in the corroborating accounts found in two sagas: *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* and *Hallfreðar Saga*.[104] Both texts recount the same episode when Hallfreðr arrives at Leirvogur and encounters the ship toll of the Mosfellingar as well as their willingness to back up their rights to the toll with force. Interestingly, in *Hallfreðar saga*, this short passage does not further the narrative of the saga, but is probably preserved here as an important event in Hallfreðr's life that could not be cut out of the saga even when streamlined from the original as in version *M* of the text on which our modern editions are based. *Hallfreðar Saga* recounts the confrontation as follows:

> *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] hálfa mörk silfrs húskarli Önundar ok svaraði heldr harðliga. Kom húskarlinn heim ok sagði sín vandrædi. 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 þeria Hallfreðar. Síðan áttu menn hlut í at sætta þá, ok var goldit hálfu meira en húskarl átti, ok skilðu at því. Annat sumar eptir áttu þeir Hallfreðr ok Gunnlaugr ormstunga ferð saman ok kómu á Melrakkasléttu; þá hafði Hrafn fengit Helgu. Hallfreðr sagði Gunnlaugi, hversu honum hafði vegnat við Hrafn.*[105]
>
> *Hallfreðar Saga* Ch. 11 (*ÍF* 8: 196)

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[104] Nordal and Jónsson (*ÍF* 3: XLIX-L) believe that the passage about Hallfreðr's encounter with Hrafn Önundarson in Leirvogur from *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* was used as a source for *Hallfredar Saga*, which they believe is younger than *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu*. It seems just as plausible, especially considering the discrepancies between the accounts, that these are at least semi-independent traditions retaining the same basic story about a well-known conflict between two famous men.

[105] "*During the summer Hallfreðr sailed out to Iceland and steered his ship into Leirvogur in the south part of the country. At that time Önundr lived at Mosfell. Hallfreðr was required to pay half a mark of silver to Önundr's farmhand, but answered him rather harshly. The farmhand went home and recounted his*

This passage illustrates the control that the people living at the Mosfell farm wielded over the Leirvogur port. The Mosfell chieftain collects direct income in the form of a toll from ships and traders. The toll, according to this saga, was ½ mark (*mörk*, pl. *merker*) of silver. A basic unit of weight and currency in medieval Iceland, the *mörk* weighed about 217 grams (Gelsinger 1981: 33; Lárusson 1958). The issue of interest here is the contemporary value of a *mörk*. Besides silver, *vaðmál*, rough sheep wool, was the other monetary standard used for exchange. [106] The common unit of measurement for *vaðmál* was an *öln* (pl. *alnir*), originally the length of the arm from behind the elbow to the fingertips, or later, from the elbow to the end of the thumb (Gelsinger 1981: 35). Despite variations in prices over time, Gelsinger (1981: 35, 37) suggests that around AD 930, 192 *alnir* of *vaðmál* equaled 1 *mörk* of impure silver.[107] A price list from the Árnes Þing assembly dating to c. AD 1186 puts the value of a *mörk* in more readily understandable terms by stating that 2.5 marks could buy a young, healthy cow (Jóhannesson 1974: 334;

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difficulty. Hrafn said it was expected that he [the farmhand] would get the worse part of dealings with Hallfreðr. And the morning after, Hrafn rode to the ship and intended to chop the anchoring ropes and stop the departure of Hallfreðr and his crew. Afterwards men took part in reconciling them, and a fee of twice as much was paid to the farmhand, and with that they separated. The summer after, Hallfreðr and Gunnlaugr Serpent-Tongue were undertaking a trip together and they came to Melrakaslétta. At that point Hrafn had married Helga. Hallfreðr told Gunnlaug how it had gone for him in his encounter with Hrafn."

[106] *Vaðmál* was increasingly used as the supply of silver to Iceland became depleted in the 11th century (Jóhannesson 1974: 331). Even before then, however, the declining availability of silver had inflated the value of silver in comparison to *vaðmál*. Originally, one legal *eyrir* of *vaðmál* was probably equal to one *eyrir* of silver (Gelsinger 1972: 35). The weight (and value) of an *eyrir* (pl. *aurar*) was 1/8 of the weight of a mark. A piece of *vaðmál* 6 *alnir* long by 2 *alnir* wide was equal to a legal *eyrir*.

[107] *Grágás* (*K* 245; see Dennis, Foote and Perkins 1995: 206) recounts that *bleikt silfr* was most commonly used when Christianity came to Iceland. Gelsinger (34, 216) translates *bleikt* ("white") as "impure" silver and states that this alloy mix was worth half of *brennt* or pure silver, helping him to make sense of the varying exchanges rates. However, Dennis, Foote, and Perkins (1995: 206) interpret *bleikt silfr* as being the same as *brennt silfr*. For the purposes of this dissertation, I have used the rate of exchange suggested by Gelsinger.

Gelsinger 1981: 37, 218).[108] Therefore, we may approximate that the ½ *mörk* that the Mosfellingar were claiming as toll for using the Leirvogur port was worth about 1/5 of a cow.

The laws in *Grágás* (*K* 166; Dennis, Foote, and Perkins 2000: 91) include a passage declaring, "Everyone is to pay a landing-place toll except men from Norway,[109] an ell [*öll*] of homespun or raw wool amounting to one-sixth of a hank or a lamb's fleece." The toll specified in the *Grágás* laws is much less than the amount recounted in the saga. The reason for this discrepancy is not clear, but could be due to exaggeration in the saga, variable toll prices at ports, or differences between law and practice. For example, the law in *Grágás* could be an attempt to limit the amount of the toll. The passage specifies that the traveler pay the toll to the landowner, which in the case of Leirvogur then must have been Önundr and Hrafn. If this law of uncertain date applies to the period of the saga, then we may infer that the land of Leirvogur belonged to the owners of the Mosfell farm.

The final lines of the passage from *Hallfreðar Saga* describes Hallfreðr telling his story to Gunnlaugr, and *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* contains a similar scene in which Hallfreðr provides a matching although slightly different account of Hallfreðr's encounter

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[108] *Grágás* (K 246) clearly states that cows were also used as a standard of exchange. The value of a cow is equal to six ewes or one male horse, with qualifications concerning the health and age of the animals.

[109] As noted by Dennis, Foote, and Perkins (2000: 91) the exemption from this toll for Norwegians may derive from the treaty between Icelanders and King Óláfr Haraldsson made sometime during his reign that stretched from 1015 to 1030. Based on the internal chronology of *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* and *Hallfreðar saga* (see Nordal and Jónsson 1938: LV-LIX and Sveinsson 1939: LXI) the confrontation between Hrafn and Hallfreðr took place before 1006 and therefore also before this treaty would have been made.

with Hrafn. In *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu*, the story of this encounter with Hrafn is a bit shorter, but contains more information on some noteworthy details:

> *Hallfreðr mælti þá: 'Þess þyrfti, félagi, at þér veitti betr mér málin við Hrafn. Ek kom skipi mínu í Leiruvág fyrir neðan Heiði fyrir fám vetrum, ok átta ek at gjalda hálfa mörk silfrs húskarli Hrafns, ok helt ek því fyrir honum; en Hrafn reið til vár med sex tigu manna ok hjó strengina, ok rak skipit upp á leirur, ok búit við skipbroti. Varð ek þá at selja Hrafni sjálfdæmi, ok galt ek mörk, ok eru slíkar mínar at segja frá honum.'*[110]
>
> *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* Ch. 10 (*ÍF* 3: 85)

Some small inconsistencies are apparent between the two saga accounts, such as Hrafn cutting the ship's anchoring ropes in *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu*, whereas in *Hallfreðar Saga*, Hrafn is preparing to cut the ropes when peacemakers intervene. Of note is also the fact that *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* says the farmhand is one of Önundr's, while *Hallfreðar Saga* states that he is Hrafn's farmhand. These differences in the saga stories may be the result of narrative considerations; the farmhand may have been transferred to Hrafn because Önundr does not play a role in *Hallfreðar Saga*. The disagreement about the cutting of the ropes may be a detail, but it does constitute violent action and is harder to explain if the *Hallfreðar Saga* account is really based on the episode from *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* as Nordal and Jónsson (*ÍF* 3: XLIX-L) believe. It seems at least as plausible that these differences may result from two partially independent narrative traditions being committed to writing in the saga forms preserved today.

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[110] "*Then Hallreðr said: 'It would be necessary, partner, that you fare better than I did in your dealings with Hrafn. I steered my ship into Leirvogur at the bottom of the [Mosfell] heath a few years ago. I ought to have paid a half mark of silver to Hrafn's farmhand, but I held it back from him. But Hrafn rode to us with sixty men and cut the anchoring ropes; and the ship floated up onto the mud-flats and was about to be wrecked. I then gave self-judgment to Hrafn, and paid one mark, and that is all I have to say about him.'*"

A more significant difference is that in *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* Hrafn musters up 60 men to go with him to force Hallfreðr to pay the toll. In *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu*, we see clearly that there is more involved than the half *mörk* toll payment; this conflict is about a challenge to the authority of the Mosfellingar and their forceful response to a challenge to their authority. Mobilizing 60 men would also be no little task with the dispersed settlement pattern of medieval Iceland. These men appear to support Hrafn and his father Önundr without any economic gain for themselves. The attachment of these men to the Mosfell chieftain will be is discussed in section 4.4 concerning the political power of the Mosfellingar. The key point from the economic perspective is that the Mosfellingar had the ability to enforce their control over the local exchange network.

Overall, the textual evidence from *Landnámabók* and several sagas, mentioning Leirvogur as the site of a ship-landing and port of trade from the settlement period up until after AD 1000, makes the direct connection between Leirvogur and the rest of the north Atlantic seem almost certain. In *Orms Þáttr Stórólfssonar*, *Hallfreðar Saga* and *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* ships sail from Norway and land directly in Leirvogur, showing Leirvogur as a port for direct contacts outside of Iceland. The main point is that in the medieval Icelandic sources, Leirvogur was remembered as a significant Viking Age port for travel and trade from which the Mosfellingar collected economic benefits that they were willing and able to sustain by force.

4.4 The Political Power of the Mosfellingar

This section deals with political power on the island-wide level and on the local district level. The aim is to identify what political position the Mosfellingar possessed and what potential power could derive from these position, in terms of both social status and wealth. The textual evidence shows that people from the farm of Mosfell held both the national Lawspeaker position, the only national level political position, and the position of *goði* (chieftain) for the local district, a position that represented the regions free-farmers at the national Althing assembly.

4.4.1 Grímr Svertingsson and the Lawspeaker Position

Grímr Svertingsson of Mosfell was the Lawspeaker of Iceland from AD 1002 to 1003. Very few scholars of the Icelandic Middle Ages doubt this fact, which is recounted in numerous sources including passages from *Landnámabók* (*H* 346; *ÍF* 1: 389-391), *Egils Saga* (Ch. 77, *ÍF* 2: 241-242), and Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók* (*ÍF* 1: 19).[111] The sources identify Grímr as a Lawspeaker, but provide no examples of his actions in this political position except for his final act. Before Grímr surrenders the title of Lawspeaker he exercises a power not normally possessed by a Lawspeaker by passing the position on to his nephew: "*Grímr at Mosfelli Svertingssonr tók lögsögu eptir Þorgeir ok hafði tvau sumur, en þá fekk hann lof til þess, at Skapti Þóroddsonr hefði, systurson hans, af því at*

[111] These three passages are cited at length in section 4.2.

hann vas hásmæltr sjalfr" (*ÍF* 1:19).[112] This last action indicates that Grímr has not only achieved prestige from his role as Lawspeaker, but has authority and political power to appoint his successor to the position.

The discussion in this section analyses what is known about the Lawspeaker position to gain insights into the power potential Grímr held as the holder of this political position. Jóhannesson (1974: 47) explains, "[t]he office of Lawspeaker was created when the Althing was founded and it remained until 1271. During this period the Lawspeaker was the nation's only public servant in Iceland." He continues, "[t]he Lawspeaker was the president of the Althing," and in this position, he "presided over the meeting of the Court Legislature where he had a vote…" (Jóhannesson 1974: 48). The Lawspeaker was elected by the General Assembly. The office of Lawspeaker required extensive knowledge of Icelandic law as the holder of this position was expected to recite 1/3 of all the laws every year (*Grágás K* 16).

Economic benefits from holding the position of Lawspeaker are made clear in *Grágás* (*K* 116), which states, "[e]very summer the Lawspeaker is to have 240 ells of homespun from the Law Council's funds for his work. Half of all the fines imposed by judgment at the General Assembly are also due to him…" (Dennis, Foote, and Perkins1980: 188). Although the laws in *Grágás* post-date the period in question, Grímr would certainly have received similar if not identical benefits during his time as Lawspeaker.

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[112] "*Grímr Svertingsson at Mosfell became the Lawspeaker after Þorgeirr and held the position for two summers, and then he was allowed to arrange that Skapti Þóroddson, his sister's son, got the position because he had a sore throat himself.*"

In spite of the economic benefits, Byock (2001: 175) argues, "[a]lthough the position of law-speaker was prestigious, it brought little or no official power to its holder, who was allowed to take sides and to participate in litigation and in feuds as a private citizen." This option to take part in litigation as an arbitrator or a respected conflict resolver had advantages. G. Sigurðsson (2004: 67) also suggests that perhaps the position offered more prestige than economic benefit, and argues, "[t]he respect accorded to the office of Lawspeaker is apparent in Ari's use of it as a basis for his chronology- similar to the use made by historians elsewhere of the regnal years of kings." Sigurðsson refers here to Ari Þorgilsson the Learned's *Íslendingabók*, which moves quickly through the history of Iceland, situating important events in time with reference to the year of particular Lawspeakers occupation.

The story of the Icelandic conversion to Christianity provides an excellent example of additional profits potentially available to Lawspeakers as well as the overall status of the position. In AD 1000 (or possibly 999), a confrontation between the Christian and pagan factions seemed inevitable and threatened to split the island's society into two polities based on religious difference and separate laws. One of the leaders of the Christian faction was asked to proclaim the Christian laws, but instead he resorted to paying the Lawspeaker, who was a pagan, to help him and to recite the laws. Ari tells this story in *Íslendigabók* (Ch. 7, *ÍF* 1: 16):

> *Þá báðu enir kristnu menn Hall á Síðu, at hann skyldi lög þeira upp segja, þau es kristninni skyldi fylgja. Enn hann leystisk því undan við þá, at hann*

keypti at Þorgeiri lögsögumanni, at hann skyldi upp segja, en hann vas enn þá heiðinn.[113]

Þorgeirr spends a night in deep and possible ritual trance-like contemplation under his cloak before emerging with an eloquent argument for keeping Icelandic society united under one faith. *Íslendingabók* (Ch. 7, *ÍF* 1: 17) recounts that he concluded his speech so effectively "*...at hvarirtveggju játtu því, at allir skyldi ein lög hafa, þau sem hann réði upp at segja. Þá vas þat mælt í lögum, at allir menn skyldi kristnir vesa ok skírn taka…*"[114] One of the most impressive aspects of this account is that everyone at the Althing seems to accept Þorgeirr's decision. This is clearly a testament to the effective conflict resolution mechanisms in medieval Icelandic society, but it is also an excellent example of the authority invested in the Lawspeaker. Clearly the Lawspeaker position was invested with the authority to make decisions for a larger group, and in the example of Þorgeirr the Lawspeaker, he made a lasting decision for the entire population of Iceland.

The Lawspeaker could financially benefit from fines imposed on individuals at the Althing and from his potential role as a prestigious arbitrator and resolver of conflicts. The wealth potential from fines varied substantially depending on the number of people fined at a particular Althing. Most of the power potential of the Lawspeaker no doubt derived from the prestige accumulated as a negotiator and a respected person who knew

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[113] "*Then the Christian men asked Hall of Síða to recite their laws, which the Christians would follow. But he avoided this by paying Þorgeirr the Lawspeaker to recite these laws, although he was still then heathen.*"

[114] "*…that both parties agreed, that everyone should have the same laws, those that he was about to recite. Then it was proclaimed law that all men should be Christian and be baptized.*"

the details of the law. As indicated by the example of Þorgeirr this position was esteemed highly enough to be considered the final judge in one of the most important decisions made at the Althing in the Free-State Period.

4.4.2 The Mosfell *Goðorð* and the Nesses

According to the saga evidence, Önundr of Mosfell held a *goðorð* (chieftaincy) in the beginning of the 11th century. *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* (Ch. 5, *ÍF* 3: 61) states, "*Önundr hét maðr, er bjó suðr at Mosfelli; hann var auðmaðr inn mesti ok hafði goðorð suðr þar um nesin*."[115] This section discusses the power that this *goðorð* provided to the *goði* (chieftain) at Mosfell and the geographic extent of this power. The passage above says that Önundr had a *goðorð* over the Nesses, but this *goðorð* is not mentioned in other sources. This section also addresses the important question of whether Grímr, who lived at Mosfell before Önundr, also held a similar *goðorð*. Finally, since the Nesses over which Önundr is said to be the chieftain is not a clearly defined geographic area, this section presents a careful study of the medieval texts to determine the size and extent of the Nesses.

The official role of a *goði* and a *goði*'s potential to accumulate power and wealth through the chieftain-thingman relationship, taxation, price-setting of imported goods, and his role as a legal expert and advocate is addressed in Chapter 1, but a few facts are worth reiterating here in the contexts of the Mosfell chieftains. The *goðar* had a certain degree of authority over people besides the people living in his household, particularly

[115] "*There was a man named Önundr, who lived to the south at Mosfell. He was the richest of men and owned the goðorð over the headlands to the south.*"

thingmen (*þingmenn*) and tenants. As for the *goði* at Mosfell, the previous section on economic power, suggests from the combined evidence of the sagas and the *Grágás* laws that Önundr likely owned the land around the Leirvogur bay where he was able to charge a ship toll from merchants. Land ownership allowed *goðar*, but also wealthier free-farmers to benefit from multiple sources of income such as this ship toll, rights to driftage, grazing rights, and institutions such as land tenancy. The *goðar* therefore had no special and institutionalized land-owning rights. Byock (1988: 114-188) demonstrates that the political power of chieftains did not depend on landownership or control over set territories. Instead, the power of the *goðorð* was based on personal relationships and authority over men (*mannaforrað*). This authority over men was not territorially based, but was limited to a certain geographic proximity to the chieftain's farmstead. Thingmen chose their *goði* within their district as a matter of law and a certain degree of proximity is logical for effective mutual political and military support. Although the *goðar* had no direct coercive control over his supporters, the office of the *goðorð* did lend a measure of tangible authority to the *goði* over his thingmen. For example, it is common in the saga literature for *goðar* to call on their thingmen for support in conflicts, and thingmen were expected to accompany their *goði* to the Althing or pay a tax called *þingfararkaup* (Byock 2001: 54, 6).

An episode in *Egils Saga* in which Grímr of Mosfell and Egill Skallagrímsson efficiently gather the most prominent and warlike men of the Nesses to support their cause strongly suggests that Grímr was himself a chieftain and sheds light on the nature of the political *mannaforrað* (authority over men) that the Mosfellingar had in the Nesses.

Þorsteinn Egilsson sent messengers to Grímr at Mosfell and asked for the Mosellingar's support in his conflict with the *bóndi* (free-farmer) Steinarr over grazing lands. The Mosfellingar respond by mobilizing their supporters. The saga recounts the extent of this response and the impression it gave at the Borgarfjörður Spring Assembly.

> *Menn sá af þinginu, at flokkr manna reið neðan með Gljúfrá, ok blikuðu þar skildir við...Þar var kominn Egill Skalla-Grímsson með átta tigu manna, alla vel vápnaða, svá sem til bardaga væri búnir; þat lið var valit mjök; hafði Egill haft með sér ina beztu bóndasonu af Nesjum sunnan, þá er honum þóttu vígligstir.*[116]
>
> *Egils Saga* Ch. 81 (*ÍF* 2: 283-284)

Most important here is the allegiance that the men of the Nesses have to either Mosfell or to Egill personally. The saga enumerates 80 sons of free-farmers supporting the case of Egill's family and although the exact number cannot be trusted, there is no reason to distrust the fact that extensive support could be gathered from the Nesses. It is possible that these men of the Nesses were supporting the Mosfellingar on the basis of an equal alliance, but the manner in which the men of the Nesses are summoned and show up in mass from a designated area seems to suggest that they are attached to the Mosfellingar by means of socially mandated political authority, probably deriving from a *goðorð*. Egill is an influential man because of his reputation, but this sort of *mannaforrað* is much more characteristic of capabilities of a *goði*. Moreover, *Egils Saga* (Ch. 81, *ÍF* 2: 283) specifically states that Egill had previously handed over his "*goðorð ok mannaforráð*" to his son Þorsteinn. Finally, the Mosfell region was in the Southern

[116] "*Men saw at the assembly, that a company of men rode from below by the Gljúfrá river, with their shields glinting...Here Egill Skallagrímsson had arrived with 80 men, all well armed, as if they were ready for battle; this group was a chosen party; Egill had with him the best free-farmer's sons from the Nesses from the south, those whom he thought most warlike.*"

Quarter, whereas the *goðorð* that Egill possessed was in the Western Quarter, and according Icelandic law, *goðar* were only allowed thingmen within their own Quarter (Karlsson 2000: 25). By sending a messenger to Mosfell, Þorsteinn is clearly reaching out for support from the Mosfellingar. It therefore seems much more likely that Egill was gathering the thingmen or allies of the Mosfell chieftain, which in this period would have been Grímr Svertingsson at Mosfell. Egill is also now part of Grímr's household, and later in the saga, we see that Egill is not even allowed to attend the Althing against Grímr's wishes. Grímr must be the active authority behind the support Egill gathers from the Nesses.

4.4.2.1 Locating "the Nesses" (Nesin) and the Authority of the Mosfell Goðorð

The passage from *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* at the opening of section 4.4.3 on the Mosfell *goðorð* states that Önundr possessed the *goðorð* "*suðr þar um nesin*" (over the headland(s) to the south). *Egils Saga* indicates the Mosfellingar relied on the support of the "Men of the Nes(ses)." But who were these men and what are the Nesses that both *Egils Saga* and *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* refer to? How far did the Mosfell chieftain's *mannafórrað* (authority over men) extend? The key to answering these questions lies in establishing the location and extent of the Nesses. *Nes* (ness or headland), which has an English cognate, ness, is a Old Norse neuter noun and therefore has the same accusative form in both the singular and plural. However, the plural form of the postpositive definite article (-in) added in the passage from *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* indicates that the *Nes* are plural, i.e. Nesses. Locating the geographic extent of these Nesses over which the

Mosfellingar held significant political authority is essential for an understanding of the power of the Mosfellingar.

The issue of the singular vs. the plural form of the word *Nes*, which is key for understanding the extent of the authority of the *goðorð* possessed by the Mosfellingar, has caused disagreement among saga scholars. For example, translators have disagreed on the number of Nes(ses) in several passages from *Egils Saga* that refer to this same area with the proper Old Norse noun *Nes*. The translation of the following lines from *Egils Saga* illustrates this disagreement: "*...litlu síðar sendi Þorsteinn menn suðr á Nes; kómu þeir til Mosfells til Gríms*" (*Egils Saga*, Ch. 81 *ÍF* 2: 282). Bernard Scudder (2004: 192) in the most recent penguin edition of the saga translates the line as, "[Þorstein] sent some men off to Nes shortly afterwards. They went to Grim at Mosfell..." On the other hand, Pálsson and Edwards (1976: 225) render the lines as, "a little later he sent some men south to the Nesses, where they called on Grim at Mosfell..." Pálsson and Edwards are correct in their translation as indicated by the declension of the word "Nes" (*Nesjum*, dative plural)[117] used to refer to this same region later in the chapter: "*...hafði Egill haft með sér ina beztu bóndasonu af* ***Nesjum*** *sunnan...* (*Egils Saga*, Ch. 81 *ÍF* 2: 283-284). [118] Therefore the geographic area called "Nes" is plural (Nesses), including several nesses or peninsulas along the southwest coast of Iceland. But which nesses are included in this regional name?

[117] Declension of Nes: singular = nes, nes, nesi, nesjar; plural= nes, nes, nesjum, nesja

[118] "*Egill had with him the best free-farmer's sons from the Nesses from the south...*" (In his translation, Scudder (2004: 193) again mistakenly translates *Nesjum* here as the singular "Nes.")

We might hope that the Icelandic edited versions of the sagas in Old Norse would offer consistent commentary or clarification on the location of the Nesses, since the Icelandic place names are very stable and these publications are of the highest quality. However, the editorial comments and indexes of the *Íslenzk Fornrit* and *Íslendinga Sögur* versions of the family sagas, as well as the most authoritative version of the *Sturlunga Sagas* do not agree. In the index of his *Íslenzk Fornrit* edition of *Egils Saga*, Sigurður Nordal (1933: 314) notes that the *Nes* term in the saga is equivalent to "*Innnesin í Kjórsarsýslu,*" but does not further describe the area included in *Innnessin* (the In, Inner, or East Nesses). The index of the *ÍF* version of *Landnámabók* also notes that the Old Icelandic *Nes* is the same as *Innnes* (Benediktsson 1968: 488). But what constitutes the *Innnes* is not clarified in either of these editions. In two footnotes of his authoritative *A History of the Icelandic Commonwealth*, Jóhannesson (1974: 315) offers a clarification by glossing the "*so-called Innnes on the bay of Faxaflói*" as "*Seltjarnarnes, Álftanes, and Kjalarnes,*" while he says "*Suðurnes*" consists of "*Reykjanesskagi on the south west coast*." This fits with the modern regional names as the term Suðurnes today refers to the western part of the Reykjanes peninsula. This is a tempting explanation, but the conclusion is contradicted by Jóhannesson and his colleagues in an edited version of *Íslendinga Saga* from the *Sturlunga Compilation*. Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn's edition of *Íslendinga Saga* (Ch. 124, 1946a: 405) mentions the same *Nesjamen* (Men of the Nesses), who were also mentioned in *Egils Saga*. In the notes, however, Jóhannesson et al. (1946a: 569) gloss "*Nesjamen*" as "*Suðurnesjamen,*" contradicting the

understanding from Jóhannesson's *A History of the Old Icelandic Commonwealth* where a clear distinction is drawn between *Suðurnes* and *Nes* (or Innness).

Part of the problem here, of course, is that the entire Icelandic coastline has protruding nesses, headlands, and peninsulas of varying size. It is therefore impossible to determine the geographic extent of the area with the generic plural name "Nesses" by reference to a map of Iceland. As demonstrated, the Icelandic academic knowledge of traditional place names is also inconsistent. We must therefore look carefully at the written sources to infer the location of the Nesses.

The Nesses are mentioned several times in *Landnámabók*, where the region is identified as part of Ingólfr's original land claim, and again numerous times in *Egils Saga* as an area under the influence of the Mosfell chieftain. The medieval textual evidence strongly suggests that the area called the Nesses also includes inland areas such as the Mosfell Valley and the site of Mosfell itself. The main objective of the rest of this section is to explore the possibility of outlining the northern and southern extent of this area on the west coast of Iceland. The maximum extent of this area would be from southern Borgarfjörður in the north to the western tip of the Reykjanes peninsula in the south. The following will attempt to narrow this extent.

Landnámabók indicates that the region called the Nesses included the area around the Mosfell Valley and the Leirvogur bay. Hrollaugr Rognvaldsson's arrival to Iceland is recounted in *Landnámabók* (*S* 310, *H* 270, *ÍF* 1: 317) as his crew "*tóku land vestr í Leiruvági á Nesjum*."[119] According to *Landnámabók* (*S* and *H* 9, *ÍF* 1: 45) this land was

[119] "*...landed on the west coast in Leirvogur in the Nesses*"

initially part of Ingólfr Arnarsson's land claim: "*En Ingólfr nam land milli Ölfusár ok Hvalfjarðar fyrir útan Brynjudalsá, milli Öxarár, ok öll nes út*."[120] The plural *öll nes* is followed by the term *út*, literally "out," which is often used in Old Norse for the direction "west." The meaning of "*öll nes út*" is generally interpreted as encompassing the entire Reykjanes peninsula, including the many smaller nesses protruding north into the sea from the mainland (see maps 3.1 and 4.1). Furthermore, if Ingólfr's land claim incorporated the entirety of the Nesses and only extended as far north as Hvalfjörður, then the Nesses should be located south of Hvalfjörður and therefore not include any part of Borgarfjörður or Akranes. Ingólfr gave the portion of his initial land claim that included the Mosfell Valley and the part of the Nesses around Leirvogur to Þórðr Skeggi (*Landnámabók S* 11, *S* 195, *H* 163 *ÍF* 1: 48, 231; see Chapter 3).

The description of Ingólfr's land claim allows for the possibility that the Nesses extended all the way out to Rosmhvalanes, the last secondary peninsula that protrudes north from the tip of Reykjanes. There is some indication in matching descriptions from *Egils saga* and *Landnámabók*, however, that the area called the Nesses does not extend that far west. A passage in *Egils Saga* concerning Ketill Gufa appears to differentiate between Rosmhvalanes and the Nesses.

> *Ketill gufa kom til Íslands, þá er land var mjök byggt; hann var inn fyrsta vetr at Gufuskálum á Rosmhvalanesi...Lönd váru öll byggð á Rosmhvalanesi þann tíma; rézk Ketill því þaðan í brott ok* ***inn á Nes*** *ok sat*

[120] "*And Ingólfr claimed the land between the Ölfus river and Hvalfjörðr south of the Brynjudalr and Öxar rivers, and all the Nesses out.*"

> *annan vetr á Gufunesi.....Síðan fór hann inn í Borgarfjörð ok sat þar in þriðja vetr...*[121]
>
> *Egils Saga* Ch. 77 (*ÍF* 2: 240)

This passage is particularly helpful for delimitating the area called the Nesses since Ketill sails from Rosmhvalanes into the Nes(ses) (*inn á Nes*). *Inn* here probably means "into," i.e. further in towards the mainland of Iceland, but in Old Norse *inn* also had the directional meaning of east (the opposite of *út* = out, meaning also "west"). In either case, the resulting direction of Ketill's travels is the same, i.e. towards the east. He arrives in the Nesses, at a place called Gufunes, a well-known peninsula located east of modern day Reykjavík (see Figure 4.1). *Egils Saga* supports the view that Rosmhvalanes is not part of the Nesses, but indicates that Gufunes is. Since Ketill sails to Borgarfjörður from the Nesses, this story appears to confirm the indications from the *Landnámabók* passage above that the Borgarfjörður area was not considered part of the Nesses. A similar account in *Landnámabók* (*S* 125 *ÍF* 1: 166, 168) tells of Ketill's movements from Gufuskálar on Rosmhvalanes to the Nesses (specifically Gufunes) and subsequently north to Borgarfjörður where he again stays briefly at a place also called Gufuskálar.[122]

Supporting the location of the Nesses south of Borgarfjörður, a passage from *Egils Saga* recounts Egill's son, Þorsteinn's communication with the people of Mosfell:

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[121] "*Ketill gufa came to Iceland at that time when the land was mostly settled. He spent the first winter at Gufuskálar on Rosmhvalanes...The land was completely settled on Rosmhvalanes by that time. So, Ketill sailed away from there and in to the Nesses, and stayed the second winter at Gufunes...Afterwards he sailed into Borgarfjörðr and stayed there for the third winter...*"

[122] "*Gufa*" means steam. These place names might all refer to steam from geothermal activity. It is likely that people later connected these places to Ketill because of his nickname, but regardless, the geography and nomenclature for these areas is almost certainly accurate.

"*...litlu síðar sendi Þorsteinn menn suðr á Nes; kómu þeir til Mosfells til Gríms ok sögðu þar þessi tíðendi*" (Ch. 81, *ÍF* 2: 282).[123] The men of Borgarfjörður travel south to reach the Nesses. Here the Mosfell farm is also located within the region called the Nesses.

But how far south of Borgarfjörður do the Nesses begin? The previously quoted passage concerning Egill's arrival to the Spring Assembly in Borgarfjörður with men from the Nesses, provides useful geographical information for answering this question: *"... hafði Egill haft með sér ina beztu bóndasonu af* ***Nesjum sunnan****, þá er honum þóttu vígligstir*" (*Egils Saga*, Ch 81 *ÍF* 2: 284). [124] The word "*sunnan*" indicating the direction of origin (i.e. "from the south") is ambiguous since the point of reference is not identified. Specifically, are these men of the Nesses coming from the area south of Mosfell, or south of the Spring Assembly in Borgarfjörður, or from the southern part of the Nesses?[125] In the episode occurring immediately after Egill's ride to the Borgarfjörður Assembly with the men of the Nesses, *Egils Saga* (Ch. 83 *ÍF* 2: 288) recounts their return ride: "*En Egill reið heim suðr á Nes, ok skilðusk þeir með blíðskap feðgar*."[126] That Egill rides home south to the Nesses again demonstrates that the Nesses are south of Borgarfjörður and that the farm of Mosfell is part of the area called the Nesses. To

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[123] *"...a little later Þorsteinn sent men south to the Nesses; they came to Grímr at Mosfell and told there this news..."*

[124] "*Egill had with him the best free-farmer's sons from the Nesses from the south, those whom he thought most warlike."*

[125] The practice of occasionally adding a fuller description or name of a location is common in the Icelandic sagas. In fact, the sagas provide the place name Leirvogur (Leiruvágr) with several levels of specificity without changing the meaning: 1) *Leiruvágr*, 2) *Leiruvágr fyrir neðan Heiði*, 3) *Leiruvágr fyrir neðan Mosfells Heiði*.

[126] "*And Egill rode home, south to the Nesses, and he and his son parted with warmth.*"

answer the question of the northern extent of the Nesses we must look beyond the Family Sagas.

The clearest indication that the Nesses includes also the Kjalarnes and Akranes peninsulas is found in *Íslendinga Saga* detailing events in the 13th century. In 1237, Snorri Sturluson's ally Þorleifr of Garðar gathers forces around the Nesses to help Snorri in a military conflict against his nephew Sturla (*Strl.* 1: 397). The identity of these men of the Nesses, who died at the resultant battle at Bær in Borgarfjörður, shows the farms and areas that were considered to be within the area called the Nesses. Among the dead in Þorleifr and Snorri's party were five men from the Reykjanes peninsula, one man from Viðey, four men from Kjós, and twenty men from around Akranes. The farms identified with farmers supporting Snorri are Brautarholt on Kjalarnes; Kvíguvágar east of Rosmhvalanes; Valdastað, Hækingsdal in Kjós, Leirárgarðr, Mel, Ás, Narfastað and Garðar in Akranes (*Strl.* 1: 404). During the conflict these men are referred to as a group as the "Nesjarmenn" (Men of the Nesses). *Íslendinga Saga* therefore shows that the area known as the Nesses included the peninsulas and coastal regions south of Hvalfjörður as well as the Akranes peninsula just north of Hvalfjörður.

The closer examination of the medieval textual sources reveals the following geographical facts about medieval mental conception concerning the location and extent of the Nesses:

1) *Nes*, "the Nesses," is a plural term and therefore must include several nesses, headlands, and or peninsulas
2) The Nesses are located south of Hvalfjörður

3) The Nesses are located east of the Rosmhvalanes peninsula.
4) The Nesses do not include the entire Reykjanes peninsula and exclude Rosmhvalanes
5) The Nesses include Gufunes
6) The Nesses include the Leirvogur bay
7) The Nesses include Kjalarnes and Akranes
8) The Nesses include the farm and the valley of Mosfell, indicating the geographic term incorporates a region that is not made up solely of headlands and peninsulas.

These facts in combination with reference to the geography of southwest Iceland suggest that the Nesses include the peninsulas of Álftanes, Arnarnes, Seltjarnarnes, Geldinganes, Blíkastaðanes, Leirvogstunga, Vídines, Kjalarnes and much of the inland territory between these peninsulas.[127] The Nesses probably also included the Akranes peninsula north of Hvalfjörður and the smaller nesses between Álftanes and Rosmhvalanes along the Reykjanes peninsula.

4.4.2.2 Contextualizing the Mosfell Goðorð over the Nesses

Nes (the Nesses) is a term used in the medieval sagas for the cluster of headlands and peninsulas from Akranes in the north to Álftanes in the south. How is a chieftaincy over this area to be situated and contextualized in the political geography around the turn

[127] Álftanes is also sometimes written Álptanes, but the Álftanes spelling is used in this dissertation.

of the first millennium AD? Several scholars have modeled the political map of the medieval *goðar*, yielding some similar results, but also a number of contradictory conclusions that have varying implications for the *goðorð* of the Mosfellingar.

A problematic issue for scholars appears to be identifying which of the traditionally well-known *goðorð*s[128] the Mosfellingar possessed. For example, in his survey of all the *goðar* of the Icelandic Free State period, Gunnar Karlsson (2004) does not mention the *goðorð* of the Mosfellingar. Lúðvík Ingvarsson (1986: 319) is also troubled by the *goðorð* of Önundr described in *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* and after trying to situate it in the political landscape, declares it a mystery. Ingvarsson finds it most likely that the Mosfellingar either had to be sharing or serving as the custodians of one of the more traditionally recognized *goðorðs*. He identifies the two most likely *goðorð* candidates as the *Allsherjargoðorð* owned by the descendents of Ingólfr Arnarson and the *Ölfusinga goðorð* centered in the region south of the Ölfusvatn lake.[129]

Ingvarsson (1986: 319) finds it incomprehensible that Önundr of Mosfell could have held part of the *Allsherjargoðorð*. He believes this would only have occurred if Önundr were the fraternal half-brother or fraternal cousin of Þormóðr Þorkelsson, who held the *Allsherjargoðorð* at that time. But Ingvarsson says that this was not the case. It is unclear, however, why this is the only scenario that Ingvarsson could imagine for splitting the authority of a *goðorð*, as there are clearly many other possibilities, such an alliance between the two, a sale of part of the *goðorð*, or a power splitting arrangement.

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[128] I pluralize *goðorð* here and in the future by adding an –s for the sake of clarity as the plural of *goðorð* in Old Norse is also *goðorð* and therefore indistinguishable from the singular.

[129] Ölfusvatn lake is also commonly called Þingvallavatn (Thing-plains-lake).

The possibility of a power splitting arrangement between the Mosfellingar and the descendents of Ingólfr might be the most likely since the *Allsherjargoðorð* holders seem to have had a largely ceremonial position at this time (Byock 2001: 176) and may have required the cooperation of the nearby and powerful Mosfellingar. Despite his difficulty with the nature of the Mosfellingar *goðorð*, Ingvarsson (1986: 320) sticks to the sources in believing that the Mosfellingar possessed part of the *Allsherjargoðorð*, but says that how it was acquired and what became of it is "an unsolved riddle."

Another possibility is that the Mosfellingar owned part of the *Ölfusinga goðorð*, which was under the control of Þóroddr goði Eyvindarson (965-1003) and then his son Skapti the Lawspeaker (1003-1030) (Karlsson 2004: 228-229). Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson (*ÍF* 3: 61) agree with Lúðvik Ingvarsson in the editorial notes to their *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu*:

> *Eftir því, sem vér vitum bezt, fær það tæplega staðizt, að Önundur hafi getað haft goðorð um Suðurnes á þeim tíma, sem hér er um að ræða. Það goðorð hefir þá enn verið í höndum Reykvíkinga og með það farið sonur Þorkels mána, Þormoður, 'er þá var allsherjargoði, er kristni kom á Ísland' (Landn. 52 kap.). Hugsanlegt er þó, að Önundur haif farið med goðorð um Grindavík (hluta af Ölfusinga goðorði).*[130]

Why it is more possible for Nordal and Jónsson that Önundr possessed part of the *Ölfusinga goðorð* than part of the *Allsherjargoðorð* is not clear, since both *goðorð*s must have been equally sharable. Önundr's kinship connection to the Ölfusingar might be one

[130] *"To the best of our knowledge, it is hardly possible that Önundr could have possessed a goðorð around Suðurnes during that period that is dealt with here. That goðorð was then still in the hands of the people of Reykjavík, and was held by Þormoður, the son of Þorkel Mána, 'who was then allsherjargoði, when Christianity came to Iceland' (Landnámabók Ch. 52). It is possible however that Önundr held the goðorð for the area around Grindavík (part of the Ölfusinga goðorð)."* Note here the use of Suðurnes to describe the entirety of the Reykjanes peninsula.

possibility for Nordal and Jónsson's conclusions. Of course, this contradicts the few facts that we know about the Mosfellingar *goðorð*, namely that it included authority over men living in the Nesses.

The difficulty scholars have with the Mosfell *goðorð* is due to compounding scholarly assumptions about the nature of the *goðorð* system, assumptions that have been challenged over the last decades. Lúðvík Ingvarsson (1986: 319) considers it unlikely that the Mosfellingar possessed a *goðorð* in the middle of the *Allsherjargoðorð* of Ingólfr's descendents. This logic, however, assumes the *goðorð* system was stable with a constant number of *goðar* and a consistency in the territories of the *goðorð*s from the earliest period. Byock (1988: 114-118) has shown that the *goðar* are not dependent on territories but on authority over men. Jón Viðar Sigurðsson has recently (1999) challenged the stability of the system, and suggests that the number of chieftains in Iceland varied, holding that initially there appears to have been more than the 36*goðar* traditionally accepted by historians and presented in the *Grágás* laws. If the number of *goðar* was not as fixed as *Grágás* suggests, then it is quite possible that the number chieftains that possess their own *goðorð* independent of other chieftains could vary considerably. Karlsson (2004: 88-93) has challenged the notion of a variable number of *goðar*, however, theorizing that the law book (*Grágás*) is more trustworthy than the sagas and that any additional variance in the numbers of *goðar* referred to in the sagas can be explained by well-known practices of selling, lending, and splitting chieftaincies and the chiefly authority of people (*mannafórrað*). The disagreement is here a matter of which sources the authors prioritize. Gunnar Karlsson (2004; 2000) trusts first the laws in

Grágás and fills in the blanks by reference to the sagas, whereas Jón Viðar Sigurðsson prioritizes the information in the sagas because he believes that they accurately represent practice rather than mandated laws for the Free State period.

If the basic assumptions are changed so that the *goðar* are not territorially chieftains (Byock 1988) and so that there is at least a possibility that the number of independent *goðar* varied (Sigurðsson 1999), then Önundr's chieftaincy becomes less problematic. A series of imaginable scenarios could have lead to the Mosfellingar controlling a previously unrecognized chieftaincy: the Mosfellingar *goðorð* could be an independent emergent *goðorð*; they could be sharing one of the traditional *goðorð*s; or they could be serving as temporary custodians of a *goðorð*. Whatever the case, there is no reason to doubt the evidence that Önundr and Grímr both possessed a *goðorð* over people living in area of the Nesses.

4.4.3 Concluding Remarks Concerning the Political Power of the Mosfellingar

The Mosfellingar held a *goðorð*, exerted political authority over the people livin in the Nesses, and while Grímr was the Lawspeaker, they possessed the highest political position in Iceland. Their political power as *goðar* would have included political privileges at the Althing, the allegiance of thingmen, and potential income sources such as price setting, first choice on imported goods, and the right to collect the *þingfarakaup* tax. Their potential to benefit from the legal system as chiefly arbitrators and advocates in lawsuits was potentially very lucrative (Byock 1988; Byock 2001), but the textual sources do not provide information showing the Mosfellingar accumulating wealth from

legal conflicts. The authority wielded by the Mosfellingar over men is clear from the episode where Grímr and Egill gather substantial numbers of supporters from the Nesses. The band of supporters generated from this political authority translates into military power,[131] illustrating the interconnected nature of the sources of power.

4.5 The Ideological Power of Mosfellingar

An ideology is a system of ideas that explains the world and gives meaning to experiences.[132] Individuals and groups who achieve unequal access to the creation, management, and control of ideology and its materialized forms gain social power. The materialization of ideology is a particularly visible aspect of belief systems that can be effectively manipulated to make ideological statements and create unequal access to ideological power (DeMarrais et al 1996; Earle 1997). There was no state hegemony or religious hegemonic control in medieval Iceland, making the ideological power disperse, particularly in the pagan period and during the early years of Christianity. However, the chieftains, who owned land, possessed expendable wealth, and were respected as group-decision makers through their political role, were best placed to harness the collective ideology and its materialized forms. This section centers on the access the chieftains of Mosfell had to the pagan and Christian belief systems, how they used these systems, and particularly how they materialized their ideologies. The shift from Norse paganism to Christianity and the Mosfellingar's adaptation to this shift is particularly enlightening as

[131] This connection is illustrated further in section 4.6.

[132] See Chapter 1 for an extensive review of the theories of ideological power, the materialization of ideology, as well as background information on the ideological sources of power in Scandinavia and Iceland in both the pagan and the Christian periods.

it shows how the Mosfellingar harnessed and centralized ideological power by controlling the major early materialized expression of the new religion and linking it to their ancestral claims to regional authority.

4.5.1 The Mosfellingar and the Materialization of Pagan Ideology

The burial of Egill Skallagrímsson is the single pagan burial in the Mosfell Valley described by the saga sources. *Egils Saga* recounts the death and burial of Egill:

> *Egill tók sótt eptir um haustit, þá er hann leiddi til bana. En er hann var andaðr, þá lét Grímr færa Egil í klæði góð; síðan lét hann flytja hann ofan í Tjaldanes ok gera þar haug, ok var Egill þar í lagðr ok vápn hans ok klæði.*[133]
>
> *Egils Saga* Ch. 85 (*ÍF* 2: 298)

The passage stresses that Egill is finely dressed before being carried to his burial mound. We should imagine a public and purposefully visible procession that displayed Egill's body, accompanied by his fine clothes and weapons, to the community. The mound would have been previously constructed, or if a natural mound were used then a hole would have already been dug. The procession and the grave goods were materialized ideological statements in accordance with paganism, illustrating Egill's status as well as the status of the Mosfellingar. The grave goods included weapons and clothes, showing off imported goods and high status weapons. If the place name evidence is correct (see Chapter 2 section 2.3.6.2), then the procession would have been a 1.3-1.4 km procession down from the Mosfell farm to Tjaldanes (Tenting-promontory) located at the confluence

[133] "*Egill became sick afterwards in the autumn, leading to his death. And when he died, Grímr dressed Egill in fine clothes; then he let him be moved down to Tjaldanes and made a mound there and Egill was placed into the mound with his weapons and clothes.*"

of the Kaldakvísl and Suðurá rivers. This procession fits into Demarrais et al.'s (1996: 17) formulation of the ceremonial event as one of four manifestations of materialized ideology: "[e]vents create shared experiences for members of an audience through participation in rituals or feasts or attendance at speeches or performances." Specifically, Egill's burial is consistent with Demarrais et al.'s (1996: 17) conception of "communal burial rituals that emphasized ancestral ties to the land."

The mound was prominently visible between two rivers at a place where travelers set up their tents during long journeys (see Chapter 2 section 2.3.6.2). This location would have been on or close to the road that ran east-west along the river. This road could be followed east through the Mosfell Valley, over the Mosfell Heath and to the Althing. The prominent and visible placement of the mound was a marker for social memory, no doubt serving as the impetus for story-telling and thereby also the maintenance of the memory of Egill, the powerful warrior poet, his kinship with the contemporary inhabitants of Mosfell, as well as the legitimacy of the Mosfellingar's claim to land and authority in the valley. Egill's mound, if we believe it existed, would have been a materialized ideological statement clearly asserting the power of the Mosfellingar over the area and reminding travelers of the historical authority and link to venerable ancestors.

One other possible mention of pagan burials in the Mosfell Valley is included in *Egils Saga* (Ch. 85, *ÍF* 2: 297-298), in a mysterious account of supernatural hovering lights or fires: "*Fyrir sunnan ána eru laugar ok þar skammt frá jarðholur stórar, ok geta þess sumir, at Egill mundi þar hafa fólgit fé sitt, því at þangat er optliga sénn*

haugaeldr."[134] The location "south of the river" from Mosfell places these holes and the mound-fires in the vicinity of Tjaldanes where Egill was supposed to have been buried. The meaning and interpretation of the "*haugaeldr*" varies. Pálsson and Edwards (1976: 237) interpret these as "fires...coming from burial mounds...", while Scudder (2004: 203) translates it as a "will-o'-the wisp." Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir (2004: 211) annotates Scudder's translation and understands the "will-o'-the wisp" as literally "grave mound fire," noting that in folklore these fires mark the location of buried gold or silver. Cleasby and Vigfusson (1876: 241) state that *haugaeldr* burns over hidden treasure in cairns. Considering the proximity to Egill's own burial mound, the trans-valley road, and the confluence of the two rivers, this would be a suitable pagan burial site. The story of the mound-fires here may be the remnants of a social memory of such a pre-Christian cemetery.

The texts reveal the Mosfellingar employing pre-Christian burial rituals to assert their claim on the landscape. The Mosfellingar reinforced the conceptual visibility of their power in the consciousness of the inhabitants and travelers in the Mosfell Valley by materializing the memory of Egill Skallagrímsson.

4.5.2 Conversion of the Mosfellingar to Christianity

After the Icelandic chieftains agreed at the Althing to adopt Christianity, the Mosfellingar responded quickly to the ideological change by displaying prominently their own conversion to Christianity. The Mosfellingar set about reworking the ritual

[134] *"South of the river there are hot springs and nearby some large pits; and some people think that Egill may have hidden his wealth there because mound-fire is often seen there."*

landscape to maintain their claims to authority and land ownership. They built a church at Mosfell, monumentally materializing the new ideology and transferred the remains of their venerable ancestor to a prominent location within the new church. The official conversion took place in AD 1000. According to *Egils Saga,* the Mosfellingar reacted within a year or two before Grímr became Lawspeaker in 1002, and certainly before his death probably in 1003 as recorded in *Flateyarbók* (Sigurðsson 1886: 15-16). *Egils Saga* recounts the story of Grímr's conversion, the construction of the church at Mosfell, and the use of Egill Skallagrímsson's remains in signaling the conversion and linking their new religion with the ancestors:

> *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 þat til jartegna, at síðan er kirkja var gör at Mosfelli, en offan tekin at Hrísbrú sú kirkja, er Grímr hafði gera látit, þá var þar grafinn kirkjugardr. En undir altarisstaðnum, þá fundusk mannabein; 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 prestr Þórarinsson, vitr maðr... Bein Egils váru lögð niðr í útanverðum kirkjugarði at Mosfelli.*[135]
>
> *Egils Saga* Ch. 86 (*ÍF* 2: 298-299)

The importance of Egill Skallagrímsson for the claims to status of the Mosfellingar is demonstrated by the fact that Egill's bones are moved three times to follow the materialized focal point of their ideological power. Every time the

[135] "*Grímr of Mosfell was baptized when Christianity was adopted by law in Iceland; he had a church built there. And people say that Þorðis had Egill moved to the church, and this is evidenced by the fact that afterwards when a church was built at Mosfell, and the church that Grímr had had built at Hrísbrú was taken down, then the old churchyard was dug up. And under the location of the altar, human bones were found. Men thought that they knew from the stories told by old people that these must be Egill's bones. At that time Skapti the priest Þórarinsson, a wise man, lived there… The bones of Egill were reburied at the edge of the churchyard at Mosfell.*"

Mosfellingar shift the materialized focus of their religious activity, they bring Egill with them. In the pagan period, Egill's mound was a signal of Mosfellingar power and landownership, presented in the form of an ancestral burial. When Christianity arrives, the ritual focus and realm of the dead ancestors shifts closer to the domestic space of the living and the people of Mosfell decide to give their most famous ancestor the most prominent place in the new church, i.e. under the holy altar. When the farmstead of Mosfell is moved to the location of the modern Mosfell farmstead in the time of Skapti Þórarinsson,[136] the Mosfellingar again bring Egill's venerable remains with them.

Egill himself is brought posthumously into the new religion and is retroactively Christianized. This action serves to linking the Mosfellingar's kin-based claims to prestige and authority with the power potential of the new religion. The ceremonial event of transferring Egill's bones to a Christian context is not repetitive as are many rituals. Demarrais et al. (1996: 17) emphasize the "transitory" nature of such events, suggesting, "shared experience and group solidarity begin to fade when they have ended." In the case of Egill's bones, however, the social memory of the event becomes essential. The incorporation of this presumed event into a saga written in the 13th century shows the tenacity and continued relevance of this social memory and the effectiveness of the original event. [137]

The church built at Hrísbrú is an example of a privately controlled, but publicly used monument. This church at Hrísbrú is public in the sense that people in the larger

[136] The middle of the 12th century. See Chapter 5 on the Mosfell Valley during the Sturlung Period for more about Skapti. See Chapter 3 on place names for more about the changing location of the Mosfell farm.

[137] For an alternate interpretation of the passage concerning the movement of Egill's bones see Tulinius (2004) who argues that the author of *Egils Saga* invented this story in imitation of a saint's *translatio*.

community of the Mosfell valley would probably have attended this church for religious services and possibly brought their relatives for burial in the graveyard. The church would clearly have served as the facilities and setting for ritual services associated with the new religion. Public monuments "associate a group with a place and represent the power and authority of its leaders" (Demarrais et al. 1996: 18). Compared to events, such as the burial ritual for Egill, "monuments are more permanent expressions of the ideology that link a group to its territory" (Demarrais et al. 1996: 18). The permanence of the ideological statement materialized in the church was enhanced by the expensive raw materials, particularly wood, necessary for the construction.

The early churches in Iceland appear to have been under the control of the chieftains and wealthy free-farmers who could afford to build churches on their property and finance Christian ritual (Vésteinsson 2000). As DeMarrais et al. (1996: 19) observe, "[b]y exercising ownership of public facilities, elites can further restrict their use and closely monitor the staging of ceremonies through agents and institutions under their supervision." Control of the church would have yielded economic gains as well. In the early period of Christianity in Iceland, before the tithe instated in 1097, church ownership could still facilitate wealth accumulation through payment to the church for ritual services and burial.

The church at Mosfell/Hrísbrú is mentioned again in *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* towards the end of a feud between the Mosfellingar and the family of Illugi the Black from Borgarfjörður.[138] This passage illustrates the potential of Christianity to influence

[138] This conflict is addressed in detail in section 4.5 below.

social action as the advantages of church ownership extend into the realm of military conflict and personal safety in a feuding society.

> *Þat er sagt um haustit, at Illugi reið heiman af Gilsbakka með þrjá tigu manna ok kom til Mosfells snimma morgins. Önundr komsk í kirkju ok synir hans, en Illugi tók frændr hans tvá; hét annarr Björn, en annarr Þorgrímr. Hann lét drepa Björn, en fóthöggva Þorgrím. Reið Illugi heim eptir þat...*[139]
>
> *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* Ch. 13 (*ÍF* 3: 105)

The church at Mosfell provides sanctuary from violence for the inhabitants of the farm. Illugi honors this sanctuary, enforced by Christian ideology, harming only people from Mosfell who do not make it into the church. This is a prime example of the power of ideology and a distinct advantage possessed by unequal access to this materialized form of ideology.

The chiefly family living at the Mosfell farm possessed unequal access to the means to materialize ideology in the Mosfell Valley and thereby make claims about their social status and landownership. The access that the Mosfellingar had to land and the means to build a church also provided increased access to wealth and thereby economic power through payments for ritual services. The control over the placement of materialized ideology and the sanctuary that the church provided allowed the Mosfellingar unequal access to the sacred space and a safe refuge in a conflict situation, resulting in an advantage in the retaliatory military actions that often occurred in

[139] "*It is said that during the fall, Illugi rode from home at Gilsbakki with thirty men and came to Mosfell early in the morning. Önundr got himself and his sons into the church, but Illugi caught two of his relatives; one was named Björn and the other Þorgrímr. He had Björn killed and Þorgrímr's foot chopped off. Illugi rode home after that...*"

Iceland's feuding system. This illustrates one arena of the interrelated nature of ideological power with military power, which is the subject of the next section.

4.6 Conflicts and the Military Power of the Mosfellingar

The saga depiction of conflicts in medieval Iceland shows clearly the exercise of power, the success of social alliances, and the use and articulation of the various sources of power. The feuds that result from conflicts are "one of the key structures in which the competition for power, the struggle for dominance, is played out" (Miller 1990: 181). Interestingly, the saga accounts of conflicts demonstrate that sometimes, even when a person or a group has unequal access to a source of power, they may not exercise the power potential. This recognition allows for historical contingency and lends agency to individuals, by stressing that the success or failure of chiefs as well as their rise or decline in power does not only consist of the sum total of the sources of power available to them. Equally or even more important is their use of these sources, the decisions they make in conflicts with other power players, and the results of the ensuing conflicts.

This section combines the discussion of military power and conflicts because the military support mobilized by chiefs and other individuals is most visible in the conflicts and resultant feuds. Therefore, while this section is organized around three conflicts that show the exercise of all the various sources of power, particular weight and space is given to violence, the threat of violence, and military power.

4.6.1 Conflict 1: Egill, Þorsteinn, and Grímr vs. Steinarr and Borgarfjörður Chiefs

When a conflict over land boundaries and grazing rights between Þorsteinn Egilsson and Steinarr Önundarson in Borgarfjörður develops into a violent feud, the Mosfellingar are drawn into a legal and military confrontation with two chieftains from Borgarfjörður. The resultant conflict illustrates the nexus of social power as the opposing parties mobilize their military, kinship, economic, and political sources of power. The main points to draw from this conflict are: 1) the military power potential of the Mosfellingar was substantial enough to have a deciding impact on a legal case outside of their district; 2) the Mosfellingar maintained a kinship alliance with the chieftains at Borg that they were willing to support with military force; 3) military power in this period in Iceland was demonstrated through competitive and public shows of force and prowess that avoided large scale pitched battles; 4) the show of military power, although effective, was not enough to permanently end the feud between Þorsteinn and Steinarr. Before the feud was over military power would be used, political power exercised, and a public consensus mobilized.

The background to the social relationships in this conflict are found in the settlement period when Þorsteinn's grandfather, Skallagrímr who settled at Borg, granted a part of his land claim and the right to farm at Ánabrekka to Steinarr's grandfather, Áni. The Háfslækr river was established as the boundary between the two farms. Two generations later the power of the chieftains at Borg had waned and the farmers at Ánabrekka had prospered to the point that Steinarr feels capable of challenging Þorsteinn. *Egils Saga* (Ch. 80 *ÍF* 2: 277) indicates the growing power of farmers at Ánabrekka:

"*þeir feðgar áttu auð fjár.*"[140] Steinarr initiates his challenge by having a slave graze his livestock on some high-quality land located beyond the boundary of his own land at the Háfslækr river.

Þorsteinn, who the saga says is known for his considered moderation, asks Steinarr to graze his cattle on his own land according to custom. When Steinarr refuses, Þorsteinn kills Steinarr's slave, after which he allows Steinarr to graze his cattle there for the remainder of the year. The following year, Steinarr hires a new slave to graze his cattle on Þorsteinn's land. Þorsteinn informs the slave to remove Steinarr's cattle from his land, and when the slave refuses, Þorsteinn again kills the slave. Steinarr confronts Þorsteinn for these killings and threatens him with continued grazing on Þorsteinn's land. Þorsteinn replies,

> *'Nú hefi ek drepit annan þræl þinn fyrir þér; gaf ek þessum ina sömu sök sem inum fyrra. Nú skaltu hafa beit heðan í frá í sumar, sem þú vill, en at sumri, ef þú beitir land mitt ok fær menn til þess, at reka hingat fé þittt, þá mun ek enn drepa fyrir þér einn hvern mann, þann er fénu fylgir, svá þó at þú fylgir sjálfar; mun ek svá gera á hverju sumri, meðan þú heldr teknum hætti umbeitina.'*[141]
>
> *Egils Saga* Ch. 81 (*ÍF* 2: 281-282)

Steinarr realizes Þorsteinn has thought out and measured his violence and that Þorsteinn is willing to defend his land. Steinarr still wants to challenge Þorsteinn, but Þorsteinn is a *goði* and has greater access to military power through his thingmen and political power

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[140] *"Father and son possessed great wealth."*

[141] *"Now I have killed a second of your slaves for you; I did this for the same reason I killed the first. Now you shall have the right to use my grazing land for this summer as you like. But next summer, if you use my land and get men to drive your cattle onto my land, then I will kill for you every man that herds those cattle, even if that man is you. I will do so every summer while you continue to use my grazing land."*

through his legal role as *goði*. Despite Steinarr's rising fortunes and economic resources, overall the power potential of these two men is still in Þorsteinn's favor and Steinarr needs to gain the support of other *goðar*. Steinarr uses his economic power to purchase the support of the other two chieftains who organize the local Spring Assembly, Einarr of Stafaholt and Tungu-Oddr (Tongue Oddr). Steinarr's talks with both chieftains include the phrase "*bað hann liðs ok bauð honum fé til*" (*Egils Saga* Ch. 81, *ÍF* 2: 282).[142] The two chieftains and Steinarr accompanied by "*fjölmenni mikit*"[143] conduct a legal summons against Þorsteinn for killing the slaves. The case is heard at the local Spring Assembly (*várþing*) for Borgarfjörður. According to Icelandic law and custom, each Spring Assembly is run by three chieftains (Karlsson 2000), and for Borgarfjörður at this time, Þorsteinn is one of the three, while Steinarr's new partners, Einarr and Tungu-Oddr, are the remaining two chieftains. Therefore, Steinarr now has the support of two out of three of these chieftains.

Þorsteinn knows the odds are now against him with Steinarr having gained the support of two chieftains and with that their substantial political prestige and their military power. At this point, Þorsteinn activates his alliance with the Mosfellingar, where his sister is married to Grímr of Mosfell and his estranged father is living out his old age.

> *Þorsteinn stefndi engum sökum í mót, ok litlu síðar sendi Þorsteinn menn suðr á Nes; kómu þeir til Mosfells til Gríms ok sögðu þar þessi tíðendi. Egill lét sér fátt um finnask ok spurði þó at í hljóði vandliga um skipti*

[142] "*he asked for his support and offered him money in return.*"

[143] "*a large party of men*"

> *þeira Þorsteins ok Steinars ok svá at þeim mönnum, er Steinar höfðu styrkt til þessa máls; síðan fóru sendimenn heim, ok lét Þorsteinn vel yfir þeirra ferð.*[144]
>
> *Egils Saga* Ch. 81 (*ÍF* 2: 282)

This passage illustrates Þorsteinn's reliance on the marriage alliance with Grímr of Mosfell for support. The support of the Mosfellingar and the fact the Egill showed some interest in his case is enough, according to the saga, to make Þorsteinn "very pleased" with the work of his messengers. The saga states that the messengers come specifically to see Grímr. However, Þorsteinn is also seeking the support of his father Egill. At this point, Egill has handed down his *goðorð* and his "*mannaforráð*" (authority over men) to his son and retains little direct power to mobilize a party of men to support Þorsteinn. As discussed above in the section on the political power of the Mosfellingar, it is almost certain that the forces that are mobilized in Þorsteinn's support are the thingmen (*þingmenn*) and allies of Grímr of Mosfell, particularly since Egill and Þorsteinn's *goðorð* was in the Western Quarter, while Mosfell and the Nesses were in the Southern Quarter. Free farmers had to declare themselves thingmen of a *goði*, but were limited by law to choosing a *goði* within their own Quarter (Karlsson 2000: 25), making it illegal for the men of the Nesses to be thingmen of Egill and Þorsteinn.

When the time comes for the Spring Assembly, both sides arrive with substantial forces to support their position. The saga carefully notes the military presence, recounting

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[144] "*Þorsteinn did not arrange a counter suit, and a little later Þorsteinn sent men south to the Nesses; they came to Mosfell, to Grímr and told the news there. Egill showed little interest but nevertheless asked quietly and exactly about the affair between Þorsteinn and Steinarr, and who the men were who had supported Steinar in his case. Afterwards, the messengers went home, and Þorsteinn was very pleased with their journey.*"

that Þorsteinn arrives "*fjölmennti mjök til várþings*," [145] and constructs a large booth in expectation of the arrival of more support. Steinarr also rides with "*fjölmennti mörk*" although the saga makes it clear that Tungu-Oddr was in charge of Steinarr's men. Tungu-Oddr's own forces are described separately as "*allfjölmennr*,"[146] and Einarr of Stafaholt has a party also said to be "*fjölmennr*." The repetitive word use does not indicate the numbers of men present, but the point is clearly that the Spring Assembly was filled with potential warriors. A competitive display has begun, and thus far, Þorsteinn is outnumbered. He would surely have been forced to accept judgment from Steinarr's party had Egill and Grímr's men from the south not arrived.

> *Menn sá af þinginu, at flokkr manna reið neðan með Gljúfrá, ok blikuðu þar skildir við; ok þeir riðu þa þingit, þá reið þar maðr fyrir í blári kápu, hafði hjálm á höfði gullroðinn, en skjöld á hlið gullbúinn, í hendi krókaspjót, var þar gullrekinn falrinn; hann var sverði gyrðr. Þar var kominn Egill Skalla-Grímsson með átta tigu manna, alla vel vápnaða, svá sem til bardaga væri búnir; þat lið var valit mjök; hafði Egill haft með sér ina beztu bóndasonu af Nesjum sunnan, þá er honum þóttu vígligstir. Egill reið með flokkinn til búðar þeirar, er Þorsteinn hafði tjalda látit ok áðr var auð...*[147]
>
> *Egils Saga* Ch. 81 (*ÍF* 2: 283-284)

The lengthy description of the weapons, particularly those of Egill, declares to the saga audience the prestige of this newly arriving force. Costly weapons in this society

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[145] "*accompanied by a very large party to the Spring Assembly*"

[146] "*a great big party*"

[147] "*Men saw at the Althing, that a company of men rode from below by the Gljúfrá river, with their shields glinting;and when they rode into the assembly, a man rode in front of them in a blue cape- he had a gilded helmet on his head, and a sheild by his side with gold finishing, in his hand was a barbed spear with a gold-incised socket; he had a sword on his waist. Here Egill Skallagrímsson had arrived with 80 men, all well armed, as if they were ready for battle; this group was a chosen party; Egill had with him the best free-farmer's sons from the Nesses from the south, those whom he thought most warlike. Egill rode with his party to their booth, which Þorsteinn had set up...*"

indicated success in warfare and military prowess. The dramatic arrival of Egill's forces has changed the tide of the competitive military display in favor of Þorsteinn's side. Önundr, Steinarr's father, gets cold feet and wants a settlement, causing both Tungu-Oddr and Einarr to terminate their support of Steinarr. The case is now given over to Egill to decide the outcome. Egill, who is a strong leader, but not as much a man of moderation as his son, lays down a harsh judgment on Steinarr, banishing him from his current farm without any compensation for his slave or his farm.

Steinarr's father warns Egill that this is a mistake, but Egill trusting in the chiefly power possessed by Þorsteinn responds, "*'Hitt mun ek ætla,' segir Egill, 'at hlutr ykkarr feðga mun æ því verri, er deildir várar standa lengr'*" (*Egils Saga* Ch. 82, *ÍF* 2: 288).[148] This quote recalls the opinion of William Morris (1990: 185) that, "feud generally did not exist across social strata" because of the "differences in power." As it turns out, however, the arbitration, the unequal power, and the show of military strength are not enough to end the hostilities. Steinarr lays several ambushes for Þorsteinn and five people die, including both Steinarr's and Þorsteinn's sons, before Þorsteinn's threat to use overwhelming force coerces Steinarr to move farther away. Þorsteinn, who has now gained the support of public opinion through his show of moderation in dealing with Steinarr, reiterates Egill's notion that the power differential between himself and Steinarr means that Steinarr has no chance of success in the feud:

[148] "*What I think, says Egill, is that the outcome for your kin will continue to worsen, as our quarrel perists longer.*"

> *En er Þorsteinn kom heim, þá sendi hann um daginn eptir húskarl sinn út til Leirulækjar at segja Steinari, at hann færði bústað sinn um Borgarhraun, en at öðrum kosti myndi hann njóta þess við Steinar, ef hann ætti fleira mannaforráð.*[149]
>
> *Egils Saga* Ch. 84 (*ÍF* 2: 292)

This feud was a victory for the side of the Mosfellingar. The stage of the feud in which the Mosfellingar were involved was a particular success for their side and a turning point in the feud. From their involvement, Grímr of Mosfell and the men of the Nesses would have gained substantial prestige and demonstrated their ability to mobilize military force.

4.6.2 Conflict 2: Önundr and the Grímsnes Mosfellingar vs. Gunnar of Hliðarendi

This second conflict shows the future chieftain of Mosfell, Önundr Eilífsson, participating in a large alliance and a show of privatized military power. The future chieftain of Mosfell and his father are only just mentioned as participants, but the simple yet important point here is that they were key players in a conflict with wide repercussions and that they were on the side of the victors. From their participation in this conflict, Önundr must have secured the kinship alliance with two of the most powerful men in the years around AD 1000, Gizurr the White and Skapti the Lawspeaker. It is highly probably that one of these two men, who both had kinship connections to the people of Mosfell in the Mosfell Valley played a role in Önundr becoming the *goði* of Mosfell. Importantly this conflict with a passing single mention of Önundr Eilífsson,

[149] "*And when Þorsteinn came home, he sent the next day one of his farmstead workers out to Leirulækr to tell Steinarr, that he must move his homestead to the other side of Borgarhraun, or else he would demonstrate to Steinarr that he [Þorsteinn] had the greater authority over men.*"

provides a very significant indication that the two Mosfells, Mosfell in the Mosfell Valley and Mosfell in Grímsnes, continued to maintain a close relationship, which dated back to Ketilbjörn's stay with Þórðr Skeggi and his marriage to Þórðr's daughter Helga. This conflict highlights a major point for this dissertation by showing the close and complex interaction between kinship obligation/mobilization, alliance building, and military power.

Before he moves to Mosfell, Önundr and his father Eilífr are drawn into a famous feud recounted in *Njáls Saga* that results in the slaying of Gunnar of Hliðarendi in AD 990 (Sveinsson 1954: LXI). Because of the scheming of envious men such as Mördr Valgarðsson and Skammkell of Hof, Gunnarr comes into conflict with the descendents of Ketilbjörn the Old.[150] Gunnarr fails to follow his friend Njáll's advice never to kill more than once within the same bloodline and never to break a settlement made by good men. Gunnarr breaks both of these warning when he kills Otkell and Otkell's son Þorgeirr in separate fights, and then fails to leave the country once declared an outlaw. Gizurr the White and Geirr the *Goði*, Otkell's second cousins through Ketilbjörn the Old's bloodline, take up the case against Gunnarr.[151]

Kinship and possibly patronage obligations draw Önundr and Eilífr into the alliance against Gunnarr. Eilífr married into the kin descended from Ketilbjörn the Old when he married Þorkatla, the daughter of Ketilbjörn and Gizurr the White's aunt (see genealogy in Figure 3.2) Þorkatla is also reported to have been Geirr the *Goði*'s mother

[150] Ketilbjörn settled at Mosfell on Grímsnes after having married Helga, the daughter of Þórðr Skeggi. Ketilbjörn is discussed in greater detail above in section 4.2 and in Chapter 3.

[151] Einar Ól. Sveinsson (1954: 119) believes that Gizurr and Geirr shared a *goðorð* at this time.

(*Njáls Saga* Ch. 46), maybe from a previous marriage.[152] Ketilbjörn had also given as dowry to Þorkalta and Eilífr the lands at Höfði, where they established their farm (*Landnámabók S* 387, *H* 341 *ÍF* 1: 386-387). This valuable land probably came with an expectation of support in the future.

Njáls Saga recounts that Gizurr the White takes the lead in forming the confederacy that outlaws and slays Gunnar of Hliðarendi. The following passage from *Njáls Saga* lists the key members of the alliance.

> *En á þingi um sumarit lýsa þeir Gizurr sekt hans at lögbergi. En áðr en þinglausnir væri, stefndi Gizurr öllum óvinum Gunnars í Almannagjá: Starkaði undan Þríhyriningi ok Þorgeiri, syni hans, Merði ok Valgarði inum grá, Geir goða ok Hjalti Skeggjasyni, Þorbrandi ok Ásbrandi Þorleikssonum,* ***Eilífi ok Önundi, syni hans****, Önundi ór Tröllaskógi, Þorgrími ór Sandgili.*[153]
>
> *Njáls Saga* Ch. 75 (*ÍF* 12: 183-184)

Eilífr and his son Önundr are mentioned by name, indicating that they were important members in the alliance against Gunnar. No events are recounted in which Gunnar would have made enemies of Eilífr and Önundr and it seems probable that their kinship and alliance obligations to Gizurr's family at the Grímsnes Mosfell determined their status as Gunnar's enemies.

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[152] *Landnámabók* (*S* 387, *H* 341) also says that Geirr the *Goði* was a grandson of Ketilbjörn the Old, but recounts that his mother was Þorgerðr and not Þorkalta. This makes more sense since Þorkatla marries Eilífr.

[153] *"And at the Althing that summer Gizurr and his party declared Gunnar a full outlaw at the Law Rock. Before the Althing ended, Gizurr called all of Gunnar's enemies together in Almannagjá (Almanna Gorge): Starkaðr from Þríhyrning and his son Þorgeirr, Mordr and Valgarðr the Grey, Geirr the Goði and Hjalti Skeggjason, Þorbrandr and Ásbrandr the sons of Þorleikr, Eilífr and his son Önundr, Önundr of Tröllaskogr (Troll Forest), and Þorgrímr of Sandgil*."

At the attack on Gunnarr's house, the presence of Eilífr is again revealed, albeit in a less than flattering manner: "*Gunnar þreif örina ok skaut til þeira, ok kom á Eilíf Önundarson, ok fekk hann sár mikitæ hann hafði staðit einn saman, ok vissu þeir eigi, at hann var særðr*" (*Njáls Saga* Ch. 77, *ÍF* 12: 187-188).[154] Eilífr's fate is not revealed and he is not again mentioned in any of the saga sources about periods post-dating this event. From this short mention in *Njáls Saga*, however, we see that the saga author believes Eilífr and Önundr's family to be honoring their alliance with Gizurr the White to the point of supporting his party in military conflict. Önundr is not mentioned during the attack on Hliðarendi, but the presence of his father makes it likely that he was there in the same way that he stood with his father and Gizurr the White at the Althing when Gunnar was declared on outlaw. Importantly, in the power dynamics of the period as portrayed by the sagas, Eilífr and Önundr stood with the winning side.

Although it is impossible to know for sure, the help and alliance that Önundr provided to the Mosfellingar of Grímsnes appears to have played a role in Önundr's future. During the conflict, Eilífr and Önundr are not remembered as chieftains (*Njáls Saga* Ch. 95), but a decade later when Önundr has moved to Mosfell he has acquired a chieftaincy. It is conceivable that Gizurr could have helped Önundr achieve a marriage with Geriný, the sister of Grímr of Mosfell, making possible his move to the Mosfell in the Mosfell Valley.

The alliance between the two Mosfell farms likely persisted. The power of the people of Mosfell in Grímsnes was increasing, especially as Gizurr was one of the

[154] "*Gunnar reached for the arrow and shot it at them, and it struck Eilífr Önundarson and he suffered a great wound. He had been standing by himself, and the others did not know that he was wounded.*"

successful proponents of Christianity. The people of Mosfell in the Mosfell Valley would have been able to benefit from the success of their ally, and at least partially, their own success or failure was linked with Mosfell in Grímsnes. The quick acceptance of Christianity at Mosfell in the Mosfell Valley may in fact be linked with the role of the Mosfellingar from Grímsnes played in spearheading the conversion to Christianity and could indicate that Mosfell in the Mosfell Valley was associated with the Christian faction.

Skapti the Law Speaker Þóroddsson was also counted in *Njáls Saga* as a staunch ally of Gizurr— he and his father Þóroddr "*veittu Gizuri hvíta at hverju máli*" (*Njáls Saga* Ch. 56, *ÍF* 9: 141).[155] Possibly beginning with the confederacy against Gunnar, Skapti and Önundr formed a closer alliance that was strengthened by kin bonds as Önundr married Skapti's aunt, Geirný.[156] The alliance with Skapti eventually became the most important alliance for Önundr and his son Hrafn, and Skapti's support comes into particular focus in the next conflict as the Mosfellingar feud with the chieftain Illugi and his son Gunnlaugr of Gilsbakki.

[155] "*supported Gizurr in every case*." Sveinsson (1954: 141) points out the kinship connection between Skapti and Gizurr with reference to the fact that Gizurr's third wife was Þóroddr's daughter, Þórdis (see *Floamanna Saga* Ch. 31, *ÍF* 13: 318).

[156] According to the chronology in *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu*, Hrafn, the son of Önundr and Geirný, was probably born slightly before or right around the time of attack on Gunnar in AD 990 (Nordal and Jónsson 1938: LIX). If this chronology is correct then Önundr and Geirný may already have been married by the time that the attack on Gunnar took place.

4.6.3 Conflict 3: Hrafn and Önundr of Mosfell vs. Gunnlaugr and Illugi of Gilsbakki

The feud between the two skáldic poets Hrafn Önundarson and Gunnlaugr Ormstunga is based on their competition for status, honor, and the hand of the beautiful Helga the Fair. Both Hrafn and Gunnlaugr are ambitious sons of chieftains, and the conflict between these two young champions embroils their families and allies, ending in an attack on the Mosfell farm. The emergence of this conflict and the resultant feud highlights the power of the Mosfellingar and demonstrates their prominence on the island-wide political stage. This feud shows the mobilization of kinship and friendship alliances for support in establishing new kin bonds as well as for gathering forces for military displays. Towards the end of the feud, the Mosfellingar's access to materialized Christian ideology allows them to avoid the full military force gathered by their opponent Illugi the Black. Though the Mosfellingar are portrayed in *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* as having excellent access to economic, political, military, and kin-based sources of power, the result of this feud may have had a lasting effect in damaging their reputation and future power potential.

Hrafn and Gunnlaugr first meet at the court of the Swedish King Ólafr Sænski (Skötkonnung) where they initially become friends after Hrafn vouches for Gunnlaugr's notable lineage.[157] But the friendship sours as the two poets compete for primacy in the king's service. Gunnlaugr insists that he deliver his poem of praise before Hrafn because he feels his family's status is greater than Hrafn's. Gunnlaugr has his way, but the two

[157] Both Hrafn and Gunnlaugr are also mentioned in *Skáldatal* (Catalog of Poets) as court poets of King Ólafr Skötkonnung (king 995-1022) and of the Norwegian Earl Eiríkr Hákonarson (earl 995-1023). This document is preserved in the 14th century manuscript *Codex Uppsaliensis*.

poets then insult each other's poetry and Gunnlaugr implies that Hrafn has offered a less than honorable poem for the king. Afterwards Hrafn declares the end of their friendship and vows to cause Gunnlaugr as much shame as Gunnlaugr attempted to cause for him. This competition for royal favor and status and Hrafn's ensuing vow of revenge is the beginning of the feud between Hrafn and Gunnlaugr.

Hrafn and Gunnlaugr, like many high status sons of chieftains, travel abroad to acquire fame and wealth. Their competition at the court of the Swedish king is mirrored by their competition at home in Iceland. Gunnlaugr and Hrafn are from powerful families in the southwest region of Iceland. The potential for competition between them can be seen in Gunnlaugr's initial discussion with Þorsteinn, the father of Helga the Fair, about Gunnlaugr's marriage proposal (*Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* Ch. 5, *ÍF* 3: 66). Gunnlaugr asks *"Hverjum vill þú heldr gipta dóttur þína en mér?"*[158] Þorsteinn responds, *"Mart er hér gott mannval."*[159] Gunnlaugr then compares his father's status with that of Önundr, Hrafn's father, stating, *"Hvárrgi þeira Önundar né Þorfinns er jafnmenni föður míns..."*[160] This verbal exchange shows the alliance and status considerations of a marriage proposal and Gunnlaugr's defensive protest clearly indicates that the sons of Önundr of Mosfell are attractive marriage alliance candidates for Þorsteinn. If we believe the general social memory contained within this saga, then this passage strongly suggests that Illugi, Þorsteinn, Önundr and perhaps Þorfinnr are the most powerful men in the

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[158] "*To whom would you rather marry your daughter than to me.*"

[159] "*There are a many good men here to choose from.*"

[160] "*Neither Önundr nor Þorfinnr are the equals of my father...*"

region in the first years of the 11th century, or at least, the most desirable men with whom to form a marriage alliance.

Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu implies that Hrafn's courtship of Helga, who had earlier been promised to Gunnlaugr, stems from his desire to harm Gunnlaugr's honor after their confrontation at the court of King Ólafr. However, Helga is the daughter of Þorsteinn Egilsson, the powerful chieftain in Borgarfjörður, meaning that there is more at stake here than the marriage to a beautiful woman or animosity towards an enemy. Helga seems to be the most politically desirable female marriage partner for both Hrafn and Gunnlaugr's families since it would result in an alliance with the Mýramenn of Borgarfjörður. Hrafn and his father Önundr, who had relatively recently moved to Mosfell, would have been particularly keen to strengthen the relationship with Egill Skallagrímsson's family, with whom Grímr Svertingsson, the former resident at Mosfell, had formed a strong alliance.

The marriage arrangements in this saga are therefore events with far-reaching political ramifications that require the engagement of prominent men on behalf of each of the competing suitors of Helga the Fair. Helga's father, Þorsteinn, initially rejects Gunnlaugr and Gunnlaugr's cause requires the advocacy of his father, Illugi the Black, who threatens Þorsteinn with an end to their friendship. As a result, Helga is promised to Gunnlaugr on the condition that he returns to Iceland from his trip aboard within three years. When Gunnlaugr stays abroad past the arranged time Hrafn secures his own engagement to Helga, but only with the aid of his powerful cousin Skapti the Lawspeaker as his advocate.

Upon his return to Iceland Gunnlaugr hears of Helga's marriage to Hrafn, and feeling his honor slighted begins to heap insults on Hrafn. While at a feast, Gunnlaugr chats with Helga for longer than is socially appropriate with another man's wife and gives her a gift. As the feast is ending, Gunnlaugr threateningly rides his horse straight towards Hrafn, who must avoid the horse. Afterwards Gunnlaugr composes an insult poem against Hrafn suggesting that Hrafn had to buy his marriage to Helga. The point of these insults in the saga is to show the animosity between the two men, and to set up the next stage in the conflict when Gunnlaugr challenges Hrafn to a duel at the Althing on Öxarárhólm island to satisfy his damaged honor over Hrafn's marriage to Helga. Hrafn is honor bound to accept the challenge.

The main supporters of each man form opposing conflict groups that become visible in the saga at the duel at the Althing. The saga indicates that Gunnlaugr relies on his close family, his father and his brother Hermundr, who accompany him onto the island for the duel. Illugi's support and military power is indicated by the large party of men (i.e. *miklu fjölmenni*) that follow him onto the island (*Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* Ch. 11, *ÍF* 3: 92). Hrafn on the other hand, not only brings his father to the duel, but also mobilizes the powerful kin from his mother's side, the descendents of Molda-Gnup, including Skafti the Lawspeaker and Svertingr Hafr-Bjarnarson. Several shields were often needed for each man during a duel, and the role of shield-holder required a dependable ally. Gunnlaugr chooses his brother Hermundr as his shield holder, while Hrafn broadens his core supporters by having his relative Svertingr Bjarnarson serve as his shield-holder. The duel ends without resolution when Hrafn's sword breaks in the

same motion as it slightly nicks Gunnlaugr's cheek. Kin from both sides intervene while both men declare victory, Hrafn because Gunnlaugr was wounded and Gunnlaugr because Hrafn is weaponless.

The importance of the conflict between these two young champions of their families is revealed by the response that their duel receives at the Althing.

> *Ok annan dag eptir í lögréttu var þat í lög sett, at af skyldi taka hólmgöngur allar þaðan í frá, ok var þat gört at ráði allra vitrustu manna, er við váru staddir; en þar váru allir þeir, er vitrastir váru á landinu...Þat hefir it þriðja þing verit fjölmennast, annat eptir brennu Njáls, it þriðja eptir Heiðarvig.*[161]
>
> *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* Ch. 11 (*ÍF* 3: 95-96)

The potential for this particular duel to unleash a devastating feud between two powerful groups was no doubt the impetus for the abolishing of dueling at this moment. The significance of the conflict between Hrafn and Gunnlaugr is also evidenced by the unusually high attendance report by the saga. Attendance numbers correlated directly with the significance of, and interest in the conflicts being addressed at the Althing. The saga, which admittedly does not underestimate the importance of the conflict, states that the Althing was one of the most well attended in Icelandic history, and likens the turnout to the Althing meetings after two of the most famous Saga Age conflicts. The island-wide interest in this conflict and its law-changing ramifications reflects the importance and standing of the individuals and alliance groups involved, showing the Mosfellingar to be among the most prominent families in early 11th century Iceland.

[161] "*And the day afterwards in the Law Council it was made law that dueling should be abolished from then on. And this was done on the advice of all the wisest men who were there; and all those were there who were the wisest in the country...This was one of the three Althing meetings that was attended by the most people, the other two were after the burning of Njáll and the after the Slayings on the Heath.*"

The result of the duel was unsatisfactory for both men's honor, and one day Gunnlaugr awakens to find Hrafn and twelve heavily armed men in his house. In a scene full of the Norse male honor and martial ethos, Hrafn reassures Gunnlaugr that he is in no danger and suggests that they both go abroad to fight another duel to settle their quarrel. Gunnlaugr accepts the proposal, lauds Hrafn's honor, and offers his enemy all hospitality. The final battle between the two heroes takes place at Dingnes in Sweden and the climatic ending has both fighters dispatch the other's companions before they turn on each other. Gunnlaugr strikes Hrafn a deadly blow, but Hrafn, in his only truly dishonorable action in the saga, tricks Gunnlaugr and deals him a fatal head wound. Hrafn admits his final action was "unmanly" (*ódrengliga*) before they both die, claiming he was motivated by his unwillingness to have Gunnlaugr win Helga the Fair. In the end then, the saga states that love or pure animosity towards his enemy prevents Hrafn from an honorable end. Interestingly the four skáldic poems that retain information about the tradition of this final duel do not mention the betrayal by Hrafn. It could be that there were two traditions about the way the duel ended.

When news of the fatal outcome of the final duel reaches Iceland, the conflict of the two young men embroils their whole families in a feud as threats and violence expand in the manner that the wise men's ban of dueling attempted to avoid. Illugi the Black feels the dishonorable action of Hrafn means that Gunnlaugr's death deserves compensation from Hrafn's family. Önundr disagrees. The potential for reconciliation breaks down at the Althing.

> *Ok um sumarit annat eptir á alþingi mælti Illugi svarti til Önundar at Lögbergi: 'Hverju villtu bæta mér son minn,' sagði hann, 'er Hrafn, sonr þinn, sveik hann í tryggðum?' Önundr svarar: 'Fjarkominn þykkisk ek til þess,' sagði hann, 'at bæta hann, svá sárt sem ek helt á þeira fundi; mun ek ok engra bóta beiða þik fyrir minn son.' Illugi svarar: 'Kenna skal þá nökkurr at skauti þinn frændi eða þinna ættmanna.'*[162]
>
> *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* Ch. 13 (*ÍF* 3: 105)

The status of a murder victim often determined the amount paid in compensation, and in this case, both fathers appear to believe that their sons were equals. Illugi's case for economic compensation rests on Hrafn's violation of traditional dueling convention and martial honor. Illugi threatens to settle the score with violence against Önundr's family as the holders of collective responsibility and the targets for unsatisfied negative reciprocity. Illugi responds quickly with military force.

> *Þat er sagt um haustit, at Illugi reið heiman af Gilsbakka með þrjá tigu manna ok kom til Mosfells snimma morgins. Önundr komsk í kirkju ok synir hans, en Illugi tók frændr hans tvá; hét annarr Björn, en annarr Þorgrímr. Hann lét drepa Björn, en fóthöggva Þorgrím. Reið Illugi heim eptir þat, ok varð þessa engi rétting af Önundi.*[163]
>
> *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* Ch. 13 (*ÍF* 3: 105-106)

This passage illustrates the benefits of controlling access to materialized Christian ideology. The church, which appears to be located close to Önundr's house, serves as a

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[162] "*And during the next summer at the Althing Illugi spoke to Önundr at the Law Rock. 'How will you compensate me for my son,' he said, 'since Hrafn, your son, betrayed him during a truce?' Önundr answers: 'I feel myself by no means obliged to pay compensation,' he said, 'as deeply wounded as I was from their encounter; but I will also not demand compenstation from you for my son.' Illugi answers: 'Then some of your kinsmen or family will suffer.'*"

[163] "*It is said that during the autumn, Illugi rode from Gilsbakki with thirty men and came to Mosfell early in the morning. Önundr and his sons made it into the church, but Illugi caught two of his kinmen; one was named Björn and the other Þorgrímr. He had Björn killed and Þorgrímr's foot chopped off. Illugi rode home after that and there was no reprisal from Önundr.*"

place of sanctuary from military force into which Önundr and his core family escape. Illugi honors church sanctity, implying that the new religion has become reasonably entrenched by this time. The date is AD 1010 according to the chronology of the saga and thus only 10 years after the official conversion.[164] Having quick access to this ideological source of power may have saved the Mosfellingar in this encounter, but Önundr's failure to respond or seek reprisal as recorded in the last line of the passage could be an indication of feuding weakness.

Gunnlaugr's kinsmen are still not fully satisfied with their vengeance after the execution and maiming of two of Hrafn's kinsmen. The saga states that Gunnlaugr's brother Hermundr tracks down and kills a nephew of Önundr who was not involved in the conflict and who is remembered as an important merchant. According to the saga Önundr's kin still do not respond: "*Engar kómu bætr fyrir víg þetta. Ok með þessu skilr skipti þeira Illuga svarta ok Önundar at Mosfelli*"[165] (*Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* Ch. 13, *ÍF* 3: 106).

The end of this conflict depicts the Mosfellingar in a negative light as they are militarily weak in the face of an attack, and fail to negotiate a truce or achieve compensation or vengeance for their kinsmen. An important question is to what extent *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* is devoted to telling Gunnlaugr's story and glorifying the family of the 'hero,' and whether this glorification is so extreme that it represses the

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[164] People running into churches for sanctuary during attacks while their attackers kill and maim the individuals who are caught outside of the sanctuary is a common theme in the Sturlunga Sagas that deal mostly with the 13th century. Although these types of actions are rarer in the Family Sagas, there is no reason to doubt the plausibility of the account in *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu.*

[165] "*No compensation was paid for this killing. And with that the feud between Illugi the Black and Önundr of Mosfell ended.*"

potential historical memory preserved in the saga. In general, the saga does not pass judgment on the characters and Hrafn appears to exhibit more laudatory moderation than Gunnlaugr in the beginning. Even the description of Gunnlaugr's personality in the beginning of the saga carries a negative connotation, while the saga describes Hrafn in purely positive terms. It seems possible, therefore, that in the last stages of the feud, the saga affords us a look into the human element in successful power management. In these final stages of the feud the Mosfellingar are not successful managers of their wealth, power and prestige. The Mosfellingar suffer a failed marriage alliance with the Mýramenn of Borgarfjörður, the death of their most promising young leader, and a military defeat at the hand of Illugi the Black's party from the upper hills of Borgarfjörður. The saga would have it that love got in the way of their success and that the Mosfellingar never retaliated for the embarrassing attack on Mosfell. After such failures, it seems possible that the decline in the power of the Mosfellingar was due to human agency and the failure of the Mosfellingar to mobilize and use their sources of chiefly power. In any case, the Mosfellingar do not appear again in the sagas as a powerful faction on the national stage after their defeat at Mosfell.

4.7 Conclusion: The Power of the Mosfell Chieftains in the Saga Age

The Saga Age inhabitants of the Mosfell farmstead drew social power from their access to kinship-based, economic, political, ideological, and military sources of power. The sagas analyzed in this chapter focused on the households of the Mosfell chieftains Grímr Svertingsson and Önundr Eilífsson, and the manifestations of their social power.

Both chiefs had high-status and prominent ancestry among the *landnámsmenn* and successfully negotiated kinship-based alliances with other chiefly families in bordering regions. The Mosfell chieftains led large households with an attached labor force of laborers and slaves, and owned land from the uplands where they ran their summer-time pastoral economy to the sea where they owned the land around the Leirvogur bay. At the natural harbor at Leirvogur, the chieftains had primacy of access to imported prestige goods and attained wealth through an enforced ship-toll. The political power of the *goði* title gave the Mosfell chiefs authority over people, which they exerted over the men of the Nesses. As *goðar*, the Mosfellingar represented the region to the Althing and benefited from the sources of income available to *goðar*, particularly the potential of wealth centralization through their role as legal arbitrators and advocates. Grímr also held the only island-wide political position as the Lawspeaker, and thereby attained both prestige from the vested authority and material wealth from his yearly pay and allotment of the yearly fines. The Mosfellingar quickly accessed the ideological power of Christianity by materializing the new ideology in the construction of a church. They retroactively Christianized of their ancestor, Egill Skallagrímsson, by transferring his physical remains from a prominent pagan burial to the center of the new religion's sacred space, and thereby provided the ritual link and continuity between their pre-Christian and Christian claims to authority. The Mosfellingar possessed military power from their potential to raise a fighting force from the Nesses that was large enough to force the payment of tolls and change the course of a legal action in Borgarfjörður.

The paragraph above is a summary of the individual sources of the power accessed by the Mosfellingar, but the strength of these sources of power lies in their articulation in a network or a constellation of power. For instance, kinship alliances could be activated for military support in conflicts as seen in the Grímr's assistance of Þorsteinn Egilsson. Grímr also used kinship relationships to transfer the political power of Lawspeaker to his nephew Skapti Þóroddsson. The economic power wielded over the Leirvogur port provided access to prestige goods that could be invested to generate social obligations of military and political support. Resources for building a church and import of luxury goods for Christian ritual, including the altar stone, books, and wine were necessary for the ideological power of the Mosfellingar. In turn, this ideological power provided legitimization of the economic wealth collected from church attendance and burial fees. The Mosfellingar used their military power derived from the political authority of the *goði* position to defend the economic rights at the Leirvogur port. The competition between Hrafn and Gunnlaugr for the best kinship alliance with the Mýramenn led to a military conflict in which the chieftain Önundr managed to preserve his life only because the materialization of his ideological power provided the sanctuary of a church. The Mosfellingar and other Icelandic chieftains succeeded and failed as a result of their access to and use of the sources of social power. Access to the individual sources of power and the successful use of the resultant power depended on the manner in which chiefs intertwined their power sources to form a mutually supportive network. Analysis of saga sources in this chapter indicates that the Mosfellingar very successfully managed their power network for most of the Saga Age, but as suggested at the end of

section 4.6.3, their failure in their power management in the feud with the family of Illugi from Borgarfjörður may have resulted in their fall from prominence and their concomitant disappearance from the textual sources.

Chapter 5 Social Power in the Mosfell Region in 12th and 13th Centuries

5.1 The Textual Sources for the Later Free-State Period

The texts covering the 12th and 13th centuries tell two main stories about the changing character of the power of the Mosfellingar. The first concerns Skapti Þórarinsson, a chieftain at the Mosfell farmstead in the early 12th century, who retains a prominent chiefly status, but is weakened by shifting regional alliances. Skapti appears in the end of *Egils Saga*, is named by Ari Þorgilsson in *prestatál*, and participates in the island-wide feud between Þorgils Oddason and Hafliði Másson. The second story, concerns the Mosfell region in the 13th century when the area lies between the domains of the centralizing power of two powerful families: the Sturlungar in Borgarfjörður to the north and the Haukdælir in Árnesþing to the east. During the 13th century, no specific people or places from the Mosfell Valley are mentioned in the textual sources. Therefore, the investigation of this period will focus on the role of the Mosfell region's inhabitants in the conflict between the Sturlungar and the Haukdælir, as well as the efforts of the two powerful neighbors to control and mobilize support from the Mosfell area. By looking closely at minor characters in these larger conflicts, this chapter illuminates the position of Mosfellingar in the changing power networks and the manner in which the people from the Mosfell region achieved a high degree of local power and political autonomy in a period otherwise marked by the formation of large territorial power structures.

After the end of the feud between Önundr and Illugi recounted in the previous chapter, the sagas do not mention any person or farm in the Mosfell Valley until Skapti

Þórarinsson appears approximately one hundred years later. This gap is not uncommon. In fact, the period between AD 1030 and 1118 is known as the "*fríðaröld*" ("The Peace Age") because the lack of source material for this century after the end of the Saga Age (930-1030) has been interpreted as an indication that there were no large conflicts (Sigurðsson 1989: 43). The assumption is that in a literature focused on feuds and conflicts, there was simply nothing to tell about the late 11th and early 12th centuries. Most modern scholars have begun their work on this century with a tacit acceptance of this framework. For example, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson (1999) suggests that the regions that feature prominently in the sagas about the 12th century were the regions with the most violence.

The presence of sources covering particular regions and families must have implications for social status and power during the 11th to 13th centuries. Following the idea that the presence of texts suggests violence, Sigurðsson theorizes that those regions experiencing violence were still dominated by *goðar* (he calls these the "*goðorð*-region"), while the regions characterized by peace had already undergone territorial power centralization ("*ríki*-region"). Sigurðsson's theory assumes the absence of texts is a proxy for peace, and that this lack of violence is the result of power centralization. Sigurðsson's suggestion shows an admirable use of the extra-textual aspects of the saga material, but in the entire Icelandic saga corpus, there are only four sagas dealing with the 12th century, making this theory tenuous and dependent on a very small sample size. Many factors could have contributed to the preservation of sources concerning the different regions of Iceland in the 12th century. The situation improves, however, for the 13th century with the

more plentiful Contemporary Sagas that contain a national and island-wide coverage. In the 13th century, the broader-based holistic coverage of the island as well as the vast increase in the number of texts provide conditions much more amenable for understanding the social implications of the presence and absence of regional textual coverage.

In contrast to Sigurðsson's suggested correlations between texts and violence, this chapter argues for a simpler interpretation, whereby the relative presence of sources about the inhabitants of a region or the members of a family in the 12th-13th centuries correlates roughly with the power of those groups. With the decline in the power of the Mosfell region, there is also a decline in the available source material concerning the Mosfellingar. Following this logic, the Mosfellingar of the 12th century led by Skapti continued to hold on to the waning power of the previous chieftains of Mosfell. By the 13th century, the Mosfellingar had lost the prominence they possessed during the Saga Age and been relegated to shifting allies of the emerging territorial confederate chieftaincies of the Haukdælir and the Sturlungar.

The historical sources available for the 12th and 13th centuries change in character substantially from the earlier centuries to include a wider range of text types as well as a genre of narrative sources favored by traditional historical scholarship. The narrative Sturlunga Sagas record contemporary events and are written by people who were present at the events they describe, whereas the Family Sagas that concern the Saga Age were dependent on oral tradition. Additional sources that traditional historians have accorded more trustworthiness such as charters and annals also become more readily available

starting in the late 12th century. The specific sources used in the analyses in this chapter consist of the so-called Contemporary Sagas, including the Sturlunga Sagas and the Bishops' Sagas, the few church charters (*máldagar*) that exist from the 13th century, the *prestatál* (register of priests) attributed to Ari the Learned, and the final chapter of *Egils Saga*. The ephemeral material concerning the Mosfellingar from this period does not allow a separate treatment of the various sources of power, such as presented in the previous chapter about the Saga Age. As far as possible, however, this chapter highlights details and social interactions in the texts where these power sources can be identified.

5.2 Skapti Þórarinsson and Mosfell in the 12th Century

The penultimate chapter of *Egils Saga* jumps forward in time over 100 years to tell the story of the transfer of Egill's bones to a new churchyard being established at the new farmstead of Mosfell about 550 m east of the original farm. In telling this story, the saga introduces the owner and priest of Mosfell, Skapti Þórarinsson.[166] The following passage was partially quoted in the previous chapter, but is worth revisiting at length:

> *...er kirkja var gör at Mosfelli, en ofan tekin at Hrísbrú sú kirkja, er Grímr hafði gera látit, þá var þar grafinn kirkjugardr. En undir altarisstaðnum, þá fundusk mannabein; 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 prestr Þórarinsson, vitr maðr; hann tók up hausinn Egils ok setti á kirkjugarðinn, var haussinn undarliga mikill... Þá vildi Skapti forvitnask um þykkleik haussins; tók hann þá handöxi vel mikla ok reiddi annarri hendi sem harðast ok laust hamrinum á hausinn*

[166] Skapti is sometimes spelled Skafti in some edited primary texts and secondary sources.

> *ok vildi brjóta, en þar sem á kom, hvitnaði hann, en ekki dalaði né sprakk... Bein Egils váru lögð niðr í útanverðum kirkjugarði at Mosfelli.*[167]
> *Egils Saga* Ch. 8 (*ÍF* 2: 298-299)

As the owner of the Mosfell farmstead, Skapti would have made the decision to move the farm and the graveyard to their new locations. At this time, the larger Mosfell farm was split into two farms: the new location was given the name Mosfell, while the old farm site was renamed Hrísbrú.[168] The farmer who took over at Hrísbrú would have been Skapti's tenant. The division of the large original farms into multiple farms with a single primary farm and several dependent *hjáleigur* or tenant farms was a symptom of the intensification of land-use and the increased social stratification in 12th century Iceland. This passage from *Egils Saga* indicates that the social changes occurring in the Mosfell Valley are consistent with these social stratification processes.

Egils Saga does not provide the date for the movement of the Mosfell farm, but the event can be dated to the early 12th century by reference to other historical sources on Skapti Þórarinsson. The earliest mention of Skapti at Mosfell is in *Þorgils Saga ok Hafliða*, where he appears at the end of the saga in AD 1121. The register of priests called *prestatál* also lists Skapti as one of the 40 noteworthy and highborn priests in the year AD 1143 (*Dipl. Ís.* 1: 86). The historical authority of this document is substantial

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[167] "*…when a church was built at Mosfell, and the church that Grímr had had built at Hrísbrú was taken down, then the old churchyard was dug up. And under the location of the altar, human bones were found. Men thought that they knew from the stories told by old people that these must be the bones of Egill. At that time Skapti the priest Þórarinsson, a wise man, lived there; he picked up Egill's skull and placed it on the churchyard wall. The skull was exceptionally large…Then Skapti wanted to learn about the thickness of the skull; he took up a decent-sized hand-axe and swung it in one hand as hard as he could and used the back side of the axe-head to break it. But in the place that it hit, the skull whitened but did not dent or break… The bones of Egill were reburied at the edge of the churchyard at Mosfell.*"

[168] See Chapter 2 on the place name evidence for the divisions of the Mosfell farm.

since scholars attribute it to the respected historian Ari 'the Learned' Þorgilssson, who also wrote *Íslendingabók*. Based on this basic chronology Icelandic scholars have suggested that the church at Hrísbrú was moved to Mosfell at some point between 1130 and 1160 (Grímsson 1861: 255).

Skapti's prominent position at Mosfell can be explained by his kinship link to both the powerful Mýramenn and Ölfusingar families. Genealogical relationships recorded in the *Melabók* manuscript records Skapti's familial relationship with both the Mýramenn and the Ölfusingar (Nordal 1933: LVII). According to *Melabók*, Skapti was 6 generations removed from Egill Skallagrímsson (Egill—Þorsteinn—Skúli—Geirlaug—Helga—Æsa—Skapti). These kinship links explain Skapti's presence at Mosfell and provides Nordal (1933: LVII) with reason and justification for his belief that Skapti possessed a *goðorð*.

5.2.1 Skapti the Chieftain-Priest and the New Sources of Power under Institutionalized Christianity

The passage from *Egils Saga* above in which Skapti tries to crush the skull of his ancestor with an axe clearly suggests that Skapti is no ordinary priest. According to the saga, he was apparently not very pious, did not exhibit the expected Christian veneration for the remains of the dead, and carried around an axe. In fact, Skapti was among the ranks of a new class of chiefs that overtly combined the ideological power of a clerical position with the old political power of the *goðar*. Many of the early Icelandic priests of the 11th and early 12th centuries were secular chieftains who had become priests to take

advantage of the ideological power potential (Vésteinsson 2000: 78-80). This mirrored the previous combination of the role of pagan priest and chief in the office of the *goði*, but Christianity provided an ideological power that was more organized and hierarchical. Vésteinsson (2000: 4) has explained this difference by holding that Christian church institutions have an innate tendency to increase organization, and that ambitious chieftains utilized this resultant organization to centralize power. Skapti's political position as a *goðorð* allowed him to control the ideological power inherent in the office of Christian priest, which in turn provided special access to the economic power potential of 12th century institutionalized Icelandic Christianity.

In his introduction to *Egils Saga*, Sigurður Nordal (1933: LVII) suggests that as one of the 40 most important priests in the country and the owner of the Mosfell farmstead, Skapti would surely have owned a *goðorð*. Besides Skapti's high-status ancestry and Nordal's (1933: LVII) conviction that Skapti possessed a *goðorð* (chieftaincy), several other facts support Skapti's status as a chieftain. As the owner of the Mosfell farm, he is the heir of the chieftains Grímr and Önundr. Skapti is also recorded as one of the 40 most powerful priests in the year. Finally, Skapti's prominent role in the feud between Þorgils and Hafliði is consistent with the stature of a chieftain. In trying to identify the chieftaincy that Skapti Þórarinsson possessed, however, we are left in the same situation as was discussed in Chapter 4 concerning the Saga Age *goðorð* of the Mosfellingar Önundr Eílifsson and Grímr Svertingsson. If Skapti was a chieftain he probably possessed one of the following: 1) part of the *allsherjargoðorð*, which traditional scholarship has held was in the hands of Ingólfr Arnarson's descendents; 2) all

of or part of the *Ölfussingagoðorð* (Chieftaincy of the People of Ölfus); 3) an unnamed chieftaincy.

Payment for church rituals and services was a source of wealth for Skapti as the owner and priest at Mosfell. *Egils Saga* shows that the Mosfell church had the rights to bury the dead, meaning that it was a fully functional parish church, rather than one of the more private and dependent chapels called *bænhús* that did not have burial rights (Vésteinsson 2000: 98-99). People from the surrounding area would have to pay for regular services and burial rights at the Mosfell church. The importance of these payments is dwarfed, however, in comparison to the institutionalized tithe.

After 1096-97 when the tithe was instituted in Iceland, the position of priest and the ownership of a church also yielded an increased amount of economic power from locally collected tithe revenue. According to the tithe law ¼ of the tithe went to the bishop, ¼ to the owner of the local church, ¼ to the local priest, and ¼ to the paupers in the area. Each church with tithe rights collected the money, distributed ¼ to the paupers and paid ¼ to the bishop. The bishop decided to which church the tithe of each farmstead should be allotted and the local communal district (*hreppur*) organized the dispersal of the tithes (Jóhannesson 1974: 174-175). The development of parishes at the end of the 11th century and the local distribution of ¼ of the tithe to paupers' parishes increased the territorialization of power (Vésteinsson 2000: 90). As the owner of the church at Mosfell and the resident priest, Skapti received 50% of the wealth collected through the tithe in the area of the Mosfell parish and would have a role in overseeing the transfer of the rest of the tithe to the bishop and to the paupers.

The Mosfell church, as the parish church, collected most of the tithe revenue within the parish, and would have been the destination for Christian ritual for the inhabitants of an area extending beyond the Mosfell Valley. At this time parishes were still elastic and in the process of being crystallized. The borders of the parishes were not always continuous and as stated above the churches were dependent on the bishop's allotment of tithes from specific farms (Orrman 2003: 433-434). Although no church charter is preserved for the early Mosfell church, church charters from other nearby churches help to provide an estimation of the maximum extent of the early Mosfell parish. These charters suggest that in the 12th century, the Mosfell church drew churchgoers from the entirety of the Mosfell Valley and collected tithe revenue from the modern Mosfellssveit region, encompassing the modern parish of the Lágafell church.

Four relevant church charters are preserved in the *Diplomaticum Íslandicum* dating to the late 12th and early 13th century from the wider Mosfell area.[169] The church farm of Reykir, located immediately south over the Grímannsfell mountain from the Mosfell Valley, has a charter dating to AD 1180 (*Dipl. Ís.* Vol. 1: 267-268). From this charter it is apparent that Reykir did not have full rights for burial and that it was dependent on the priest at Mosfell for ritual services. Even if Reykir owned the rights to collect tithe, ¼ of the tithe designated for the priest would go to the priest at Mosfell. Along the coast to the south and west of the Mosfell Valley, a charter also from 1180 AD records the existence of a church at Gufunes, approximately 10 km from Mosfell (*Dipl. Ís.* Vol. 1: 268-269). The charter clearly states that tithe is owed to this church. To the

[169] See Figure 5.1 for the location of the sites (Reykir, Saurbær, Gufunes, and Viðey) with churches recorded in early charters.

north and west, a charter from around 1220 exists from the Saurbær farm on Kjalarnes (*Dipl. Ís.* Vol. 1: 401-402). In the spring of 1226 a charter was written for the founding of a church dedicated to the Virgin Mary on Viðey, associated with the new monastery, the effect of which is discussed further below (*Dip. Ís.* 1: 490-492).

The charter evidence indicates that the Mosfell church was the only church in the Mosfell Valley and therefore the ritual center for the valley's inhabitants. The resultant prestige and revenue from church rituals and services supplemented the wealth and prominence of Skapti and the Mosfellingar. The original extent of the Mosfell parish is difficult to reconstruct, as is the number of farms attached to this parish. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that the Mosfell church received most of the substantial tithe revenue within the modern Mosfellssveit region.

5.2.2 Skapti's Involvement in the Feud in *Þorgils Saga ok Hafliða*

The feud between Þorgils and Hafliði involves two powerful chieftains clashing on either side of Hrutafjörður, which marks the dividing line between the Northern and the Western Quarters. The reciprocal retaliation and escalating conflict depicted in *Þorgils Saga ok Hafliða* only slightly masks the underlying competition between these two *goðar* over control of the *Melmannagoðorð* and the area in the West Fjords known as the Strands (*Strandir*) where fishing was particularly lucrative (Sigurðsson1989: 52; Guðmundsson 1959: 64-66). Each of the chieftains owns more than one *goðorð*, which defies the *Grágás* laws stating that a *goði* can only possess a single *goðorð* (Sigurðsson 1999 Karlsson 2000). This illustrates the changes in the political climate of the 12th

century and demonstrates that chieftains are beginning to centralize power through the possession of multiple *goðorð*s. The saga recounts the feud from 1117 until the opposing parties reach a lasting settlement in 1121. Skapti's role as a prominent supporter of Þorgils in this island-wide feud shows his status as a powerful chieftain and provides an important glimpse into Mosfellingar's difficult decision of choosing sides between their historic allies: the Mýramenn in Borgarfjörður and the Ölfusingar in Ölfus. As will be illustrated in the sections below the stakes of this decision intensify in the 13th century, as both areas and the associated *goðorð*s become incorporated into two developing *ríki* of the Sturlungar and the Haukdælir.

The sheer number of supporters that the chieftains Þorgils and Hafliði mobilize against each other demonstrates the increasing power of the chieftains in the 12th century when compared to the earlier Saga Age. In the final standoff between the two chieftains at the Althing, Þorgils has 840 men with him to support his cause, while Hafliði has mobilized 1440 men. This is a vast and qualitative difference from the much smaller raiding parties most frequently seen in the Family Sagas. This conflict had an island-wide profile and other sources record it as one of the major events of the early to mid 12th century. For instance, the otherwise very terse and church-centric account of the early bishops presented in the *Hungrvaka* text (Vigfusson and Powell 1905: 439, 444) includes two mentions of the conflict between Þorgils and Hafliði as events that mark and define calendar years.

This feud not only provides a rare view into the power centralization occurring in the 12th century, but since the feud embroils most of the prominent chieftains and farmers

in Iceland, it identifies contemporary alliances and sheds light on the political landscape of the 12th century. This section uses the saga in this latter respect, with specific reference to the fact that Skapti Þórarinsson of Mosfell is named as an ally of the Þorgils' coalition.

The conflict between the two chieftains escalates beyond the violence between followers and assassins when Þorgils chops three of Hafliði's fingers off at the Althing in 1118. In response, Hafliði assembles a partisan court at the Althing that declares Þorgils an outlaw. Subsequently both chieftains focus on military defense and gathering supporters for their cause on an island-wide scale, drawing in the most powerful chieftains and farmers of the Western, Northern and Southern Quarters. Þorgils draws his support from his power center in the Western Quarter, but men from the western half of the Southern Quarter also support him. Hafliði relies on his kinship connections with the powerful Haukdælir family, led by Teitr Hallsson, who have concentrated the power of the Rangávellir area in their hands. Þórðr of Vatnsfjörður in the West Fjords, who had become an enemy of Þorgils, also joins Hafliði as the only chieftain from the western part of the country who does not support Þorgils. The standoff between the chieftains comes to a head at the Althing in 1121 when Hafliði uses his 1440 supporters to try to prevent Þorgils and his 840 men from entering the Þingvellir area. The bishop of Skálholt intervenes to avoid a large-scale pitched battle between the two forces and convinces Hafliði not to confront Þorgils (*Strl.* 1: 39-40). This interaction between Bishop Þorlákr and Hafliði demonstrates the amplified influence of the organized Christian church.

The saga description of the regional allies of each chieftain indicates that the Mosfell Valley was in the territorial sphere of Þorgils' supporters. The saga describes the region of origin of Þorgils' party,

> *Þar var þá sjau hundruð manna. Þar var beðit Styrmis Hreinssonar af Gilsbakka, mágs Þorgils. Þar váru þá allir goðorðsmenn með Þorgilsi fyrir vestan Bláskógaheiði nema Þórðr ór Vatnsfirði.*[170]
>
> *Þorgils Saga ok Hafliði* Ch. 23 (*Strl.* 1: 40)

According to this passage, all the chieftains who owned a chieftaincy west of *Bláskógaheiðr* (Bláskógi Heath) supported Þorgils. As Jóhannesson et al. (Strl. 1: 57, 538; 2: 372) point out, *Mosfellsheiðr* (Mosfell Heath) is included in this conception of Bláskógi Heath. These two heaths are sometimes used synonymously, but most accurately, the Bláskógi Heath consists of the highlands between the Þingvellir plains and Borgarfjörður, while the Mosfell Heath encompasses the highlands south of Bláskógi Heath and between Þingvellir plains and the Mosfell Valley (Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn 1: 538). In any case, the Mosfell Valley and any chieftaincy from the Mosfell area and the area of the Nesses, including the *Allsherjargoðorð*, would fall in the area west of Bláskógi Heath that supported Þorgils.

The support of Skapti Þórarinsson, the chieftain of the Mosfell region, for Þorgils is confirmed in the last chapter of the saga as Skapti scorns Hafliði's proposed monetary compensation for his wounded hand: "*Þá er Hafliði sagði upp vöxt fjárins, þá svaraði Skafti Þórarinsson: 'Dýrr myndi Hafliði allr, ef svá skyldi hverr limr.'*" (*Þogils Saga ok*

[170] "*There were then 700 men. Styrmir Hreinsson of Gilsbakki, a kinsman of Þorgils, waited there. All the owners of goðorðs located west of Bláskógaheiðr except Þórðr of Vatnsfjörðr were there with Þorgils.*"

Hafliða Ch. 31, *Strl.* 1: 50).[171] This is the only mention of Skapti Þórarinsson in the Sturlunga Sagas. Even if Skapti did not actually say these words or anything like it, the author attributes these words to Skapti because he was a prominent figure in Þorgils' alliance.

Skapti is remembered as a powerful supporter of Þorgils and a prominent chieftain in Þorgils alliance, as he is given the argumentative and aggressive line chastising Hafliði for his high self-worth. This depiction strengthens the indications that Skapti was a *goði*, as suggested by his status as the priest-owner of the Mosfell farm, his inclusion in Ari's list of the 40 most important priests, and his high-status kinship ties. Skapti's support for Þorgils also suggests that Skapti and the Mosfellingar no longer preserved the previous close kinship alliance with the chiefly families of Mosfell on Grímsnes and the Ölfus region, both areas now controlled by the Haukdælir. The Haukdælir under the leadership of Hallr Tietsson had sided with Hafliði. Rather in this conflict, the Mosfellingar appear to be favoring their alliance with the Mýramenn of Borgarfjörður. The evidence is thin, but if these indications are correct, they could signal the breakdown of the regional alliance-network that supported the Mosfellingar in the 10th and 11th centuries. The power players of Mosfell region are torn already in the 12th century between their two historically important alliances with the chieftains in Borgarfjörður to the north and Árnesþing to the east. Both Borgarfjörður and Árnesþing become the geographic centers of increasingly territorial *ríki*. Meanwhile, the Mosfell

[171] *"Then when Hafliði had pronounced the size of the payment Skapti Þórarinsson answered: 'The whole of Hafliði would be quite valuable, if each limb is worth this much.'"*

area is developing as a periphery rather than a center of power consolidation, a periphery that will be contested by the emerging centers.

5.3 Between Power Centers (*Ríkjar*): the Mosfell Region in the 13th Century

The sources for the 13th century, particularly regarding the period from the 1210s to the end of the Icelandic Free State in the early 1260s, are rich in political detail for the power struggles of the new elite. These sources contain no direct mentions of people or places in the Mosfell Valley. Under careful scrutiny, however, the competition and conflicts that occur in the wider area, particularly between the Sturlungar and the Haukdælir families, provide insight into the power structure in the Mosfell region and role of the people of the Mosfell Valley. The area around the Mosfell Valley has not drawn much attention from historians of 13th century Iceland. This is primarily because the available sources focus mostly on other regions that served as power centers for the powerful new class of *stórgoðar* (literally, 'large-chieftains'). Jón Jóhannesson (1974: 234), for example addresses our area of interest in passing at the end of a section on the Sturlungar,

> *Between the areas which were under Snorri's control on the one hand, and the region constituting the jurisdiction of the Haukdælir on the other, lay the district of the priest Magnús Guðmundarson, that is the district known as the 'supreme chieftaincy' (allsherjargoðorð, and the half of the Lundarmannagoðorð which belonged to the priest Thórðr Böðvarsson (d. 1220).*

The region referred to by Jóhannesson encompasses the entirety of the area called the Nesses, which was discussed in detail in Chapter 4 as the support foundation and power base for the chieftains of Mosfell in the late 10th and early 11th centuries. In the 13th century, this area became a sort of "no man's land" between the two emergent territorial *ríkjar* of the Sturlungar and the Haukdælir. The lack of sources on the Mosfell Valley and its inhabitants, in itself, indicates a decrease in the power and wider relevance of the Mosfellingar before the beginning of the 13th century.

The central point that this section seeks to illustrate is that the Mosfellingar were caught between two emergent territorial chiefdoms (called pl. *ríkjar*, sg. *ríki*) controlled by the Sturlungar and the Haukdælir. The wider Mosfell area was a "no-man's land" over which both of these territorial powers competed for dominance and from which they sought support by means of intimidation, force, and reward. The people of the wider region in which Mosfell is located were pressed from both sides, preventing any centralizing effort from occurring within the region itself. Therefore authority and power in this the wider Mosfell area remained more akin to the personal power characteristic of the Saga Age, with the *stórgoðar* not being able to exert permanent direct control. Although they were often bullied and forced into subservient roles, the people of the wider Mosfell region maintained a high degree of political independence from the *stórgoðar* by alternating support, demonstrating their prowess in military conflicts, and taking advantage of the power vacuum between the competing *ríkjar* of the Sturlungar and the Haukdælir.

This section broadens the perspective to include the wider area in which Mosfell lies, encompassing the whole area of the Nesses, i.e. between the Álftanes peninsula where the modern Bessastaðir farm is, and Akranes to the north of Hvalfjörður.[172] This area includes Álftanes, Seltjarnarnes, the Reykjavík area, Gufunes, Mosfellssveit, Kjalarnes, Hvalfjörður, and Akranes. The story of the wider region in which Mosfell and the Nesses are located centers on the centralization and power consolidation efforts of the Sturlungar and the Haukdælir families.

The leaders of these families compete for control of this area and attempt to elicit support. These leaders are examples of the new class of paramount leaders called *stórgoðar* who attempt to develop relationships and force support from local leaders and *goðar*. Their domains or *ríki* were regional chieftaincies formed through the consolidation of *goðorð*s into territorial units. Sigurðsson (1989) describes a *ríki* as a territorial domain with reasonably fixed boundaries, made up of three to six *goðorð*s in one or two *várþing* (Spring Assembly) districts. However the increased territorial power was "ill-defined," "fragile, patched-up arrangements almost without a supporting infrastructure" (Byock 2001: 347), making the structures of this new class of paramount chieftains prone to rapid change, volatile, and vulnerable to violence. The personal bond between the *goðar* and his thingmen could not be maintained by the *stórgoðar* whose territorial aggregation had made them nominal leaders of a much larger number of farmers.

[172] Álftanes is somtimes also written Álptanes.

The story of the identifiable local leaders in wider region of the Nesses is also quite fascinating as it provides the clearest picture of the situation and the agency of the people living in this region. These local leaders include individuals like Koðran Svarthöfðason of the Nesses, Þorleifr of Garðar, and Mágnus Árnason the *allsherjargoði* and his cousin Árni the Unready of Kjalarnes. Particular focus will be given to the way these men negotiated their political alliances and relationships with the *stórgoðar* of the Sturlungar and the Haukdælir, and thereby managed to keep their region partially independent and free from the complete direct control of the new class of territorial chieftains.

5.3.1 The Emergence of the Ríkjar of the Sturlungar and the Haukdælir

The emergence of *ríkjar* to the north and the east of the wider Mosfell region geographically isolated the Mosfell region, while the aggressive pressures from both directions limited the centralizing possibilities of the aspiring power wielders in the area. Significantly, the competition between the two *ríkjar* also meant that the people stuck between the *ríkjar* were often forced to choose sides. In the 9th-12th centuries, the Mosfellingar appear to have relied on alliances with both the Mýramenn of Borgarfjörður as well as the people of Ölfus and Grímsnes, but in the 13th centuries the Mýramenn, the Ölfusingar and the Mosfellingar of Grímsnes become incorporated into opposing *ríkjar*, splitting the Mosfellingar's allies into two competing groups. As a result, the Mosfellingar's political strength was curtailed by their inability to maintain effective alliances with both the Mýramenn of Borgarfjörður represented by Snorri Sturluson on

the one hand, and the Ölfusingar of Ölfus and the Mosfellingar of Grímsnes represented by the Haukdælir family on the other hand.

5.3.1.1 The Sturlungar in Borgarfjörður

Snorri Sturluson was responsible for the centralization of power that resulted in a *ríki* centered in the Borgarfjörður region. Snorri's family, known as the Sturlungar after his father Sturla Þórðarson of Hvammr, had increased their power dramatically in the 12th century from their original patrimony in the Dalir region and their original *goðorð* (*Snorrungagoðorð*). Sturla's ambitious and successful sons, Þórðr, Sighvatr, and Snorri, each became powerful chieftains in different regions of Iceland. Throughout the majority of the 13th century, the son's of Sturla and their descendents would remain allies and be held together by kinship, although intermittently but briefly clashing over preeminence and inheritance. Þórðr remained in the Dalir region taking the *Snorrungagoðorð* chieftaincy after his father, while Sighvatr became a *stórgoðar* over all of Eyjafjörður, and Snorri created the power center of his *ríki* in Borgarfjörður.

In 1199, Snorri Sturluson gained a foothold in Borgarfjörður through his marriage to Herdís Bersadóttir, the daughter of Bersa Vermundarsson the Wealthy. Bersa who lived at the Borg farm, the former power center of Egill Skallagrímr's family, had tremendous wealth ("*átta hunðruð hundraði*"[173] *Strl*. 1: 237) and owned the traditional chieftaincy of the Mýramenn (*Mýramannagoðorð*). Snorri inherited the wealth and the chieftaincy, and took over the farm at Borg in 1202 after Bersi's death (*Strl*. 1: Ch. 15).

[173] "*eight hundred hundreds*" (this is the "long-hundred" = 120 hundreds)

In a few years, Snorri also gained control over the chieftaincies of the Men of Reykholt (*Reykhyltingagoðorð*) as well as the Jöklamenn *(Jöklamannagoðorð*), which had belonged to the people of Gilsbakki, including Illugi the Black, who feuded with Önundr of Mosfell in the 11th century. Finally, the chieftain Þórðr Böðvarsson of Garðar on Akranes, further south towards Mosfell decided to give Snorri half of his chieftaincy over the Lundamenn (*Lundamannagoðorð*), partially to stem the influence there of Snorri's brother Þórðr Sturluson.

Snorri's emergent *ríki* stretched across the Western and the Southern Quarters and in doing so was unique among the *ríkjar* for incorporating regions in more than one of Iceland's Quarters. (Jóhannesson 1976: 234). Snorri's *ríki* included both the *Reykhyltingagoðorð* and the *Lundamannagoðorð* that belonged to the Kjalarnesþing district assembly, which the people of Mosfell attended. Snorri's claims to power in Kjalarnesþing made him a major power player in the area of the Nesses. Since Snorri had consolidated the region of the Mýramenn in Borgarfjörður, who had previously been allied with the Mosfellingar, and was pushing his chiefly claims into Kjalarnesþing. The Mýramenn of Borgarfjörður were allies on equal footing with the Mosfellingar in the 10th century, but by the 13th century the power had shifted in favor of Snorri's Borgarfjörður *ríki* and this chapter will show Snorri's attempt to treat the people of the Mosfell region and Kjalarnesþing as a subservient allies.

5.3.1.2 The Haukdælir in Árnesþing

The Haukdælir family, taking their name from their primary farm at Haukadalr on Biskupstunga, may have consolidated their power over the Árnesþing district already by the early 12th century (Jóhannesson 1976: 232). The Haukdælir received significant power from their substantial influence on the bishop at Skálholt, which was located in the middle of their *ríki*. Several of the early bishops belonged to the Haukdælir family, including the first two, Ísleifr and Gizurr. The Haukdælir controlled the three chieftaincies traditionally tied to Árnesþing: *Flóamannagoðorð*, *Ölfusingagoðorð*, and *Mosfellinga/Haukdælagoðorð*. The *Mosfellinga/Haukdælagoðorð* was initially in the possession of the descendents of Ketilbjörn the Old who settled at Mosfell on Grímsnes, and does not refer to the Mosfell in the Mosfell Valley. There was, however, a connection between the two Mosfells as Ketilbjörn married Þórðr Skeggi's daughter and named his farm after the Mosfell in the Mosfell Valley.[174] The two Mosfells appear to have maintained a relationship and probably a loose alliance. This *Mosfellinga/ Haukdælagoðorð* stayed in the hands of the descendents of Ketilbjörn, but its gravitational center shifted to the Haukadalr farm in the late 11th century when Tietr Ísleifsson held the chieftaincy.

The *goðorð* of the Ölfusingar was clearly in the hands of the Haukdælir in the 13th century, but it is not clear how this came to be (Ingvarsson 1986 vol. 1: 299). The importance of this is that the chieftains of Ölfus were previously tied by kinship to all of the important leaders of the Mosfellingar from the Mosfell Valley (i.e. Grímr

[174] See Chapter 2 for the analogical place name formation of the Mosfell farmsteads and Chapter 3 for the textual sources on Þórðr Skeggi and Ketilbjörn the Old. See also the genealogy in Figure 3.2.

Svertingsson, Önundr Eilífsson, and Skapti Þórarinsson) and had always been their consistent allies. This close connection was now broken as the Haukdælir assumed this chieftaincy and often resided at farms in Ölfus such as Reykir (*Strl.* 1: Ch. 121). *Þórðar Saga Kakala* clearly expresses the enmity between the Ölfusingar and Snorri in Borgarfjörður in a description of the Sturlungar's vengeance against the Ölfus region in 1243 for Snorri's murder. The saga describes Símon of Ölfusvatn, a supporter of the Haukdælir, before the Strulung party executes him.

> *Hafði hann frá blautu barnsbeini verit fylgðarmaðr Gizurar Þorvaldssonar...Han var einna manna tillagaverstr við Sturlunga. Hann var ok í Reykjaholti at vígi Snorra Sturlusonar. Váru honum þar eignaðir áverkar við hann.*[175]
>
> *Þorðar Saga Kakala* Ch. 16 (*Strl.* 2: 33)

The kinship and alliance bonds of the Mosfellingar had been weakened by the takeover of the *Mýramannagoðorð* by Snorri Sturluson and the *Ölfusingagoðorð* by the Haukdælir. The Mosfellingar could not maintain an effective alliance with farmers and leaders from both these areas, which were now incorporated into the power centers of competing regional polities.

The boundary of the Haukdælir *ríki*, which in contrast to Snorri's *ríki* appears to have been reasonably consistent, is well-defined in its articulation with the wider Mosfell region. Textual references to the Haukdælir's district place it west of the Þjórsá river and south and east of the Bláskógi Heath (Bláskógaheiðr) and Mosfell Heath (Mosfellsheiðr).

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[175] "*From childhood he had been a supporter of Gizurr Þorvaldsson [the Haukdælir stórgoði]. He was one of the men who were most hostile to the Sturlungs. He was also at Reykjaholt when Snorri was killed. He was thought to have wounded Snorri.*" (brackets added by author).

Sometimes these two heaths are used synonymously, but most accurately, the Bláskógi Heath consists of the highlands between the Þingvellir plains and Borgarfjörður, while Mosfell Heath lies adjacent to and south of Bláskógi Heath. Mosfell Heath stretches west to the Mosfell Valley after which it is named (see Figure 5.1).

A listing in *Íslendinga Saga* of the Haukdælir chieftain Gizurr Þorvaldsson's primary support regions includes: 1) Flói, 2) Biskupatunga 3) Grímsnes, 4) Hreppar, 5) Skeiði, 6) Ölfus (*Strl.* 1: 461) (see Figure 5.1).[176] All of these regions are located in Árnesþing, demonstrating that this was the center of Gizurr's and the Haukdælir's military power and political support. Movements of Gizurr Þorvaldsson's supporters in 1238 substantiate the boundary of the Haukdælir *ríki* east of Mosfell Heath and Bláskógi Heath. Gizurr moves his men out of his district by crossing "*vestr um Bláskógaheiði*"[177] and later he and his kinsman Kolbein Ungi decided "*at menn váru sendir ofan um heiði [Mosfellsheiði] ok um alla sveit Gizurar*" (*Strl.* 1 Ch. 131:417 and Ch. 135: 423).[178] The proximity of the Haukdælir *ríki* to the Mosfell Valley and the Nesses, separated only by the Mosfell and Bláskógi highlands, made the Mosfell area vulnerable to political pressure, military recruitment, and land acquisition by the more powerful Haukdælir.

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[176] 1) Flói is located along the southern coast east of Ölfusá; 2) Biskupatunga is east of Apavatn and west of Hvítá river; 3) Grímsnes is souteast of Þingvallavatn lake and west of Hvítá river; 4) Hreppar is located east of Biskupstunga on the eastern side of Hvítá river; 5) Skeiði, later Skeiðahreppur, is located east of Hreppar;6) Ölfus is south of Þinvallavatn lake and west of Ölfusá river

[177] "*west over Bláskógi Heath*"

[178] "*that men should be sent down over the [Mosfell] Heath and all around Gizurr's district.*" (The information in brackets is my addition, but the heath is correctly annotated as Mosfell Heath in the notes to *Strl.* 1: 570)

5.3.2 Power in the Nesses: A No-Man's Land without Territorial Power

The Mosfell region was squeezed between the *ríkjar* of the Sturlungar and the Haukdælir who competed for influence and supporters in this "no-man's-land". Power within this region had not become territorial as it had in the emerging *ríkjar* in Borgarfjörður and Árnesþing, but rather remained personal. For instance, military power still depended largely on personal allegiances rather than territorially mandated recruitment. As larger forces and the *stórgoðar* moved through the area and competed to extend their power into this region, however, forced recruitment appears in the sources.

A central thesis of this section is that the Mosfell area was not just under the influence of the Sturlungar as many scholars have assumed. Rather this area was an arena of competition between Sturlungar and Haukdælir. The older view, which is depicted in all Icelandic historical maps and atlases, including the very best of the kind, show the Mosfell region as part of the Snorri's *ríki* and under the control of the Sturlungar (see e.g. *Íslenskur Sögu Atlas* vol. 1: 83, 85, 91, 97, 101). Jón Víðar Sigurðsson (1989: 55), whose work is exemplary, provides an example of the articulation of this older view. Based on the recruitment by Snorri and Þorleifr in 1237 of troops from "*Rosmhvalanesi ok um öll nes fyrir sunnan Borgarfjorð*" [179] (*Strl.* 1: 404), Sigurðsson concludes that this entire area was under the control of the Sturlungar and Snorri: "*Ég túlka þetta á þann vega að þessi landsvæði hafi verið hluti af valdasvæði Snorra*" (Sigurðsson 1989: 55).[180]

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[179] "*Rosmhvalanes and all the Nesses to the south of Borgarfjörður*." Sigurðsson believes this takes place in 1238, although Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn calculate it to be 1237.

[180] "*I interpret this in such a way that this region would have been part of Snorri's domain* [lit. power-region]." (brackets added by author)

Just because one chief can draw supporters from a region, however, does not mean another chieftain cannot do the same. Sigurðsson assumes the nature of power in this region was territorial. This section will provide examples showing that loyalties are not split on territorial lines and that both Haukdælir and Sturlungar successfully recruit supporters, own land, and exert influence here. Farmers and leaders in this area depend on personal loyalties that change for different reasons, including coercion and incentivized persuasion.

The point of sections 5.3.2.1. and 5.3.2.2 is to illustrate with direct references to the source material that both the Sturlungar and the Haukdælir had supporters and recruited military forces in the wider Mosfell area. The Sturlungar and Haukdælir employ these supporters in conflicts to threaten and inflict violence.

5.3.2.1 Supporting the Sturlungar

The Sturlungar had ties and friendship alliances if not supporters in the region of Kjós, which stretches south from Hvalfjörður encompassing the Mosfell Valley and most of coastal area west to Reykjavík. Kjós extends east up to Þingvellir and Árnesþing and was therefore adjacent to the *ríki* of the Haukdælir. *Íslendinga Saga* (Ch. 7, *Strl.* 1: 235-236) tells that in 1198, Sighvatr Sturluson led a case for the men of Kjós to defend against the apparent aggression of Markús Skeggjason, a thingman and probable agent of the powerful Oddaverjar, who controlled a *ríki* east of the Haukdælir. To counter the Oddaverjar attempt to extend their influence over Kjós, the men of Kjós, including Ketill

Eyjólfsson of Eyr and his brother Koll Auðgi of Möðruvellir,[181] seek out the assistance of Sighvatr Sturluson. Sighvatr wins the case at the Althing against the Oddaverjar. The saga concludes this episode by indicating the support the Sturlungar gained in this region: "*Fekk Sighvatr af þessum málum mikla sæmd, ok váru Kjósverjar jafnan vinir hans síðan*" (*Strl*. 1: 236).[182]

Once Snorri forms his *ríki* in Borgarfjörður, the *Sturlunga Sagas* provide a much clearer indication of the Sturlungar's capacity to gather supporters and troops in the greater Mosfell area and in this respect *Íslendinga Saga* mentions the men of the Nesses on numerous occasions. In 1229, Snorri recruits supporters to attend the Althing and relies on the attendance of the men of Nesses. The saga says that all chieftains gathered their followers and "*Snorri hafði ok margt manna ór Víðidal ok Miðfirði ok af Suðrnesjum ok um allan Borgarfjörð. Hafði hann eigi færa en sjau hundruð manna*" (*Strl.* 1: 333).[183] It was common practice for thingmen to accompany their chieftain to the Althing and in this case, Snorri appears to have been able to rely on the men of the Nesses for military support although it is not clear how Snorri activated this obligation.

Snorri also recruits the men of the Nesses for military actions. In 1237, Snorri's

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[181] Both the Eyr and the Möðruvellir farms a located between Hvalfjörður and the Mosfell Valley.

[182] "*Sighvatr recieved much honor from this case, and the men of Kjós were always his friends thereafter*."

[183] "*Snorri also had many men from Víðidalr and Miðfjörðr and from the South Nesses and from around all of Borgarfjörður. He had no less than 700 men*."

ally Þorleifr of Garðar gathers forces around the Nesses to help Snorri counter a military challenge by Snorri's power-hungry nephew Sturla Sighvatsson (*Strl.* 1: 397).[184] Snorri's recruitment of the men of the Nesses shortly thereafter, probably in April of 1237, has been cited above and Sigurðsson (1989) used this recruitment as his primary example for Snorri's power over the area. Snorri's main support and military power in this conflict with his nephew Sturla derives from the southwest of Iceland and appears to be centered in the Nesses. The details of this conflict, and specifically the identity of the people who died at the battle at Bær in Borgarfjörður, provide more information on the specific farmers who supported Snorri and their region of origin. Among the dead in Þorleifr and Snorri's party were five men from Rosmhvalanes, one man from Viðey, four men from Kjós, and twenty men from around Akranes. The farms identified with farmers supporting Snorri are Brautarholt on Kjalarnes; Kvíguvágar east of Rosmhvalanes; Valdastað, Hækingsdal in Kjós, Leirárgarðr, Mel, Ás, Narfastað and Garðar in Akranes. As a group during the conflict all these men are referred to as the "Nesjarmenn" (the Men of the Nesses). Subsequent to this battle, Sturla conducts a punitive expedition against the men of the Kjalarnesþing area in the manner distinctive of the Sturlung Period, further illustrating the substantial nature of the support this region had provided for Snorri and Þorleifr. Specifically, Sturla plunders Garðar on Akranes, as well as the Kjalarnes

[184] This force may be from just around Akranes as suggested by Jóhannesson, Finnbogason, and Eldjárn (1946: 569), but it is at least as probable that these were men from the broader area of the Nesses. The accusative form of the word "*nes*" makes the number unclear, but the use of the plural "*nesjum*" from which Snorri departs only six sentences later leads me to believe that the plural was intended in the previous use of "*nes*" as well.

peninsula about which the saga states, "*Víða var annars staðar rænt, í Saurbæ ok í Hvammi ok þar um sveitir*" (*Strl*. 1: 407; see Figure 5.1).[185]

The Sturlungar continued to recruit the men of Kjós and the Nesses for military expeditions even after Snorri's death. After Snorri's death, his son Órækja collects forces in the area between the Mosfell Valley and Þingvellir as reinforcements against Gizurr. The saga states that when Órækja and his party hear about Gizurr's troop movement, "[*s*]*endu þeir menn á Kárastaði ok stefndu mönnum á Almannagjárhamar til móts við sik, þeim er þar váru*" (Strl. 1: 456). [186] This summoning of the men from Almannagjárhamar by an undisclosed number of Órækja's supporters implies that this recruitment was forced. Almannagjárhamar, which is located on the Mosfell Heath, was on the borders of what is traditionally considered the geographical extents of the Haukdælir *ríki*. This proximity explains the apparent reluctance of these men to fight against the Haukdælir, as they would surely have feared the same repercussions as were suffered by the men of Akranes and Kjalarnes at the hands of Sturla.

5.3.2.2 Supporting the Haukdœlir

The Haukdælir also actively recruited forces and mobilized allies in the Kjalarnesþing region around the Mosfell Valley. The evidence for the Haukdælir recruiting supporters in this area is scarcer than for the Sturlungar. But this is perhaps not so strange, since the Sturlunga Sagas focus on the Sturlungar and were written by a

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[185] "*Other places were widely plundered, at Saurbær and at Hvammr and around there in the district.*"

[186] "*They sent men to Kárastaðir and summoned the men from Almannagjárhamar to meet them, those that were there.*"

member of the Sturlung family. Nevertheless, the men of the Nesses clearly support Gizurr in his attack against Snorri. The Haukdælir potential for recruiting supporters from this region is best illustrated by a closer examination of the support that Gizurr Þorvaldsson of the Haukdælir mobilizes to attack Snorri at Reykjaholt.

Gizurr Þorvaldsson is drawn into conflict with Snorri Sturluson in 1241 after he accepts a request for help from Klængr and Ormr, who are in a dispute with Snorri over their inheritance. Snorri had married Klængr and Ormr's mother, Hallveig Ormsdóttir, and entered into an agreement of shared property with her that gave Snorri custody of the property of Hallveig and her sons (Jóhanneson 1976: 244). Klængr and Ormr were Hallveig's sons from a previous marriage to Björn Þorvaldsson of the Oddaverjar family. After the death of their mother, Klængr and Ormr demand their part of their inheritance from their mother. When Snorri offers them a poor deal on the division of land, they ask Gizurr for support. At least part of the land in question is in Kjalarnesþing, as in for example Snorri's farm at Bersastaðir, which he argues he bought with his own wealth. *Sturlunga Saga* characterizes Gizurr's response: "*kvað hann þat ófallit, at þeir hefði eigi rétt skipti við Snorra, kveðst ok þar til vilja veita þeim sinn styrk*" (*Strl*. 1: 452).[187] Gizurr helps the brothers gather forces to pressure Snorri, but clearly, there a larger power play between Gizurr and Snorri is underway. Gizurr seizes on this opportunity to pressure Snorri. Gizurr organizes an expedition against Snorri and among this force are Árni

[187] "*He called it unjust that they did not recieve a fair deal from Snorri, and said that he would lend them his strength in this matter*"

Óreiða (the Unready) from Saurbær on Kjalarnes, and according to the saga more men from Kjalarnes are gathered as "*Klængr reið á Kjalarnes eftir liði*" (*Strl.* 1: 454).[188]

After the famous death of Snorri at the hands of Gizurr's party, the saga reveals Gizurr's personal aspirations as his supporters argue that Gizurr should be given control of Snorri's inheritance since it would offer the most stability. Apparently they were convincing, as the saga states, "[*k*]*om því svá, at þau handsöluðu Gizuri arfinn Snorra*" (*Strl.* 1: 455).[189] The men of the Nesses continue to support Gizurr through this process. Gizurr stationed them at Snorri's old farm of Reykjaholt where and placed Klængr in charge. These men are noted when acts of vengeance begin for Snorri's murder, and the saga describes the men defending Reykjaholt against Snorri's son Órækja:

> *...Klængr var í Reykjaholt… Var þar Koðran Svarthöfðason ok fleiri bændr af nesjum. Þar var ok margt heraðsmanna fyrir, svá at þar váru alls fyrir nær átta tigir manna.*[190]
>
> *Íslendinga Saga* Ch. 153 (*Strl.*1: 456)

Koðran of the Nesses is discussed in greater detail below, but it is clear from the account of this conflict that men from the Nesses and around Kjalarnes at times supported Gizurr. It also appears from this last passage that the men of the Nesses make up the most important contingent defending Reykjaholt.

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[188] "*Klængr rode to Kjalarnes for troops*"

[189] "*It came about that they pledged Snorri's inheritance to Gizurr*"

[190] "*…Klængr was at Reykjaholt… Koðran Svarthöfðason was there as were numerous men from the Nesses. Many district-men were there as well, so that there were nearly 80 men there altogether.*"

5.3.3 Competitive Encroachment into the Wider Mosfell Region

The previous section demonstrated that both the Sturlungar and the Haukdælir were able to recruit supporters from the area of Kjalarnesþing, including notably the region called the Nesses. This section will provide evidence that leaders of both these *ríkjar* also encroached on the area by using political, military, economic, and ideological sources of power. The Sturlungar and the Haukdælir used different strategies. The Sturlungar took a more direct confrontational and economic approach centered on military might and landownership. The Haukdælir also used military force for coercion, but relied more on harnessing local discontent and ideological power. Specific methods of encroachment addressed in this section include 1) land acquisition through marriage alliances, 2) the transfer *goðorð*s, 3) purchase of land and farms 4) pressing aggressive lawsuits, 5) application of military force, 5) use of the power centralizing potential of the Christian monasteries.

5.3.3.1 Snorri's Encroachment from Borgarfjörður

Snorri Sturluson's strategy for gaining a stronger foothold in the Kjalarnesþing area involves strategic marriage alliances, land purchases, and legal battles against the leaders of the region. His marriage to Herdís Bersadóttir and his inheritance of her father's wealth had gained him a strong foothold in Borgarfjörður, which lead to his acquisition of the *Reykhyltingagoðorð* and the *Lundamannagoðorð*, both which were tied to the Kjalarnesþing Assembly. The only traditional *goðorð* in Kjalarnesþing that remained outside of Snorri's influence and control was the *allsherjargoðorð*, which had

traditionally been in the hands of the descendents of Ingólfr Arnarson in the Reykjavík area.

In the early to mid 13th century, possibly the most powerful man in Kjalarnesþing south of Snorri's Borgarfjörður-centered *ríki* was Magnús Goði, who held the title of *allsherjargoði* and lived near modern-day Reykjavík. Jóhannesson et al. (1946, vol. 2: 339) explain that it is unclear how the *allsherjargoðorð* passed into Magnús' kin-group, known as Ámundaætt. Magnús was the son of Guðmundr Grís and Solveig, the daughter of the Oddaverjar chieftain Jón Loftsson, which explains why the Oddaverjar defended him against Snorri's aggression. Magnús is mentioned by name as one of the key members of a party with Þorvaldr Gizursson and the Sturlungar that moves in 1209 against bishop Guðmundr in an attempt to stem the power of the church and the bishop, who had been attempting to separate canon law from secular law (*Strl*. 1: 250-251; Jóhannesson 1974: 206-207).

Snorri twice clashes with Magnús on legal issues in an attempt to weaken him and to gain the upper hand. At the Althing, in 1216, Snorri instigates trouble by having his men take timber belonging to Magnús, thus starting a fight. Magnús is wounded, bringing his uncle Sæmundr, the chieftain of the Oddaverjar, to his aid. There is a standoff between Sæmundr and Magnús on one side and Snorri supported by his brothers Sighvatr and Þóðr on the other. In the end Sæmundr determines the fee for the Magnús' wounds and concerning this payment *Íslendinga Saga* sparingly and enigmatically states, "[*b*]*ændr af Akranesi gengu til handsala fyrir Snorra*" (*Strl.* 1: 268).[191] The men of

[191] "*The farmers from Akranes went into handsale for Snorri*."

Akranes, who were most likely thingmen of the *Lundamannagoðorð* of which Snorri controlled half, are clearly supporters of Snorri in this case. How the men of Akranes provided payment to Magnús is unclear. Some form of movable wealth is possible, but it is also conceivable that political obligations were at stake.

Whatever form the payment took, Snorri was clearly upset ("*líkaða illa*") by this result and looked for an opportunity to confront Magnús again. The same year Snorri hears that the rich widow Jórunn *Auðga* (the Wealthy) of Gufunes[192] has died and that Magnús intends to inherit her farm and wealth, probably on the basis of her political ties to him.[193] Snorri decides to claim the property for himself with a fraudulent claim made by a local vagrant. Snorri then uses military force and legal action to thwart Magnús' plans.

> *En um várit um stefnudaga fór Snorri suðr á Seltjarnarnes ok hafði tvær ferjur af Akranesi ok fjóra tigu manna á hvárri. Þeir létu fáa eina sjá, er þeir fóru suðr at nesinu, ok kómu þeir mjök á óvart Magnúsi. Ok stefndi Snorri Magnúsi skóggangsstefnu til Þverárþings.*[194]
>
> *Íslendinga Saga* Ch. 34 (*Strl.* 1: 268)

Magnús protests that he is being illegally summoned to the Þverárþing assembly in the Western Quarter. According to the law, the case should be brought to court in the Southern Quarter where both his home and the property in question is located

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[192] part of the Nesses region; see Figure 5.1

[193] *Íslendinga Saga* states that Jórunn had attended the Althing with Magnús the previous summer.

[194] "*But in the spring during the Summoning Days, Snorri went south to Seltjarnarnes with two ferries from Akranes and 40 men on each ferry. They let few people see that they went south to the ness, and they arrived with Magnús completely unaware. And Snorri summoned Magnús to trial for full outlawry at the Þverá Assembly.*"

(Jóhannesson 1974: 229-230). Nevertheless, Snorri proceeds to prosecute him at the Þverárþing assembly in Borgarfjörður where he has Magnús declared an outlaw. Forces gather at the Althing, but this time Snorri gains his victory, seemingly on the basis of his large military support that includes "*sex hundruð manna, ok váru átta tigir Austmanna í flokki hans alskjaldaðir*" (*Strl*. 1: 269).[195] His brothers Sighvatr and Þórðr support Snorri with "*miklu liði*" (*Strl*. 1: 269).[196] The farm and the land at Gufunes are given to Jórunn's farm-manager, who is required to pay a rent to Snorri.

Snorri Sturluson also acquires direct management and control over lands in the Nesses. Snorri's acquisition of a farm on Kjalarnes is discussed below in the section on Árni the Unready, but the most notable example is Snorri's ownership and frequent use of the Bersastaðir farm on Álftanes. In *Íslendinga Saga*, Snorri claims he bought this farm, which there is no reason to doubt. The first mention of Snorri owning this farm occurs in 1235, when Órækja Snorrason comes to Borgarfjörður to find his father, but learns, "*Snorri var suðr á Bersastöðum um sumarit at búi sínu*" (Strl. 1: 387).[197] In 1236, *Íslendinga Saga* recounts that Snorri uses his farm at Bersastaðir as a refuge against gathering forces from the northern fjords: "*Snorri vildi þá ekki liði safna, ok fór hann brott ór Reykjaholti ok suðr á Bersastaði með allt skuldalið sitt*" (*Strl.* 1: 391).[198] Bersastaðir serves Snorri as a refuge further away than Borgarfjörður from potential

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[195] "*seven hundred and twenty men, and eighty of them in his party were Norwegians who all had shields.*"

[196] "*a large troop*"

[197] "*Snorri was south at Bersastaðir during the summer at his farm.*"

[198] "*Snorri did not want to gather troops, but he went away from Reykjaholt and south to Bersastaðir with his whole household.*"

threats from other *stórgoðar*, such as the Ásbirningar in the Northern Quarter, but also provides a strong power center for his claims to the southwest portion of the country. Scholars such as J. V. Sigurðsson (1989) have used Snorri's ownership and use of a farm at Bersastaðir to argue for this area being under Snorri's control. But in light of the demonstrated unstable loyalties of the men of Kjalarnesþing and the non-territorial character of power in this region, Snorri's purchase of Bersastaðir should rather be seen as an attempt to centralize a measure of authority that he did not have in the area.

5.3.3.2 The Haukdælir Encroachment from Árnesþing

From the information retained in the sources, the Haukdælir appear to have taken a somewhat more responsive and cautious approach to exerting power over the Kjalarnesþing area. Surely, the Sturlung-centric sources do not tell the whole story, and it is likely that the power centralizing techniques of the Sturlungar and the Haukdælir shared a number of characteristics, but the differences are nevertheless noteworthy. An example of Snorri's nephew Sturla Sighvatsson's coercive tactics and the Haukdælir response will illustrate the point. In 1238 after Snorri has gone to see the Norwegian court, his nephew Sturla loosely controls Snorri's former *ríki* and conducts a forced resource collection in Kjalarnesþing. *Íslendinga Saga* recounts the raids and the response of the locals:

> *Þann tíma sendi hann suðr Svarthöfða Dufgussson ok nær flesta alla fylgðarmenn sína til Hvalfjarðar, ok fóru þeir út í Geirshólm, ok drógu þerir þar at föng ok öfluðu heldr medð harðindum til. Var þá hleypt suðr*

> *til Reykja ok sagt Gizuri, at menn Sturlu váru í Geirsholmi ok myndi ræna um alla sveit niðri þar.*[199]
>
> *Íslendinga Saga* Ch. 132 (*Strl.* 1: 419)

The response of the local men from Kjalarnesþing reveals that seeking the assistance of the Haukdælir against the Sturlungar was a viable option. Gizurr also responds with a sense of responsibility, setting out immediately with a force and ridding up over Mosfell Heath. He does not attack Sturla's men in the end, but with the manners of a caring leader he advises the men of the district to "'*gæta yðar ok fjár yðvars sem þér kunnuð, ok haldið saman sem bezt, hverir sem mest þurfu'*" (*Strl*. 1: 419).[200] The Kjalarnes region and the area around Mosfell are not under the control of the Sturlungar, and the inhabitants of this region appear to be able to call on both sides for support. The corollary is that they could be bullied and subjected to raids from both *ríkjar*, although no examples of this being done by the Haukdælir survive in the sources.

5.3.3.2.1 The Viðey Monastery: Ideological Power and Haukdælir in Kjalarnesþing

The Haukdælir's most interesting, and also their most lasting, encroachment and power centralization effort into Kjalarnesþing and the Mosfell region was the materialization of ideological power in the monastery on Viðey. Viðey was the first monastery in the Southern Quarter and was founded by the initiative of the Haukdælir

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[199] "*At that time he sent south Svarthöfði Dufgussson and almost all of his followers to Hvalfjörður, and they went out to Geirshólm, and there gathered goods and they procured these by harsh methods. News was rushed south to Reykir and Gizurr was told that Sturla's men were at Geirshólm and would pillage around the whole district down there.*"

[200] "*Get yourselves and your goods together where possible, and hold out together as best you can, [protecting] those who are most in need.*" (bracketed word added by author)

family in 1225 or 1226. Þorvaldr Gizurarson was the founder and he held the office of prior until his death in 1235 (Jóhannesson 1974: 197-198). Þorvaldr of the Haukdælir founds this monastery in the name of piety, but the underlying purpose is clearly a bid to retain more control and power of the area around the Nesses, including the Mosfell Valley.

The political nature and regional power potential of the monastery can be sensed in the passage below from *Íslendinga Saga* in which Gizurr negotiates with Snorri about the monastery foundation:

> *Þetta vár it sama fór Snorri Sturluson suðr um heiði ok fundust þeir Þorvaldr Gizurarson ok töluðu margt. Litlu áðr hafði andazt Kolskeggr inn auðgi, er einn var auðgastr maðr á Íslandi. En eftir hann tók fé allt Hallveig Ormsdóttir. Þorvaldr kærði þat fyrir Snorra, at hann vildi setja klaustr nökkurt, sagði, at Kolskeggr hefði heitit at leggja þar fé til. Bað han Snorra til at eiga hlut með þeim... þeir Snorri ok Þorvaldr bundu vináttu sína með því móti, at Gizurr, sonr Þorvalds, skyldi fá Ingibjargar dóttur Snorra, en Þorvaldr skyldi eiga hlut at við Hallveigu Ormsdóttur, at hon gerði félag við Snorra ok fara til bús með honum...Eftir þetta kaupir Þorvaldr Viðey, ok var þar efnat til klaustrs...Var Þorvaldr þá vígðr til kanoka.*[201]
>
> *Íslendinga Saga* Ch. 52 (*Strl.* 1: 302)

The marriage alliance between the children of Þorvaldr and Snorri cements their friendship, but the exchange of support for their respective power consolidation efforts is

[201] "*That same spring Snorri Sturluson went south over the heath [Mosfell Heath], where he and Þorvaldr Gizurarson had a meeting and talked a great deal. A little earlier Kolskeggr the Wealthy, who was the wealthiest man in Iceland, had died. Hallveig Ormsdóttir inherited all his wealth. Þorvaldr brought forward for Snorri that he wanted to establish a monastery, and said that Kolskeggr had promised to contribute money for this. He asked Snorri to agree to this… Snorri and Þorvaldr affirmed their friendship at the meeting, on the conditinons that Gizurr, Þorvaldr's son, should marry Ingibörg, the daughter of Snorri, and Þorvaldr should persuade Hallveig Ormsdóttir to make a partnership with Snorri and live in his household… After that, Þorvaldr bought Viðey, and there established a monastery... Þorvaldr was then consecrated a canon*."0

the real objective in this meeting. In exchange for Snorri's agreement to support Gizurr's foundation of a monastery in the Nesses region of Kjalarnesþing, Gizurr will help Snorri acquire control of the wealth and the chieftaincy that Hallveig had inherited. In this deal, the monastery appears to be valued as the equivalent of the wealth of the wealthiest man in Iceland and a chieftaincy.

But why would a monastery be so valuable? In his analysis of the wealth of the Icelandic Christian church, Jóhannesson (1974: 176) states, "[g]ifts were the greatest source of income for the Church." This is particularly so for the monasteries that often served as a place to retire for the elite as was also the practice in mainland Europe. That this principle is applicable to Viðey is revealed in the several church charters (*máldagar*) and letters preserved from the first years of the Viðey monastery. These documents also shed light on the methods and extent of wealth that came quickly under the control of the monastery.

The first two *máldagar* and a letter from Bishop Magnús Gizurarson, a Haukdælir, concerning the monastery date to AD 1226 (*Dip. Is.* 1: 483-496). The main purpose of Magnús' letter is to request gifts for the Viðey Monastery (*Dip. Is*. 1: 490-492). Bishop Magnús and Þorvaldr are brothers and this call for gifts to his brother's new monastery is obviously a move to gather wealth for a new Haukdælir power initiative in Kjalarnesþing. The flow of wealth to Viðey was mandated by law at the Althing in the form of a "cheese tax." This law is preserved in one of the two *máldagar* from 1226. The *máldagi* states, " *at a meðal Reykjaness oc Bozar skal giallda af hveri vm bæ. þeim er*

ostr er giorr. slikan hleif sem þar er giorr. til staðarens j Viðey hvert havst" (*Dipl. Is.* 1: 124, 496).[202]

The degree to which all the farms in this area paid the yearly cheese tax is unclear, but the growing wealth of Viðey is clearly recorded in a *máldagi* from 1234, which includes a list of the possessions of the monastery. Among these possessions are numerous farmsteads, pasturage rights in Þormóðsdalr in the Mosfell region, and the rights to driftage (whales and timber) along the Reykjanes coastline (*Dip. Is.* 1: 506-507). All the farms and driftage rights are within Kjalarnesþing, but as the editors of the *Diplomaticum* recognize, after only 8 years, the monastery has, "*verið búið að safna allmiklum auði"* (*Dipl. Is.* 1: 506).[203]

The Haukdælir were the most adept of the *stórgoðar* at using the new Christian ideology and its nascent Icelandic institutions as a source of power. As discussed above, they virtually controlled the bishop position at Skálholt during the first two centuries of Icelandic Christianity. In 1247, Viðey received its first abbot and the terms of consecration made it clear that his authority over fiscal matters would be free from the control of the individuals contributing endowments and their heirs (Jóhannesson 1974: 197-198). The inclusion of this condition does indicate, however, that hereditary control by the Haukdælir was a possibility and they surely maintained a certain degree of influence.

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[202] *"That between Reykjanes and Botnsá, shall be owed from each farm that produces cheese, one loaf of cheese made there, to the monastery of Viðey each autumn.*" Botsná is located at the eastern end of Hvalfjörður.

[203] "*has accomplished the collection of a great deal of wealth*"

Initially dominated by the Haukdælir, the Viðey monastery develops into a power center in its own right. The monastery becomes the a 3rd major power player in addition to *ríkjar* of the Haukdælir and Sturlungar and serving as a gravitational center drawing potential allegiances and landownership away from the Mosfellingar. Viðey essentially filled a power vacuum, the niche between the secular powers of two *ríkjar*. Another secular power in Kjalarnesþing would be impossible in the competitive contexts of the early to mid 13th century, but an ideologically based power center agreed upon by both neighboring chieftains was immune to most secular conflict and could not be effectively targeted with the military power and violence that the *ríkjar* came to depend upon in the 13th century. Pressed from all sides and located in the no-man's land of the 13th century struggles between two *ríkjar*, the odds were against the Mosfellingar to develop their own power center.

5.4 Agency of the Mosfellingar in No-Man's Land: Opportunistic Allies

The previous sections have focused on the actions of the *ríkjar* vying for power over the Kjalarnesþing area. This section shifts focus to explore the reactions of specific individuals in the Nesses and the greater Mosfell area, and how they negotiate their precarious political position between the *ríkjar*. The actions and allegiances of two local big-men provide insight into how the Kjalarnesþing region retained a surprisingly high measure of local power and political autonomy.

5.4.1 Koðrán Svarthöfðason: *Stórbóndi* of the Nesses

Koðrán Svarthöfðason, a *stórbóndi* from the Nesses, is not a major character in the sources, but from several disperse episodes, we see that Koðrán switches his support between the two *ríkjar*, demonstrating his 'free-agent' position. Koðrán supports different *stórgoðar* at different times. He first appears supporting Snorri against his nephew Sturla, then supporting Gizurr against the Sturlungar, and finally rejecting Snorri's son Órækja's offer to join his force. Both the Haukdælir and the Sturlungar seek Koðrán's support, and Koðrán takes an active part in alliance forming and breaking as well as military conflicts well beyond the dictates of the *stórgoðar*. Koðran appears at first glance to be opportunistically following the changing tides of power, but a more nuanced view sees Koðrán as a valued and respected ally who thrives in the power struggles between powerful neighbors that surround his region. Koðrán first appears fighting alongside Snorri Sturluson and Þorleifr at the battle of Bær against Sturla, where the men of the Nesses played a large role. Koðrán is identified as one of the important *bændr* (free-farmers) who were injured in the battle on Snorri and Þorleifr's side:

> *Fjölði manna varð sárr af Þorleifi ok inir beztu bændr, Hafrbjörn Styrkársson, Rúnólfr, bróðir hans, er síðan var ábóti í Viðey, Jörundr inn mikli,* ***Koðrán Svarthöfðason***.[204]
>
> *Íslendinga Saga* Ch. 124 (*Strl.* 1: 406)

Koðrán is included here in the list of the most powerful farmers, indicating that he is a man of greater stature than an ordinary *bóndi* and was probably one of the *stórbændr* who

[204] "*Many men were wounded from Þorleifr's party and among them were these foremost of the bændr: Hafrbjörn Styrkársson, Rúnólfr, his brother, who later became abbot of Viðey monastery, Jörundr the Great, Koðrán Svarthöfðason.*"

were often the local power wielders for the *stórgoðar* (Byock 2001: 342). In this battle, Koðrán fights with Snorri and Þorleifr in defense of Snorri's *ríki* in Borgarfjörður, but he is also fighting in defense of local autonomy from Sturla who is attempting to consolidate power in the south. The rallying cry for the recruitment of the men of Kjalarnesþing that support Snorri is not revealed in the saga. Most of the men in Þorleifr's group are from Kjalarnesþing south of Borgarfjörður and the men of the Nesses feature prominently, strongly suggesting that Koðrán is from this region as well.

When Koðrán appears again, he is in the following of the Haukdælir under Gizurr Þorvaldsson in a fight against the Sturlungar at the famous battle of Örlyggstaðir. Snorri was in Norway at this time, but Koðrán is again in a group fighting against Sturla Sighvatsson. This time Sturla is accompanied by his father and his supporters from Eyjafjörður. Koðrán makes a direct personal attack on Sturla,

> *Þá sótti Koðrán Svarthöfðason at Sturlu ok lagði til hans með spjóti. Sturla mælti til hans: 'Ertu þar enn, fjandinn?" Koðrán svarar: 'Hvar væri hans meiri ván?'... Þá stóð Húnröðr upp ok lagði spjóti í hægri kinn Sturlu ok nam í beini stað. Þá mælti Sturla: 'Ok nu vinna smádjöflar á mér.'*[205]
>
> *Íslendinga Saga* Ch. 138 (*Strl.* 1: 435)

The manly exchange of battle quips between Koðrán and Sturla is a common saga technique, but the saga author would only have attributed these lines to men that the contemporary audience understood were present at the battle and from which these lines

[205] "*Then Koðrán Svarhöfðason advanced against Sturla and attacked with his spear. Sturla said to him: 'Are you there too, devil?' Koðrán answered: 'Where should he be more expected?'... Then Húnröðr stood up and thrust his spear into the right cheek of Sturla and it stuck into the bone. Then Sturla said: 'And now lesser devils assault me.'*"

were conceivable. Sturla's quip refers to Koðrán and compares his spear to a devil. The familiarity Sturla appears to have with Koðrán may refer to the battle at Bær where Koðrán also fought against Sturla.

Koðrán's shift to support the Haukdælir against the Sturlungar is further demonstrated as he takes part in the attack and killing of Snorri Sturluson at Reykjaholt in 1241. *Íslendinga Saga* tells us that Koðrán stayed at Reykjaholt with 80 other men to defend against a reprisal from the Sturlungar: "[*v*]*ar þar Koðrán Svarthöfðason ok fleiri bændr af nesjum*" (*Strl.* 1: 456; see also section 5.3.1.1).[206] Beyond any doubt this statement shows that Koðrán is from the Nesses. Órækja Sturluson attacks and defeats the men at Reykjaholt, after which follows the most interesting passage concerning Koðrán's position and independence.

> *Heldu þeir Órækja þá á búnaði sínum ok ætluðu suðr at Gizuri... Órækja spurði Koðrán Svarthöfðason, ef hann vildi fara með þeim, en Koðrán neitaði því.*[207]
>
> *Íslendinga Saga* Ch. 153 (*Strl.* 1: 457)

Since Órækja already has a large force, he would be unlikely to solicit the help of one man, particularly a single man who has just fought against him and who was present in raiding parties that killed his cousin, his uncle, and his father, who he is seeking to avenge. Koðrán, as a *stórbóndi*, must have had authority over a number of men. Órækja does not understand Koðrán as one of the men ultimately responsible for the murder of

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[206] "*Koðrán Svarthöfðason was there as were numerous men from the Nesses.*"

[207] "*Órækja's party continued gathering forces together and planned to go south to attack Gizur… Órækja asked Koðrán Svarthöfðason if he would go with them, but Koðrán refused.*"

his family members. Rather, Koðrán is an independent political and military leader, and as such an attractive ally. Koðrán, who was part of the losing side, still has independence and military power, and therefore he is still worth Órækja's respect. Órækja's special attention to Koðrán is even more impressive considering Órækja's depiction in the *Sturlunga Sagas* as rash and violent.

Koðrán's ability and freedom to refuse Órækja reflects his independence and power. Órækja does not want to make Koðrán his enemy. As such, Koðrán is the human manifestation of the Kjalarnesþing's position as a no-man's land between two power centers. Although the powerful Sturlungar and Haukdælir both covet him as an ally, he retains the freedom to shift alliances between these *stórgoðar* families. Koðrán and the men of the Nesses do not owe unconditional allegiance to either the Haukdælir or the Sturlungar. By using opportunistic alliances and demonstrating their military power in conflict, the men of the Nesses take advantage of the s*tórgoðar* competition to carve out a semi-autonomous area for themselves in the power vacuum between the larger powers.

5.4.2 Árni the Unready: *Goði* of Kjalarnes

Árni Magnússon *Óreiða* (the Unready) who lived on Kjalarnes is counted at least once among the island's chieftains (*Strl*. 1: 374). He was, according to *Íslendinga Saga*, also a close friend of King Hákon of Norway (*Strl.* 1: 286). He was a nationally known figure as illustrated by the fact that his death in 1250 is noted in the first chapter of *Svínafellinga Saga*, a saga that deals entirely with the Eastern Quarter of Iceland (*Strl.* 2: 87). Árni provides an example of a *goði* from Kjalarnesþing whose power was

intermediate between the *stórgoðar* like Snorri Sturluson and the *stórbændr* like Koðrán Svarthöfðason. Árni, like Koðrán, was an independent political player and was not the follower of any particular territorial *stórgoði.* Árni's independence manifests in his shifting alliances with the Sturlungar and the Haukdælir.

The earliest mention of Árni comes when he marries Snorri's daughter in 1218, thus forming a kinship alliance with the Sturlungar. Jóhannesson (1976: 244) believes that Snorri would not have married his daughter Hallbera to Árni Magnússson unless he had possessed part of a chieftaincy. Jóhannesson (1976: 244) postulates that Árni's chieftain status derived from his inheritance of part of his cousin Magnús Guðmundsson's *allsherjargoðorð*. *Íslendinga Saga* shows Árni had more to offer a marriage partner, explaining, "[*h*]*afði hann Brautarholt til félags við hana ok mikit fé annat*" (*Strl.* 1: 271).[208] But Snorri may never have meant the marriage to last, and appears to have planned to benefit from their divorce six years later. When Árni returns from Norway, the saga reports that he and Hallbera separated immediately:

> *Þá þegar var gert fjárskipti þeira Árna ok Hallberu Snorradóttur. Lét Snorri sér ekki líka annat en hon hefði Brautarholt ór skipti. En Árni keypti Saurbæ á Kjalarnesi*.[209]
>
> *Íslendinga Saga* Ch. 53 (*Strl.* 1: 304).

The division of property may also have included a division of Árni's chieftaincy, in which case Snorri would have received control over part of the *allsherjargoðorð*

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[208] "*He brought Brautarholt to the partnership with her as well as much other wealth.*"

[209] "*Then immediately the property of Árni and Hallbera Snorradóttir was divided between them. Snorri would not accept anything else than for her to get the Brautarholt farm out of the division. But Árni bought Saubær on Kjalarnes.*"

(Jóhannesson 1976: 244). Even without the control of the chieftaincy, Snorri managed to gain control of Árni's previous farm of Brautarholt. Although Árni is being bullied by Snorri and must have felt slighted, he continues to support Snorri.

Between the wedding and the divorce, Árni had shown himself independent of Snorri's faction when he supported the Haukdælir against the Oddaverjar at the battle of Breiðabólstaðir despite Snorri's support of the Oddaverjar faction. It is possible that this fueled Snorri's enmity towards Árni and his rough treatment of him over the division of property. Árni fights with Björn Þorvaldsson of the Haukdælir defending Breiðabólstaðir and refuses to abandon him despite repeated attempts to offer quarter specifically for Árni. When the Oddaverjar and their allies offer free quarter for friends or kinsmen of Snorri Sturluson, Árni responds, "' [*h*]*ér kenni ek mitt mark á þessu, en þó mun ek eigi við Björn skiljast at sinni*" (*Strl*. 1: 281).[210] Árni's support of the Haukdælir faction, motivated by unspecified kinship connections, illuminates Árni's dilemma as he attempts to retain kinship obligations to two stronger factions that are perpetually in competition. Árni's problems are symptomatic of the difficult position in which the men of Kjalarnesþing find themselves between the *ríkjar* of Snorri and the Haukdælir.

In the 1230s, the textual sources count Árni twice among Snorri's political supporters and military displays. In 1232, when Snorri moves against the men of Vatnsfjörður, Árni is one of the few supporters identified by name. Árni is also prominently named as one of Snorri's allies that ride to the Althing with him in 1234. *Íslendinga Saga* mentions Árni alongside other chieftains riding to the Althing, while

[210] "'*Here I recognize the sign of my family in this deal, but nevertheless I will not abandon Björn now.*'"

indicating both Árni's ability to raise forces of his own and his support for Snorri: "*Snorri Sturluson hafði fimm hundruð manna. Þorleifr ór Görðum hafði hundrað manna. Árni óreiða hafði fimm tigu manna. Ok veittu þeir Snorra báðir*" (*Strl.* 1: 374).[211] In 1236, Árni provides supplies for a military force that Snorri and his son Órækja gathered in Borgarfjörður. However, the text is ambiguous about Árni's willingness to provide this support: "*Órækja fór um föstuna suðr til Kjalarness ok fekk þar föng mikil, mjöl ok skreið, smjör ok hunang, er Árni í Saurbæ gaf Órækju*" (*Strl.* 1: 390).[212] The Sturlungar are collecting both material aid, either forced tribute or socially obligated support, and military assistance from Árni. Árni's next actions to alter his alliance network illustrate that he resents these obligations and the demands of the Sturlungar and that he has the power to act against them.

When Árni next appears in 1240, he has just returned from Norway with letters from the Norwegian King to Gizurr Þorvaldsson of the Haukdælir that demand Snorri be sent to Norway or killed on the grounds of treason (*Strl.* 1: 447, 453-454). This is a crucial period in Iceland's early integration into the Norwegian Kingdom and Snorri as many other men, including Árni have become liegemen and made alliances with the king in order to consolidate power at home in Iceland. Gizurr, who means to honor the king's orders and no doubt sees political gain in it for himself, creates an alliance against Snorri: "*stefndi hann mönnum at sér. Váru þar fyrir þeir bræðr, Klængr ok Ormr, Loftr*

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[211] "*Snorri Sturluson had 600 men. Þorleifr of Garðar had 120 men. Árni the Unready had 50 men. And they both supported Snorri.*"

[212] "*During the Fast, Órækja went south to Kjalarnes and there got great provisions, meal and dried fish, buttter and honey, which Árni at Saurbær gave to Órækja.*"

biskupsson, Árni óreiða" (*Strl*. 1: 453).[213] Jóhannesson (1976: 255) believes that Árni joined the confederation against Snorri because of his obligation as a liege vassal to the king, but that he would not have favored Snorri's murder. However, even after the murder of Snorri, Árni chooses to stay in Gizurr's party against the Sturlung family and takes part in the capture and detention of Snorri's nephew Sturla and his son Órækja (*Strl*. 1: 469).

Árni the Unready entered into a marriage alliance with Snorri only to support his Haukdælir kin in a battle against Snorri's allies. He was cheated and treated badly by Snorri in the division of property after his divorce from Snorri's daughter, but continued to support Snorri with military force and economic resources. His final political action visible to us in the saga was to support the murderers of Snorri. His motivations, whether they are animosity towards Snorri, loyalty to the king, or simple survival instinct remain unclear. Nevertheless, Árni's character and actions that were often torn between his alliance with the Sturlungar and loyalties to the Haukdælir, sketches the dilemma of any aspiring chieftain or leader in Kjalarnesþing and the Mosfell region.

5.5 The End of the Free State: Successfully Remaining a Neutral Zone

The local power wielders in Kjalarnesþing south of Hvalfjörður, such as Koðrán and Árni, retain a degree of political independence and neutrality by opportunistically switching allegiances and changing alliances in socially acceptable manners. These local leaders, who are sought as allies by powerful *stórgoðar* vying for regional power, possess

[213] "*He summoned men to him. There were among them the brothers Klængr and Ormr, Loftr the son of the bishop, and Árni the Unready.*"

a measure of independence that allows them to chose sides or refuse involvement in the larger regional conflicts while retaining their local authority. Partially through the efforts of local leaders and partially as a result of the competition for control of this region by the Sturlungar and the Haukdælir, the wider Mosfell region is never truly incorporated into either of the two *ríkjar*.

After the death of Snorri, power shifted in favor of the Haukdælir and Kolbein Ungi of the Ásbirningar briefly and nominally appears to take over the Snorri's chieftaincies. Large areas shift hands, and we lose any detailed perspective on this region. According to the traditional understanding and political maps (see e.g. Júlíusson et al. 1991: 100-107), the Ásbirningar/Haukdælir alliance and the Sturlungar continue to contest the area. This view holds that Kjalarnesþing passes rapidly and progressively through the hands of several leading *stórgoðar*: Gizurr, Kolbein, Þórðr Kakali, Þorgils Skarði, and then Gizurr again. It is doubtful, however, whether any of these leaders consolidated power in the area or could count on the area for consistent personal support. Finally, the area is incorporated, as the rest of the country, into the Earldom of Gizurr under the aegis of the Norwegian crown. In 1254, Gizurr recognizes King Hákon of Norway as overlord and becomes the Earl of Iceland (*Strl*. 1: 502). In 1261 the Northern and Southern Quarters agree to pay tribute to the King and one year later, the tribute is accepted at the Althing (*Strl.* 1: 528), thereby ending the independence of the Free State of Iceland.

One final event from *Þorgils Saga Skarða* that occurred in 1252 in the Nesses demonstrates the measure of neutrality still understood to exist in this part of

Kjalarnesþing. The most powerful member of the Sturlung family, Þorgils Skarði, and Gizurr of the Haukdælir meet in no-man's land on the holy ground of the increasingly powerful Viðey monastery to try to reconcile their family feud.

> *Um haustit eftir Máríumessu reið Þorgils Böðvarsson suðr á nes við sjaunda mann ok gisti í Görðum at Þorleifs, ok fór með þeim heldr fáliga. Þaðan reið Þorgils til Hólms ok tóku þar skip, er Þorleifr átti, ok fóru yfir um fjörð ok gistu í Saurbæ at Magnús Árnasonar. Þá spurði Þorgils, at Gizurr var kominn ofan á nes. For Þorgils til fundar við hann. Fundust þeir á Viðey, fór með þeim álitliga.*[214]
>
> *Þorgils Saga Skarða* Ch. 14 (*Strl.* 2: 122)

Þorgils encounters farms and men that are familiar to our story, although Snorri's old friend Þorleifr is now cold in his relations to the Sturlungar, while Árni the Unready's son Magnús now owns Saurbær. The Nesses remain a no-man's land, where both Sturlungar and Haukdælir can find friends, but neither can expect unchangeable loyalty. The neutrality and independence of this region is precisely the reason the two most powerful men in Iceland decide to meet there.

[214] "*During the autumn, after the Feast of Maria, Þorgils Böðvarsson rode south to the Nesses with six men and stayed at Garðar with Þorleifr, and their meeting went rather coldly. From there Þorgils rode to Hólm and there took a ship that Þorleifr owned and went over the fjord and stayed at Saurbær with Magnús Árnasonar. Then Þorgils learned that Gizurr arrived down to the Nesses. Þorgils went to meet with him. They met each other on Viðey, between them it went pretty well.*"

Chapter 6 Settlement in the Mosfell Valley: the Archaeological Evidence

6.1 Introduction: Medieval Settlement in the Mosfell Valley

This chapter is the first of four chapters addressing the archaeological evidence from the Mosfell Valley and the implications this evidence has for understanding the changing political economy of the region. These four chapters progress from an economic focus in the first two chapters, a socio-political focus in Chapter 8 and finally an ideological focus in Chapter 9.[215] Chapter 6 lays the foundation of medieval society in the Mosfell Valley with a discussion of the archaeological evidence for the farmstead settlement pattern in the valley. The settlements in the valley consisted of single farmsteads, more or less evenly distributed across the productive land in the valley (see Figure 6.1 for a map of the traditional farmsteads in the valley discussed in this chapter). The archaeological evidence from each of the farmsteads will be addressed separately in temporal perspective beginning with the earliest sites and ending with the latest. The archaeological remains of the settlement pattern in the valley reveal a landscape that was much more intensively settled by the earliest Norse migrants than indicated by the textual evidence.[216]

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[215] In a sense, this organization follows Cultural Materialist understanding of culture as divided into infrastructure, structure, and superstructure (Harris 1968). Although this organization is useful, these chapters do not subscribe to the ideas of the Cultural Materialism paradigm that see the infrastructure (ecology and economic organization) as determinant of both structure and superstructure.

[216] The Mosfell Archaeological Project has collected most of the data used in this chapter. Professor Jesse Byock of UCLA is the overall Director of this project and I have served as the Field Director since 2006. The work of MAP is detailed in the yearly reports of the project (see reports by Byock et al. 2001-2006;

Archaeology is better suited than the medieval textual sources for an investigation of the establishment, quantification, spatial patterning, and settlement histories of the farmsteads in the Mosfell Valley. For instance, Skeggjastaðir is the only settlement period farm mentioned in the textual sources. The Mosfell farmstead also appears in the textual sources as well, but not until the end of the 10th century. The place name evidence suggested that the medieval texts are very incomplete in their record of the farms in the valley and that Helgadalur and Leirvogstunga are probably settlement farms, while the –staðir farms (i.e. Skeggjastaðir, Hraðastaðir, Æsustaðir) also date to the first few generations after the initial settlement. The archaeological evidence is uniquely suited to test the realities of these suggestions and to provide a corrective of the limited farms mentioned in the early textual sources.

The archaeological evidence presented in this chapter fills in the settlement pattern of the Mosfell Valley landscape. The archaeological surveys and excavations in the valley indicate that at least four farms in the Mosfell Valley were founded shortly after the initial settlement of the island in the mid to late 9th century. This is four times the number of farms indicated by the texts. Seemingly, in agreement with the place name evidence, the archaeology reveals that the Norse settlers founded very early settlements at Mosfell/Hrísbrú, Skeggjastaðir, Leirvogstunga, and Helgadalur.

Byock, Walker and Zori 2007, 2008; Byock and Zori 2009, 2010; Earle et al. 1995; Steinberg and Byock 1999).

6.1.1 Settlement Data and Data Recovery Methods

Icelandic archaeology in lowland and valley environments such as the Mosfell Valley requires subsurface investigations (Smith and Parsons 1989). No surface scatters of finds exist and structural ruins from the medieval period are very rarely visible on the surface. This situation has several effects. Firstly, it is difficult to locate medieval remains. Secondly, the identification of medieval archaeology requires extensive sub-surface testing that is both time consuming and expensive. As a result, successful identification of medieval remains is difficult to achieve and comprehensive identification of all sites in a region even more so. The Mosfell Archaeological Project has conducted sub-surface testing and excavation that has identified and examined medieval ruins at most of the traditional farms in the Mosfell Valley. Much of the information in this chapter details these investigations.

This chapter builds primarily on the excavations and surveys conducted by the Mosfell Archaeological Project (MAP) over the past decade. The first MAP excavations took place at the Mosfell farm in 1995. In 1999, MAP undertook geophysical surveys at Hrísbrú, Skeggjastaðir, Hrísbrú, Minna-Mosfell, and Hraðastaðir, with limited results. Larger scale excavations began in 2001 with the church at Hrísbrú and continued every summer until 2008 when the excavation of the large longhouse was completed. In 2009, the focus of MAP shifted to a regional sub-surface survey of the other potential medieval farmsteads in the valley. In addition to the work by MAP, the archaeological excavations of Fornleifastofnun Íslands (The Institute of Archaeology, Iceland) from 2006 informs the section on the Leirvogstunga farmstead (Pálsdóttir and Hansson 2008), while the

survey conducted by the National Museum of Iceland in the wider Mosfell region has been particularly helpful for their extensive mapping of ruins visible on the surface as well as their interviews with people in the valley (Stefánsdóttir et al. 2008).

Historical maps from the late 19th and early 20th century as well as a number of historical aerial photographs from every decade since1950 are invaluable for understanding the pre-modern settlement of the Mosfell Valley. The settlement landscape of the Mosfell Valley appears to have been relatively stable through the pre-modern period, meaning that many cultural features apparent in the pre-modern period have their origins in the medieval period. Furthermore, these aerial photos and historical maps provide the necessary foundation for unlocking the wealth of information contained in 19th century local accounts of ruins, archaeological remains, and oral traditions in the Mosfell Valley. These authors all use their contemporary landscape as a starting point of their descriptions. Modern site disturbances and changes to the pre-modern cultural landscape are charted in this chapter with reference to the aerial photographs. The early photos are particularly valuable since the 1950s and 1960s saw the initiation of substantial landscape modification with mechanized machinery. In the 1950s, the number of homes in the valley also began to increase dramatically while the old farmhouses and the old farm boundary walls disappear or are modified. The early aerial photographs allow a view of the cultural features before the rapid changes of the 1950s and 1960s.

In 1916, all farmsteads in the valley were drawn in plan, providing a fortunate view of the old farmsteads as they appeared when constructed of turf and stone and before the effects of mechanized farm equipment. These traditional farms pre-date the

extensive use of concrete on the island and are surely accurate representation of the 19th century farms in the valley. The location of the farms and probably also the location of the main habitation structures were very stable and consistent through time. The medieval ruins at Hrísbrú and Skeggjastaðir were located about 100 m from the current farms, but at the Mosfell farm and probably also Helgadalur, the medieval farms appear to be located underneath the 19th century farms. The combination of historical maps and aerial photographs help understand these changes in the pre-modern farm layout and to reconstruct the old landscape as a starting point for approaching the medieval archaeology of the valley.

Preparation for the sub-surface survey of selected farmsteads began with the examination of historical maps, farmstead drawings from 1916, and a suite of aerial photographs taken between 1954 and 2006. Unified analysis of these materials was facilitated by the ArcGIS model created by the Mosfell Archaeological Project, which includes layered, and georeferenced maps and photographs. This model allows accurate measurements of features visible in photographs and comparison to the features on the historic maps. These tools aided in the selection of sites of specific interest for the subsurface survey.

Preliminary site surveys incorporating conversations with the farmers and inhabitants of each of the farms often helped to identify areas of archaeological interest. The people of the Mosfell valley and in particular the residents of Hrísbrú, Helgadalur, Hraðastaðir, Minna-Mosfell, and Skeggjastaðir have an in-depth knowledge of the valley

and retain a rich oral tradition about the features in their landscape.[217] Micro-topography place names retained in oral memory, such as Kirkjuhóll (Church knoll) at Hrísbrú, proved in some cases to have medieval origins. When shown the historical maps and photographs, local inhabitants added details concerning the conection between the historic features and their understanding of the current and historic landscape. This information helped the selection of locations of particular interest on each of the farms for sub-surface testing.

The sub-surface testing in the Mosfell Valley has combined test trenching, coring, cleaning of exposed profiles, and larger excavations. Excavations at Mosfell, Hrísbrú, and Leirvogstunga provided extensive information about settlement histories at each of these sites. In 2009, MAP conducted systematic testing of the remaining potential medieval sites at Hraðastaðir, Skeggjastaðir, Æsustaðir, and Helgadalur. For the testing in 2009, we employed a coring device consisting of a dry sampling tube with a 1.25 inch diameter (3.18 cm) and a length of 18 inches (45.72 cm). A telescoping pole on the coring device allowed the core to reach a depth of just over 110 cm. The soil samples in the core were examined, analyzed, drawn, and recorded in the field and in a few cases brought back to the laboratory and examined with light microscopy. The extracted soil cores were examined for sub-surface archaeological remains including particularly midden layers, surface and floor layers, and turf walls. For the dating of these sites, the

[217] The Mosfell Archaeological Project has greatly benefited from the knowledge and generosity of following individuals from the Mosfell Valley: Ólafur Ingimundarson and Andrés Ólafsson from Hrísbrú, Hreinn Ólafsson and Herdís Holm at Helgadalur, Bjarni Bjarnason from Hraðastaðir, Guðmundur Skarpheiðensson from Minna-Mosfell, Liselotte Widing at Skeggjastaðir, and Valur Þorvaldsson and Guðrún Sigurðardóttir at Minna-Mosfell.

tephra or volcanic ash layers in the valley were essential (see section 6.1.2 below on tephrochronology and the Mosfell Valley).

This chapter treats the farms individually that appear to have been occupied in the Middle Ages. The treatment of the evidence from each farm strives for balance, but much more archaeological evidence has been recovered from some farms than others and some farms have a more well-documented settlement history or require more detailed consideration of the data. Hrísbrú, where the Mosfell Archaeological Project has conducted extensive excavations is presented in this chapter in summery format since the archaeological material from this Viking Age chieftain's farmstead is at the core of subsequent chapters on the archaeology of subsistence, exchange, and ideological power at a chiefly establishment.

6.1.2 Employing Volcanic Tephras for Settlement Chronologies in the Mosfell Valley

Frequent and large volcanic eruptions in Iceland, one of the world's most volcanically active countries, have deposited tephra layers that are invaluable as stratigraphical markers in sub-surface archaeological surveys. This section presents some basic tenets of the tephrochronological method and introduces the tephra layers in the Mosfell Valley to prepare the reader for the use of tephrochronology in this chapter to date archaeological sites. The word tephra refers to all airborne solid matter ejected by volcanoes, including everything from ash to large blocks. Most tephra layers, particularly those form the last 2000 years, have been dated accurately with a combination of historical sources, comparative stratigraphy, carbon dating, and ice-coring in Greenland

(Grönvold et al 1995; Haflidason et al. 2000; Thorarinson 1970). The tephra layers are often readily visible in soil profiles, particularly in lowlands where erosion is limited and subsequent soil formation has covered each of the tephra layers (Thorarinson 1970: 296-298). The tephra layers are distinguishable from each other in the field by color, thickness, grain size, and stratigraphical location. Some tephras appear similar in the field, but can be distinguished in the lab based on their chemical composition and/or the physical characteristics of the glass inclusions (Wastegård et al 2003; Larsen et al. 2001; Thorarinson 1970). Since tephra layers are deposited rapidly, are easily identified, and have been dated to within a few years, they are excellent stratigraphic horizons for dating archaeological deposits.

A series of tephra layers have fallen in the Mosfell Valley since the Norse settlement of Iceland and are of use to archaeological survey and excavations in the region. Below is a list of the tephra layers in the valley and the dates at which they were deposited (Sigurgeirsson 2002).

1. Landnám Tephra (LNL) - AD 871 ± 2
2. Katla-R Tephra- c. 920
3. Eldgjá-1 Tephra layer - c. AD 934
4. Medieval Tephra Layer - AD 1226
5. Katla1500 – c. 1500
6. Katla 1721- c. 1721

The Landnám (LNL) tephra from 871 and the Katla 1500 tephra sandwich the historical period of interest for this dissertation. These two tephra layers are also the most frequently encountered and most distinctive of the historic tephras in the valley. The Landnám tephra is particularly recognizable with two separate components: a lower part that is nearly white in color and an upper part that is olive green. The Landnám tephra is of particular use for the dating of settlement period farms in the Mosfell Valley and is found incorporated in the turf walls of structures at Hrísbrú, Helgadalur, Skeggjastaðir, and Leirvogstunga. The Katla 1500 tephra is grayish black like the rest of the Katla tephras in the valley, but appears in a much thicker layer and is found almost everywhere in the valley. The Katla 1500 tephra provides a reliable absolute date in the stratigraphy that splits the medieval layers from the post-medieval deposits.

The three tephras between the LNL tephra and the Katla 1500 tephra, provide breaks in the medieval period that help to date sites in the valley and define phases in the occupational history of each individual site. The Katla-R Tephra from c. 920 and the Eldgjá-1 Tephra from c. 934, which also has its source in the Katla volcanic system are almost identical in appearance and have a very similar chemical signature (Sigurgeirsson 2002). These layers helped define the construction and repair sequences for the Hrísbrú longhouse and provided a *terminus post quem* for the construction of the stave church on the same farm. The layer called the Medieval Tephra (c. 1226), which is also a product of the Katla system, has been particularly useful in defining the medieval occupation of the Leirvogstunga farm.

Volcanic tephra layers often appear in the turfs used for the construction of medieval Icelandic houses. Medieval Icelanders constructed house walls with turf cut from the wetlands in blocks or strips. The harvested turfs included recent tephra layers that had become incorporated into the top layers of the wetland soil. These tephra layers in turfs therefore provide a *terminus post quem* for the construction of the turf structures. For example, a house wall containing Katla 1500 tephra stringers in its turf blocks was constructed after AD 1500.

Since turf is only cut from the top layer of a wetland, the window during which turfs might contain a particular tephra is relatively narrow. This window varies depending on the rate of soil accumulation. Soil thickening in most areas of the Mosfell Valley from the late 9th century until the mid 13th century AD has been approximately 0.3-0.6 mm per year, although up to 2 mm per year has been observed. Under the thickening rate of 0.4 mm/year, 1 cm of soil would take about 25 years to form (Sigurgeirsson 2002). Under these conditions, the period during which a tephra layer might have been incorporated into the harvested turfs is probably in the range of 100 years. Although somewhat imprecise, this provides a rough *terminus ante quem* for the construction of buildings containing the various tephras. Turf is usually cut from the same location, meaning that once turf containing a particular tephra is cut from a wetland, no other turfs subsequently taken from that area will contain that same tephra. The first large construction projects after the fall of a particular tephra therefore often uses a large quantity of turfs containing that tephra, whereas subsequent projects, even if undertaken within 100 years of the volcanic eruption may not contain any traces of the tephra from that eruption.

6.2 Landnám-Period Settlements: Archaeological Evidence of the Earliest Sites in the Mosfell Valley

6.2.1 Hrísbrú: The Original Mosfell

The extensive Mosfell Archaeological Project excavations at Hrísbrú have brought to light a Viking Age longhouse, Iceland's first cremation burial, and a conversion-period stave-church surrounded by an 11th century graveyard (Figure 6.2).[218] The presence of an early church, the impressive size of the longhouse and the high quality of the imported finds, particularly glass beads, indicates that this was a high status residence (Figures 6.3, 6.4, and 6.5). The archaeological evidence corroborates the textual sources that remembers Hrísbrú as the original seat of the Mosfell chieftains and supports the place name data that suggested the first *landnámsmaðr* in the valley chose this site was for his primary farm. Independently of either the textual or place name data, however, the archaeological remains clearly indicate that Hrísbrú was the chiefly seat of power in the Mosfell Valley during the 9th-11th century.

Hrísbrú is mentioned in *Egils Saga* as the place where Grímr Svertingsson, chieftain of the Mosfell region, lived and built his church after Iceland converted to Christianity. *Egils Saga* recounts that the priest Skapti Þorárinsson moved the church and probably also the main farm of Mosfell to the site where the modern Mosfell farm is located. At that point, the place name Mosfell moved with the main farm and the old

[218] This section on the archaeological findings of the Mosfell Archaeological Project at Hrísbrú draws on the project's extensive series of unpublished excavation reports submitted to the Icelandic Cultural Heritage Protection Agency (Fornleifavernd Ríkisins) (see Byock et al. 2010, 2009, 2008, 2007, 2006, 2005, 2004, 2003, 2002).

Mosfell farm was renamed Hrísbrú. The next mention of the Hrísbrú farm in the textual sources is from 1547-1548, when the farm is in the possession of the Danish King (*Dipl. Isl.* 12).

The medieval remains excavated by MAP have not been disturbed by the construction of subsequent farmhouses or buildings, nor have they been affected by modern agricultural machinery (Figures 6.6 and 6.2). Both the modern and the 19th century farms are located further down the slope of the Mosfell mountain to the southeast. The modern farm of Hrísbrú is located just south of the 18th and 19th century farm depicted on the farm map from 1916 (Figure 6.7). It appears likely, however, that the construction of the modern hanger seen in the aerial photo from 2006 (Figure 6.2) has severely disturbed and mostly removed the remains of the 19th century farm shown on the 1916 map (Figure 6.7).

The sections below in this chapter provide an overview and introduction to the findings of the Mosfell Archaeological Project at the Hrísbrú farm. The data from this archaeological work at an important chiefly residence provide an excellent opportunity for a case study of a Viking Age chieftain's establishment. As such the coming chapters will focus on the archaeology of this chiefly site in the context of the valley system, providing information on the archaeological correlates of the sources of chiefly power in Iceland.

6.2.1.1 Viking Age Longhouse

The house excavated at Hrísbrú is a Viking Age longhouse built between AD 871 and 920/934, partially rebuilt after AD 920/934, and abandoned in the 11th century (Figure 6.8, 6.3, 6.4). The longhouse appears to be part of the initial habitation of the Hrísbrú farm. Excavation and sub-surface testing at Hrísbrú have yielded no cultural deposits predating the longhouse. The restructuring after AD 920/940 was not extensive and the longhouse seems to have retained much the same form throughout the period of its occupation. After the abandonment of the house, no subsequent structures were built directly on the site, but it is clear from the midden deposits dumped into the house and excavated during the 2007 season that domestic occupation of an unknown scale continued at the Hrísbrú farm near the older longhouse.

The Hrísbrú longhouse is in form a classic Icelandic Viking Age longhouse with bow-sided walls built from turf and stone, a tripartite internal room division, and doors at opposite ends of the long axis. In external dimension, the longhouse measures about 29 m long and approximately 10 m wide. The internal dimensions of the house are 25 m x 5 m measuring at the center of each axis. The walls of the longhouse are just over 2 m thick and consist of turf and stone. The house is divided into three separate rooms, including a central hall flanked by gable rooms on either side.

The house is one of the largest excavated Viking Age longhouses in Iceland and contained more high status beads than any of the other contemporary Icelandic houses. The 2008 excavations brought to light unusually clear remains of the superstructural support system in the longhouse that contribute substantial new evidence concerning

Viking Age house construction. Post holes and post support stones found undisturbed show the placement and relationship between the structural supports holding up the building and supporting the heavy turf roof. The Hrísbrú longhouse also had a distinct construction technique that employed a unique structural solution to the Icelandic turf-and-stone house.

Inside the longhouse, benches, thick floors, empty post holes, storage niches, barrel pits, and a large central hearth were all identified in an excellent state of preservation. In the middle of the longhouse was a rectangular long-fire containing ash, charcoal, and burnt bone. In the central hall, empty postholes with stone linings were positioned between the central floor and the benches. These one-meter wide benches, where the inhabitants would have worked and slept, span the distance from the walls to the floor. The void spaces in the post holes indicate that the original posts of the house had been removed after the abandonment of the building, probably for reuse in other structures. The eastern gable room also had post holes dividing the room into three aisles, but this room did not have raised benches. The eastern gable room was a multi-purpose room where at least some of the daily work took place and where the inhabitants may have kept a few animals. The western gable room, which was used for storage and textile working, probably had a wooden floor.

Complete excavation of the inside of the longhouse revealed the organization of the internal space and recovered a large number of finds (Figure 6.8). The house contained extremely well-preserved floor deposits, allowing for stratigraphic excavation of over 20 individual floor layers that revealed spatial and temporal differences in

household activities. Each of these floor layers was excavated on a 1 m sample grid and 100% of the soil was sifted through a flotation machine for maximum artifact and ecofact recovery. The 1 x 1 m sample squares allow an understanding of the distribution of even the smallest finds across the floors, thus providing high-resolution data on varying activity areas within the house. The micro-refuse recovered from the flotation sampling allows for the combination of distributional analysis of these small finds with the more traditional artifacts to build an enhanced understanding of the activity patterns and use of space in the Hrísbrú longhouse.

The excavation of longhouse surface layers and pits yielded an unusually large quantity of Viking Age finds such as spindle whorls, iron nails and fittings, and a particularly rich collection of imported glass beads. The recovered finds show the comparative wealth of the Hrísbrú household and provide details of the subsistence economy of the farmstead that mixed animal husbandry, with local grain production, and exploitation of local wild game. [219]

6.2.1.2 Conversion Period Church

Constructed in the late 10th or early 11th century, the church at Hrísbrú was a display of the chieftain's early conversion to Christianity and a show of his power and prestige. This church is among the oldest churches excavated in Iceland. The church, consisting of two rooms, is oriented east-west and surrounded by burials on the north, south, and east sides (Figures 6.9, 6.10, and 6.11). The church was a wooden stave church

[219] See Chapter 7 on the subsistence economy of the farm. See Chapter 8 for a closer analysis of the finds and a discussion of the archaeological evidence for the status of the Hrísbrú house.

supported by wooden posts in the four corners of the nave and tied together by sill beams. The church had a turf wall on the north side of the nave and possibly also on the south side of the nave. The church and the graveyard were in use predominantly in the 11th century after which the church appears to have burned down. After the abandonment of the church, some of the burials from the churchyard were exhumed, suggesting that the church and some burials were moved to another location, probably in the late 11th or early 12th century. Burial at the church continued, however, sporadically into the 14th century.

The church at Hrísbrú consisted of a chancel and a nave, forming a building of two connected rectangular rooms. The larger room, with a doorway opening to the west, served as the nave. The smaller chancel (the enclosed space around the altar), which makes up the eastern end of the building, was almost perfectly square. Measured from the outside, the nave is 3.2 m wide and 4.3 m long, while the dimensions of the chancel are approximately 2.5 x 2.5 m. The entire church, including both chancel and nave, is 6.8 m long. The chancel of the church at Hrísbrú was constructed in an architectural style different from the nave. The nave structure was based on four earth-dug post holes connected by four wooden sill beams, while the chancel foundations did not make use of post holes, and consisted of stone slabs and gravel trenches supported by cobbles. There is evidence of turf walls on the north and south sides of the nave but not surrounding the chancel.

In the nave, a tightly compacted gravel floor in the center of the nave is the result of human ambulation, while loose gravel along the perimeter of the floor represents the

areas shielded by wooden benches running along the inside of the walls. In the center of the nave, the floor is very compact, but in a 30-40 cm wide strip along the southern, northern, and western nave walls, the floor gravel is noticeably looser. The rows of larger stones inside the nave running east-west and parallel to the southern and northern walls are the remains of the bench supports.

The church appears to have been destroyed by fire as indicated by a large amount (ca. 1%) of charcoal on the floor and an overlying layer of burned turf. The charcoal in the center of the nave is in large pieces that were not subjected to the compacting and fragmentation effects of people walking on them, indicating that this layer of burning in the center of the nave is associated with the final destruction of the building, perhaps occurring even after it was abandoned. Supporting the possibility of the church having burnt is a deposit of grayish brown soil with turf mottling and burnt organic matter lying directly on top of the church floor. This layer is probably the remains of the fire-exposed and collapsed turf roof of the church.

The floor of the chancel, which was built up of a mixture of very fine gravel and greasy black sediment, showed evidence of post-abandonment exhumation of an underlying burial. The floor deposit is of uneven thickness and covers the entire chancel interior, except where a cut through the floor was found in the southeast corner of the chancel. This hole, filled with disturbed soils, was the result of a post-church digging activity. The hole was clearly dug soon after the church went out of use since gravel spray from the digging through the floor lay directly on top of, and extended beyond the eastern wall foundation of the chancel. The cut into the chancel floor ended in a large

east-west oriented empty grave shaft that predates the construction of the church chancel, but was clearly laid out in association with the church.[220]

Excavations in the Hrísbrú Christian cemetery yielded evidence of 26 graves. 21 graves contained skeletal material, while five empty grave shafts are the results of both poor preservation as well as the translocation of some of the burials to another location. (Figure 6.9). All of the burials are inhumations, while at least two of them (Features 4 and 46) are reburials deposited along the southern and northern walls of the chancel. The finds included in burial assemblages were few, but interesting in light of the Christian ideological tradition that shuns the inclusion of grave goods. Among the grave goods were an iron pot fragment placed on top of the coffin lid of burial Feature 46, a wooden shaft in burial Feature 3, and a large number of clench bolts (Zori 2007). The symbolic significance of these grave goods in the hybridization of the Christian and pagan ideologies will be addressed in the Chapter 9.

6.2.1.3 Hulduhóll: A Viking Age Cremation Site

A particularly interesting aspect of the Christian burial ground at Hrísbrú is the proximity of a pagan burial site on the adjacent mound of Hulduhóll located approximately 15 m to the SW of Kirkjuhóll (see Figure 6.2). Hulduhóll, which is mostly a natural mound, has been modified purposefully, seemingly to replicate the shape of a ship. On top of the mound, MAP excavated a cremation grave in the years 2001-2003. This grave consists of a 20 cm deep deposit of charcoal, ash and burned earth

[220] This grave shaft is addressed in greater detail in chapter 9 on the archaeology of ideological power. The location of this grave under the altar imbued it with considerable ritual significance.

concretions, iron and copper artifacts, and four cremated human skull fragments that appear to be from the same individual. As the site of a medieval ritual cremation, this is the first documented instance of this burial rite in Iceland.[221] The act of cremation at this time in Iceland would have required substantial amounts of scarce and valuable fuel. The ritual display on this prominent mound in front of the Hrísbrú farm and the public consumption of large quantities of valuable wood has all the marks of a high status burial rite. The late 10th-early 11th century date of this cremation makes it possible that this pagan burial display took place after the construction of the church and the initiation of burial in the Christian graveyard. This cremation suggests that the years of conversion to Christianity in Iceland involved a dynamic interplay of paganism and Christianity with the practice of both ritual systems occurring simultaneously. In this light, the Hrísbrú cremation burial could be seen as a pagan backlash, a sign of peaceful coexistence within a single household community, or a last gasp of paganism.

6.2.1.4 Dating the Viking Age Site at Hrísbrú

The Viking Age sites at Hrísbrú have been dated by a combination of tephra analysis, radiocarbon dating, stratigraphical relationships, and artifact and house typologies. The longhouse was built before AD 940 and abandoned sometime in the 11th century. The church was built in the late 10th or early 11th century with a concentration of burials in the 11th century. The Hulduhóll cremation took place in the late 10th or early 11th century.

[221] See Chapter 9 for an in depth discussion of this site.

Tephrochronology. The tephrochronological evidence shows that the longhouse was built between AD 871 and 934. All identified turf layers from the longhouse contained the landnám AD 871 ±2 tephra, indicating the house was built after AD 871. The density of landnám tephra inclusions and character of the turf in the collapse are similar in the north and south walls of the longhouse. This suggests that the turf used for these walls was harvested at the same time as part of a single construction episode. In the eastern gable room of the longhouse one turf layer from a later repair in the longhouse contained 10th century tephra, either Katla-R from c. 920 or the Eldgjá-1 tephra from c. 934 AD, and therefore provided an accurate dating window for the occupation of the longhouse (Sigurgeirsson 2008). This tephra evidence indicates that after AD 920 or 934 the eastern portion of the longhouse was repaired with turf containing tephra from 920 or 934.

A series of deposits and midden layers dumped into the abandoned house lay well below the in Katla tephra from AD1500 that stretched in a thick layer across the inside of the walls of the longhouse and appeared in thinner lenses and spots on top of the walls and around the house (Figure 6.12). The long-term accumulation of aeolian soil between the last midden layer and the deposition of the Katla 1500 tephra is consistent with an early medieval date for both the longhouse and later midden layers.

The church was constructed on top of a leveled building with walls containing both landnám AD 871 tephra and a black tephra identified as Katla-R from c. 920.[222] This tephra evidence provides a 10th century *terminus post quem* date for the construction of

[222] There is a possiblity that the black tephra layer identified as Kalta-R could be Eldgjá-1 from c.934.

the church. The leveled building remains are located immediately below the church, suggesting that the church is a late 10th or early 11th century construction. The church builders' reuse of an older turf wall that includes landnám tephra to shield the north side of the wooden church is also consistent with a 10th-11th century construction date.

Radiocarbon Dating. Radiocarbon dates of barley seeds from several floor layers of the longhouse and midden layers dumped on top of the house indicate that the house was occupied in the 10th century and probably into the 11th century.[223] Radiocarbon dates of barley seeds from the floor layers in the house all predate AD 1000 (see Appendix 1, UCIAMS 64171, UCIAMS 64172, and UCIAMS 64173). The abandonment of the longhouse therefore probably took place in the last years of the 10th or the first years of the 11th century. Barley samples from the first midden layers lying on top of the collapsed roof and walls of the longhouse provide a *terminus ante quem* for the abandonment of the longhouse at some time in the early 11th century (see Appendix 1, UCIAMS 64174 and UCIAMS 64168).

The age of the church has been determined by carbon dating of bone collagen from burials in the graveyard, wooden fragments from the foundations of the church, and hay from a surface layer from the agricultural building that was leveled for the construction of the church (see Appendix 1). A 10th century date from the short-life hay sample from the structure predating the church provides a *terminus post quem* for the establishment of the church (see Appendix 1, Beta-175675). The dates from five skeletons show that the primary use of the cemetery dates to the early 11th century,

[223] See Appendix 1; compare with Harris Matrix in Figure 7.11 and with longhouse context descriptions in Appendix 2.

although it may have been founded already in the last years of the 10th century. Interestingly, the churchyard continued to be used sporadically into the later medieval period as indicated by two burials post-dating the abandonment of the church (Features 18 and 43). One of these two burials (Features 43) appears to have been inhumed close to the date of the church's abandonment, while the second (Feature 18) was buried several centuries later in the 14th century. A wooden fragment from the chancel wall yielded a date of AD 871-960 (1 sigma), but this projected age does not reflect the actual age of the church, probably because the wood was "old" already when used in the construction of the church. That portions of the church were constructed from driftwood that could be of considerable age has been shown by wood identification analysis at Hrísbrú (Høeg 2005) and is consistent with the general lack of local wood suitable for construction.

Find Typologies and House Style. Imported glass beads are the most useful artifact type recovered from Hrísbrú for typological dating. By analyzing the entire assemblage, Elín Ósk Hreiðarsdóttir (2007, 2009 and 2010) has concluded that the beads from the Hrísbrú longhouse date to late 10th- early 11th century. The Hrísbrú longhouse is built in the style of Viking Age longhouses that had disappeared by the 12th century (Ólafsson and Águstsson 2003).

Stratigraphic Relationships. Stratigraphic relationships and the spatial relationship between the church and the longhouse indicate that the church and longhouse were in use contemporaneously. The outside living surface that was forming during the occupation of the longhouse was partially in place when the church was built, and continued to develop after the church's construction. This stratigraphic connection shows

that the longhouse was built first and the church built later while the longhouse was still in use. Below the church are remains of an earlier agricultural structure that had been purposefully leveled for the construction of the church.

6.2.2 Skeggjastaðir

Skeggjastaðir is located at the northeastern extent of the Mosfell valley and just south of the Leirvogsá river (Figure 6.13). According to *Landnámabók*, Þórðr Skeggi, the first settler in the Mosfell region, settled at Skeggjastaðir (*ÍF* 1: *S*11, *H*11, *S*307). The place name analysis presented in Chapter 2, however, concluded that the farms in the Mosfell Valley with the suffix *–staðir* were subsidiary farms given out by the main farmer to his supporters. The first element in the place names reflects either the name of the farmer who owned the farm or the name of the subsidiary farmer who worked the farm. In 2009, the Mosfell Archaeological Project conducted systematic coring at Skeggjastaðir that discovered the site of a medieval farmstead that appears to date to the settlement period (see maps in Figure 6.13 and 6.14, aerial photo in Figure 6.15 and contemporary photograph of farm in Figure 6.16).[224] This sub-surface testing also shed light on the dating and nature of ruins visible in the old homefield and located additional medieval farm activity areas, indicating the presence of a substantial sized farmstead at Skeggjastaðir in the early medieval period.

[224] Before the sub-surface survey in 2009, the Mosfell Archaeological Project had previously conducted geophysical investigations at this site in 1999 with limited results that were mainly undertaken to test the usefulness of ground conductivity in locating sub-surface sites. Although this testing did not reveal any ruins not already visible on the surface, the concomitant phosphate testing conducted during the 1999 season did provide the useful and positive indication that the Katla AD 1500 tephra could be found in some areas of the old Skeggjastaðir homefield (see e.g. core SK 73 in Figure 6.20).

The impression of the settlement history of Skeggjastaðir provided by textual sources is valuable in the archaeological research as it outlines two habitation phases broken by a late-medieval period of abandonment. After being named in *Landnámabók*, Skeggjastaðir appears in the written sources again in a 1395 charter as owned by the Viðey monastery (*Dipl. Ís.* 3: 598). Skeggjastaðir must have been abandoned in the 15th or early 16th century because the farm is not mentioned in the charter of the Danish King's lands (*Fógetareikningar*) from 1547-1552. The farmstead then appears again in 1704 in the *Jarðabók* by Arni Magnússon and Pál Víðalín in which the farm is described as, "*Skieggiastader, forn jörð byggð úr auðn fyrir 16 árum…*"[225] According to *Jarðabók*, the farm was therefore reestablished in the 1680s. Afterwards Skeggjastaðir appears to have been continually settled (Stefánsdóttir 2006: 162). From the perspective of archaeological research, this period of abandonment of almost 300 years is promising as it reduces the likelihood that the 18th and 19th century farm would have been placed on top of the medieval farm. The sub-surface survey of conducted by MAP in 2009 benefited from this situation in the identification of the occupation area of the medieval farmstead that appears to be undisturbed by later construction.

The modern Skeggjastaðir farm is located closer to the modern gravel road than the 19th and early 20th century farm, which is visible on a farm map of Skeggjastaðir from 1916 (Figure 6.16 and 6.17). On this 1916 plan, the farmstead is shown to the north of the farm access road (*heimreið*) in approximately the location that is today used as a vegetable garden (Figure 6.17 and 6.18). According to the current resident at

[225] "*Skeggjastaðir, old abandoned land resettled 16 years ago*"

Skeggjastaðir, Liselotte Widing, the earthen wind-breaks that shield the modern vegetable garden were pushed up with a bulldozer recently, in the last 10 years. The suggestion that the modern vegetable garden is situated in the location of the 19th century farm is supported by finds that Liselotte made in her garden, including a broken quernstone. The heimreið appears to be in the same location today as it was when the farm map was drawn in 1916 and it probably much older. To the south of the heimreið today are five large barns (Figure 6.13, 6.15, 6.16). In the 1916 map the "cabbage garden" (*kálgarður*) was located here (Figure 6.17).

Skeggjastaðir has a particularly noteworthy homefield wall (*túngarður*) that is drawn on the 1916 map. This wall is still visible today and consists of a large number of stacked and unusually large stones (Figure 6.19; see also Figures 6.13, 6.17). This wall could easily date to the earliest period of the inhabitation of Skeggjastaðir and therefore mark the area of the original homefield (*tún*). This wall would have required significant labor mobilization to construct and must have been completed in the winter with the use of sledges or sleds. Nowhere else in the Mosfell Valley is the old homefield wall so readily apparent, and no other homefield wall in the valley compares in size or labor investment.

6.2.2.1 The Early Medieval Farmstead at Skeggjastaðir

The remains of a medieval farmstead at Skeggjastaðir were identified through systematic coring on a 20 x 20 m grid (see Figures 6.13, 6.14). The soil cores revealed evidence of a large occupation area, including remains of turf walls, peat ash midden

layers, and an extensive outside living surface surrounding the farm buildings (see Figure 6.20). In the area of the medieval farmstead, the grid was tightened to 10 m intervals between each core to increase the resolution on the archaeological deposits. The coring documented the remains of a farm stretching across an area measuring approximately 40 m N-S and 20 m E-W (E 1100-1120 and N 960-1000).[226] Tephrochronology indicates that the farm dates to the medieval period since the Katla tephra that fell in AD 1500 lies on top of the occupation layers in many of the cores. Furthermore, the turf walls seen in four cores contained landnám tephra (AD 871 ± 2), suggesting an early post-settlement date for the construction of the walls (Figure 6.14).

The medieval farm is located beyond the end of the old heimreið (farm access road) that continues northeast beyond the current house and is visible on the 1916 farm map. The farm sits close to the edge of a steep gully through which a small stream flows from south to north down to the Leirvogsá. This placement would have been ideal for easy access to fresh water, while the steep gully provided a defensible location. The site is situated high on the sloping homefield with a good view of the surrounding landscape.

Turf walls. Turf wall remains with landnám tephra inclusions appeared in adjacent cores SK 77, 78, 79, and 80, pinpointing the location of one or more structures in a greater than 10 m radius around E1110 N970 (see Figure 6.14). The turf walls were compressed and relatively thin, measuring 7-8 cm in all the cores. The turf in core SK 79 included two clear stringers of landnám tephra showing the stacked individual turfs (see

[226] The Skeggjastaðir survey work was conducted on an arbitrary local coordinate system with an origin set at 1000, 1000, 100. The data is then converted into the ISNET93 system for incorporation into a valley-wide ArcGIS model that is based on the ISNET93 system. All coordinates reported in this section use the arbitrary grid. The ISNET93 coordinate system is the most accurate coordinate system for Iceland and is used by all government institutions and other teams of surveyors and archaeologists.

core SK 79 drawing in Figure 6.20). The stacked turfs in core SK 79 combined with the observation that the turf sits directly on top of natural and disturbed natural soil in cores SK 77, 78, and 79 strongly suggest that these are not collapsed turfs. Although it does seem likely that these turf remains are in situ walls, it is not possible to say for certain without further work and excavation.

None of the cores with early turf wall remains contained the Katla 1500 tephra that covers the medieval occupation area in other cores. However, the linear landnám tephra inclusions in all turf wall remains from this area suggest that these walls were constructed early in the settlement history of the Skeggjastaðir site. The turf walls and at least the lowest midden and occupation layers in the area date to the same period, probably not long after landnám tephra fell in AD 871.

Outside Surface Area (OSA). Coring at Skeggjastaðir revealed an outside living surface with remains of concentrated domestic activity. This distinctive layer appeared in cores SK 71 (E1100 N960), 72 (E1100 N980), 73 (E1110 N990), 74 (E1110, N1000, and 75 (E1100 N990) (see Figure 6.14). These locations are mostly north and east of the cores that contained turf walls, possibly indicating that an outside work area existed to the east and north of the domestic structures. Core SK 73 in which the OSA layer was stratigraphically below the in situ Katla 1500 tephra shows that this surface area dates to the medieval period. Similar samples of the OSA found in the other cores from this area are most likely part of the same occupation area dating to medieval period.

This anthropogenic layer accumulated over a significant period of time and consists of compact and fine silty gray clay and loess with a high concentration of

charcoal and reddish orange linear oxidation stains, which are manifestations of low-grade iron panning. The unique character of this layer, which the medieval inhabitants walked and lived upon, was created by the compacting and sorting effects of human ambulation. Trampled clay remained in a higher proportion than sand and silt. The compact surface area retained small pools of water on the surface, which created the laterally striated iron oxidation soil stains and panning. The gradual accumulation and compaction of this layer also created the lateral compaction of layers that breaks naturally along the old surfaces when squeezed between the fingers. The outside living surface around the Viking Age longhouse at Hrísbrú was very similar in character and appearance, indicating that this type of layer may be a consistent and reliable archaeological correlate to external activity areas.

Midden Layers. Several core samples showed dense layers of ash, charcoal, and food waste that indicate midden dumps. The density of cultural material here was much higher than expected from the partially anthropogenic layers surrounding a farmstead that would include only ambient burnt bone and charcoal. Midden layers appeared in cores SK 61 (E1120 N1000), 64 (E1120 N980), 77 (E1110 N980), 79 (E1120 N970). In a few cores (SK 77 and 79), low grade midden layers appeared on top of the remains of turf walls, suggesting that the occupation in this area may be multi-phased. Based on their relative depth in the soil and their proximity to the early turf walls and the pre-1500 occupation area, these midden layers are most likely associated with the same medieval farmstead.

The largest midden layers appeared in cores close to the edge of the ravine leading down to the stream. The inhabitants of the suggested domestic structures located just to the east probably dumped kitchen waste down the nearby slope and into the stream. The thickest midden sequence, including two dense peat ash lenses, came from core SK 61 (see Figure 6.20), taken close to the edge of the steep slope leading down to the farm stream to the east. Core SK 61 showed cultural activity between 30 and 70 cm below the surface and two peat ash layers between 55-61 and 63-69 cm below surface, interspersed with a charcoal rich cultural layer. Core SK 64, which was also located close to the edge of the gully, yielded a peat ash midden layer, approximately 18 cm thick.

6.2.2.2 Additional Ruins, Features and Activity Areas at Skeggjastaðir

The systematic survey and coring at Skeggjastaðir provided insight into the layout, extent, and character of several other areas of cultural activity, including evidence of low intensity medieval activity areas. Two areas in particular had been previously identified as possible locations of the medieval farmstead. The first site is centered on Ruin SK 1, which was identified in a survey by the National Museum of Iceland in 1980 as a likely candidate for the old farm mound.[227] The archaeologist Ágúst Georgsson, believed that the low hill on which this ruin sits indicated a deep cultural deposit that could be on old farm mound (*bæjarhóll*), containing the remains of an older farmhouse (Stefánsdóttir et al. 2006: 163; Georgsson 1980). The second site, the location of the 19th century farm and the current vegetable garden, was an obvious candidate for the location

[227] In their *Skráning Fornleifa í Mosfellsbæ*, Stefánsdóttir et al. (2006) gave this ruin number 241-5, with 241 being the code for *Skeggjastaðir* and -5 being the catalog number of the archaeological feature.

of the earlier medieval farm because of the common continuity in the location of traditional Icelandic farms. The subsurface coring in 2009 tested these two theories and showed that although previous activity had taken place at these sites, neither site is the location of the medieval farm. These findings are consistent with the evidence presented above identifying the medieval farm to the east of the end of the old farm road and adjacent to the ravine.

Ruin SK 1

A visible ruin centered at E1093 N1086 is located on a low rise in flat area below the modern vegetable garden (see Figure 6.14). This ruin is visible on the farm map from 1916 N-NE of the farm, and was already a ruin by this time (see farm map in Figure 6.17). The internal dimensions of the ruin measure approximately 2 x 6 m. The long axis of the building is oriented N-S. Coring was conducted in and around this building, to investigate the character and date of the structure, and to test Georgsson's theory that this area was the site of an old farm mound consisting of ancient farm buildings. Four cores in the area were placed at the grid points designated for coring by the systematic survey of the area (cores SK 24, 25, 38, 39), but because of the special interest of this site an additional 13 cores were taken in or around this structure (cores SK 4-15). Coring revealed that Ruin SK 1 post-dates AD 1500. Significant evidence of domestic activity was found in the cores around the building. Nevertheless, cores from the center of the building and from around the building indicate that this is not an old farm mound, but a natural rise in the landscape. The natural strata appear at 40 and 50 cm below the surface

in the cores from the center of the building and below the visible ruins there is no further indication of structural remains.

The turf walls of ruin SK 1 were lined on the inside by stones. The turf walls contained Katla 1500 tephra, making it clear that this building was built after AD 1500. This Katla tephra was documented in 3 lateral layers of turf blocks that measured 60 cm in thickness in core SK 10. With the current data, however, it is not possible to determine more precisely when this building was constructed. The entrance to the building in the northern end of the east wall is paved with stones, which appeared at a depth of approximately 20 cm below the surface and just below mixed turf collapse in cores SK 9 and 10. Inside the building, cores SK 7 and 8 revealed thick layers of turf collapse (iron stained red, gray, and dark organic brown) that had toppled into the building cavity and mixed with aeolian soil, but no floor layers or stone paving existed.

Around the building coring revealed evidence of domestic activity, some of which pre-dated the AD 1500 Katla tephra. Core SK 6, located approximately 2 m south of Ruin SK 1, contained low-grade evidence of domestic activity in a cultural layer with ambient charcoal from 6-42 cm below the surface. Five meters southeast of the building, core SK 24 showed a 10 cm thick cultural layer with low densities of peat ash and charcoal. To the west of the building, significant amounts of cultural material was found in layers stratigraphically below the in situ Katla 1500 tephra. Core SK 38 (E1080 N1080) contained in situ Katla 1500 tephra between 30 and 37 cm below the surface followed by a cultural layer with ambient charcoal. Core SK 37 (E1080 N1060) also held the in situ Katla 1500 tephra above an aeolian deposit, followed by a 4 cm thick cultural layer with

charcoal flecks and spots. Although the evidence is not extensive, such cultural burning deposits were not encountered across most of the homefield and is therefore more than sufficient to document that this was an area of human activity before AD 1500.

The 19th-early 20th Century Farm

The modern vegetable garden is located partially on top of the 19th farmhouses that were still used in 1916 when the farm map was drawn (see Figures 6.17 and 6.18). Because of the common continuity of farmstead placement in Iceland, coring was intensified in this area in order to investigate the age of the oldest layers below the 19th century farm. The area has been highly disturbed and appears to have been leveled and bulldozed, causing mixing of the remaining deposits. Liselotte at Skeggjastaðir told us that the earthen walls sheltering the modern vegetable garden were not bulldozed up from the surrounding landscape, but created from trash filled soil brought in from across the modern gravel road where a modern trash dump is still being used. The results of the coring in this area showed no signs of medieval occupation layers, suggesting that the medieval farm was not situated here.

The coring in this area strongly suggests that the vast majority of remains of the 19th and early 20th century farmhouse have been bulldozed and removed from this location. In many places rock and gravel lies close to the surface, while locations where the coring could document deeper deposits revealed natural strata about 40 cm below the surface (i.e. cores SK 16 and 52). The post-depositional disturbing and mixing of the cultural deposits in this area is supported by the mixed sediments in core 18 where a

piece of modern glazed whiteware was found in a layer of mixed turf containing small amounts of tephra (possibly *landnám*.

Activity Area North of Modern Vegetable Garden

North of the modern vegetable garden core samples revealed a concentration of cultural material, showing a low level of cultural activity in the area during the medieval period. This area of higher density cultural material, documented in cores SK 46, 49-51, 53, and 54, is centered around E1040N1040 and extends outward with a radius of at least 20 m (see Figure 6.14). At E1040N1040 core SK 49 contained a mottled cultural layer above clearly striated turf that appears stacked. Turf was also documented 20 m to the south in core SK 53, where a cultural layer with charcoal overlies a layer of turf. At E1060N1040, core SK 50 contained a mixed cultural layer with burnt bone, peat ash, and charcoal. To the north and west of the central E1040N1040 point, cores yielded low density cultural layers with charcoal (SK 47, 55, 46), mixed peat ash (SK 46), and soil with mixed turf mottling (SK 54). Core SK 51 (E1060N1020) had in situ Katla 1500 tephra immediately above a thin cultural layer with charcoal, suggesting that at least a portion of the cultural activity documented in these cores dates from the late Middle Ages.

6.2.3 Leirvogstunga

The Leirvogstunga farmstead has recently undergone extensive archaeological investigation as part of a rescue excavation that demonstrates that the farmstead dates

back to the early settlement period.[228] These findings are particularly significant because it provides a corrective to the understanding from the textual evidence in which Leirvogstunga (originally called just Tunga) first appears only in tax records from 1547-1548 (*Dipl. Ís* 12: 110). The place name analysis undertaken in Chapter 2 concluded that the primary topographical character of the Leirvogstunga/Tunga place name strongly suggests that this was one of the first farms in the valley. The archaeology provides clear and incontrovertible evidence of a settlement-period foundation of the Leirvogstunga farmstead. The archaeological remains also show that this farm was a farm of substantial size inhabited continuously through the medieval period (Figure 6.22).

The excavations by Fornleifastofnun Íslands revealed a large farmstead complex that appears to have been continuously occupied from the early settlement period to the present. Several medieval buildings and cultural features indicate that Leirvogstunga was a substantial farm in the medieval period. The center of the pre-modern farm lies underneath the farm mound, which was visible before the excavation in a preliminary survey as a cultural modification of the natural rise between the modern Leirvogstunga farms II and III (Hreiðarsdóttir 2006: 10). The rescue project excavated the eastern extent of the farmstead including animal shelters and storage barns as well as the old settlement-period wall surrounding the farmstead buildings and demarcating the eastern extent of the building sector. The size of the farm and the character of the finds suggests to the

[228] The archaeological evidence presented in this section about the Leirvogstunga farm is based primarily on the preliminary site reports generously shared by Lilja Pálsdóttir and Oddgeir Hansson from Fornleifastofnun Íslands (The Institute of Archeaology, Iceland).The results presented in these interim reports are preliminary. The large excavation between 2006 and 2008 was undertaken as a response to the planned construction of a large apartment complex on the land of the traditional Leirvogstunga farm.

excavators that this was a medium sized farm of intermediary status— i.e. not a chieftain's establishment, but also not a tenant farm (Pálsdóttir and Hansson 2008: 79).

The prevalence of fish bones in many of the floor layers of the farmstead and the finding of at least one net sinker (Pálsdóttir 2008: 76, 79) indicate that at least a portion of the farm's economy was directed towards the exploitation of marine resources. The placement of the Leirvogstunga farm close to the sea is ideal for fishing, collecting shell fish and sea-bird eggs, as well as utilizing driftage such as meat-rich beached whales and drift wood suitable for building. This site would also have been ideal for monitoring and taking advantage of the naturally favorable ships-landing place in the Leirvogur bay that is named in multiple medieval sagas (see Chapter 4 for detailed discussion of the saga evidence). Both *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* and *Hallfreðar Saga* include stories of the Mosfell chieftains having posted a man down by the Leirvogur port in the early 11th century (*ÍF* 3; *ÍF* 8). Although the time depth of this practice is unknown, the location of Leirvogstunga makes this farmstead an ideal candidate for the placement of such monitoring activities.

The modern Leirvogstunga farmstead is split into 6 separate homes named Leirvogstunga II-VII (see Figure 6.22), but traditionally this was a single farm as seen on the farmstead map drawn in 1916 (Figure 6.23). The oldest farm building on the current Leirvogstunga farm is still located where the 1916 map shows the farm house and is today called Leirvogstunga III. The remains of the medieval farmstead were found between this building and the house called Leirvogstunga II (see Figure 6.24)

The excavation area at the Leirvogstunga farm was divided into several regions and areas. The excavations discussed in this section all took place in Region C ("Svæði C"). Region C was further divided into Areas 1-4 with additional sub-groupings designated by lower-case letters, such that, for example, Area 2 was divided into 2a and 2b. The remains discussed below are all contained within areas 2A, 2b, 3b, and 4 (see Figure 6.24). Area 4, located south of and partially underneath the current Leirvogstunga II farm house, contained the thickest cultural layers and is therefore in all likelihood the center of the old farm. Area 2a, located east of Area 4 also showed a high density of buildings and cultural features that increased towards the west. Area 3b contained deep midden layers, leading excavators to suggest this was the location of the farm's öskuhaugur ("ash mound") that served as the primary location for kitchen trash disposal (Pálsdóttir and Hansson 2008: 10).

Thirty-two buildings from different periods were identified and investigated as part of the Leirvogstunga excavation (Pálsdóttir and Hansson 2008: 78). Most buildings were disturbed by later buildings and cuts such as 20th century pipe trenches. The buildings appear to have functioned as animal structures, storehouses, workshops, and kitchens. However, none of the buildings were primary habitation houses. The excavators believe that the house for the medieval portion of the farm is located in Area 4, which has not been excavated. A medieval turf wall seen in trench SK-18 between areas 3B and 4 may belong to the main habitation house of the medieval farm.

6.2.3.1 The Medieval Farmstead at Leirvogstunga

The Leirvogstunga farmstead was settled soon after the original colonization of Iceland. The presence of landnám tephra in laid structural turf blocks indicates that these turf features were built not long after the landnám tephra fell in AD 871 ± 2. The author of the interim report from the excavations, Lilja Pálsdóttir, states "*Nú þegar er orðið ljóst að byggð hefur verið í Leirvogstungu fljótlega frá landnámi, því að víða á rannsóknarsvæðinu sést í torfhrun með landnámsgjóskunni í sem féll um 870*" (Pálsdóttir and Hansson 2008). [229] Soil deposition in wetlands where turf was cut from only the top layer makes it highly improbable that landnám tephra would appear in structural turfs after a 100 years (see section 6.1.2 Employing Volcanic Tephras for Settlement Chronologies in the Mosfell Valley). Moreover the landnám tephra layer could of course only appear once in turfs cut from any particular area. Since turf-cutting probably took place in the same area over time, the landnám tephra would have been removed soon after the settlement of the farmstead.

The most significant element of the oldest farmstead encountered in the excavations is the remains of the turf wall surrounding the old farm buildings. This wall was identified as a wall fragment (Feature [798][230]) forming the eastern boundary of the central farm buildings (Pálsdóttir and Hansson 2008: 68). This wall contains landnám

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[229] "*Now it has become clear that Leirvogstunga had been settled soon after the settlement of Iceland, because widely distributed in the research area were found turf wall blocks containing landnám tephra that fell around AD 870.*"

[230] The project at Leirvogstunga employed the "single-context" excavation method and each excavated layer or context was given a unique number. When referring to these contexts their reference numbers are placed in brackets, such that context 798 is written [798]. To be consistent with the excavators, I use their notation style in the discussion of the Leirvogstunga site.

tephra in the turf blocks. The tephra layer called the “Medieval Tephra” from the Katla eruption of AD 1226 fell stratigraphically above this wall, reinforcing the pre-1226 date of the wall. No buildings from the old farm were found east of this wall, except outlying animal shelters built much later.

A long test trench (SK-18) dug in the northern part of Area 3B across the southern extent of the center of the medieval farmstead revealed thick cultural deposits and a clear medieval turf wall (Pálsdóttir and Hansson: 44-45). The trench stretched 30 m from east to west descending partially down the slope to the west towards the Leirvogur bay. The trench was 1.5 m wide and 1.5 m deep. The southern profile of the trench was drawn and shows cultural deposits up to 1.4 m thick. The in situ AD 1226 Katla tephra appears in the middle of these cultural deposits, clearly showing a substantial occupation for a long period before 1226. Underneath the 1226 tephra particularly substantial peat ash layers appear. The deposits on both side of the 1226 tephra include midden layers with peat ash, wood charcoal, and bone as well as pit features filled with midden. These midden layers are most likely the remains of kitchen trash dumped southwest of the house and down the hill. The southern profile of the trench also contains a clear medieval turf wall 0.6 m wide and 0.2 m high that includes stingers of 1226 tephra in the turf blocks. This wall was therefore built after 1226 and before AD 1500 since the Katla 1500 tephra appears stratigraphically higher in the profile. The excavators believe that this turf wall stretches into area 4 and is part of the central buildings of the medieval Leirvogstunga farm (Pálsdóttir and Hansson 2008: 45). Several cultural layers also appear below this wall, again demonstrating the antiquity of the Leirvogstunga farmstead.

Several buildings found in the excavation of Area 2a appear to date from the medieval period between AD 1226 and 1500, but may have earlier origins.[231] These buildings all appear to be ancillary structures to the main farm house that has yet to be found. The buildings are located in the easternmost extent of the old farmstead center. These structures have been heavily disturbed by later activity and have only been preliminarily examined, however, they appear to be small, i.e. no larger than 4 x 4 m. Structure [758] was a cowshed built up against the earlier turf wall containing landnám tephra (wall [798]) that surrounds the farm buildings. Structure [1656], which could have been used for food preparation, includes a large number of post and stick holes in the floor as well as multiple pits. Structure [1395] appears to be contemporary with structure [1656] with which it shares a connecting door and probably served in food preparation as well. Structure [694] has been so heavily disturbed that only the floor layer remains. Structure [829] has clear walls and floor layer, as well as a door to the south (Pálsdóttir and Hansson 2008: 65-69). Together these buildings provide evidence for a medium to large farmstead with structures serving specialized purposes functioning during the medieval period.

6.2.4 Helgadalur

The Helgadalur farm is located in the southwest corner of Helgadalur, a subsidiary valley that branches off to the south of the larger Mosfell Valley (Figures 6.2,

[231] These features are dated to this period as they are located stratigraphically below the AD 1500 tephra and above the 1226 tephra. The 1226 tephra was sometimes included in the turf walls, indicating a post 1226 date for the construction of that particular wall.

6.25, 6.26). Stefánsdóttir et al. (2006: 35) hold that the valley Helgadalur has been settled from the medieval period, but the farm is first mentioned in the textual record in AD 1395 when it is cataloged in a charter as belonging to the Viðey monastery. The Helgadalur farm is the best candidate for an early settlement site in the Helgadalur valley. Moreover, the place name Helgadalur, meaning “Holy-valley” is possible connected with the pre-Christian religion (see Chapter 2 on the place name Helgadalur). Archaeological testing of this farm conducted by MAP in 2009 revealed that Helgadalur farm was occupied very soon after the initial settlement of Iceland around AD 870 and was therefore one of the first farms in the Mosfell Valley.

A farm map from 1916 shows the Helgadalur farm that dates at least to the 19th century (Figure 6.27). This map indicates that the old farm is located west of and partially underneath the current farm. Frequent finds of historical pottery and domestic trash in the current vegetable garden west of the modern farmhouse provide archaeological support for this observation (personal communication, Herdís Holm of Helgadalur). Both the modern and the 19th century farm lay on the northern side of a substantial stream that served the farm. Herdís Holm has observed that the soil that slopes down into this stream is very fertile and contains ash and charcoal, indicating that domestic refuse was traditionally thrown down the slope and into the stream. The old farm map and the midden material in the stream bank, as well as a ridge that appeared to be formed by accumulated cultural material suggested that archaeological testing of the Helgadalur farm would be fruitful

In 2009, MAP undertook a survey of the Helgadalur farm aiming to identify any preserved remains of an early medieval occupation of Helgadalur and evaluate the age of this farm. The survey began by locating and investigating the extent of the archaeological remains, their state of preservation, and the feasibility of conducting fruitful future archaeological work at Helgadalur. The survey was highly successful and the sub-surface testing and investigation of an exposed section of the stream yielded evidence for a very early farmstead at Helgadalur that dates to earliest part of the settlement period (AD 870-930).

6.2.4.1 Sub-Surface Testing at Helgadalur

The selective subsurface testing at Helgadalur focused on a low ridge located west of the modern house and the current vegetable garden (Figure 6.28). This area was selected for particular attention as the low ridge appeared to have a partial cultural origin and because the ridge was beyond the area occupied by the current and previous farm buildings. This area had the most potential for a preserved segment of the old *bæjarhóll* (farm mound) that could effectively be investigated through archaeological work. Two transects of cores were taken in straight parallel lines along the long axis of the ridge running parallel to and just north of the stream behind the farm. The eastern extent of the lines was the fence for the vegetable garden and the lines were continued west until the drop-off of the ridge, at which point the cultural material in the cores also dramatically decreased. The northern sample transect was cored at 10 m intervals whereas 20 m intervals were used for the southern transect. Core samples were then taken north of the

ridge in the lower-lying hay field, and here too the cultural material rapidly decreased with distance from the ridge.

Results of Sub-Surface Testing

Significant cultural material from an early farm occupation was documented on the ridge west of the modern vegetable garden (see Figure 6.28). This ridge was partially formed by the accumulation of cultural material. Most importantly, the coring discovered clear evidence of the settlement of the Helgadalur farm very soon after the landnám tephra fell in AD 871 ± 2. In core HGD 5 charcoal of cultural origin was found immediately above a lens of in situ landnám tephra. The green landnám layer was identified in a natural gravelly clay lens between 90 and 92 cm below the surface. Immediately above the landnám containing layer was an orangish gray anthropogenic deposit with significant amounts of charcoal at the far bottom. These findings indicate that Helgadalur was the site of one of the first farms in the Mosfell Valley.

Substantial cultural remains were found in all the cores taken on the ridge. These materials consisted mostly of dense midden material with mixed turf and possible indications of an outside living surface that could have developed around a farmhouse. All cores on the ridge, cores HGD 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, and 9 included midden layers with peat ash, ash, and charcoal, and most cores contained burnt bone fragments. These midden containing layers were found usually down to a level of approximately 50 cm below the surface. Core HGD 3 had midden material below 1 m that stretched below the reach of the coring device. This core sample contained remnants of clear hay at the

bottom. Core HGD 7 contained a cut into natural sediment filled with midden material. A probable outside surface area was recognized in cores HGD 3, 4, and 5 on the ridge, suggesting that the original farm would have been close by. However the identification of the distinct surface layer that usually develops around farmhouses was complicated by the natural clay deposits and iron-panning that has formed naturally in the area adjacent to the stream. It is unclear how much of the midden, mixed turf deposits, and surface layers belong to the phase of occupation that followed soon after landnám.

Coring to the north and the west of the ridge on lower land revealed a dramatic and quick drop in cultural material. Small amounts of charcoal found in these cores in the aeolian soil down to about 30 cm below the surface probably derives from windblown cultural material from the ridge area. Further archaeological work on this ridge would be fruitful as intact medieval and settlement period deposits remain undisturbed.

6.2.4.2 Cultural Layers Eroding into the Stream behind the Farm

An eroding profile on the northern slope of the stream behind the Helgadalur farm and immediately south of coring transects offered the opportunity to easily clean and examine the cultural deposits in section (Figure 6.29). The cleaned section was 50 cm wide and sloped down approximately 1 m from 25 cm below the grass surface outcrop (Profile HGD 1). This profile revealed mixed midden with charcoal, bone, peat ash, and re-deposited turf that had been dumped down the slope to the stream. The inclusion of substantial amounts of landnám tephra from the AD 871 ±2 eruption indicates an early medieval date to portions of this mixed deposit.

The pieces of mixed turf containing landnám tephra included a particular concentration of the tephra at 57 cm below the grass outcrop and 65 cm down the sloping profile (Figure 6.30). This landnám tephra is disturbed and mixed with mottled orange sand, dark gray organic stained soil. Core HGD 13, taken through the slope of the profile, revealed stratified turf blocks containing multiple landnám tephra layers and a clear layer of thin black tephra, probably Katla-R from c. 920 or Eldgjá-1 from c. 934. There is a strong likelihood that this turf containing landnám tephra was cut for use in building construction during the early period occupation at Helgadalur. As discussed in section 6.1.2 Employing Volcanic Tephras for Settlement Chronologies in the Mosfell Valleyabout dating potential of tephra layers, turf with this quantity of landnám tephra usually dates to the early period of Icelandic settlement.

The contents of the midden lenses sloping down to the stream appear to include material from the Middle Ages as well as from the modern period. A few finds were identified in the section profile, but not collected, including: 1) an iron nail 30 cm below the grass outcrop and 5 cm down the sloping profile, 2) a shard of glazed whiteware ceramic 50 cm below the grass outcrop and 55 cm down sloping profile, 3) a light-weight piece of rock-coal. The layers are disturbed and have been exposed to post-depositional mixing by the ongoing erosion of the stream bank. It is very likely, however, that intact layers of stratified midden dating back to the medieval occupation could be found if excavation of these sloping deposits were carried out.

6.3 Medieval Settlements: Archaeological Evidence of Medieval Farms

6.3.1 Mosfell

Archaeological investigations by MAP at the current Mosfell farm discovered remains of the medieval farmstead including the probable remains of a medieval church (Figure 6.31).[232] Mosfell is mentioned prominently as the site of medieval chieftains in the saga sources, and is recorded as a church farm in an early register of Icelandic churches from AD 1200 (*Dipl. Ís.* 12: 9). The place name evidence presented in Chapter 2 shows that the Mosfell farm was the primary farmstead in the Mosfell region. The textual record of the Mosfell chieftains and the place names Mosfell and Hrísbrú strongly suggest that the place name Mosfell originally referred to the current Hrísbrú farm, and that this name was transferred to the location of the current Mosfell farm sometime in the 12th century. The archaeological evidence from the current Hrísbrú farm as well as the evidence from the current Mosfell farm corroborates this scenario. The impressive early elite residence excavated at Hrísbrú is discussed above (see section 6.2.1 Hrísbrú: The Original Mosfell) and in greater detail in the following chapters (Chapters 7, 8, and 9). The archaeological research at the current Mosfell farm has shown the presence of a medieval farmstead before AD 1500, but no evidence has been found of a settlement-period farm at this location. The presence and size of the medieval churchyard at Mosfell strongly suggests that this farm was a power center in the medieval period after the farm had been moved here from Hrísbrú.

[232] The Mosfell Archaeological Project conducted test excavations at the Mosfell farm in 1995 under the direction of Dr. Jesse Byock and with the participation of the National Museum of Iceland (see Earle and Byock 1995). Further test excavations were conducted on the church mound in 1999 (see Steinberg and Byock 1999: 59-60).

The archaeological remains of the medieval and pre-modern farmstead at Mosfell have been greatly disturbed over the years as part of the frequent remodeling of this landscape and the construction of multiple churches and farm houses. Unfortunately, this remodeling appears to have disturbed and removed a large portion of the medieval layers. Fortunately, however, our understanding of the Mosfell site is greatly enriched by unusually detailed 19th century descriptions of the archaeological evidence of the earlier farms (Grímsson 1861; Kålund 1877; Vigfússon 1884). The priest at Mosfell in the middle of the 19th century, Magnús Grímsson, wrote the most well-informed and exhaustive description of old ruins and middens at Mosfell (Grímsson 1861). Grímsson had a keen interest in the history of his farm, but in general, the interest in the Mosfell site in the 19th century revolved around the connections to *Egils Saga* and the identification of remains that could be tied to the saga tradition. These observations of the local landscape in the 19th century before modern machinery was used to modify the landscape identify ruins of probable medieval structures and middens that were still visible in the landscape. Combining these 19th century observations with aerial photography and historic maps holds tremendous value for the archaeological interpretation of the Mosfell site and provides the necessary context for interpreting the recent test excavations by the Mosfell Archaeological Project.

The landscape modifications and the history of the church construction at Mosfell are discussed in this section because of the importance these actions have for the preservation of the medieval archaeology of Mosfell. Moreover, it is essential to understand the location of the structures present in the 19th century in order to make use

of the 19th century descriptions by Grímsson, Kålund, and Vigfússon who use the contemporary buildings to describe the location of old medieval ruins and features that they believed were medieval. Finally, the review of the history of the Mosfell site and particularly the phases of construction and abandonment of the church and the farm are essential for the contextual understanding of the archaeological excavations that revealed portions of the medieval Mosfell farmstead.

6.3.1.1 The Three Phases of the Mosfell Church

The medieval farm at Mosfell held a special status as the site of a parish church and the history of settlement here is closely linked to the church. The prominence of the site has since its foundation been tied to the presence of a church and during the two documented periods when the church was abandoned, the site lost its prominence. There appears to have been three separate phases of the Mosfell church: 1) Medieval (12th- 15th century); 2) pre-modern (early 16th century to 1888); 3) modern (1965 to present). Between these phases, the church was torn down and people had to go outside of the valley for religious services, drawing this ideological source of power out of the valley. In each of these three phases, the church was rebuilt in the same general area, and the landscape and remains of the earlier churches and churchyard were disturbed.

According to *Egils Saga*, the first church was built at Mosfell in the 12th century and this account is verified by the appearance of the Mosfell church in Bishop Páll's register of the churches in the diocese of Skálholt in AD 1200 (*Dipl. Ís.* 12: 9). The sources indicate that the church ceased to exist at Mosfell in the Middle Ages sometime

before the early 15th century, by which time the Mosfell farm was privately owned property by various laymen and had ceased to be a recognized church farm (*Dipl. Ís.* 5: 500; *Dipl. Ís.* 12: 46-47).

The church at Mosfell was re-established in the first part of the 16th century as indicated by the presence of a priest at Mosfell in 1536 (Níelsen 1949: 112). This church remained continuously in use until 1888 when it was torn down. The 19th century church is described in detail by Magnús Grímsson, the priest at Mosfell in the middle of the 1800s, as well as by several travelers including Sigurður Vígfusson and P. E. Kristian Kålund. The graveyard is also shown in the farmstead map drawn in 1916, although at this time, the actual church structure had already been taken down (Figure 6.32). The abandoned churchyard is also clearly visible on an aerial photograph from 1954 (Figure 6.33).

During the period between 1888 and 1965 when the church no longer existed at Mosfell, the farmstead's prominence and power declined. The functioning farm itself moved away from the place of prominence up on the southern slope of the Mosfell mountain and down to the wetter center of the valley between the Köldukvísl and Suðurá rivers called Víðir or Víðinn. The movement of the farm down to the center of the valley had occurred at least by 1938 when Björn Bjarnarson described the region: "*Mosfell, prestssetrið, var sunnan í fellinu, en nú er bærinn fluttur suður yfir Köldukvísl á Vídinn,*

til að geta hitað húsin med hveravatni frá Norður-Reykjum..."[233] (Bjarnason 1937-1938: 103).

The third phase of the Mosfell church began when the modern church was built at the site in 1965. This church still stands today. During the construction of this church the landscape was substantially remodeled. The old pre-modern farm buildings were bulldozed and a new concrete parson's house was erected on the site of the old turf farm Figure 6.34). The area where the medieval graveyard and the ruins of the church stood was also bulldozed, apparently in order to serve as land fill for a built-up church mound for the new church's graveyard.[234]

6.3.1.2 The Medieval Church Ruins at Mosfell: The Evidence from 19th Century Descriptions, Aerial Photography, and Historical Maps

19th century descriptions of the ruins of an older church lying north of the 19th century church provide invaluable information about the archaeological remnants of the medieval church. Much of this area has now been bulldozed so that the information recorded by the 19th century scholars is not recoverable through modern archaeological work. This section therefore carefully analyzes these descriptions, particularly the detailed work of Magnús Grímsson. Grímsson arrived to Mosfell in 1855 and died in 1860 (Níelsen 1949: 112; Bjarnason and Guðmundsson 2006: 164). Grímsson's description therefore reflects the appearance of the landscape in the late 1850s. Grímsson

[233] "*Mosfell, the priest-seat, was located south on the mountain slope, but now the farm has been moved south of Köldukvísl onto Víðinn, in order to heat the houses with hotspring water from Noður-Reykir*."

[234] The construction of the Mosfell church in 1965 and the remodelling of the landscape was remembered by the farmer Guðmundur Skarpheðinsson who was interviewed by Jesse Byock in 1995.

situates the ruins of the medieval church in his contemporary landscape. It is therefore also essential to understand the layout of the Mosfell farmstead in Grímsson's time and this will be addressed with reference to the map of the farm drawn in 1916 and aerial photographs from the 1950s when the ruins of Grímsson's farm and the churchyard were still visible.

Magnús Grímsson (1861: 256-257) presents a detailed account of the ruins of the presumed medieval church:

> *Kirkjan stendr enn í dag á Mosfelli, en ekki er hún þar nú í sama stað og hún hefir first verið sett á. Kirkjan stendr nú á háum hól fyrir vestan bœinn. Áðr hefir hún staðið norðanvert við hól þenna, eðr í norðrjaðri hans. Norðanvert við kirkjugarðinn, sem nú er á Mosfelli, sér enn til kirkjugarðsrústarinnar fornu; er hún auðsén að vestan, norðan, og austanverðu, en að sunnanverðu hefir garðrinn gengið að eðr inn í kirkjugarðinn, sem nú er, og sést því ekki til hans þar; ætla eg, að þessi kirkjugarðr hafi verið ferskeyttr hérumbil 18 eðr 20 faðmar á lengd austr og vestr, en 12 eðr 14 faðma breiðr norðr og suðr. Kirkjan sjálf hefir staðið austast í garðinum, og verðr ekkert ráðið í um stærð hennar, því rust hennar er, eins og garðsins alls, og öllu fremr, gjörfallin og grasi vaxin. Í þessum garði sjást enn glögg merki til leiða, sem snúa í austr og vestr, sumstaðar í skipulegum röðum. Enginn steinn sést hér neinstaðar, nema einn eða tveir hleðslusteinar norðanvert í garðsrústinni. Gatan vestr úr túninu á Mosfell liggr nú sunnan til um garð þenna, norðan undir hinum nýja kirkjugarði.*[235]

[235] "*The church still stands today at Mosfell, but not in the same place where it was initially. The church stands now on a high knoll west of the farm houses. Before the church stood to the north of the knoll or in the northern slope of this knoll. North of the churchyard, which is currently used at Mosfell, the old churchyard ruins can still be seen; the western, northern, and eastern extent of the churchyard wall are clearly visible, but to the south the wall went into the church yard that is there now, and it cannot be seen there. I believe that this churchyard was between 18 to 20 fathoms in length (33 to 36.5 m) east to west, and between 12 to 14 fathoms wide (22 to 25.5 m) north to south. The church itself stood furthest to the east in the churchyard, and it is not possible to estimate the size of the church because the ruins, like the ruins of the whole churchyard, is completely collapsed and overgrown with grass. In this churchyard can be seen still distinct remains of graves, that are oriented east-west, and in some places organized in rows. No stones can be seen here anywhere, except one or two stones in the north part of the churchyard wall ruins. The road west out of the homefield at Mosfell lies now south of this old churchyard and north of the new churchyard*."

According to this passage, Grímsson was able to see the remains of an old cemetery wall, several clear grave mounds, and the ruins of a building inside the cemetery that Grímsson assumes to be the church. The ruins of the cemetery walls are clear enough that Grímsson ventures an estimate of the size of the graveyard, which at some 35 x 25 m was rather large. The distinctive archaeological signature of the church wall and the E-W oriented graves leave almost no doubt that these were the ruins of a Christian churchyard.

Significantly for the location of the church is Grímsson's statement that the church and the visible remains of the churchyard lay north of the road leading west from the Mosfell farm. This same road can be seen in the farm map drawn in 1916 and also in the aerial photograph from 1954 (Figures 6.32, 6.33). The correspondence of the 1916 road with the road in 1954 is illustrated by overlaying the map on the aerial photograph (Figure 6.35). A comparison of the aerial photographs from 1954 and 2006 (Figures 6.31, 6.33, 6.35) suggests that the location of the graveyard ruins described by Grímsson would have been underneath the current gravel road and to the north of that gravel road. The archaeological investigations of this area described below support this suggestion.

The dating of the church ruins identified by Grímsson is much more problematic. Clearly, they predate by a substantial period the arrival of Grímsson to Mosfell in 1855. Concerning the dating of the church Grímsson (1861: 257) says,

> *Enga veit eg ástæðu til þess, hví kirkjan og kirkjugarðrinn hafa hér verið færð ur stað, né heldr nær það hefir verið gjört. En rústin sýnir, að lángt*

muni vera síðan. Mjög eru og bæði leiði og gröptur forn orðin í þeim kirkjugarði, sem nú er, og sá garðr mjög útgrafinn...[236]

Grímsson's reference to the old gravestones in his contemporary graveyard is significant, and in 1909, before the construction of the modern churchyard, Matthías Þórðarson (1911: 48-54) documented three gravestones from the 17th century in the abandoned remains of the old graveyard. One of these stones marks the grave of Jarþrúðar Þórólfsdóttur who died in 1607. These stones belonged to the graveyard around the church from Magnús Grímsson's time, i.e. the second phase church at Mosfell and was outside of the ruins of the older churchyard described by Grímsson. This means that the churchyard used during Grímsson's parsonage at Mosfell had been located there since 1606 and that the old ruins to the north pre-date 1606.

6.3.1.3 The Mosfell Farm: The Evidence from 19th Century Descriptions, Aerial Photography, and Historical Maps

The 19th century farmstead of Mosfell can be seen in the 1916 farm map and as ruins in the 1954 aerial photograph (Figures 6.32, 6.33). In 1965 when the church at Mosfell was reestablished this area was bulldozed and the parson's house was built in this same spot (see Figure 6.34). As seen in the aerial photograph from 2006 (Figure 6.31), this area was bulldozed and leveled again to create the modern parking lot east of the current church. The ruins of the medieval farmhouses have not been identified

[236] "*I do not know the reason why the church and the churchyard were moved from this place, nor when this was done. But the ruins show that it must have been a long time ago. There are many old mounds and graves in the currently used churchyard, and this graveyard is rather full...*"

archaeologically, but the 19th century descriptions of the landscape and the remains of midden materials suggests that the original farm at Mosfell may have been located in the same place as the 19th century farm. If so, then the archaeological remains of the medieval farm have likely been destroyed by the bulldozing and construction events on the site. The 19th century descriptions may therefore be the only source that will ever be available about the archaeology of the early Mosfell farm houses and middens.

Magnús Grímsson (1961: 257) believed that the farm at Mosfell had always been located in the same place as the 19th century farm buildings. Surely, the old churchyard ruins suggest that the farm buildings were located some place close by. Grímsson (1861: 261) describes the farm in the 1850s as follows:

> *Bærinn Mosfell stendr á austrhala hóls þess, sem kirkjan stendr á… Austr af hólnum er jafn-aflíðandi, og þar er nú bærinn; ætla eg að hann hafi þar staðið síðan hann var fluttr frá Hrísbrú, því engar rústir eru þær þar nærlendis, sem bendi á annað, enda eru og hér öskuhaugar miklir og fornir. Eru þeir hér, eins og á Hrísbrú, beint fram undan bæjardyrum og skammt frá þeim, svo stórir, eins og smáhólar.*[237]

The lack of other house ruins in the 19th century and the presence of large middens outside of the doors of the farmstead do suggest that the Mosfell farm had stood in the same location for some time, but is insufficient evidence to demonstrate the original location of the Mosfell farm. Middens can accumulate at different rates and it is near impossible to accurately estimate a farm's age by the size of its midden. Sigurður

[237] *"The farm Mosfell stands on the eastern side of the knoll that the church stands on…East of the knoll the landscape gently slopes down and the farm is located there now; I believe that it has always been there since it was moved from Hrísbrú, because no old ruins are present in the area that would suggest otherwise. Furthermore there are visible here large and old ash-midden mounds. They are here, just as at Hrísbrú, just outside of the farm doors and as large as small hills."*

Vigfússon, who visited Mosfell in 1884, also believed the original farm of Mosfell to be located in the same place as the 19th century farm. Vigfússon (1886: 65), however, adds some additional archaeological evidence acquired by the local inhabitants: *…á Mosfelli veit eg að það hefir prófazt við húsabyggingar og umrót; þar fanst mikil aska, bæði undir búnum og í kálgörðunum fram undan bænum.*[238] In 1995, when the site was investigated by the Mosfell Archaeological Project, no ruins of the old farm buildings were found, but Earle and Byock (1995: 5) nevertheless state, "to the east of the modern church yard where the present parish house building stands, is logically the location of the original Mosfell farm." Although it is not directly stated, this is based on the presumed natural advantages of the location, the proximity to the medieval church ruins, and the testimony of the 19th century scholars.

6.3.1.4 The MAP Test Excavations at Mosfell in 1995 and 1999

The Mosfell Archaeological Project undertook test excavations at the Mosfell site during the summers of 1995 and 1999, focusing on locating the church and investigating the remains of the medieval graveyard. In 1995, MAP excavated seven large test units in and around the gravel path running east-west directly north of the modern churchyard (Figure 6.31). According to the calculations of the excavators this was the area identified by Magnús Grímsson as the location of the old churchyard. The excavations uncovered the remains of a medieval structure in the location where Grímsson describes visible

[238] *"…at Mosfell I know that it has been tested during the construction of buildings and the overturning of soil; there was found a great deal of ash, both under the farm and in the vegetable garden in front of the farm."*

church ruins. The smaller excavations in 1999 confirmed that the modern church mound consisted of bulldozed material that probably includes most of the graveyard of the medieval church. The 1995 and 1999 excavations revealed that despite the large-scale modification of the landscape, some remains of the medieval occupation of this site still remain.

The 1995 excavations unearthed the remains of a medieval building that are consistent with the appearance and location of the medieval church. Only the northwest corner of this building has been exposed in Unit 2, but a great deal was learned from this partial excavation (Figure 6.36). The building was oriented east-west. The northern wall consisted of a thick turf wall overlying a base of large stone cobbles. The western wall of the building was constructed from wooden planks set into a wall trench. Landnám tephra found in situ underneath the foundations of the building indicate that the building was constructed after AD 871, while the deposition of Katla tephra from AD 1500 on top of the collapsed walls shows that the building predates AD 1500. All indications, including the E-W orientation of the building, the wooden western façade, the location of the structure in the middle of an old churchyard, and the medieval date supplied by the tephra layers, suggest that these are the remains of a medieval church.

According to the estimations of the excavators using Grímsson's description of the location of the church ruins, Unit 2 was expected to be in the easterly end and northerly edge of the old churchyard (Earle and Byock 1995: 3). After clearing off the modern gravel road fill Unit 2 (3 x 3 m) revealed the NW corner of a wall base for a building and a 20 cm thick cultural deposit. The two walls differed in character. The E-W

wall line, which is approximately 2 m wide and constructed with the flat surfaces of the stones upwards, appears to be the stone base for a turf wall. The wall base is constructed with river cobbles laid directly on sterile soil. The stones varied in size from 10 to 70 cm in maximal diameter measurements. Among and on top of the stones in the E-W wall was Layer 4 (in plan) consisting of a mixture of brown turf and tephra fragments that were interpreted as the remnants of the turf wall that would have sat on top of the stone foundation.

The western wall consisted of a north-south line of stones that was thinner and constructed with smaller stones with maximal diameter measurements around 30 cm. A cultural layer (Layer 2 in profile and plan) directly associated with both wall lines had accumulated during the use-life of the building. In profile this layer has a sunken surface along the western wall, indicating the presence of a narrow trench for a timber wall. Because of the thinness of the stone foundations in comparison with the northern foundation wall and because of the lack of turf remains, it appears that this building had a plank-faced western wall.

A loose surface layer inside the building suggested that the floor may have been covered with planks, while a compact surface layer just outside the western wall was probably created by foot traffic at the entrance to the building. The thin cultural surface layer inside the building (Layer 3 in profile) contained no stones or turf but included small fragments of charcoal. Excavators believed that this layer underlay a wooden floor that would have limited the layer's build-up and compaction as well as the inclusion of artifactual material. In profile, this layer could be seen on top of a thin Landnám tephra

layer and sterile soil. A round anomaly inside the building recorded in contrast to the underlying sterile soil appears to be a post hole and was filled with anthropogenic soil similar in appearance to Layer 2, which partially filled the trench feature along the western wall of the building. To the west of the building, excavators recorded an outside surface area of compacted anthropogenic soil including peat-ash and charcoal (Layer 3 in Plan). [239] This layer appears to be the trampled deposit of the old land surface such as would be expected to exist outside of the entrance to a building.

Excavators were able to date the structure to the medieval period because its construction was bracketed by the AD 871 ± 2 Landnám tephra and the AD 1500 Katla tephra. Inside the structure and underneath the surface layer inside the building excavators encountered Landnám tephra from AD 871 ± 2. On top of and among the stones of the northern wall, excavators found turf fragments containing tephra bits believed to derive from the Katla 1500 eruption. The tephra evidence shows that the wall base was built after AD 871 ± 2 but abandoned sometime before AD 1500 (Earle and Byock 1995: 4).

In the remaining units excavated in 1995, the cultural layers underneath the modern gravel road had been severely truncated and often entirely removed by recent construction. In Units 3, 4, and 6 the pre-modern and medieval layers were missing and sterile subsoil was encountered immediately below the topsoil. Unit 1 (8 x 2 m), placed directly under the paved walkway adjacent to the modern church yard contained modern

[239] The recording method of the 1995 excavations used separate number sequences for the cultural layers recorded in profile and in plan. Therefore the layer numbers were duplicated and must be distinguished from each other with the notation “in plan” or “in profile.” For instance, this layer (Layer 3 in plan) is not the same as the surface layer inside the structure (Layer 3 in profile).

fill directly on top of sterile gravelly clay (Earle and Byock 1995: 3). The underlying gravels lying so close to the surface in Unit 1 suggests that it would have been difficult to dig graves with substantial depth in this area. This may explain the need to build low mounds over the graves.

Unit 5 (2.5 x 2.5 m), which was the westernmost exaction unit contained several large cobbles overlying a cultural layer that could be the remains of a wall. This unit was located 6.5 m west of Unit 2 (Earle and Byock 1995: 4). Since the structural remains uncovered in Unit 2 appear to be the western end of the medieval church, it is possible that this wall fragment is the western side of the old cemetery wall. The distance between these two features, however, is much too small to match Grímsson's estimation of the east-west measurement of the old church yard at 35 m, particularly since he asserted that the old church stood in the eastern side of the churchyard.

Unit 7, placed north of the gravel road in what was estimated to be north of the medieval churchyard, revealed an in situ layer of Katla 1500 tephra that indicated that the pre-1500 layers should be in tact in this location. However, no cultural layers appeared below the Katla tephra, suggesting that this area was indeed outside of the medieval graveyard and beyond the outdoor activities taking place around the farm. Sub-surface coring in this area produced organic soils but no cultural material. The excavators believed that the irregularities in the tephra layer could be explained by the tephra falling on the broken surface where animals treaded as well as subsequent animal traffic. This is possible, but such irregularities in the tephra layer are not uncommon and can be caused by post deposition processes, particularly the frost-thaw cycle.

In 1999, MAP tested the theory that the modern graveyard mound may have been created by bulldozing the medieval churchyard into this area. Guðmundur Skarpheðinsson, the farmer at Minna-Mosfell who arrived in the valley in 1937 and witnessed the creation of the modern church in 1965, reported in 1995 that he believed the medieval churchyard, which was still visible when he arrived, was bulldozed into the modern church mound to build up the northern side of the graveyard. Skarpheðinsson believed that the southern portion of the medieval graveyard overlapped with the northern extent of the 19th century churchyard and personally observed that the modern churchyard mound was made to extend north of the northern extent of the 19th century churchyard (Earle and Byock 1995: 12-13). Therefore, logically, Skarpheðinsson believed that an undisturbed portion of the medieval graveyard would exist underneath the modern church mound to the north of the 19th century graveyard between the bulldozed area and the northern extent of the 19th century church.

The archaeological work conducted at Mosfell in 1999 aimed to test the idea that the modern church mound was created from bulldozing, to see if medieval churchyard material had been incorporated into the modern church mound, and to check whether, as Skarpheðinsson suggested, the remains of the medieval churchyard were intact below the modern church mound. Unit 20, a north-south trench measuring 6 x 0.5 m was dug from the northern extent of the modern church mound south towards the top of the mound. The northern end of the trench yielded approximately 50 cm of fill before excavators reached sterile glacial gravel, while the southern extent of the trench had over 2 m of fill above the sterile gravel. In the southern end of the trench, excavators encountered inverted turfs

with green grass up to 1 m below the surface, which must have been the result of recent soil inversion, probably from the construction of the mound in the 1960s. No structural remains, human skeletal remains, or artifacts were uncovered. The trench revealed clear evidence of a built-up bulldozed mound, but no identifiable remains of the earlier church, the church cemetery wall, or human skeletal remains.

6.4 Medieval Settlements with Inconclusive Archaeological Dating

Two additional medieval farm sites in the valley, Hraðastaðir and Æsustaðir, have undergone survey and preliminary archaeological subsurface testing. The archaeological work at these sites has not been able to verify the medieval age of these two farms or identify when these sites were first settled. This section presents the archaeological data from these sites and places it in context with reference to historical aerial photography and historic maps to shed light on the history of these farms and to comment on the efficacy of future archaeological work that would be necessary to complete the archaeological view of the early settlement pattern of the Mosfell Valley. The location of a likely pagan grave mound remembered in oral tradition at the traditional boundary between these two farms, however, may be the archaeological mark in the landscape indicating that both these farms pre-date the advent of Christianity in around AD 1000.

6.4.1 Hraðastaðir

Hraðastaðir is known to be a medieval farm from the first textual reference to the farm in the Viðey monastery charter from 1395 (*Dipl. Ís*. 3: 598). Magnús Grímsson

(1861), the priest at Mosfell between 1855 and 1860, believed based on his textual and oral tradition research that the earliest farms in valley were Mosfell, Hraðastaðir, and Skeggjastaðir. The place name Hraðastaðir, which uses the –staðir suffix, suggests the farm has an early origin as a subsidiary farm to the main farm, presumably Mosfell/Hrísbrú (see Chapter 2; Sigmundsson 1979). Furthermore, *Landnámabók* mentions a man named Þorbjörn Hraðason who lived in the Mosfell Valley. His father, Hraði, would be a likely candidate for the original owner of the Hraðastaðir farm which bears his name.

Despite the historical tradition and place name evidence of a probable *Landnám*-period farm at Hraðastaðir, no archaeological evidence of this early farmstead has been found. Traditional surveys of the area (Stefánsdóttir 2006: 57-64; Georgsson 1982) as well as geophysical and phosphate testing (Steinberg and Byock 1999: 49-53) have not yielded any traces or indications of medieval structures, middens, or sub-surface chemical signatures. In 2009, MAP conducted subsurface soil coring in and around the oldest structural ruins that could be identified. The structural ruins are post-medieval in date, but kitchen trash dumped inside this building suggests the existence of a pre-modern habitation closer to this structure than the current and traditional Hraðastaðir farm houses (Figures 6.37, 6.38). This is significant because it may be an indication that the earliest Hraðastaðir farm is located close to this ruin and not in the location of the 19th century and 20th century farm seen in the historical maps and aerial photographs (see section 6.4.1.2 Sub-Surface Testing at Hraðastaðirbelow for details; Figures 6.39, 6.40).

The area of the old Hraðastaðir farm is a difficult place to productively conduct archaeological work for many reasons. Firstly, extensive modern construction has taken place on the site that has resulted in the presence of 9 private homes on the property of the old farmstead (Figure 6.37). Secondly, the modern farm of Hraðastaðir is located in the same place as the 19th and early 20th century farm and possibly also on top of the remains of the medieval farm (Figure 3.39). Bjarni Bjarnason, the current owner whose family has owned the farm since the mid 19th century believes that the old farm has always been in the location where the modern farmhouse stands today, but shifted back and forth between the two adjacent plots where the house stands and where the collapsed barn is situated (Bjarnason pers. comm.; Figure 6.41). These two buildings are separated by about 10 m (see Figure 6.37). The traditional turf and stone house at Hraðastaðir is depicted on the farmstead map as a four-part structure at the end of the road coming from the south (Figure 6.39). These buildings lie in the same location as the currently occupied old Hraðastaðir house and the associated barn, confirming Bjarnason's oral tradition at least back to the late 19th century. Finally, sub-surface testing on this site is also potentially very hazardous, as anthrax (*Bacillus anthracis*) has been identified in the ground just northeast and east of the farmhouse (Stefánsdóttir 2006: 59; Bjarnason pers. comm.). Several horses perished from anthrax around 1900, which led to the abandonment and destruction of some farm buildings that can still be seen on the surface.

The location of the Hraðastaðir farm in the 19th and 20th centuries is depicted on the farmstead map from 1916, where the farm stands in the middle of the road that leads south from the main E-W axis of the Mosfell Valley and continues to the Helgadalur

farm further south (Figure 6.39). In this map a turf and stone wall surrounding the old homefield (tún) is shown and the outlines of this wall are clearly visible in the aerial photograph from 1954 (Figure 6.40). This wall no longer stands today, but small remnants can be seen to the north and east of the main farm (Stefánsdóttir 2006: 59). The ruin investigated in 2009 (HRĐ 1) lies outside of this tún wall, indicating either that this wall does not demarcate the original center of the Hraðastaðir farm, or that the kitchen refuse found in Ruin HRĐ 1 was deposited over 100 m away from the farmstead's center.

6.4.1.1 Hraðaleiði: A Possible Pagan Burial Mound Marking Land Boundaries

Oral tradition dating back to at least the end of the 18th century holds that a low mound between Hraðastaðir and Æsustaðir to the west is called *Hraðaleiði* or "Hraði's burial mound" (Rafnsson 1980; Stefánsdóttir et al. 2006: 63-64). The earliest record of the oral tradition of Hraðaleiði was made in 1817 by Markús Sigurðsson, who was the priest at the Mosfell church between 1801 and 1818 (Rafnsson 1980: 258-259). This mound is still clearly visible today and does not appear to be a natural mound (see Figures 6.42, 6.43; this mound is located at ISNET93 E373557 N4106886). The mound is particularly interesting in the light of its location at the intersection of the traditional boundaries of the Mosfell, Hraðastaðir, and Æsustaðir farms as recorded in 1890 (Stefánsdóttir 2006: 57; Figure 6.43). The location of the mound is consistent with criteria for the placement of Icelandic pagan burial mounds on the boundaries of farms, outside of cultivated fields, and in a prominent place in the landscape (see Eldjárn 2000; Friðriksson 2009). The location of the Hraðaleiði mound is not likely to be an accident,

meaning that it is either a genuine pagan burial or a very old oral tradition that was co-opted into the land division of the Mosfell Valley. The mound may therefore be a demonstrable pre-Christian artifact of the antiquity of the land division system in the valley as well as a strong indication that the farms of Hraðastaðir and Æsustaðir pre-date the arrival of Christianity around AD 1000.

The Hraðaleiði mound is distinct in the landscape of the bottom of the valley with no other mounds in the area. The mound is situated close to and just north of the Suðurá river. Hraðaleiði is today approximately 1.7 m high, 10-12 m long and 6 m wide (Stefánsdóttir 2006: 64). The soil in the mound visible where erosion is taking effect is loose, gravelly and appeared to be re-deposited soil when examined in 2009. The oblong shape of the mound appears to be at least partially caused by the erosion of the mound to the western and northwestern side. The partial erosion of the mound had begun already in the mid 19th century when Magnús Grímsson (1861: 273) investigated the mound.

Magnús Grímsson (1861: 273), priest at Mosfell from 1855 to 1860, described Hraðaleiði, noting evidence of landscape disturbance that he interpreted as the remnants of the man-made mound's construction: "[*a*]*ð hóllinn sé af mönnum gjörðr held eg efalaust, því svo er að sjá, sem sín gjóta sé hvorumegin hans, þar sem moldin hefði verið tekin upp úr*."[240] This disturbance observed by Grímsson is no longer visible today, probably because the area surrounding this mound is now a hayfield that has been leveled by machine. Of note, however, is that the mound itself has not been touched with modern machinery because of the oral tradition of this mound (Bjarnason pers. comm.).

[240] "*That the mound is man-made is doubtless, I believe, because signs of its construction are visible on either side of the mound, where earth has been dug up.*"

6.4.1.2 Sub-Surface Testing at Hraðastaðir

The sub-surface testing conducted at Hraðastaðir in 2009 targeted the area in and around the ruins of an old structure (Ruin HRĐ 1) east of the current farm house (Figure 6.44 and 6.37).[241] Bjarni Bjarnason showed MAP members the ruins of an old building visible on the surface east of the currently utilized hay field east of the Hraðastaðir farm. These ruins were present when Bjarni's grandfather arrived to the farm in 1851. This structure was chosen for further investigation because it appears to be the oldest ruin on the Hraðastaðir farmstead and, for safety reasons, because it was located some distance from the area where anthrax has been documented.

Ruin HRĐ 1 (ISNET93 E374287 N410972) is located approximately 10 m east of the fence that encloses the modern cultivated homefield. The western portion of the building has been truncated by a recent sheep house (*fjárhus*) that Bjarni Bjarnason remembers using in his lifetime. This recent sheep house is in turn truncated by an earthen wall constructed recently to the west. The eastern wall of Ruin HRĐ 1, as well as the part of the north wall not truncated by the sheep house is visible on the surface (see Figure 6.44). Stones line the inside of the walls of the building.

Sub-surface testing showed that this structure post-dates AD 1500, was probably used as an animal shed, and that domestic trash was dumped into the building before it collapsed. The turf walls of the building contain Katla 1500 tephra, indicating that the structure was built after AD 1500. Coring inside of Ruin HRĐ 1 revealed a stone paved floor approximately 40-50 below the surface. This stone floor suggests that that building

[241] These disturbed ruins were also documented by a survey conducted in 1980 by Ágúst Georgsson and is recorded in the National Museum survey as Ruin 243-14 (Stefánsdóttir 2006: 60).

was a structure built for animals. A large concentration of peat ash in a thick layer just above the stone paved floor shows that the building was used as a place to dump refuse. Since the ash is located immediately above the stone floor, the ash must have been deposited before the collapse of the roof of the building. Ruin HRĐ 1 is situated approximately 100 m from the current Hraðastaðir farm, probably too far to be the habitation from which this midden material was disposed. Rather, the dense peat ash dump may indicate that some form of domestic occupation post-dating 1500 lay closer to this building. Further testing could be conducted around HRĐ Ruin 1 to attempt to locate the habitation associated with the midden dumping. This site is probably not far from the structure and could be the remains of a farmstead at Hraðastaðir that predates the current and 19th century location.

6.4.2 Æsustaðir

Æsustaðir is not mentioned in the textual record until 1704 (Magnússon and Vídalín 1704; Figure 6.45). The place name, however, with the –staðir suffix, also used in Skeggjastaðir and Hraðastaðir suggests that the farm has a much earlier origin. The place name analysis presented in Chapter 2 proposes that Æsustaðir, like the other –staðir farms is a settlement period or early medieval subsidiary farm originally dependent upon the large farm at Mosfell established by the original settler to the valley. An oral tradition about a pagan burial mound in which the presumed owner of the farm, Æsa, had been laid to rest may preserve the memory of the antiquity of this farm. Of the farms on the south side of the valley, Æsustaðir has the largest amount of natural hay meadow immediately

surrounding the farm, further suggesting that this location would have been optimal for the first farmstead in this part of the valley. The archaeological work on this farmstead pushed back the history of the farmstead by over two centuries by documenting deposits with cultural material below the 1500 tephra. However, the investigations of the Æsuleiði mound remembered as a pagan burial mound showed that the mound although cultural, was constructed in the post-medieval period.

Archaeological research at Æsustaðir conducted in 2009 focused on preliminarily testing the age of the farm with a focus on the old homefield, the remains of an old infield (tún) wall, and a small mound just west of the farm that is remembered as the pagan burial mound of the early settler Æsa (Figures 6.45 and 6.46). No visible ruins or indications of old habitation areas were identified. The position of Æsustaðir on the top of a hill and surrounded by bog limits the potential placement of the original farmstead to the area currently occupied by several contemporary structures. The historic map from 1916 shows that the 19th century farm was located further north than the current farm and next to the current barn (Figures 6.47 and 6.48).

The sub-surface coring at Æsustaðir focused on the homefield (tún) and presumed location of the homefield wall (túngarður) to the northwest of the current farm. These core samples verified the presence of the old homefield wall suggested by the modern vegetation pattern at the edge of the flat hill on top of which Æsustaðir sits (see Figure 6.49). This homefield wall runs along the edge of the slope, showing that the old homefield was confined to the top of the hill. The map from 1916 indicates that no wall surrounded the homefield in the early 19th century. No homefield wall is visible in the

aerial photograph from 1954 or any photographs from the subsequent decades (see Figure 6.46). This indicates that the remains of this tún wall are of substantial age and went out of use before the beginning of the 20th century. Whether this wall is connected with the medieval farm is unclear. Comparative core samples inside and outside the homefield wall showed little cultural material and natural deposits were encountered approximately 50 cm below the surface. The presence of Katla 1500 tephra in several cores with soil including indications of human habitation indicates that this farmstead predates AD 1500.

6.4.2.1 Investigation of Æsuleiði

The archaeological testing of the Æsuleiði mound showed that the mound was of cultural origin, but that it was created after AD 1500. According to oral tradition the mound called Æsuleiði is a pagan burial mound of the farm's founder, a woman named Æsa. (Figures 6.45, 6.46, and 6.49). This oral tradition can only be traced back to 1968 when it was recorded in a place name survey of the farm, while the mound itself can be seen on the aerial photograph from 1954. The oral tradition holds that no-one should mow or disturb this mound, a common warning for supposed pagan graves. The mound, which is mostly grass-covered, has partially eroded today, and measures 4 m across the long axis and 3.5 m across the short axis. The low mound rises 1 m above the surrounding landscape. Erosion has particularly affected the SE side, exposing the soil in the mound. The mound was significantly eroded when the site was visited in July of 2009, and it is clear that the mound might soon be lost.

To test the date, character, and construction method of the mound, a 1 m wide profile was cleaned and cut from the eroded side of the mound (Figure 6.50). At the bottom, a 20 cm wide and 100 cm long trench was dug through the disturbed deposits to investigate the strata below the mound. At the bottom of the disturbed deposits, we cored down an additional 84 cm to investigate the sub-surface stratigraphy of this marshy area and to confirm the natural origin of these layers. The coring of the sub-surface layers encountered Katla 1500 tephra 1.15 m below the top of the mound. The trench was subsequently deepened and flattened out on the Katla 1500 tephra to verify that the layer was in situ and that it stretched below the remnants of the mound. 20 cm below the Katla 1500 tephra, the coring also documented another black tephra layer (1 cm thick) that must be either Katla-R c. 920 or Eldgjá-1 c. 940.

The soil in the mound consisted entirely of mixed layers, with no meaningful stratigraphy. The mixed deposits in the mound consisted of urine bleached hay, manure, wood pieces and branches, as well as clumps of clay, peat, loose dark brown organic material, and iron stained soil from the marshy surrounding landscape. The mixed deposits contained a significant amount of re-deposited landnám and Katla 1500 tephra in clumps and stingers (Figure 6.51). The top of the mound is consists mostly of orange silty clay. The central 50 cm of the mound contains the highest degree of mixed material, while the lowest 20 cm of the mound is mostly made up of peat and disturbed and re-deposited tephra.

The Æsuleiði mound is decidedly post-medieval as it was constructed after the AD 1500 Katla eruption. In the investigation of the subsurface underneath the mound, 10

cm of bog deposits had naturally accumulated on top of the Katla 1500 tephra. Since the rate of bog accumulation during this period is unknown, a more precise date for the mounds construction is difficult to estimate. The reason for the construction of this mound could not be determined, but the mound is not a pagan burial mound. The association of the oral tradition with this mound could be trans-located from another place in the Æsustaðir landscape or could have developed independently of an actual historical event.

6.5 Conclusion

The archaeological research on the farmsteads presented in this chapter provides a high-resolution picture of the settlement pattern and chronology in the Mosfell Valley. The farmstead studies relied on a combination of methods including large scale excavations, surface survey, sub-surface core sampling, historical landscape research through aerial photographs and historic maps, as well as analysis of 19th century accounts of archaeological remains. The results of this research and analysis fills gaps left by both the textual sources and the place name studies by pushing back the settlement date of three farmsteads by several centuries and expanding the register of known medieval settlements exponentially. The archaeology provides hard evidence for the toponymic theories of settlement order and offers a balancing corrective to the textual source focus on the high status site at Mosfell/Hrísbrú by providing proof of several other very early farmsteads in the valley.

The archaeological evidence indicates that the Hrísbrú site was the seat of the chieftain in the valley from the settlement period and up until at least the 11th century. In the 11th or 12th century, the large farm at Hrísbrú shifted locations, but subsequently smaller scale occupation appears to have continued in the vicinity of the old chieftain's longhouse. The remains of a church at the Mosfell farmsteads partially uncovered in 1995 suggest that the chieftain's establishment was moved about 500 meters east to the current Mosfell farm. This evidence appears to corroborate the textual tradition from *Egils Saga* that recounts the movement of the Mosfell chieftain's farm from Hrísbrú to Mosfell in the beginning of the 12th century.

The earliest farms documented archaeologically, which include Hrísbrú, Leirvogstunga, Skeggjastaðir, and Helgadalur, are spaced evenly across the landscape of the Mosfell Valley. This picture provided by archaeology shows a more densely settled landscape than the texts suggest. The subsurface surveys and excavations showed that farms also existed at Helgadalur, Skeggjastaðir, and Leirvogstunga. *Landnámabók* remembers Skeggjastaðir as an early farm in, but Helgadalur and Leirvogstunga do not appear in the textual record until the pre-modern period. Although the archaeological remains uncovered from Helgadalur and Leirvogstunga are not extensive enough to determine the size of these farms or status of the inhabitants, it seems likely from available evidence that the textual sources neglected these sites because of their lesser and possibly subsidiary status to the Mosfell farm.

Excavations at Leirvogstunga revealed a medieval farm of a size that appears consistent with intermediary stauts. This size estimate is based on several agricultural

buildings predating 1226 located inside an old farmstead wall dating to the settlement period. Evidence of fishing, including a large amount of fish bones, net sinkers, and a fish hook, show an orientation toward marine resources. The placement of the farm on a low rise above the sea is ideal for access, utilization, and monitoring of the Leirvogur bay.

Systematic sub-surface survey indicated that Skeggjastaðir was a farm of substantial size during the medieval period. The center of this medieval farm is located high on the old homefield demarcated by the old homefield wall that may date to the earliest period. This medeival farm is situated adjacent to a ravine that provided fresh running water and a defensive advantage. The site is free of post-medieval occupation evidence and is not being currently utilized, making it ideal for future research.

The subsurface survey at Helgadalur shows that this farm was established early in the settlement period. Core samples revealed charcoal midden immediately above the insitu Landnám tephra layer from AD 871±2 as well as an outside surface layer characteristic of intense activity areas around farm buildings. Redeposited building turfs containing both Landnám (871±2) and Katla-R (c. 920) or Eldgjá-1 (c. 934) tephra and midden layers discarded down the slope to the stream behind the medieval farm further support the substantial size and age of this farm.

Approaching the distribution of the earliest farms from the perspective of the landscape and geography of the Mosfell Valley suggests an economic logic in their placement. The Hrísbrú site is ideal for the balanced economy of a large Norse farmstead. This site is located on the northern side of the valley, which received the most sunshine for the longest part of the year. Because of this, the sunny northern slopes of the Mosfell

mountain support the widest dry hay meadow in the valley, which the Hrisbru-based chieftans would have used to produce hay for the winter, often the limiting factor of how many animals could be kept. The farm is positioned prominently at the mouth of the valley, maximizing access to low wetland grazing ideal for grazing cattle that appear to have been an economic preoccupation of high status households (Vésteinsson et al. 2002). The outlying farms are characterized by a greater degree of economic specialization. The location of Leirvogstunga and the material remains from the recent excavations indicates an orientation toward the sea. Skeggjastaðir is placed ideally to take advantage of the riverine resources of the salmon-filled Leirvogsá River, as well as the grazing in the low highlands. The Helgadalur farm fills in the final large gap in the landscape by taking advantage of the slopes of the subsidiary “Holy” Valley to the south. The agency in the placement of these farms remains unclear. It is tempting, however, to interpret the farm locations as a result of a chiefly design of the primary settler, who likely choose the dominant site of Hrísbrú for himself while establishing supporters at more peripheral farms that specialized in utilizing specific economic resources.

Chapter 7 Subsistence Economics in the Mosfell Valley

This chapter addresses the economic foundation of the medieval society in the Mosfell Valley by presenting the archaeologically recovered evidence of the character and changes in the local subsistence economy. The subsistence economy was the base that sustained the Icelandic chiefly political economy and allowed for investment of resources in the prestige economy. In examining the plants, animals, and people of the Mosfell Valley in the Middle Ages, this chapter combines data from specialist research on pollen profiles, ethnobotanitcal samples, zooarchaeological remains, and studies of the human skeletal remains.[242] The resulting insights into resource exploitation, ecological change, and human adaptation brought to light through the archaeological evidence are not visible in the textual sources. The texts offer nothing comparable for the Mosfell region nor do the texts yield equitable anecdotal data from other regions in Iceland. The integration of the analyses of the archaeological material yield insight into the general subsistence economy of the valley and specifically on the chiefly household at Hrísbrú.

The research presented here provides a picture of how the population of the Mosfell Valley utilized natural resources and changed the character of the flora and fauna of the region. The human use and changes to the local flora is seen from the changes in the pollen profile in the valley, most notably, the introduction of grain and the disappearance of the birch forests. Identification of seeds and wood from the excavations at Hrísbrú shows plentiful local barley consumption and a clear differentiation in the use

[242] The conclusions and compilations of data presented are based on the work of members of the Mosfell Archaeological Proejct, particualry specialists in palynology, ethnobotany, zooarchaeology, and osteoarchaeology.

of wood types for fuel, structural purposes, and burial assemblages. The most detailed information concerning the food and diet of the people of the Mosfell Valley derives from the extensive excavations at the early Hrísbrú farmstead, which yielded high caliber and stratified primary food refuse deposits within the Viking Age longhouse. Particular attention is given to the zooarchaeological remains in this chapter because of the insight it provides into the food consumption and animal ratios at a chiefly household. Isotopic examination of skeletal remains from Hrísbrú support the view of marine resource exploitation provided by the zooarchaeological remains, while more standard osteoarchaoelogical studies show that the population at Hrísbrú faced harsh lives in adapting life in the North Atlantic.

The initial impact of the settlers to the Mosfell Valley was dramatic as they introduced Northern European domesticates and began to utilize local resources. Food production in the Mosfell Valley relied on the mixed sedentary pastoral economic package common to other Norse communities in the North Atlantic. The settlers focused on animal husbandry supplemented by barley cultivation, and the collection of wild marine and terrestrial resources. Birch forest were used to fuel hearths and forges, and burned to clear land for pasture. The wetlands were mined for turf for house construction, while the beaches were cleared of large driftwood timber useful for timber framing. The Norse clearly changed the natural environment to accommodate their cultural package, but as will be argued in this chapter, also succeeded in managing local wild resources.

The Mosfell Valley encompasses varied ecological zones that offered distinct resource bases for the medieval population. Although the Icelandic subsistence economy

is characterized by stability after the initial dynamic encounter between Norse culture and the island ecology, this chapter identifies key temporal changes in the subsistence economy. From the Hrísbrú household, it appears that wild marine resources were more important in the Viking Age household than the subsequent medieval occupation. Barley cultivation began slowly, peaked around AD 1000 and disappeared by the 12th century. The use of these resources over time in the Mosfell Valley in the subsistence economy is the basis of this chapter, while a discussion of the potential uses of some of these subsistence goods for the prestige economy are discussed in the following chapter (Chapter 8).The evidence specifically from the Hrísbrú farmstead shows an economic base consistent with the ideal Norse farmstead and suitable for the needs of managing a chiefly political-economy.

7.1 Ancient Pollen in the Mosfell Valley: Barley Cultivation, Deforestation, and Implications for the Prestige Economy

The Mosfell Archaeological Project has incorporated a team of palynologists to conduct pollen analyses on the vegetation in the Mosfell Valley from the time of the initial settlement up until AD 1500 (Erlendsson and Edwards 2010; Hallsdóttir 2004).[243] This research focuses on anthropogenic changes to the vegetation, particularly as it relates to the stables and organization of the Norse subsistence economy. The

[243] Several soil columns were taken from the center of the valley between Hrísbrú and the Kaldakvísl and at Seljabrekka in the low highlands (Erlendsson and Edwards 2010; Hallsdóttir 2004). The highest resolution data was achieved in 2009 and the conclusions from this work (Erlendsson and Edwards 2010) provide the basis of this section.

chronological framework for this study is provided by three tephra layers that provide age breaks in the soil column profiles. Three tephras identified in the soil profiles are 1) The *Landnám* tephra from AD 871 ±2 (Grönvold et al. 1995), the Medieval tephra from AD 1226 (Jóhannesson and Einarsson 1988) and a Katla tephra from around AD 1500 (Hafliðason et al. 1992). Between these years, a constant rate of soil accumulation was used to estimate the age of layers in the profile. The pollen research has shown that the landscape in the valley was dramatically transformed when the Norse settlers arrived. Particularly the production of cereals in the early period that ceased in the late 12th century has implications for the political economy of the Mosfell Valley and the power of the chieftains of Mosfell.

Prior to the settlement of the valley (i.e. below the landnám tephra), the landscape was wooded as indicated by high values for pollens of birch (*Betula*) and willow (*Salix*). This conclusion is supported also by the discovery of several birch tree trunks and roots in some of the drainage trenches below Hrísbrú (Byock et al. 2005). Across the Mosfell Valley a dark brown soil layer containing inclusions of what appears to be tree sap has been identified with through sub-surface coring, providing further support for the widespread forest in the valley (Byock et al. 2010).

At the time of settlement, the Norse transformed the landscape in the valley to suit the needs of their subsistence package. The decline in birch and willow pollen indicates that large amounts of land were cleared. Cereal production began shortly thereafter as demonstrated by the appearance of barley (Hordeum-type) pollen (see Figure 7.1 for a graph comparing the decline in birch pollen and the rise in barley pollen during the

medieval period). This barley pollen is recorded from the level of the Landnám tephra and up until the mid-12th century. A large number of barley seeds recovered from the late 9th-11th century longhouse at Hrísbrú supports the conclusion that barley was grown locally (see section 7.2 on the macrobotanical remains). The barley pollen coincides with the appearance of microscopic charcoal and bone fragments that signal the fertilization of the fields. At the same time pollen values for meadowsweet and the carrot family (*Apiaceae sp.*) rise and remain high until the mid-12th century (Erlendsson and Edwards 2010). This is significant since these taxa are vulnerable to grazing and often decline with the Norse settlement (Erlendsson, Edwards, and Buckland 2009), but are probably prominent here because the cultivated fields of barley were protected from grazing animals. These changes coincide with the Landnám tephra from AD 871 ± 2, and the charcoal begins to appear just below this tephra. The charcoal below the Landnám tephra could indicate a pre-870 settlement of the Mosfell Valley, but could also be the result of slight post-deposition soil mixing.

Subsequently, but below the AD 1226 tephra, the pollen profile indicates further changes to the landscape suggesting a reorganization of the economy in the Hrísbrú area and possible the whole valley. The barley pollen disappears from the pollen profile in the late 12th to early 13th centuries, showing that cereal cultivation ceased. Around the same time, the recorded pollens document the virtual disappearance of taxa sensitive to grazing, such as meadowsweet and the carrot family. At this time sedges commonly found in meadows and pastures increase. This indicates a change in the use of the landscape in which cultivated and fertilized fields appear to have been converted to

grazing lands. Interestingly, *Egils Saga* recounts the movement of the primary chieftain's farm from Hrísbrú to Mosfell at this time. Conceivably, cereal production could have shifted to Mosfell at this time and the economy of Hrísbrú reoriented towards livestock grazing. On the other hand, cereal production may have been abandoned in the whole valley at this time. The end of the Medieval Warm Period (Patterson et al. 2010; Hughes and Diaz 1994) as well as the deterioration of the landscape (Amorosi et al. 1997) could have caused the abandonment of cereal production. The explanation for the disappearance of cereal production, however, need not be purely environmental, and in the case of the Mosfell region could be driven by changing local political considerations.

Barley was particularly important for making beer, and beer was one of the most valuable luxuries for the chiefly feasting (see Chapter 8 for an in-depth discussion of the politics of feasting). From the 9th to the 12th century, the Mosfell chieftains would have benefited from direct access to this valuable feasting product. This period coincides with the successful Mosfell chieftains of the Saga Age recorded in the saga texts (see Chapter 4). The decline in barley cultivation suggested by the pollen data implies a decrease in the feasting potential of the Mosfell chieftains in the late 12th century. This timing of decreased power was also detected in the historical documents (see Chapter 5), as the Mosfellingar disappear from the textual record. The production of cereals in Iceland at this time when the Medieval Warm Period was coming to an end was probably both labor and resource intensive, as indicated by the fertilization of the fields recorded in the pollen profiles. Cereal production probably did not make sense from the point of view of maximizing food goods, but rather only as part of a political chiefly strategy. With the

declining power of the Mosfellingar, it is possible that they abandoned this political crop in favor of more effective investment in the pastoral economy of herding.

7.2 Macrobotanical Analysis: Barley Seeds, Drift Wood Structures, and Birch Wood Fuel

Macrobotanical samples collected from the Hrísbrú excavations shed light on the food, fuel, and construction resources utilized in the Mosfell Valley during the medieval period. These macrobotanical remains provide evidence of how the population of the Mosfell Valley employed the changing natural resources partially documented by the pollen studies. During the excavations of the longhouse, church, and graveyard at Hrísbrú individual samples of wood and charcoal thought to be of special interest were collected. Soil samples taken in 4 or 10 liters amounts and floated by machine produced large quantities of botanicals divided into heavy and light fractions. The flotation of bulk samples produced a seed assemblage containing a large number of barley seeds that are of particular interest for the understanding of the subsistence economy as well as the power potential of the Mosfell chieftains. Other seeds of weeds and grasses provide evidence of the changing environment. Wood identification shows that the people of the Hrísbrú farm used local birch forest for fuel, employed driftwood for building construction timbers, and imported oak from Europe. Like grain, wood for building construction was also a commodity of chiefly consumption. This section focuses on the

wood and seeds used by people of the Mosfell Valley to produce food, build structures, and fuel their fires.[244]

7.2.1 Seeds: Agriculture and Winter Fodder

The barley (*Hordeum vulgare*) seeds found in the longhouse and midden layers at the Hrísbrú site suggest that barley was readily available to inhabitants during the 10th and 11th centuries (see Table 7.1 and Table 7.2). A total of 211 barley seeds have been recovered from the 141.8 liters of soil that have been floated and sorted from the longhouse area at Hrísbrú site, making the ratio of barley seeds per liter 1.488. This is an unusually large number of seeds and illustrates the resource wealth of the Mosfell chieftains. In contrast, at Hosftaðir in Mývatn, another high-status Viking Age longhouse, the floatation and sorting of 1479.2 liters yielded only 23 barley seeds or a ratio of 0.0155 (Guðmundsson 2010: 324, 334). The contribution of grain to the diet of the inhabitants at Hrísbrú is unclear, but the number of seeds suggests that it could have been substantial. Grain was an expensive commodity in medieval Iceland that could only be grown in a few places. The irreplaceable role of grain was not, however, for the production of food, but rather for brewing beer for chiefly feasting.[245]

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[244] The identification and analysis of the botanical evidence was undertaken by Dr. Steve Martin (2005, 2006, 2007), Dr. Helge Høeg and Dr. Niels Bonde (2004), and Dr. Virginia Popper (2002, 2003). The analysis presented in this section is based on the work of these scholars, but is not an exhaustive presentation of the extensive macrobotanical investigations undertaken by members of the Mosfell Archaeological Project.

[245] See Chapter 8 on political power and exchange for a detailed discussion of the use of resources for status and political stature.

Sample #	Context	Barley Seed counts	Volume (L)	Context Type	Phase
S-2006-005	19	12	1.3	floor	house
S-2006-006	8	2	2.3	midden	post-house
S-2006-008	15	1	1.5	midden	post-house
S-2006-009	19	1	3	floor	house
S-2006-010	12	1	3.5	bench	house
S-2007-001	34	43	5.6	midden	post-house
S-2007-002	36	24	4	midden	post-house
S-2007-003	34	49	4	midden	post-house
S-2007-005	39	4	3.8	midden	post-house
S-2007-006	44	33	4	midden	post-house
S-2007-11	46	1	4	pit	house
S-2007-028	8	1	10	midden	post-house
S-2007-031	111	1	3.1	post hole fill	house
S-2007-037	95	11	5.7	floor	house
S-2007-039B	95	13	10.7	floor	house
S-2008-175	11	3	7	bench surface	house
S-2008-186	11	2	5.2	bench surface	house
S-2008-190	11	1	5.5	bench surface	house
S-2008-192	11	1	3.8	bench surface	house
S-2008-193	11	1	10	bench surface	house
S-2008-205	11	1	6.1	bench surface	house
S-2008-216	11	5	0.5	bench surface	house
Total		**211**	**104.6**		

Table 7.1. Barley seeds identified in the longhouse at Hrísbrú and in the midden layers dumped into the house.

The recovery of a large quantity of barley seeds from 10th and 11th century deposits at Hrísbrú is consistent with the pollen evidence discussed in the previous section that showed barley cultivation beginning around AD 870 and coming to an end in the 12th century. Barley seeds were recovered from almost all the samples sorted from floor and surface layers from inside the longhouse. Barley seeds were also prevalent in the midden layers dumped into the house cavity of the longhouse after it was abandoned. This indicates that the access to barley for the inhabitants of Hrísbrú continued after the abandonment of the longhouse. The discovery of this density of barley seeds at Hrísbrú

suggests that the inhabitant of Hrísbrú had significant potential for producing beer and hosting large semi-ritualized feasts. This archaeological evidence for feasting potential and the likelihood that this data is material manifestation of chiefly power is discussed in the next chapter (see Chapter 8)

Based on historical sources and place name evidence, it is widely accepted that the Norse settlers brought barley to Iceland as part of their economic package. The extent to which early Icelanders relied on barley as part of their subsistence economy is less certain, as is the level of success that grain cultivation had in Iceland (Guðmundsson 2010: 331). The archaeological and palynological evidence for barley cultivation is steadily growing with more excavations yielding barley seeds and regional landscape studies showing the presence of barley pollen (Trigg et al. 2009; Sveinbjarnardóttir et al. 2007: 198; Guðmundsson 2010: 331). The evidence from Hrísbrú adds to the steadily mounting evidence of barley cultivation in early Iceland, contributing both the pollen signature and a large quantity of seeds. The extent of this evidence suggests that the Hrísbrú inhabitants had excellent access to a crop that was used not only for subsistence but also for the creation and maintenance of chiefly power in the region.

Sample	Context	Phase	UCIAMS #	Date ± (uncalibrated)	Calibrated Age (1 std dev)
S-2007-005	39	post-house	64168	AD 910 ± 20	calAD 973-1025
S-2007-003	34	post-house	64169	AD 895 ± 20	calAD 901-1023
S-2007-006	44	post-house	64174	AD 870 ± 25	calAD 895-1018
S-2007-002	36	post-house	64170	AD 865 ± 20	calAD 895-1014
S-2007-028	8	post-house	64175	AD 835 ± 15	calAD 891-978
S-2007-037	95	longhouse	64171	AD 825 ± 20	calAD 885-980
S-2008-017	11	longhouse	64172	AD 810 ± 15	calAD 870-974
S-2006-009	19	longhouse	64173	AD 805 ± 20	calAD 782-974

Table 7.2 ^{14}C dates on barley seeds from the Hrísbrú longhouse and the midden layers dumped inside the abandoned housed. The samples were analyzed at the University of Irvine AMS laboratory and calibrated by the author using the OxCal 4.1 (Bronk Ramsey 2010; atmospheric curve from Reimer et al. 2009).

Several other seed types from weeds, grasses and sedges found at Hrísbrú shed light on how the local population used and changed their environment. A large number of seeds from *Stellaria sp.*, including *S. media* (common chickweed), *S. crassifolia* (fleshy stitchwort), and *S. humifusa* (low stitchwort) were found in the longhouse and in the midden layers. Chickweed invades cultivated fields and disturbs areas around habitation sites, and as a result is frequently found as a contaminant in grain stores (Trigg et al. 2009: 69; Renfrew 1972: 163).These weedy annuals would have grown in the vicinity of the farm, concentrated in barley fields and areas where kitchen waste was deposited (Martin 2010). Seeds from grass and sedges from wetland meadows found inside the longhouse are evidence of the inhabitants using native Icelandic plants and transporting them to their house. These plants, including *Poaceae sp.* (meadow-grass), *Rumex* sp. (sorrel), *Polygonum* sp. (knotgrass), and *Carex sp.* (sedge) were collected from hay fields and wetlands for animal fodder and were probably stored in the house for the winter (Martin 2010).

7.2.2 Wood: Native Birch Forest Fuel, Imported Oak Timber, and Structures of Driftwood

Wood samples from Hrísbrú reveal the use of various wood resources for building construction, fuel burning, and human burial. Among the identified specimens were local Icelandic wood, as well as non-local wood acquired as driftage on the shore and also probably imported from Europe. Different wood types were used for different purposes. The variation in wood from the churchyard was greater than in the longhouse deposits.

All of the wood from the longhouse floor, surface, and midden layers consist of birch (*Betula* sp.) charcoal employed as fuel. Most of the large posts and sills from the longhouse appear to have been removed by the inhabitants when they abandoned the house and therefore no wooden structural elements of the longhouse were recovered for analysis. The excavation of the church, however, yielded remnants of sill beams, posts, wooden paneling, while the graves contained wooden fragments from grave furnishings.

The birch wood from the longhouse and from the later midden layers was all charcoal and derived from contexts containing domestic waste (see Table 7.3). The contents of these layers in the longhouse came from a fireplace, probably the single large fireplace in the middle of the central hall (see Figure 6.8). The birch wood samples included both bark and leaf buds, indicating that the wood was local Icelandic wood. Birch wood continued to appear in high densities in the midden layers from the later 10th and 11th century, showing that the inhabitants of Hrísbrú continued to have access to birch forests. This means that birch forests continued to exists in the Mosfell Valley and probably also that the inhabitants of the valley achieved a measure of success in the management of the local forest resources.

Sample ID	Context	Context Type	Wood Type	Part	weight (g)	Phase
S-2006-10	12	bench surface	birch (*Betula* sp.)	wood	3.39	longhouse
S-2006-10	12	bench surface	birch (*Betula* sp.)	bark	0.11	longhouse
S-2006-5	19	floor	birch (*Betula* sp.)	wood	4.61	longhouse
S-2006-5	19	floor	birch (*Betula* sp.)	bark	0.19	longhouse
S-2006-9	19	floor	birch (*Betula* sp.)	wood	0.88	longhouse
S-2006-9	19	floor	birch (*Betula* sp.)	bark	0.13	longhouse
S-2007-38	95	floor	birch (*Betula* sp.)	wood	0.03	longhouse
S-2007-39B	95	floor	birch (*Betula* sp.)	wood	18.34	longhouse
S-2007-39B	95	floor	birch (*Betula* sp.)	bark	0.53	longhouse
S-2007-39B	95	floor	birch (*Betula* sp.)	leaf bud	7	longhouse
S-2007-32	114	cut fill	birch (*Betula* sp.)	wood	0.8	longhouse
S-2006-7	24	post hole fill	birch (*Betula* sp.)	wood	0.11	longhouse
S-2006-7	24	post hole fill	birch (*Betula* sp.)	bark	<0.01	longhouse
S-2007-15	60	post hole fill	birch (*Betula* sp.)	wood	0.19	longhouse
S-2007-25	92	post hole fill	birch (*Betula* sp.)	wood	0.15	longhouse
S-2007-29	99	post hole fill	birch (*Betula* sp.)	wood	4.02	longhouse
S-2007-29	99	post hole fill	birch (*Betula* sp.)	leaf bud	1	longhouse
S-2007-30	113	post hole fill	birch (*Betula* sp.)	wood	2.06	longhouse
S-2007-31	111	post hole fill	birch (*Betula* sp.)	wood	0.92	longhouse
S-2007-7	53	post hole fill	birch (*Betula* sp.)	wood	0.21	longhouse
S-2007-9	54	turf collapse	birch (*Betula* sp.)	wood	0.16	longhouse
S-2006-6	8	midden	birch (*Betula* sp.)	wood	0.81	post-longhouse
S-2006-6	8	midden	birch (*Betula* sp.)	bark	<0.01	post-longhouse
S-2006-8	15	midden	birch (*Betula* sp.)	wood	0.2	post-longhouse
S-2006-8	15	midden	birch (*Betula* sp.)	bark	0.12	post-longhouse
S-2007-2	36	midden	birch (*Betula* sp.)	wood	8.08	post-longhouse
S-2007-2	36	midden	birch (*Betula* sp.)	bark	0.47	post-longhouse
S-2007-2	36	midden	birch (*Betula* sp.)	leaf bud	5	post-longhouse
S-2007-4	9	midden	birch (*Betula* sp.)	wood	0.35	post-longhouse
S-2007-11	46	midden	birch (*Betula* sp.)	wood	2.49	post-longhouse

Table 7.3 Wood identified from contexts in the longhouse at Hrísbrú and in the overlying midden layers dumped into the abandoned house. All samples were analyzed by Steve Martin.

An unusually rich sample of structural wood from the Hrísbrú church reveals that a combination of local and non-Icelandic wood was used to construct this building (see Table 7.4). The main structural elements consisting of sill beams and vertical posts were made from larch (*Larix* sp.), pine (*Pinus* sp.), and spruce/larch (*Picea* sp./*Larix* sp.). All

four posts of the nave yielded wood samples allowing for the identification of wood type. The northwest and southwest posts were pine, the northeast post was larch, and the southeast post either larch or spruce. The large structural timbers may have been imported, but it is more likely that that they were driftwood collected from the local coast. The driftwood origin of these specimens is supported by the analysis of the wood structure of the eastern sill beam that showed the latewood was completely devoid of tracheids, which can be caused by exposure to salt water (Martin 2006).

Less structural elements of the building, such as the paneling of the stave walls appears to have consisted of birch. Birch wood found in the sample taken from the remains of the eastern and southern sill beams are surely the remains of wooden plank paneling. Birch wood and charcoal appears also to have been deposited in the post holes around the larch and pine posts. The destruction of the church is associated with a burning event. The partially burnt destruction layers over the nave and chancel yielded a mix of pine, larch, spruce, and birch. These remains probably derived mostly from the roof and partially also from the walls and internal wooden features such as the benches located along the inside of the northern and southern walls of the nave.

Sample ID	Context Type	Context Description	Wood Type	Wood description	Counts
F-2003-25	floor	church floor	conifer, cf pine (*Pinus*)	uncharred	1
S-2004-12077	floor	church floor	birch (*Betula*)	charcoal	5
S-2004-12078	floor	church floor	birch (*Betula*)	charcoal	10
S-2004-13390	post	NE post, nave	larch (*Larix*)	charcoal	20
S-2005-16	post	NW post, nave	pine (*Pinus*)	uncharred	5
S-2004-11214	post	SE post, nave	spruce/larch (*Picea/Larix*)	charcoal	19
S-2005-11	post	SW post, nave	pine (*Pinus*)	charcoal	7
S-2004-11214	post hole fill	SE posthole, nave	birch (*Betula*)	charcoal	1
S-2005-11	post hole fill	SW post, nave	birch (*Betula*)	charcoal	3
S-2004-14462	sill beam	east sill beam, nave	birch (*Betula*)	uncharred	2
S-2004-14461	sill beam	east sill beam, nave	spruce/larch (*Picea/Larix*)	uncharred	2
S-2005-8	sill beam	east sill beam, nave	pine (*Pinus*)	uncharred	1
S-2004-100682	sill beam	south sill beam	birch (*Betula*)	uncharred	3
S-2004-13392	sill beam	south sill beam	spruce/larch (*Picea/Larix*)	uncharred	5
F-2003-43	structure	burn layer in chancel	conifer, cf pine (*Pinus*)	uncharred	1
S-2004-12072	structure	burn layer, chancel	birch (*Betula*)	charcoal	1
S-2004-12073	structure	burn layer, chancel	birch (*Betula*)	charcoal	12
S-2004-12074	structure	burn layer, chancel	birch (*Betula*)	charcoal	5
S-2004-12075	structure	burn layer, chancel	birch (*Betula*)	charcoal	8
S-2004-12076	structure	burn layer, chancel	birch (*Betula*)	charcoal	4
S-2004-100683	structure	destruction layer, nave	birch (*Betula*)	charcoal	8
S-2004-100684	structure	destruction layer, nave	larch (*Larix*)	uncharred	15
S-2004-100683	structure	destruction layer, nave	spruce/larch (*Picea/Larix*)	charcoal	8

Table 7.4 Identified wood samples from the church at Hrísbrú. The samples from 2003 were analyzed by Virginia Popper, the samples from 2004 by Helge Høeg, and the samples from 2005 by Steve Martin.

In the churchyard, wooden fragments found in several graves included birch,

larch, and oak (see Table 7.5). These wooden fragments were preserved in the graves particularly when oxidized and partially mineralized from close contact with iron objects such as nails and clench bolts. Most of the pine and birch wood probably derives from coffins. Only a single burial, burial Feature 20, included oak. This oak wood was attached to clench bolts also found in this grave on top of the skeleton. The oak wood was probably imported from Scandinavia or the British Isles. As will be argued in Chapter 9, this burial assemblage probably contains part of a boat and represents a synchronization of Christian and pagan ritual.

Sample ID	Context	Context Type	Context Description	Wood Type	Wood description
F-2002-28	2002-5	grave	attached to clench bolt	conifer	uncharred
F-2002- 17	2002-20	grave	attached to clench bolt	oak (*Quercus* sp.)	uncharred
F-2002-21	2002-20	grave	attached to clench bolt	oak (*Quercus* sp.)	uncharred
F-2003-34	2003-46	grave	box for secondary burial	conifer, cf *Pinus* sp.	uncharred
S-2005-15	2005-2	grave	shaft under chancel	birch (*Betula* sp.)	charcoal
S-2007-18	2007-CK-5	grave	grave fill	birch (*Betula* sp.)	uncharred
F-2003-9	graveyard	fill	attached to nail	conifer	uncharred
F-2003-37	graveyard	fill		conifer, cf *Pinus* sp.	uncharred
F-2003-2	graveyard	fill		conifer	uncharred

Table 7.5 Wood identified in the graveyard at Hrísbrú. Burial Feature 20 includes the only example of oak found at the site.

7.3 The Subsistence Economy Viewed from the Faunal Record

The large scale-open area excavations at Hrísbrú allow for a detailed examination of the fauna utilized by the Norse settlers in the Mosfell Valley. Specifically, this archaeofaunal assemblage provides a view of the pastoral and hunting-gathering practices of a chiefly household. The general picture of the medieval subsistence economy of Hrísbrú from the faunal remains reveals a farmstead that depended primarily on

domesticated animals, mostly sheep and cattle, but pigs and possibly even rabbits were also kept at the farm (see Table 7.6 and Figures 7.2, 7.3, 7.4). The diet was supplemented by fish, shellfish and marine mammal resources. Fowling was also practiced, but besides birds, no other wild game was available to the Icelandic settlers. The farmstead at Hrísbrú had access to the full range of animal foods and products of the Norse subsistence package. In most respects, the Hrísbrú fauna is characteristic of the zooarchaeological remains from other previously studied large farms in Iceland. The faunal assemblage from Hrísbrú, however, displays a relatively high percentage of fish bone that may speak of preferential access or control of coastal resources. Most significantly, the Hrísbrú assemblage shows a high cow to caprine bone ratio (1.18/1) that speaks of the success of the inhabitants of Hrísbrú at replicating the ideal Norse economic package of high status farms.

The Norse settlers preferred cattle over sheep/goats despite the fact that the ecology of Iceland was more suitable to caprines. This preference has been documented through zooarchaeological investigations of excavated farmsteads across the Norse North Atlantic and has been interpreted as the settlers' attempt to achieve the ideal economic package from the homelands (McGovern 2000: 331-332; McGovern, Perdikaris and Tinsley 2001: 155-156). Variations in the cattle to caprine ratio recorded in the archaeofauna of excavated Icelandic farms are partially due to local ecology, with southern Iceland having environmental conditions more favorable to cattle. But as Vésteinsson and colleagues conclude (2002: 112), "…current evidence suggests that cattle to caprine bone ratios in Iceland may also track status as much as local

environment, and there is a general tendency for cattle bone to be most common in the earliest phases of all sites." The desire and ability of the Norse settler to focus their pastoral economy on cattle raising appears to be driven by social status competition and sustained in the long run only by high status farmers.[246]

This section incorporates all archaeofauna from eight seasons of excavations in the three areas of the Hrísbrú site: Kirkjuhóll (Church Knoll- abbr. CK), Hulduhóll (Elfin Hill- abbr. EH), and Tún (Tun- abbr. TUN). During each year of the Mosfell Archaeological Project excavations at Hrísbrú from 2001 to 2008 faunal material was collected for identification and laboratory analysis. The samples were sorted, cataloged, and exported to the University of California Los Angeles where the analysis was completed by the Thomas Wake and the author in the UCLA Zooarchaeology Laboratory.

7.3.1 Data and Methods

7.3.1.1 Bone Preservation

Nearly the entire animal bone collection from Hrísbrú consists of calcined bone. The frequent rainfall and rapid percolation of water through the permeable soils at Hrísbrú create conditions unfavorable to bone preservation. Although the preservation conditions varied locally within all three excavation areas very little non-burned bone remained. Most of the preserved unburned bones were teeth and occasionally the maxillae and mandibles in which teeth were retained. In a few isolated areas rich in

[246] See a further discussion in section 7.3.5 and a more in depth treatment of status and feasting in Chapter 8.

charcoal such as midden pit Feature 10 on Church Knoll, more unburned bone remained. The effect of these preservation issues on the faunal assemblage from Hrísbrú is that the collection is rather small and consists mostly of calcined bone fragments from hearth cleanings.

7.3.1.2 Sampling and Recovery Strategy at Hrísbrú

Sampling techniques in the Hrísbrú excavations utilized several different screen mesh sizes depending on the context or layer being excavated. At CK the layers were mostly screened over ¼-inch mesh. The soil surrounding the human burials was water-screened over 1/8-inch mesh. All fragments of faunal material were collected during the 2001 and 2002 seasons at CK. During the 2003-2005 seasons at CK non-inhumation

Common Name	Scientific Name	CK	EH	TUN	Grand Total
Atlantic Cod	*Gadus morhua*			2	2
cf. Cod	*cf. Gadidae*			122	122
Herring	*Clupea sp.*	12			12
Flatfish	*Pleuronectiformes*			3	3
Bony fish	*Teleostei*	9	83	250	342
Fish Total		**21**	**83**	**377**	**481**
Auk	*Alcidae* (medium to small)			12	12
Auk (cf. Auklet)	*Alcidae* (small)			19	19
Pink footed goose	*Anser brachyrhynchus*			9	9
Gull	*Larus sp.*	1			1
Bird				8	8
Bird Total		**1**		**48**	**49**
Sheep/Goat	*Ovis/Capra*	44	20	117	181
Sheep/Goat/Cow	*Ovis/Capra/Bos*	3		15	18
Cow	*Bos taurus*	11	1	202	214
Horse	*Equus caballus*			3	3
Horse/Cow	*Equus/Bos*			3	3
Pig	*Sus scrofa*	1	2	2	5
Rat	*Rattus sp.*			1	1
cf. Rabbit	*cf. Leporidae*	1			1
Small mammal		5			5
Land mammal		518	522	2803	3843
Land mammal Total		**583**	**545**	**3146**	**4274**
Walrus	*Odobenus rosmarus*			1	1
Whale	*Cetacea*	1		1	2
cf. Seal	*cf. Pinnipedia*			10	10
Marine mammal			11		11
cf. Marine mammal				3	3
Marine mammal total		**1**	**11**	**15**	**27**
Grand Total		**606**	**639**	**3586**	**4831**

Table 7.6 Numbers of identified specimens (NISP) from Hrísbrú divided into rows of identified taxa and columns for each of the three excavation areas.

layers were still screened with ¼-inch mesh, but the small faunal fragments that were only identifiable to the “land mammal” category were no longer collected from the large disturbed Stratum I layer. At Elfin Hill (EH), where a cremation was uncovered, the layers were all water-screened over 1/8-inch mesh and all fragments regardless of size were collected. At the TUN site ¼ -inch mesh was used for all layers above the longhouse and all faunal material that remained in the screen was collected. Baulk soil samples were taken in 2006 and 2007 from each of the midden layers above the abandoned longhouse. All occupation layers associated with the house were excavated in 2008 and a minimum of 10 liters of each layer from each 1 x 1 m grid square was floated over 2 mm mesh screen for heavy fraction recovery.

Complete excavation of the inside of the longhouse in 2008 revealed the layout and organization of the internal space. The house offered extremely well-preserved floor deposits, allowing for stratigraphic excavation of 38 individual floor layers, revealing spatial and temporal differences in household activities. Each of these floor layers was excavated on a 1 meter sample grid and 100% of the soil was sifted through a flotation machine for maximum artifact and ecofact recovery. The 1 x 1 meter sample squares allow us to understand the distribution of the smallest finds across the floors, thus providing high-resolution data on varying activity areas within the house.

7.3.1.3 Laboratory Methods

On the arrival at the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology’s Zooarchaeology Laboratory (CIOA-ZL) the vertebrate faunal remains from Hrísbrú were sorted by

vertebrate class. The respective classes were analyzed in the CIOA-ZL by Wake and Zori. Thomas Wake identified fish, bird and mammal remains from Hrísbrú with the assistance of Davide Zori. All mammal identifications were confirmed using the comparative osteological collection housed in the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology's Zooarchaeological Laboratory and the UCLA Department of Biology Dickey Natural History collections. Each bone specimen was identified to the most discrete taxonomic level possible. More detailed taxonomic assignment (to species or genus) was usually limited to specimens with sufficient distinguishing features allowing rapid identification to the given level. The general identification and data recording methods are as follows.

Bones lacking discrete identifiable features were sorted into broad mammal size categories by class. Size categories are defined as follows: for mammals, very large represents cow size or greater, large represents sheep/goat size or greater, medium represents smaller than sheep/goat but larger than rabbit, and small represents rabbit or rat, very small represents mouse or smaller. For each discretely identifiable bone a series of data were recorded including catalog number, complete provenience and screen size information, skeletal element, part of element, side, age, and modification (Grayson 1984; Lyman 2008; Reitz and Wing 2008). Data recorded regarding modification of bone specimens include evidence of burning, cut marks, gnaw marks, and indications of tool or other artifact manufacture. The bone was counted and weighed to the nearest 0.01 g using electronic scales.

Use of the NISP (Number of Identified Specimen) measure is the most effective way of quantifying a smaller sample of relatively poorly preserved faunal remains such

as was found at the Hrísbrú site (Amorosi and McGovern 1995:184). By this method each fragment that can be identified to a taxonomic level is counted individually. This quantification method is also the most widely used in previously analyzed collections from the North Atlantic, and is therefore employed in this report. In only a few contexts could a MNI (Minimum Number of Individuals) be established as exceeding one individual, making this quantification method almost meaningless. Nevertheless when the MNI exceeds one we note it in this report.

7.3.2 The Longhouse and Midden Layers in the TUN Excavation Area

The faunal material from the TUN excavation area, including the longhouse and several midden layers dumped on top of it, had the greatest taxonomical variety and the most precisely datable assemblage from the Hrísbrú site. Much of the material in this area, particularly the finds collected from the surface layers of the longhouse, can be associated directly with the occupation of the Viking Age longhouse. The deposits in this area were clearly stratified and, below the top few layers, had not been disturbed by natural post-depositional processes or human activity.

A clear Katla tephra layer from AD 1500 capped most of the deposits making the vast majority of the material firmly datable to the medieval period preceding the eruption. Layers of turf collapse from the walls and roof of the longhouse separate the layers associated with the longhouse from those dumped into the abandoned house, allowing for clear separation of the sampled material and a comparison of the food remains from the longhouse and post-longhouse occupation at the Hrísbrú site. The faunal finds are

presented by their broad temporal and super-contextual association in Table 7.7 and the rooms of the longhouse in Table 7.8, while Tables 7.9 and 7.10 show the archaeofauna divided into individual contexts associated with the longhouse and with the overlying midden layers respectively. The stratigraphic relationships of the TUN contexts are displayed in the Harris Matrix in Figure 7.11.

A total NISP of 3586 pieces of faunal material was recovered from the TUN area. 2994 pieces are associated with the longhouse occupation, 104 were found within the turf and stone layers from the collapsed longhouse, 424 derive from the midden layers pre-dating AD 1500, and 51 specimens have come from the top layers that post-date AD 1500. In the following discussion the faunal material from the TUN site is compared and divided according to these four temporal periods.

7.3.2.1 Faunal Material from the Longhouse Occupation Layers

The occupation layers inside the longhouse have been fully excavated and sampled on a 1 x 1 m grid to allow maximum resolution in the analysis of the finds. The information from these samples shows a considerable variation in the diet of the inhabitants of the longhouse (see Tables 7.7 and 7.8). Domesticated animals dominate the assemblage, but fragments of wild animal bones show that the inhabitants of the longhouse supplemented their diet through fishing, fowling, as well as scavenging of whales. The burned bone found in occupation surfaces indicates that the inhabitants ate the common Norse staples of sheep, cow, fish (flat fish and cod), pig, and seal. Several

bones exhibit visible modifications, including indications of butchering practices, rodent gnawing, and bone ornament manufacture.

The excavation methods and the large number of preserved floor layers make the Hrísbrú faunal collection from the longhouse a unique opportunity to study food refuse in its primary context. Most faunal remains derive from midden layers dumped outside of the house, but the Hrísbrú collection was deposited in the same building as the food was cooked and consumed. Although some of the material in these floor layers developed naturally as bones fell and ash settled on the floor, it seems likely that portions of these floor layers were purposefully created with hearth waste. Ethnographically in Iceland, hearth material was used to “clean” floors, take away odors, and flatten walking surfaces (Milek 2006). Such actions appear likely in the Hrísbrú longhouse considering the calcined bone contents of floor layers in rooms of the house that did not have hearths. Only the central hall contained a hearth.

The analysis of the faunal material from the longhouse considers the separate rooms and divided spaces of the house. The floor layers clearly indicate house divisions, probably dividing walls, between the central hall, the eastern gable room, and the western gable room. Moreover, an “intermediary area” exists between the western gable room and the central hall, which is clearly in character and use from the two adjacent rooms. The final spatial unit analyzed separately for this study is the western doorway, consisting of an elongated entranceway leading to the south out of the western gable room. Other divisions in space existed, such as the bench layers that were raised above the floor layers in the central hall, individual pit features, and a particularly clear alcove in the eastern

gable room. For analytical clarity and to maintain significant sample sizes, the analysis based on room division is most suitable. The central hall, where eating and cooking took place, included the largest number of finds as well as the greatest variation in species. Nevertheless, the significance of the differences between the faunal assemblages from the various rooms should probably not be overemphasized since it seems likely that the burned faunal material probably all derives from the long-fire hearth in the central hall.

The layers from the longhouse occupation that produced faunal material include bench layers (C-11, 12, and 137), post hole fill (C-21, 62, 87, and 191), hearth contents (C- 18), fill of pit features (C-40, 1421, 146, 161, 162, 182, 184, 235) and floor layers (C-14, 19, 88, 94, 95, 115, 145, 147, 156, 157, 158, 163, 168, 183, 190, 192, 202, 203, 209, 214) (see Table 7.9). The fragmented and small size of the specimens in the collection from the longhouse means that the MNI (Minimum Number of Individuals) in the longhouse is no more than 1 for each species. The age of the animals was most often unclear. Nevertheless, five specimens of sheep/goat bone from the longhouse came from juvenile animals, while two juvenile cows could be discerned.

Common Name	Scientific Name	Longhouse	Post-1500	Pre-1500 Midden	Wall Collapse	Total
Atlantic cod	Gadus Morhua	1		1		2
cf. Cod	cf. Gadidae	122				122
Flat Fish	Pleuronectiformes	3				3
Bony Fish	Teleostei	241		9		250
Auk	*Alcidae* (medium to small)	12				12
Auk (cf. Auklet)	*Alcidae* (small)	18		1		19
Pink footed goose	*Anser brachyrhynchus*		9			9
Bird		7		1		8
Sheep/Goat	*Ovis/Capra*	64	4	38	2	108
Cow	*Bos taurus*	10	1	140	50	201
Sheep/Goat/Cow	*Ovis/Capra/Bos*	13		2		15
Horse/Cow	*Equus/Bos*	1	1	1		3
Horse	*Equus caballus*			3		3
Pig	*Sus scrofa*	1		1		2
Rat	*Rattus sp.*	1				1
Land mammal		2491	36	221	52	2800
Walrus	*Odobenus rosmarus*			1		1
Whale	*Cetacea*	1				1
cf. Seal	*cf. Pinnipedia*	8		2		10
cf. Marine mammal				3		3
Grand Total		**2994**	**51**	**424**	**104**	**3573**

Table 7.7 Numbers of animal bones (NISP) found at the TUN site separated into larger super-context divisions. "Longhouse" finds are from surface layers and internal features in the Viking Age longhouse. The "Wall Collapse" group consists of finds from contexts of the collapsed turf and stone walls of the longhouse. The "Pre-1500 Midden" finds are from layers of secondarily deposited midden material dumped into the cavity of the abandoned longhouse from a nearby later medieval and as yet unidentified house. The "Pre-1500 Midden" layers pre-date the AD 1500 Katla tephra layer, while the layers included in the "Post-1500" group were found above the Katla tephra.

The assemblage contained 367 fish bone fragments from 15 different contexts and in all spatial units of the longhouse. A large sample of *Gadidae* (cod) bones was

identified in layers C-40, 115, and 235, while three examples of *pleuronectiformes* (flat fish) have been identified from bench surface C-12 (see Table 7.9). Most of the fish bones could only be identified as *teleostei* (bony fish). The fill of two pit features (C-40 in the western gable room and C-235 in the central hall) contained a particularly dense concentration of fish bone. The surface layer on top of the southern bench (C-12) contained the most fish bones of any context in the house. Concentration of fish bones in the surface layers in the central hall suggest they were consumed in this area. The fish bones in the midden pit features were secondarily deposited in these locations.

One substantial whale bone piece and eight fragments of marine mammal (cf. seal) bone were found in the top floor layer in the central of the longhouse (C-19). Marine mammal was differentiated by closed marrow cavity and diagnostic cancellous tissue patterns. No other layers associated with the occupation of the longhouse contained examples of marine mammal bone.

Bird bones appeared in all the divisions of the house: contexts 11, 14, 18, and 235 in the central hall, contexts 168, 202 in the eastern gable room, context 115 in the western doorway, and context 40 in the western gable room. Bird bone appeared in the greatest variety of contexts in the central hall, including a bench surface, a floor layer, the central hearth, and a refuse pit. However, a large number of *Alcidae* (auk) bones came from a small floor layer in the eastern gable room of the longhouse (C-202; see Figure 7.9 and Table 7.9). This floor layer is almost certainly a single event dump and is the lowest floor layer in this part of the house. It is possible that all these alcidae bones are from a single

animal that served a meal early in the history of the Hrísbrú longhouse and that the ashes from this meal were then used to even out the surface next to an adjacent post hole.

Land mammal bones (2581 specimens) made up the majority (86%) of the faunal assemblage from the deposits associated with the longhouse. Most of the bones were very small fragments, only identifiable as land mammal, however, sheep, cow, pig and a small rodent (rat or mouse) bones were also found. Almost half (1273) of bone fragments were found in the central hall of the longhouse. Sheep bones were found in all the rooms of the house and cow bones were unearthed in every room except the eastern gable room. A single pig canine was found in post hole fill (F-2007-83 in C-62) in the eastern gable room. A calcined tibia fragment of what appeared to be a rat was identified from the floor in the central. If this is a rat tibia, this would be the first identified in Viking Age contexts in Iceland (McGovern 2010: 221). A single bone fragment from floor layer C-14 in the central hall showed rodent gnawing marks, further demonstrating the presence of rodents in the house.

Evidence of butchery practices in the Hrísbrú longhouse was found on five land mammal bones. The butchery practices included both slices and chops with iron tools. “Chops,” heavier blows with an axe or cleaver causing shearing and crushing on impact, are usually associated with initial butchery or early stages of cooking (McGovern: 2010: 182). In contrast, “slices,” are more controlled cuts with a knife that would probably be more common at the table (McGovern 2010: 182). Three of the six bone fragments with butchery marks were parts of ribs. Three of the five came from floor layer C-95 in the intermediary area. One rib fragment from C-203 in the eastern gable room had a visible

slice mark. One cow rib from C-95 showed several cut marks. Several cut marks can be seen on a 2nd distal phalanx of a cow from bench surface C-12. These cut marks were made at the top of the hoof at the edge of the fur-bearing part of the skin by the toes. An *Ardiadactyla* rib fragment from C-95 and a land mammal bone fragment from floor layer C-14 in the central hall both showed clear chop marks, distinguished by bone being pushed aside on either side of the mark from the force of the blow. Another bone fragment from C-95 featured several chop marks that could be either for marrow extraction or an attempt at tool creation.

Common Name	Central Hall	East Room	Intermediary Area	West Doorway	West Room	Total
Atlantic Cod					1	1
cf. Cod	121			1		122
Flat Fish	3					3
Bony Fish	173	9	3	16	40	241
Fish Total	**297**	**9**	**3**	**17**	**41**	**367**
Auk (medium to small)		12				12
Auk (cf. Auklet)	2	10			6	18
Bird	5	1		1		7
Bird Total	**7**	**23**		**1**	**6**	**37**
Sheep/Goat	21	5	13	5	20	64
Sheep/Goat/Cow	6	1	1		5	13
Cow	6		1	2	1	10
Horse/Cow		1				1
Pig		1				1
Rat	1					1
Land Mammal	1239	206	242	258	546	2491
Land Mammal Total	**1273**	**214**	**257**	**265**	**572**	**2581**
Whale	1					1
cf. Seal	8					8
Marine Mammal Total	**9**					**9**
Grand Total	**1586**	**246**	**260**	**283**	**619**	**2994**

Table 7.8 Numbers of identified animal bones (NISP) from the Hrísbrú longhouse divided into rows of identified taxa and columns for each of five spatial units within the house.

Taxon/ Context	11	12	14	18	19	21	40	62	87	88	94	95	115	137	141	145	146
Atlantic Cod							1										
cf. Cod													1				
Flat Fish		3															
Bony Fish		156	8	6	2		33					2	16			1	4
Auk (medium to small)																	
Auk (small, cf. Auklet)				1			6										
Bird	1		1	1									1				
Sheep/Goat		2	8	2	1		13				2	9	5			2	3
Sheep/Goat/Cow	1		3	2			4			1		1					
Cow	1	3	2				1					1	2				
Horse/Cow																	
Pig								1									
Rat			1														
Land mammal	34	143	578	75	141	1	263	18	9		80	214	258	1	16	93	59
cf. Seal					8												
Whale					1												
Grand Total	**37**	**307**	**601**	**87**	**153**	**1**	**321**	**19**	**9**	**1**	**82**	**227**	**283**	**1**	**16**	**96**	**66**

Table 7.9 (part 1) Number of identified specimens (NISP) in contexts associated with the habitation of the longhouse in TUN excavation area.

Taxon/ Context	162	163	168	182	183	184	190	191	192	202	203	209	214	235	Total
Atlantic Cod															1
cf. Cod														121	122
Flat Fish															3
Bony Fish			1	3		1				5			3		241
Auk (medium to small)										12					12
Auk (small, cf. Auklet)			3							7				1	18
Bird			1											2	7
Sheep/Goat	1		1	3		4	5				2				64
Sheep/Goat/Cow	1														13
Cow															10
Horse/Cow											1				1
Pig															1
Rat															1
Land mammal	176	19	9	25	16	28	15	7	28	9	57	3	33	9	2491
cf. Seal															8
Whale															1
Grand Total	**178**	**19**	**15**	**31**	**16**	**33**	**20**	**7**	**28**	**33**	**60**	**3**	**36**	**133**	**2994**

Table 7.9 (part 2). Number of identified specimens (NISP) in contexts associated with the habitation of the longhouse in TUN excavation area.

7.3.2.2 Faunal Material from Medieval Midden Layers (Post-Longhouse, Pre-1500)

The midden layers that were dumped into the cavity of the abandoned longhouse by later medieval inhabitants of the Hrísbrú site yielded a stratified and temporally controllable sample of faunal bones that shed much light on the economy of post-longhouse medieval farm. Together these midden layers yielded 424 specimens. Just over half of these (221) were not distinguishable beyond the category of land mammal, but the other half of the collection showed significant variation in the diet of the medieval inhabitants of Hrísbrú. Cow bones outnumbered all other species, but fish, sheep, pig, horse, marine mammal, and wild fowl are also represented (see Table 7.10). Carbon dating of barley seed samples from several of the midden layers dumped into the cavity of the longhouse indicates that these midden layers date to a period very soon after the abandonment of the longhouse, probably in the late 10th or early 11th century (see Table 7.2; see also Appendix 1).

A comparison of the contents of the each of the individual midden layers shows that C-34 contained almost half (44%, 187 specimens) of the total counts of the recovered animal bone. C-34 was the last midden layer to be dumped in the ruins of the longhouse, and covers the entire eastern end of the longhouse cavity, sloping up the sides of the structure's collapsed walls. The midden contained a concentration of fire-cracked stones that were secondarily deposited in the longhouse cavity, probably from hearth cleaning activities at a nearby homestead. Midden layer C-34 contained burnt and degraded unburned bone including cow teeth and mandibles and mussel periostracum. One unidentifiable land mammal bone had clear cut marks. Context 34 also contained the

most variation of the any of the midden layers, including cow, horse, sheep, cod, and bird (probably auklet). This layer was the only midden layer containing any bird bone and also the only midden layer with fish bone identifiable as cod. C-34 was the only supplying a MNI (minimum number of individuals) higher than 1, as it included bones from at least two cows (two right lower M1) and two sheep (two lower left M1).

Taxon/ Context	8	9	15	34	36	38	39	44	47	65	142	Midden Total
Atlantic Cod				1								1
Bony Fish	3			1			5					9
Auk (small, cf. Auklet)				1								1
Bird	1											1
Sheep/goat			3	30			4	1				38
Sheep/Goat/Cow		1	1									2
Cow		5		44	71	20						140
Horse/Cow				1								1
Horse				1			1	1				3
Pig								1				1
Land mammal	31	37	7	108		6	24		2	1	5	221
Walrus			1									1
cf. Seal	2											2
cf. Marine mammal	3											3
Grand Total	**40**	**43**	**12**	**187**	**71**	**26**	**34**	**3**	**2**	**1**	**5**	**424**

Table 7.10 Number of identified specimens (NISP) in midden layers dumped inside the cavity of the abandoned longhouse in TUN excavation area.

The lowest and oldest midden layers (C-8, 9, and 44), taken together, appear to have a faunal profile distinct from the rest of the midden layers. They contain the only pig bone (in C-44) and 5 of the 6 examples of marine mammal bone (C-8). Interestingly

there is little diagnostic cow and sheep bone from these layers (see Table 7.10). There has been some discussion in Iceland about the presence of pigs after the initial settlement period, as they were less adaptable to the Icelandic environment after the forests had been cleared (Amorosi and McGovern 1994). Pigs are common on Icelandic sites from the 9th to the 11th centuries, but then grow increasingly rare in the 12th and 13th centuries (Edvardsson and McGovern 2005: 26). The one pig bone here illustrates that pigs were still eaten after the abandonment of the longhouse sometime in the late 10th or early 11th century. It is possible that the absence of pig bone from any of the later midden layers indicates the cessation of pig husbandry sometime during the medieval period.

Although the midden layers are not contemporary and can be analyzed by themselves for changes over time, a comparison of these midden layers as a unit with the faunal material from the longhouse occupation layers provides broad-based suggestions about the similarities and differences between the Viking Age economy centered on the longhouse and the economy that persisted at the Hrísbrú farm after the abandonment of the longhouse (see Table 7.7 and Figure 7.6). Among the clearest patterns from the comparison of these two periods is the greater number and higher percentage of fish bone found in the longhouse occupation layers. It is possible that some of this dramatic difference is a signature of the recovery methods. The floor layers were floated over 2 mm mesh, whereas only 10 liters of each midden layer was treated in this way and the rest was screened over ¼ inch mesh. Despite these variations in collection methods, the difference is significant and could indicate a higher reliance on fish in the diet of the early settlers at Hrísbrú. This scenario could be supported by the much larger number of cow

bones from the midden layers. The midden layers contained 140 cow bones whereas the longhouse layers, which yielded a much larger number of bones, have only yielded 10 identifiable cow bones. Depositional processes for the inside of a structure as opposed to a midden dumping area may, however, account for at least part of this discrepancy. The midden layers contained many more cow teeth sometimes attached to fragmented jaw bones. Cow teeth are diagnostically more recognizable than small fragmented limb bones, for example. The jaw bones and teeth were probably among the bones that were collected and discarded outside of the house, thus ending up more frequently in middens than trampled into floor deposits.

7.3.2.3 Faunal Material from Post-1500 Layers

Very little faunal material was recovered from the layers post-dating AD 1500 (see Table 7.7). In most areas the in situ Katla AD 1500 tephra was only a few centimeters below the topsoil and occasionally included in the sod roots. The most interesting archaeofauna finds from these top layers were several calcined elements of an adult pink-footed goose (*Anser brachyrhynchus*) that was recovered within the Katla tephra. The pink-footed goose is a highland bird species (McGovern 2010: 225) was probably brought to Hrísbrú from outside of the valley.

7.3.3 Church Knoll (Kirkjuhóll)

The bone collection from the Church Knoll (CK) area was mostly uncovered as part of the large stratum of mixed soils (Stratum I) disturbed by the grave shafts for the

human inhumations surrounding the medieval church as well as the later early modern structure constructed on top of this area. The small post-medieval building was itself very poorly preserved and it was only possible to identify two wall fragments. Land mammal bones made up the vast majority of the faunal bone collection from CK with 551 identified pieces. 21 fish bone pieces and one bird bone fragment were also identified from CK. No clear layers could be associated with this building. The result, with a few exceptions addressed below, is a mixed and non-stratified collection of faunal material which can only be treated as a whole with no temporal control.

A midden pit (Feature 10) found in 2001 to the southeast of the church contained the most plentiful and interesting material from CK. Feature 10 was a closed context midden pit with dense trash midden material containing the richest faunal assemblage found at CK. Feature 10 was a small midden pit stratigraphically beneath one of the burials (Feature 6). A small carbonized twig was carbon dated to a calibrated age of AD 900-990, making it almost certain that this pit was connected with the contemporary occupation of the longhouse located about 20 m to the north. The pit contents are therefore temporally related to the faunal material retrieved through preliminary sampling of the floor layers of the longhouse. Feature 10 contained 90 small fragments of unidentifiable land mammal, one pig bone, the proximal ischium (acetabulum) of what appears to be a rabbit (*leporidae*). Also within this feature were the ulnar carpal of a *Larus* sp. (gull, probably a herring gull), and 12 herring vertebrae, including one first vertebra. Only one of these fish bone vertebrae was calcined. The relatively good preservation of this feature must be explained by the alkalinity of the soil matrix that

consisted almost exclusively of charcoal and ash. One worked and polished bone needle made from terrestrial mammal bone was also uncovered from Feature 10. This small feature then made up most of the variation in the faunal remains from CK, contributing the only bird bone and 12 of the 21 fish bone pieces. Feature 10 also accounted for the entire sample of identifiable pig and rabbit.

Outside of Feature 10, the rest of the faunal assemblage from CK consisted almost exclusively of non-identifiable land mammal and a few cow, sheep, and non-species specific fish bones fragments. No clear patterns of the distribution of this material could be determined.

7.3.4 Elfin Hill (Hulduhóll)

The main feature of the Elfin Hill excavation was a Viking Age human cremation grave or the at least the site of the cremation event (see Chapter 9). The site yielded several human skull fragments likely to be from the same individual showing clear evidence of exposure to high temperatures while the bone was still "green" (White 1999; Ubelaker 1978). The layer containing these skull fragments also contained large pieces of charcoal, burned earth, a large amount of ash, and a sample of burned faunal material. The layers above the cremation also contained the usual ambient burned bone that exists in the top layers of all the excavated areas at the Hrísbrú farm. A relatively large number of bones (639 fragments) were recovered from the excavation area because all deposits were waterscreened over 1/8 inch mesh. The EH archaeofaunal assemblage included a relatively high percentage of fish and marine mammal and a lower percentage of

identifiable sheep/goat and cow bone, thus matching most closely the archaeofauna percentages found in the lower levels of the TUN site associated with the Viking Age longhouse.

The cremation layer at EH is a sealed context dated with multiple ^{14}C samples of native birch twigs to the late 10th to early 11th century (Byock et al. 2005). Caprine bones and at least one fish bone were found securely within the cremation layer. It is possible these few bones derive from animals included in the cremation rite. On the other hand it is also conceivable that the archaeofauna were food remains present at the site surface before the cremation took place and that they only became included within this layer during post-cremation processes such as the gathering together of the larger fragments of human bone.

As a whole, the faunal assemblage from EH consisted mostly of general land mammal bones. The EH excavation area was dominated by unidentifiable general land mammal bones, which make up over 80% of the sample (522 out of 639). Fish made up the second most common taxon with almost 13% (83 out of 639). Caprine bones represent 3% and marine mammal 1.7%. As noted, these percentages match most closely the faunal material recovered from the longhouse occupation layers. The affinity of the EH faunal material with the fauna from the longhouse makes sense since both assemblages date from the Viking period and represent the food remains from the same subsistence economy.

7.3 5 Discussion: The Hrísbrú Archaeofauna in Wider Context

The archaeofauna from Hrísbrú illustrates a diversified subsistence economy that through the longhouse and post-longhouse periods, utilized terrestrial domesticates and fish, as well as marine mammals and birds. The inhabitants of Hrísbrú, as most other Norse settlers of the North Atlantic, relied mostly on the terrestrial domesticates they brought from Scandinavia. Sheep/goats and cow were the most important domesticate food source, but at least initially pigs would also have provided meat. A single find from the TUN site suggests that the Norse settlers may also have brought a few rabbits with them to Iceland. In the earliest period at Hrísbrú, represented best by the assemblage from the longhouse occupation layers, but also by a pit midden on CK and the lowest levels at EH, domesticated fauna was substantially supplemented by fish and to a lesser degree by hunting/scavenging marine mammals. Later in the medieval period the contribution of fish to the diet of the inhabitants of Hrísbrú seems to have declined. The overall ratio of cattle to caprine bones identified in the faunal assemblage suggests a preference for cattle raising and supports the potential of the Hrísbrú fauna to sustain a chiefly political economy.

The faunal assemblage from Hrísbrú appears to be in many ways typical of the range of archaeofauna collection from other Viking Age and medieval Icelandic settlement sites. The variation in domesticated vs. wild fauna is very similar at most Icelandic sites (see Figures 7.8 and 7.9 for a comparison of wild and domesticated animals at Hrísbrú), but the percentages of identified taxa vary considerably and illustrate differences in local subsistence strategies. Sites in different regions often show localized

stress on one or the other species (Amorosi 1989; Amorosi and McGovern 1994; Harrison et al. 2004).

The material from the longhouse at Hrísbrú exhibits a species variation distinct from the faunal assemblages recovered from other Viking Age house sites such as Vatnsfjörður (Edvardsson and McGovern 2005) and Granastaðir (Amorosi and McGovern 1994). Differences in percentages of identified species between the sites show a more intensive utilization of pig and horse meat at Granastaðir, a greater reliance on marine mammal at Vatnsfjörður, and a preference for fish at Hrísbrú. The greater reliance on fish at Hrísbrú cannot be explained by proximity to the coast since Vatnsfjörður lies even closer to the sea. Furthermore, it is a common feature of Norse sites in Iceland and Greenland that even inland sites such as Granastaðir and Hofstaðir (McGovern 2010; Vésteinsson et al. 2002: 110), as well as far interior sites such as Aðalból in Hrafnkelsdalur (Amorosi 1989) still have significant amounts of fish bones. The relative abundance of fish bones at Hrísbrú, however, suggests that the farm had excellent access to the products of fishing in the region. This access may have been based on trade, but could also be a result of the control the chieftains at Hrísbrú may have had over the area and the other early farms, particularly Leirvogstunga lying immediately out to the sea.

The faunal assemblage from the Hrísbrú has a cow to caprine bone ratio at the high end of the variation shown from the fauna documented from other 9th-10th century Icelandic farms (see Figure 7.10). The high status 8th-9th century farm at Aaker in southern Norway has been used as the ideal or model high status Norse farm that aspiring chieftains in Iceland would have attempted to emulate. The faunal assemblage of

identifiable bones shows an approximate ratio of 2 cow bones to 1 sheep/goat bones (McGovern 2000: 331-332; Vésteinsson et al 2002: 108-109). Hrísbrú has a ratio of 1.18 cow bones to 1 sheep bones. The highest cow to sheep bone ratio from a settlement period farm comes from Tjarnargata, which showed a 1.85/1 ratio. Herjólfsdalur on the Westman Islands on the south coast of Iceland has a ratio of 1 cow to 1.11 sheep. The Hofstaðir farm in Mývatn in northern Iceland displayed a 1/3.04 ratio, while Granastaðir in Eyjafjörður in northern Iceland had a 1/2.03 ratio.

Preference for cattle has also been documented in Greenland, where the early ratios are 1 cattle bone to 2.3 caprine at the low status W 48 farm, whereas ratio declines to 1 cow to 8 caprines in the 14th century. Higher status sites in Greenland retain the economic focus on cows as seen at W51 Sandnes that produced a 1 to 1 ratio in the 11th-12th century, and retained a 1 to 1.15 ratio into the 14th century (Vésteinsson et al. 2002: 110; McGovern 1992).

Three factors appear to be significant determinants in the ratio of cow to caprine bones: age, local environment, and status. The early sites from the 9th and 10th century tend to have a higher proportion of cow bones. The local environment in southern Iceland appears to have been more favorable to cow-raising than the northern Iceland. Finally, high status sites, whether in northern Iceland, southern Iceland, or Greenland, retained higher ratio of cow to caprine bones. All three factors favoring high cattle to caprine ratios are present at Hrísbrú, making it difficult to ascertain whether the high ratio was driven by status competition and chiefly consumption. The Hrísbrú farmstead is located in a favorable environment in southern Iceland and at the mouth of a valley that would

have allowed extensive wetland meadow grazing of cattle. The Hrísbrú assemblage is also early, dating mostly from the 10th-11th century. In sum, although the motivation for a high cattle/caprine ratio cannot be determined, it is clear that the Hrísbrú farm had a subsistence strategy consistent with high status farms.

7.4 The Human Skeletal Evidence of Health and Subsistence

The excavation of twenty six inhumation graves from the churchyard at Hrísbrú has allowed the examination of the skeletal remains for evidence of human health and diet. The graves were all inhumations laid out east-west in Christian fashion around the conversion period church. Carbon dating of five skeletons confirms that the majority of the burials date to the period around the official arrival of Christianity to Iceland in AD 1000 (see Table 7.11). The graveyard at Hrísbrú likely contains inhabitants from the Hrísbrú farm, including members of the chiefly family, but also attached laborers working at the farm and possibly other people from the surrounding farms. So, although this graveyard is located on a chiefly farm, it probably contains a reasonable cross-section of society that includes the most powerful and the least powerful inhabitants of the valley. The mixed status composition of the churchyard population may also help to explain some of the poor health and common diseases observed in the Hrísbrú population. The skeletal remains suggest, however, that all social classes were involved

in significant amounts of physical labor, making it impossible to assess status based on the skeletal remains.[247]

The twenty six inhumation burials in the Hrísbrú churchyard include twenty-one graves containing skeletal material and five empty grave shafts. The sex of sixteen skeletons could be determined and resulted in the identification of twelve males and four females. Despite the poor preservation and the complete disintegration or removal of a few of the skeletons, the osteoarchaeological data for stature, sex, age, pathological conditions, as well as the isotopic evidence shed light on the subsistence, activity patterns, gender roles, origins, and diet of the Hrísbrú population.

Stature estimates were calculated for five adult males, but no female skeletons allowed similar estimates. The average estimated height of the five males was 168.3 cm. This height appears short when compared to other measured skeletons from Iceland and Northern Europe (Steffensen 1958; Steckel 2004). Steffensen's estimates of Icelanders from the 9th to the 11th centuries based on the analysis of 22 skeletons including both males and females yield an average of 172.3 cm. This makes the male population at Hrísbrú on average 4 cm shorter than Steffensen's mixed population sample. The sample sizes from Hrísbrú and from Iceland as a whole are small, making any conclusions based on stature comparisons very provisional.

Stature is often employed as a reflection of net nutrition (Steckel 2004), and in this perspective, the nutrition and health of the Hrísbrú population would be rather poor.

[247] The analysis of the skeletal material for from the Hrísbrú churchyard was carried out primarily by Dr. Phillip Walker's osteoarchaeology team from the University of California, Santa Barbara, including Phillip Walker, Jacqueline Eng, Rebecca Richman, and Kaethin Prizer. Dr. Per Holck from the University of Oslo assisted with this analysis. These members of the Mosfell Archaeological Project made all identifications of age, sex, and pathologies

This is unexpected, since other material indications suggest that Hrísbrú was a relatively wealthy high-status household with access to locally cultivated barley, an “ideal” Norse cattle/caprine economy, and extensive wild resources. It therefore seems likely that other factors are responsible for the short stature of the Hrísbrú males.

The relatively poor health of the Hrísbrú population is supported by a range of pathologies observed in the Hrísbrú skeletal population. Two individuals exhibited skeletal lesions consistent with tuberculosis. Sinus infections and broken bones are also common. One man (Burial 4) died of an ear infection that caused a brain abscess. Childhood for at least some of the Hrísbrú population involved nutritional stress and hard labor. Linear enamel hypoplasia in the teeth of several individuals indicates that they experienced stress and disrupted growth during early childhood, while the skeleton of a 7-8 year old (Burial 52) shows signs of heavy work.

The people buried in the Hrísbrú cemetery who survived early childhood usually lived into their late 30s and 40s. The skeletal population allowed age estimation with varying degrees of accuracy for seventeen individuals. These seventeen individuals include one infant, one child of about 7 or 8, one sub-adult, three people in their 20s, nine adults in their 30s and 40s, one woman aged around 50, and one man older than 60 (see Table 7.11). The cause of death could be determined in two individuals. One man (Burial 4) died of an ear infection that caused a brain abscess, while another man was killed with multiple bladed weapons (Walker et al. 2004; Walker et al. 2010).

The activities and farm work in which the Hrísbrú population engaged was gender specific and strenuous for males. Male skeletons showed frequent use of hands in a

strong grip and evidence of repeated pulling activities. These could be consistent with rowing and/or horseback riding. The males at Hrísbrú had extensive evidence of osteoarthritis, particularly in the wrist (50 % of male joints) and elbows (80% of male joints), probably brought on in part by agricultural work (Walker et al. 2004). The females in the Hrísbrú population lack the same evidence for strenuous activity. Evidence of female work was found in one woman's (Burial 1) distinctive tooth wear indicating use of her teeth during work, probably as a seamstress. The skeletal population of Hrísbrú suggests a sexually based differentiation in labor and activities, with male skeletons showing evidence of physically demanding work carried out outside of the house whereas female skeletons display signs of likely indoor activities and less evidence of hard-labor related skeletal changes.

Isotopic evidence from several of the skeletons in the Hrísbrú cemetery shed light on the diets of the population as well as their geographic origins. Carbon and strontium isotope studies provide a rough estimate of the proportion of marine diet consumed by the inhabitants of the Mosfell Valley. A $^{13}C/^{12}C$ ration of -17.4 0/00 obtained from the bone collagen of Burial 2 in the Hrísbrú cemetery suggests that this individual derived approximately 28% of his protein from marine sources in the decade or so before his death (Byock et al. 2002; Walker et al. 2010). $^{87}Sr/^{86}Sr$ ratios from the teeth of six skeletons (Burials 3, 4, 18, 43, 46) from the Hrísbrú churchyard confirm that marine foods made up a substantial percentage of the diet of the population.

The $^{87}Sr/^{86}Sr$ ratios from the teeth of six people from the Hrísbrú cemetery shows that they all grew up in Iceland, but that the $^{87}Sr/^{86}Sr$ ratios in their teeth had been

elevated by the consumption of marine foods (Schwarcz and Dickin 2003; Byock et al. 2004; Walker et al. 2004). The mean of the strontium ratios of the Hrísbrú population (0.70754) falls between the ratios from the Mid-Atlantic Ridge basalt that forms the geology of Iceland (0.703) and sea water (0.7092). The old granites of Norway and the British Isles, where the Norse immigrated from have much higher rations, between 0.7190 and 07140. From these figures, it appears that the people buried at Hrísbrú absorbed 73% of their strontium from marine foods (Byock et al. 2004). This does not, however, translate to an equivalent percent of total caloric intake, since marine animals contain a much larger concentration of strontium than terrestrial foods (Walker et al. 2004). Compared to previously examined strontium isotope ratios in teeth of Icelanders from the inland Viking Age site of Skeljastaðir (72.7% under 0.7075) and the late medieval cemetery on the island of Haffjarðarey (all above 0.7078; Price and Gestsdóttir 2006), the Hrísbrú population appears to be intermediate between the other two sites in terms of their consumption of marine foods.

Burial ID	Skeletal material	Sex	Age	Stature	Pathology and Health	Activities	Phase	$^{87}Sr/^{86}Sr$	$^{13}C/^{12}C$	C14 (Calibrated)
1	x	F	35-50			groove in upper left incisor- possibly seamstress	church			
2	x	M	mid 40s	166	killed by bladed weapons		church		-17.4	AD 890-990
6	x (teeth)		infant				church			
3	x	M	late 30s-mid 40s	171		prolonged sitting with extended legs and use of hands requiring strong grip	church	0.70666		
4	x	M	early to mid 20s	171-173	chronic ear infection affected brain, probably caused death; injury in fall, nutritional deficiency in childhood; tuberculosis	strenuous activity, probably from pulling	church	0.70767	-18.4	AD 780-980
5	x	M	45-50	161.8	osteoarthritis	teeth very worn, strenuous activity	church			
7	x	M	40-50		sinus infection	extensive tooth wear, repeated head movement	church			

Burial ID	Skeletal material	Sex	Age	Stature	Pathology and Health	Activities	Phase	$^{87}Sr/^{86}Sr$	$^{13}C/^{12}C$	C14 (Calibrated)
18	x	M	35-50		osteoarthritis in vertebrae and left hand		post-church	0.70740	-21.9	AD 1320-1350
24							church			
25	x (single humerus)						church			
37							church			
39							church			
41	x (single ulna)	M	adult				church			
43	x	F	early 20s		maxillary sinus infection		post-church	0.70719	-19.7	AD 810-1010
46	x	M	12-15		pulmonary infection on left side, tuberculosis		church	0.70803	-19.3	AD 660-870
47	x	F	40s		osteoarthritis		church			
49	x	M	35-50	170.5	osteoarthritis, healed fracture of right tibia, neural arch defect, mandibular tori	regular use of hands with strong grip,	church	0.70827		
52	x		7-8		early childhood stress	strenuous activities	church			
4852	x (dental enamel)		adult				church			
6514	x	M	30-40				church			

Burial ID	Skeletal material	Sex	Age	Stature	Pathology and Health	Activities	Phase	$^{87}Sr/^{86}Sr$	$^{13}C/^{12}C$	C14 (Calibrated)
15901	x	M	60 or more		abscess in alveolar bone, dental hypoplasia, dental caries, osteoarthritis,		church			
8830	x	F	around 50		dental hypoplasia, dental caries, large Schmorl‘s nodes- probably from axial overloading of the spine. Nodular exostosis- occlusal stress		church			
12000	x (dental enamel)		20s-early 30s				church			
2005-2							church			
2007-5	x	M	adult				church			
2007-3							church			

Table 7.11 Chart of the 26 burials excavated in the Hrísbrú churchyard providing a summary of the information derived from the analysis of the skeleton, carbon dating, and strontium isotope studies.

7.5 Conclusion: Evolving Resource Exploitation in the Mosfell Valley and the Link to the Trajectory of Local Social Power

The multidisciplinary investigations of ancient pollen, botanical samples, zooarchaeological remains, and human skeletal material combine to present a picture of how the population of the Mosfell Valley utilized natural resources and changed the character of the flora and fauna of the region. Food production relied on the mixed sedentary pastoral economic package of the Norse settlers, focusing on animal husbandry supplemented by barley cultivation, and the collection of wild resources. The archaeological evidence from the Mosfell Valley offers a view of resource exploitation, ecological change, and human adaptation not available in the textual sources. In combination, the multi-disciplinary archaeological evidence has revealed hitherto unknown local cereal production, skeletal proof of the nutritional costs of adaptation to a new environment in the North Atlantic, qualitative differences in wood and fuel use, as well as quantifiable details of medieval food consumption. Resources from this subsistence economy, particularly barley, beef, and building-quality wood, were invested in the prestige economy and employed in chiefly consumption and status display.

The focal point of the examination of the subsistence economy of the Mosfell Valley has been the chiefly household at Hrísbrú. The large-scale open area excavations at Hrísbrú allowed for the collection of samples from stratified layers and recognizable features that could be associated with clear contexts, such as house and church floor layers, bench surfaces, hearths, and post holes. Macrobotanical and zooarchaeological

samples from the house, the church, and both Christian burials and a pagan cremation show that the Hrísbrú houshold had enviable access to raw materials and resources that would have been ideal for chiefly subsistence and prestige economics. The impressive number of barley seeds recovered from floor layers dwarfs assemblages from other chiefly households, such as Hofstaðir, excavated with the same modern methods. Birch wood charcoal indicates continued access to native forests for fuel consumption. The high ratio of cow to caprine in the faunal assemblage is also consistent with a chiefly household. The zooarchaeological remains of fish and marine mammals as well as the carbon and strontium isotope ratios in the human skeletons show that the Hrísbrú inhabitants had access to plentiful marine resources. The skeletal population from the Hrísbrú graveyard is interesting particularly in light of these material indications of resource wealth and status, because it shows that life in early Iceland was labor intensive and difficult even for members of a high status household.

This chapter documents important changes in the subsistence economy that occurred towards the end of the study period of this dissertation. Consumption of marine resources appears to have declined as indicated by a decrease in the proportion of fish and marine mammal bones over time. This is supported by a dramatic decrease in the marine protein signature in the $^{13}C/^{12}C$ isotope ratio from the only later medieval skeleton (Burial 18) in the Hrísbrú churchyard. Probably most significantly, barley cultivation at the Hrísbrú farm disappeared and the apparent management of the local birch forest collapsed by the beginning the 13th century. Barley cultivation had continued after the abandonment of the longhouse, probably in the 11th century, as indicated by the

prevalence of barley seeds in the midden layer dumped into the ruins of the longhouse. The pollen profile also shows that birch forests continued to prosper into the 12th century. The 13th century appears to be the period of dramatic change in the management of natural resources. The reorganization of the resource base does not correspond with the movement of the main Mosfell farm from Hrísbrú to the current Mosfell, recorded by textual sources as occurring in the middle of the 12th century. The collapse of barley production may instead have an explanation that directly relates to the decreasing social power of the Mosfell chieftains in the 13th century. The Hrísbrú household and the chieftains in the Mosfell Valley seem to have lost some of their access to a diverse resource pool that fueled the early chiefly political economy. Marine foods were diverted elsewhere, field fertilization and grain cultivation was abandoned, birch forests cut down, and the Mosfellingar were left to rely more exclusively on their pastoral herding.

Chapter 8 Political Power and the Prestige Economy in the Mosfell Valley

8.1 Introduction

Political power is difficult to identify archaeologically in the medieval Icelandic context. Medieval Iceland lacked permanent regional administrative centers with a well-defined architecture of power. The closest were the regional assembly or *þing* sites where chieftains and their followers met to solve disputes. These assembly sites are ephemeral in the archaeological record and cannot be connected to any particular group or farmstead. The assemblies were held during short periods in the summer in shifting locations in the landscape. They had little permanent architecture and the natural geography usually determined the position of the meeting. The assembly sites that have been identified, including the local district assembly attended by the Mosfell chieftains, cannot be associated with any particular domestic sites or leaders. Consequently, this chapter relies primarily on analysis of domestic sites for a discussion of political power.

The political system of medieval Iceland centered on the chieftain and his house. The chiefly longhouses functioned as meeting halls for the chieftains' supporters and the chieftains used their halls for status display. This chapter therefore compares the material culture of longhouses as indications of status. Various forms of politically motivated activity, status display and worship took place in Viking Age chieftain's halls. After the adoption of Christianity, this changed only partially with the movement of the primary religious worship to a structure outside of the longhouse.

All available evidence points to the fact that the Hrísbrú longhouse was a chieftain's house. Orri Vésteinsson has categorized Icelandic houses into low, middle, and high status by reference to three parameters, i.e. house size, artifacts/prestige goods, and historical records indicating status (Vésteinsson 2004: 74-75). The Hrísbrú longhouse measures an impressive 28 m from end to end, which makes it one of the largest Viking Age longhouses excavated in Iceland (Table 8.1; see Figures 6.3, 6.4., 6.8). The Hrísbrú longhouse yielded more imported glass beads than any other archaeologically excavated farmstead in Iceland. Finally, several detailed medieval Icelandic sagas mention chieftains living at the old Mosfell farm located at the site of present day Hrísbrú. By Vésteinsson's criteria, the Hrísbrú farmstead is clearly the seat of an important high-status household in Iceland during the 10th-11th centuries.

This chapter aims to proceed further in employing archaeological material to define a high-status site in medieval Iceland. This study will help to clarify the structure of the household of Hrísbrú, the wider social organization of the Mosfell region, and provide information on the archaeological correlates of the sources of chiefly power in Iceland. Status has not been a focus of Icelandic archaeology. Rather Icelandic archaeology has over time focused on a text-based interest in the homes of saga heroes, the evolution of house architecture, and more recently the environmental impacts of the initial settlers and the nature of the early Episcopal sites. The lack of focus on status is partially due to a persistent belief, partially originating in the saga tradition, that differences in status were negligible in medieval Iceland, particularly when compared to the Scandinavian homelands (Vésteinsson 2004: 79). However, archaeological work has

also supported this idea. For instance, Hofstaðir is the only Viking Age site that Vésteinsson unreservedly classifies as “high status,” but in her final interpretation of the artifactual material, Colleen Batey (2010) concludes that there is no indication from the finds that Hofstaðir was a high status site.

This chapter will address first the ephemeral administrative centers and attempt to locate the administrative nodes in which the Mosfell chieftains were involved. As will be shown, the implications of the location and character of these sites are difficult to interpret. Nevertheless, it is clear that the Mosfell chieftains benefited from quick and easy access to the local and island-wide administrative power centers. The historically important regional Kjalarnes Assembly was located within the power sphere of the initial kinship alliance network of the first settler in the Mosfell Valley. Both this regional assembly and the national Althing assembly were located within a day’s horseback ride from the Mosfell Valley.

Secondly, the structure of the longhouse is analyzed as a monumental hall that served as a private home, a feasting hall, and a materialized statement of the power of the occupant. Particular attention is directed towards the construction of the hall, the internal organization of social space, and the feasting potential of the inhabitants. The Mosfell chieftain invested in status display and competition with local products from the subsistence economy such as beef and barley, as well as with resources such as driftwood and birch forests acquired through direct control or special access.

Finally, the chapter turns to the artifactual material from Hrísbrú and the imported prestige goods uncovered in the longhouse to evaluate the status of the Hrísbrú chieftains.

Products of copper, silver, and glass arrived at Hrísbrú from Europe and Asia as part of the overseas exchange that maintained the chieftain's potential for material wealth displays and gift giving. The medieval port of trade at Leirvogur is the logical entry site of these imported goods. Although difficult to track archaeologically, texts indicate that the Mosfell chieftains controlled the Leirvogur port (see Chapter 4). The combination of evidence from archaeological survey, landscape archaeology, place name study, and texts indicates that through the local geography and directed efforts, the chieftains of Mosfell were able to take advantage of not just the exchange of goods, but also the exchange of valuable information and the formation of social bonds.

8.2 Political Administration and the Missing Architecture of Power in Medieval Icelandic Archaeology: Approaching the Assembly Sites Attended by the Mosfell Chieftains

The administrative structure of medieval Iceland was based on the Norse-Germanic system of assemblies or things (Old Norse sing. *þing*) that met regularly in predetermined locations to resolve personal and intergroup conflicts (Byock 2001: 170-174; Jóhannesson 35-40). In Iceland, there were three types of yearly assemblies, including two regional assemblies held in the spring and the autumn, and an island-wide assembly called the Althing (*Alþingi*) held every June at Þingvellir (also used in the singular Þingvöllr). Local Spring Assemblies were probably established soon after the settlement of Iceland and at least two regional assemblies are recorded as preceding the founding of the national Althing in AD 930. The location of the Althing is well-known

and remained stable, but the identification of regional assembly sites has been much more controversial (Friðriksson 1994: 143). This section explores the possible locations of the regional assembly for the Mosfell region. The location of the local assembly attended by the Mosfell chieftains has implications for the examination of the social power of the Mosfell chieftains. This assembly was the arena where local political contests were enacted and a favorable placement of the thing site close to the power base of the Mosfell chieftains would benefit them in political contests that were often won by the presence of a force of supporters.

The regional assembly sites were much smaller than the Althing and often shifted locations. The changing location of the local assembly sites allowed for shifting local power dynamics. The Spring Assemblies, which had local judicial functions of dispute resolution, appear to be older and more important events than the Autumn Assemblies. According the Old Icelandic laws in *Grágás*, after the reforms of 960, each Spring Assembly (*várþing*) was run by three local chieftains. The whole country was split into four quarters and each quarter had three Spring Assemblies, except the Northern Quarter, which had four local assemblies. On the other hand, the Autumn Assembly (*leið*) was held in August and served to inform people of the news from the Althing. Since Autumn Assemblies could be held by individual chieftains, unofficially they also served to reaffirm chieftain and thingman (supporter) allegiances (Byock 2001: 174).

The location of most of the regional assembly sites is unclear and the potential material correlates for their identification are controversial and difficult to locate archaeologically. The assembly sites did not have any permanent architecture, shifted

locations periodically, and were only occupied for about one week each year, making the archaeological traces very ephemeral. The temporary occupation of these sites suggests that one important archaeological correlate should be temporary and seasonal occupation. The medieval texts provide additional potential archaeological correlates with references to a “court or judgment ring” (*dómhringr*) for the meeting of the judges and clusters of turf “booths” (*buðir*) used as temporary housing during the assembly.

The nature and materials used in the construction of the court ring are unknown. A few stone circles found at potential assembly sites have been interpreted as a court ring (see e.g. Guðmundsson 1987), but the *Grágás* laws and the sagas suggest that at least some court rings could have been set up yearly (Friðriksson 1994: 107-108). On the other hand, the appearance of the booths, small structures (1 x 2) with turf walls and a textile tent-like roof, is well-known from texts and archaeology. The booths are nevertheless also problematic as they are archaeologically identical to other small turf structures also found at habitation sites and particularly at trading sites.

Based mostly on textual sources and place names studies, scholars have identified a number of potential assembly sites (see map of sites in Byock 2001: 172-173). Two sites, Hegranes and Þingnes by Elliðavatn, have received broad recognition as successfully identified archaeological examples of thing sites. The latter of these two sites would have been the local thing site for the Mosfell chieftains.

8.2.1 The Spring Assembly Site of the Mosfell Chieftains

The Mosfell chieftains attended the Kjalarnes Assembly, which is the western-most assembly in the Southern Quarter of the Icelandic Free State. Both *Íslendingabók* (*ÍF* 1: 8) and *Landnámabók* (*ÍF* 1:46) state that Ingólfr Arnarson's son, Þorsteinn Ingólfsson, established this spring assembly on the Kjalarnes peninsula to the northwest of the Mosfell Valley, prior to the founding of the Althing (see Figure 8.1 map of the possible locations of thing sites attended by the Mosfell chieftains). These sources do not say where on the peninsula the assembly was held, but *Kjalnesinga Saga* (*ÍF* 14: 8) does note in passing that the booths from this assembly could still be seen there in the late Middle Ages.

The *Styrmisbók* version of *Landnámabók* states that Þorsteinn established the Kjalarnesþing (Kjalarnes Assembly) with the advice of other local chieftains in his kinship alliance network: "*við ráð Helga bjólu ok Örlygs at Esjubergi ok annarra viturra manna…*"[248] As detailed in Chapter 3, this kinship alliance network included Þórðr Skeggi, the first settler of the Mosfell Valley. The placement of the first known Spring Assembly within the area dominated by this kinship alliance network brought national political power to the region. After the Althing was established, the chieftains of the Kjalarnesþing assembly and the descendents of Þorsteinn were given the honorary title of supreme chieftain (*Allsherjargoði*) of this national assembly.

On the Kjalarnes peninsula, there are several place names suggesting the presence of both spring and autumn assemblies, but no archaeological evidence has been

[248] "*on the advice of Helgi Bjóla, Örlygr of Esjuberg and other wise men…*"

recovered. In the beginning of the 18th century, the famous antiquarian Árni Magnússon drew a map of Kjalarnes on which the name Þingeyri ("Assembly-gravel-bank") is located in the middle of the southern coast of the peninsula (Bjarnason and Guðmundsson 2005: 34-35). The places called Leiðvöllur ("Autumn-assembly plain") and Leiðhamrar ("Autumn-assembly precipice") are located by the sea on the Kjalarnes peninsula west of the Mógilsá river, and some scholars have identified this area as the most likely location of the original Kjalarnesþing (Jóhannesson 1974: 76; Friðriksson 129-130). Based on the place name evidence it seems likely that both spring and autumn assemblies were held on the Kjalarnes peninsula. Since no material evidence has been identified, however, the exact location and character of the assembly remains unknown.

A peninsula called Þingnes ("Assembly-promontory") stretching into the Elliðavatn Lake to the southeast of the Mosfell Valley is another candidate for the location of the Kjalarnes Assembly. The place name strongly suggests the presence of an assembly on this peninsula at some point in time, and archaeological excavations carried out by the National Museum of Iceland provided archaeological evidence of small temporarily occupied turf structures as well as a stone circle interpreted as a court ring (Guðmundsson 1987). Guðmundsson reports the discovery of 15-18 structures, most of which he believes were assembly booths. The "court ring" uncovered by Guðmundsson actually consists of two concentric circular features: an outer stone ring (18 m diameter) and an earlier ring of turf (8 m diameter) within the larger stone ring. The Þingnes complex of structures has been dated only roughly by tephrochronological analysis. Guðmundsson states that the earliest structures were built right on top of the Landnám

tephra from AD 871 ± 2 and that the site had been abandoned for some time when the Medieval tephra fell in AD 1226. Based on the Þingnes place name, the medieval date, the lack of permanent occupation layers and finds, and the similarity of the site to the conceptions of the material correlates of the assembly sites, Guðmundsson (1987: 349) concludes, "[m]y present belief is that this site was, at some stage between the 10th and the 13th centuries, used as an assembly site, and that it must have been the Kjalarnes Assembly." He concludes with the suggestion that the original Kjalarnes Assembly was established on the Kjalarnes peninsula and then moved to Þingnes.

Although there are issues with the identification of the Þingnes site as an assembly site mostly related to the lack of clear material correlates for such a site (Friðriksson 1994: 107-108, 129-135), Guðmundsson's evidence is frankly as good as it gets. The most likely scenario, then, appears to be that the district assembly attended by the Mosfell chieftains was located first somewhere on the Kjalarnes peninsula, possibly at Leiðvöllur, and then for a time on Þingnes in Elliðavatn. The implications of the location of the site should not be exaggerated, but the location of both sites within the power base of the Mosfell chieftains is significant. Travel to both these sites would have easily been accomplished within a day. Both of the sites are also within the original sphere of influence of the kinship alliance network formed by Þórðr Skeggi and his kinsmen. If the conclusion detailed in Chapter 4 about the extent of the power of the Mosfell chieftains over the Nesses is correct, then both sites were also within the 10th-11th century power sphere of the Mosfell chieftains. Although having both the local assembly site and the general national Althing within a day's ride of the seat of the Mosfell

chieftaincy must have been an advantage, the archaeology of these sites do not reveal much about the details of the power and status of the Mosfell chieftains. For more information about the prestige and political power of the Mosfell chieftains, we must therefore turn to the examination of the chiefly farmstead at Hrísbrú.

8.3 The Mosfell Chieftain's Longhouse at Hrísbrú

The Hrísbrú farmstead provides clear indications that this was a chieftain's establishment. The farm meets all three of Vésteinsson's (2004) criteria for a high status site: a monumental longhouse, plentiful prestige goods, and textual sources referring to the status of the site. This section details this evidence and connects it to chiefly status competition enacted in feasting and the display of power.

The longhouse at Hrísbrú is among the largest Viking Age houses excavated in Iceland (see Table 8.1). House size reflects status on several levels: 1) as a private home accommodating relatively large numbers of inhabitants, 2) as a public arena for feasting and probably also ritual activity in the pre-Christian period, 3) as a monumental symbol of power. A large house had the obvious practical purpose of accommodating more people. In absence of any other evidence, the larger the house, the more individuals are suspected of living in the house. A large house was particularly necessary for chieftains who periodically hosted ritually and politically charged feasts to build alliances, cement bonds of allegiance, and compete with other chiefs. The seating capacity of the main central hall in the house determined the number of individuals that could attend feasts. Finally, a monumental house was also a symbol that manifested the power of the owner

Longhouses	House and Hearth Dimensions					
	Max. Internal Length (m)	Max. Internal Width (m)	Approx. Floor Area (m2)	Central Hearth Length (m)	Central Hearth Width (m)	Approx. Central Hearth Area (m2)
Aðalstræti	16.7	5.8	96.9	4.37	1.07	4.68
Bessastaðir 19		5.4		>2.6	0.8	
Eiríksstaðir	12.3	3.8	46.7	2.95	0.65	1.92
Granastaðir 9	14.7	5.4	79.4	4.34	0.9	3.9
Grelutóttir	13.4	5.4	72.4	3.1	0.9	2.79
Herjólfsdalur II	13.5	3.5	47.3			
Herjólfsdalur V	10	3.5	35	1.3	0.8	1.04
Hrísbrú	25.2	5.1	113.2	4.3	0.75	3.23
Hofstaðir	35.9	7.7	276.4	1.2	0.7	0.84
Hólmur		3.8		1.4	0.74	1.04
Hvítárholt III	20	6.3	126	1.8	0.5	0.9
Hvítárholt VIII	18	5	90	1.5	0.5	0.75
Hvítárholt IX	16.3	5	81.5	1	0.55	0.55
Ísleifsstaðir	19.8	5.6	110.9	2.4	0.95	2.28
Skallakot	26	5.4	140.4	2.4	0.65	1.56
Snjáleifartóttir	16.3	5.5	89.7	1.8	0.7	1.26
Suðurgata		3.5		1.2	0.75	0.9
Sveigakot S4		4.7		1.38	0.4	0.55
Sveigakot MT 1				1.35	0.4	0.54
Vatnsfjörður	14.3	4.9	70.1	1.98	0.6	1.19

Table 8.1 Comparisons of the sizes of the excavated longhouses and the sizes of the central hearths. The longest houses and the clearest candidates for chiefly status are Hrísbrú, Hofstaðir, and Skallakot. Compare with Table 8.2 showing the prestige goods uncovered at each of these sites (Most of the data for this table comes from Milek 2006: Table 3.2; additional data from Lucas 2010 and the Mosfell Archaeological Project is also incorporated).

for local neighbors, allies, and attached laborers and showed off status and impressed visitors and travelers. The three following sub-sections will deal with these three aspects of longhouse.

8.3.1 The Hrísbrú Longhouse as a Private Home: The Anatomy of a House

The longhouse excavated at Hrísbrú was primarily a domestic space designed for a large household. The Hrísbrú longhouse was a classic Icelandic Viking Age longhouse with bow-sided walls built from turf and stone, a tripartite internal room division, and doors at opposite ends of the long axis (see Figures 6.3, 6.4., 6.8, 8.2, and 8.3). The house had an internal system of posts supporting the superstructure and dividing the rooms of the house into three aisles, a common feature of many Iron Age longhouses across northern Europe. All rooms had internal wooden paneling. The house was divided into five separate spatial units including a central hall, two gable rooms, an anteroom, and a covered entryway attached to the western gable room. Internal features and artifact distributions in the house shed light on the varied activities that took place in various rooms of the house.

The house walls were constructed in at least two major phases. The first phase consists of a cobble wall with a turf exterior that extends around the entirety of the longhouse. For this first phase, the same construction techniques were used for all walls and long strips of turf called *strengur* were used in the construction of the turf walls. Because of the uniform use of the unusual construction technique employing many fist-sized cobbles, the entire structure encompassed by the cobble wall is interpreted as part

of the original plan of the longhouse (see section 8.3.3.2 for detailed interpretation of the unusual cobble stone wall component). In the second phase of construction, large foundation stones were added to the outside of both long walls, but only for the western half of the house. This was probably done to add structural support, although the use of these large stones in the architectural support system remains unclear. It is possible that the large stones, almost all of which have a flat broad surface sloping in toward the center of the longhouse, may have supported buttresses designed to help hold the weight of the building. Additional stories or lofts in Icelandic houses are virtually impossible to recognize archaeologically, but it possible that the extra superstructural support provided to this western part of the house may have been designed to support a second story.

A system of posts supported the structure of the longhouse. The weight-bearing posts of the house were located along the interface of the center aisle and side aisles, and along the outside of each of the side aisles. In the central hall, the post holes were clearest, deepest, and stone-lined. The side aisles in the central hall had rectangular post support stones or post pads along the external side. In the eastern gable room, post holes were present along the same two lines as in the central hall and flat post support stones were located along the outside of the side aisles. The western gable room lacks postholes and the roof-supporting posts appear to have rested on post support stones located along the inside of the walls and along the interface of the central aisle and the side aisles.

8.3.1.1 The Central Hall

The central hall of the longhouse, measuring 9.5 m long and 5 m wide, was the center of activity in the Hrísbrú longhouse (Figure 8.4; also Figures 8.2, and 6.8). The central hall was the heart of the house and the most secluded space. This room contained the only hearth, the thickest floor layers and the largest number and variety of finds. Floor and bench surface layers of variable compaction consisting mostly of domestic refuse, soot, and ash, cover the living surfaces in the central hall. The evidence indicates that the inhabitants of the longhouse ate, slept, and worked in the central hall. The builders of the house dug out the central cavity in the central hall down to a gravel layer, creating the heightened elevation of side aisles in relation to the floor in the center and leaving the natural soil on the north and south sides to serve as raised living platforms or benches. The intact and raised soil of the platform areas clearly indicates that the side aisles were lined with wooden planks placed on edge and fastened into the posts along the interface of the central aisle and each side aisle. Wood, skins, or some other material would have covered the tops of the benches.

Fourteen surface layers were excavated from the central hall of the longhouse. Many of the floor layers concentrated in the area around the hearth. Partially this is due to the accumulation of soot and ash on the floor around that hearth that would later be trampled down and incorporated into the growing number of floor lenses. However, some of these floor layers such as C-2008-157 and C-2008-167 appear to be floor spreads purposefully deposited by the inhabitants of the longhouse to prepare or repair their central floor. People must have been concerned with the state and appearance of their

floor for reasons of cleanliness, use, and presentation. A flat trampled floor with fresh ash would be flatter, easier to sweep, smell less, and probably also be considered more aesthetically pleasing (Milek 2006).

At the eastern and western ends of the central hall, sill beams and a step up out of the hall clearly demarcate and divide the space between the central hall and the peripheral rooms. At the eastern end of the hall, a linear break in the dark floor layer in line with the last post holes marks the location of a sill beam that supported a wooden separating wall and a door between the hall and the eastern gable room. The western extent of the hall is marked by a step up into the adjoining room and the remnants of a wooden sill beam running across the central aisle between the two westernmost post holes in the central hall. On top of this sill beam, floor layers had accumulated in multi-lensed fashion intermixed with lenses of natural orange silty soil that eroded out of the step up into the intermediary area. The accumulation of floors on top of the sill beam suggests that, at least in the later stages of the house, there was no wooden partition wall or door across this threshold.

A complex hearth feature made up of several contexts extends along the center of the hall (see Figures 8.2 and 8.4). The whole feature is 5.37 m long and approximately 0.75 m wide. Large cobbles set on their edge mark the western boundary of the hearth (C-2007-18), while a trench is the boundary to the north, and a row of rectangular, fire-exposed cobbles placed upright in a line is the southern boundary. The eastern end of the hearth abuts a round depression with holes and void spaces measuring 0.7-0.75 m in diameter (C-2007-114). Based on the round shape and diameter of this feature, the

depression may have held a barrel or some other container holding substances or objects used in food preparation. There is considerable variation in the size, form, and construction technique of Viking Age fireplaces. It is clear, however, that the elongated shape, the location in the center of the floor, and orientation of the long axis of the fireplace with the long-axis of the longhouse fit well with the current conception of the classic Viking Age long-fires (see for example Stenberger 1943, Milek 2006, Einarsson 1995).

The relationship between the size of the central fireplace and the overall longhouse structure may have implications for the size of the permanent inhabitant population of the house (see Table 8.1 for comparison of house and hearth sizes of excavated longhouse). For instance, the large size of the Hofstaðir longhouse compared to the relatively small central fireplace suggested to Lucas (2010) that the fireplace would not have been able to heat the entire space within the house. Lucas argues that the space inside the longhouse was larger than required to accommodate the permanent inhabitants and that the house was deliberately made larger in order to houses periodic feasting and ritual gatherings (Lucas 2010). In the Hrísbrú longhouse, the substantial fireplace suggests the fireplace could have provided enough warmth to adequately heat the central hall the large house. However, the larger numbers of permanent inhabitants at Hrísbrú would not prevent large scale feasting events from being held here (see section 8.3.2 below for a discussion of the Hrísbrú longhouse as a feasting hall).

8.3.1.2 The Eastern Gable Room

The inhabitants of the longhouse used the eastern gable room as a multi-purpose room as indicated by the variable character of the floor layers and the diversity of finds. The niche opposite the southern doorway appears to have been used for storage. The internal length of the eastern gable room is 7.05 m, while the width of the room varies, narrowing from 4.76 m in the western end and to 3 m in the far eastern end (see Figures 8.5, 8.2, and 6.8). In contrast to the floor in the central hall that had elevated side aisles, the surfaces of the three aisles in this room are level with each other. The floor layers in the eastern gable room are variable, thinner, and more localized than in the central hall, particularly in southern aisle. Most floor layers are confined within a single aisle, showing that each aisle had a different use and function. The floor in the central aisle is thicker and more consistent than the floor layers in the side aisles, suggesting more traffic and activity took place in the center of the room.

The lack of a fireplace indicates that this room was not designed primarily as a living room. Nevertheless, the relatively large number of finds such as beads that were most likely lost in the course of work, suggest a frequent human presence in this room. Hammer scales, bi-products of iron cold-working, bear witness to fixing or reworking of iron objects in this room. A few animals may have been kept in this room as evidenced by hay and dung deposits as well as frequent floor layer disturbance possibly caused by animal foot-traffic. The large size of the doorway relative to the smaller doorway in the western gable room also supports the theory that animals larger than humans were intended to pass through the door.

The doorway in the south wall of the eastern gable room opens into the western end of the room. Demarcated by a post support stone on the western side and a door-post stone to the east, the doorway is 1.94 m wide. The doorway is much broader (70 cm wider) than the doorway in the western gable room, possibly so that livestock could be brought into the house through this door. The door-post stone, which lies in situ on the eastern edge of the doorway, has a round wear pattern, showing where the rotating door-post stood. The wear pattern in the stone is concave and highly polished, indicating frequent and long-term use.

Across from the door, up against the north wall, was a separate little room or alcove measuring 1.52 x 1.42 m and containing several isolated floor layers that suggest a different use for this space. Large foundation stones marking the north and south ends of the alcove suggest the presence of some form of partition or dividing wall.
An isolated and thick floor layer (C-2007-120) confined to the alcove contained an ephemeral lens of hay resting on the surface of the floor, suggesting the area may have been used to store animal fodder.

8.3.1.3 The Western Gable Room and an Antechamber to the Hall

West of the central hall, the house contains two distinct areas: the gable room into which the doorway from the south opens and an elevated intermediate area between the western gable room and the central hall (see Figures 8.6, 8.2, and 6.8). The shared characteristics of this area, besides a shared super-structural system, include a floor raised above the floor in the central hall and a purpose of storage as indicted by large barrel pits.

The intermediary area functioned largely as a passageway, while a number of loom weights found along the northern wall in the western gable room indicate that this room was used for weaving as well as storage.

The western gable room has an entrance in the southern wall, two storage pits, thin surface layers in the side aisles and evidence of a wooden floor. The center of the room contained no earthen floor layers, while the surface layers in the side aisles were very thin (see Figure 6.8). On the basis of the lack of floor layers and the presence of wood remains in the area around the inside of the doorway, it appears likely that at least the central floor area, but also probably the side aisles were covered with planks. Two large stones in the center of the room may be connected with such a plank floor.

Two large rounded storage pits in the western gable room would most likely have held barrels of food (see Figures 8.2 and 6.8). Against the center of the western wall, a sub-rounded pit (C-2007-81) for a storage barrel measured between 0.58 m and 0.73 m in diameter. Small wood fragments probably from the barrel were identified at the bottom of the cut into the underlying sterile soil. Another pit (C-2008-186) with multiple layers of fill was located against the inside of the north wall opposite of the doorway. The cut of the pit approximated the shape of a rectangle with rounded corners with dimensions measuring 79 x 63 cm. The bottom fill layer (C-2008-182) consisted almost exclusively of organic material with a high density of visible phytoliths. In three layers above the organic layer, five probable loom weights appeared in the fill layers of this pit, a density that suggests that these weights were stored or placed here.

The final phase of occupation in the space between the western gable room and the central hall was not a place where people would have spent much time, but rather functioned as a sort of antechamber or passage that people moved through to go between western room and the main hall. A rounded pit (C-2007-46), interpreted as a cut for a barrel, occupies the north central part of this intermediary area between the long hall and the western gable room. The pit has a diameter of approximately 1 m across the short axis and 1.15 m across the long axis. This pit feature and the top floor layer in the room (C-2007-95) were in use contemporaneously. Multiple clear floor layers in the intermediary area can be divided into two use phases. The remains of the lower phase of the intermediary area, which included a burning pit, seems to have a have had a greater variety of functions beyond the storage and passageway function of the last phase.

8.3.1.4 The Primary Entrance and an Entry Passageway

A doorway with an external roof-covered walkway led into the southeastern corner of the western gable room (see Figures 8.7, 8.2, 6.8). This was the primary doorway into the longhouse. The wood remains of the lintel beam line up with door post stone and stretch perpendicularly across the threshold of the doorway. Wood planks inside the doorway (C-2008-183) support the idea that the western gable room was at least partially covered in a plank floor. Outside of the house, an entry passageway flanked by entry walls and covered with planks, leads south toward the church, less than 10 m away (see Figure 6.3).

The doorway was flanked on the outside by short turf walls running perpendicular to the south wall of the longhouse. Stones lined the inside of these walls. The turf walls, which protected the entrance from wind and weather, also mark this doorway as the main entrance. Some of these stones supported posts holding up the superstructure of the doorway. The doorway was filled with turf collapse (C-2007-74), partially originating from the side walls, and indicating the presence a turf roof over the entryway.

Underneath the turf collapse, a trampled surface layer (C-2007-115) appeared, consisting mostly of grayish black ash and hearth deposits with clear linearly oriented wood fragments and wood stains extending continuously across the doorway. The layer takes up the entire passageway and is 3.5 m long and 1.2 m wide. The trampled surface layer in the entryway has a rippled appearance, caused by planks laid at intervals across the passageway from east to west (see Figure 8.7). The remains of these planks consist of small amounts of wood and lines of worm feces left where worms have eaten the wood. The use of planks on the floor of the doorway strongly supports the possibility that a roof covered this entryway. A small post hole (C-2007-100) in the center of the southern end of the walkway held a post that helped hold up the roof.

8.3.2 The Hrísbrú Longhouse as a Feasting Hall

Several lines of archaeological evidence strongly suggest that the Hrísbrú longhouse was the site of feasting on a chiefly scale. The evidence includes a large house suited for social gatherings, barley pollen and seed evidence that suggests beer production, and faunal remains bearing witness to high levels of expensive beef

consumption. In their simplest form, feasts are any unusual occasion accompanied by an unusual shared meal (Hayden 2001). The feasts held at Hrísbrú and the feasting events known from the Icelandic sagas, however, are on a larger scale and more akin to "a form of public ritual activity centered around the communal consumption of food and drink" (Dietler 2001: 67). The ritual and public aspect makes feasts ideal stages for other social transactions that establish and reproduce social relations (Dietler and Hayden 2001: 3-4). Feasts function as a special form of gift exchange "that establishes the same relations of reciprocal obligation between host and guest as between donor and receiver in the exchange of other more durable objects" (Dietler 1996: 90; Mauss 1950). Since "feasts are inherently political" and "constitute a fundamental instrument and theater of political relations" (Dietler 2001: 66), the evidence of feasting is a valuable data set to examine for insight into chiefly political action. Crucially from the practical perspective, feasting is one of the few chiefly activities that leave material remains that are visible in the archaeological record (Hayden 2001; Dietler 2001: 72).

Icelandic chieftains and wealthy farmers held feasts to display their generosity and ability to consume luxury goods (Byock 2001: 67-68). These were opportunities to show off their wealth and offer commensal hospitality that included consumption of expensive meat and beer. The sagas frequently record well-attended wedding and funeral feasts that cemented alliances and displayed the household's economic wealth (Byock 2001: 67). A chieftain's feast was a public statement of wealth and consumption capacity that served as an indication to allies and supporters of the resources the chieftain could mobilize. A short citation from *Laxdæla Saga* (*ÍF* 5: 217) concerning a feast thrown by

Þorkell and his wife Guðrún at their farm called Helgafell illustrates perfectly the conception that medieval Icelanders had of feasts and conspicuous wealth consumption:

> *Hann hafði jóladrykkju at Helgafelli, ok var þar fjölmenni mikit, ok með öllu hafði hann mikla rausn þann vetr, en Guðrún latti þess ekki ok sagði til þess fé nýtt vera, at men miklaði sik af, ok þat mundi ok á framreitum, er Guðrúnu skyldi til fá um alla stórmennsku.*[249]

The feasts occurring at Hrísbrú and other farms in medieval Iceland are likely to have been what Michael Dietler (1996) classifies as "entrepreneurial feasts" and "patron-role feasts." In an "entrepreneurial feast," the hosts aim to acquire social power and prestige by competing with others to show off wealth and generosity. The purpose of displaying wealth and hospitality in this manner was to appear as a desirable ally. In Iceland, every household with ample resources engaged in these types of feasts to build alliances. Chieftains hosted entrepreneurial feasts to build alliances with other chiefs and to compete with other chiefs to attract potential supporters (*þingmenn*). In a "patron-client feast," hosts aim to maintain inequalities in social power by the same operative principle of reciprocal obligation created through commensal hospitality. In this type of feasting, however, reciprocation is not expected and the social relations remain continually unequal with a perpetual host and perpetual guests (Dietler 1996: 96-97). This type of feast has the potential of institutionalizing inequality and social obligations of political support. In Iceland, chieftains held this type of feast for his supporters or þingmenn. In the "patron-client feast," but not in the "entrepreneurial feast," the feasting

[249] "*He hosted a Yule-drinking feast at Helgafell, and a large number of people attended. He showed great magnificence with everyone that winter. Guðrún did not resist this and said that this is what wealth was for- to increase prestige; and the resources should be made available that Guðrún needed to make an extravagant display*."

group was the same as the chieftains support group, as witnessed by the attention in the sagas to describing the attendants of such feasts.

Feasting can be problematic to recognize in early Iceland because the feasts took place inside the domestic sphere and were not separated spatially from the center of regular domestic life. For an archaeological study, specialized feasting structures facilitate identification of feasting locations. As Dietler and Hayden stress, feasts held in domestic contexts, as was the case in Iceland, are considerably more difficult to identify archaeologically (Dietler and Hayden 2001: 9-10). In these cases, the material correlates and waste products of feasting will be subsumed in the domestic record. Feasting takes place in houses and the waste products are disposed of in the same location as the daily domestic trash.

The size of houses in Iceland, however, provides an indication of which houses were more suitable for large political feasting events. A smaller "entrepreneurial feast" could be hosted in any house, but a larger feast of the "patron-client" type would necessitate a larger feasting hall. The higher status houses excavated from Viking Age Iceland appear to have this exact size distinction. Most Viking Age houses fall between 12 and 16 m in length (Lucas 2010: 376; Milek 2006). At about twice this size, the Hrísbrú longhouse is monumental and provides a suitable internal space for large feasts and other social and ritual gatherings (see Table 8.1 for comparison of the size of excavated Icelandic houses).

Although feasting waste products from early Icelandic feasts would be discarded in the normal trash middens, Dietler and Hayden (2001: 10) suggest, "under

extraordinary conditions it may still be possible to recognize feasts in domestic contexts through analysis of permutations of faunal and artifactual remains." They also suggest that the presence of alcohol can be another usefully diagnostic signal of feasting (Dietler and Hayden 2001: 10) as alcohol is usually reserved for consumption during special occasions in most small-scale societies.

The following two sections will illustrate that, beyond the size of the Hrísbrú house, the potential feasting waste products of barley and cattle bones found in the longhouse are consistent with a chiefly feasting establishment. Although these goods, barley and a high proportion of beef, could be consumed in subsistence and daily meals, the high economic investment required for the production of barley and maintenance of cattle in the Icelandic environment indicates that they were not the logical investment for pure subsistence. Rather it is more likely that the chieftain at Hrísbrú invested the large quantity of barley and beef in the political economics of feasting.

8.3.2.1 Beer and Barley: Alcohol for Feasting

The archaeological work at Hrísbrú has provided evidence of local barley cultivation and consumption from local pollen profiles and the Hrísbrú longhouse excavations. The details of this evidence of barley cultivation in the valley and consumption in the domestic sphere at Hrísbrú were presented in Chapter 7. The focus in this section will be the value of barley in the Icelandic political economy, the cost of barley production in this sub-arctic environment, and the implication of barley cultivation in the Mosfell Valley for the social power of the Mosfell chieftains. The pollen record of

barley cultivation and the dating of several occupation phases containing barley seeds at Hrísbrú allows for the proposition of a model of a politically-driven trajectory for the utilization of barley in the valley.

The longhouse at Hrísbrú yielded an unusually large number of seeds that illustrates the resource wealth and feasting potential of the Mosfell chieftains. A grinding stone of the type used to grind grain was found lying on the bench surface inside the longhouse, and provides further evidence that barley was processed for consumption at the site (Figure 8.8). The number of barley seeds recovered during the Hrísbrú excavation dwarfs the barley seeds from the excavation of the huge and high-status longhouse at Hofstaðir in Mývatn (see Table 7.1 for barley seed counts from the Hrísbrú longhouse). From the Hrísbrú longhouse, a total of 211 barley seeds have been recovered from the 141.8 liters of floated and sorted soil, making the ratio of barley seeds per liter 1.488. At Hofstaðir, in contrast, the flotation and sorting of 1479.2 liters yielded only 23 barley seeds and a 0.0155 ratio of seeds per liter (Guðmundsson 2010: 324, 334). If the feasting potential of a household can in any way be measured by access to the raw materials for alcohol production, then the chieftain at Hrísbrú possessed an excellent material base for political action through feasting.

As the raw material for beer, barley was immensely significant for the medieval Icelandic chiefly political-economy. Beer was necessary for feasting, while feasting was an integral part of chiefly display and the creation of support networks and debt

obligation. Durrenberger (1992: 42) believes that grain for beer production was one of the four most important "items of chiefly consumption" in medieval Iceland.[250] Cross-culturally alcohol has a widespread association with hospitality and because it induces an altered state that facilitates social interaction, it has frequently played a role in both religious and secular rituals (Dietler 1990: 261-362; Dietler 2006: 237, 242). In societies, like medieval Iceland, where formalized leadership roles exist, "the generous public provision of alcohol on a regular basis frequently is seen as a duty of the person who performs that role, as it symbolically institutionalized a patron-client relationship" (Dietler 2006: 237). It is doubtful that chieftains really would have been unable to function as chiefs without luxury goods such as grain as Durrenberger claims (1992: 519); however, having a large store of barley surely helped chiefs succeed.

In the wider Norse world, alcohol was employed in ritual ceremonies. Consumption of alcohol is a standard element of feasts described in the sagas. The serving of alcoholic beverages is also depicted on rune and picture stones around the Viking world. In the archaeological record, the ritualized importance of alcohol consumption during feasts is illustrated by the recovery of elaborately decorated drinking vessels both in settlements and as grave goods, particularly accompanying females who appear to have gained significant status through producing and serving alcohol (Enright 1995; Jochens 1995). Since beer was the only commonly available alcohol in Iceland, the

[250] The other three essential items of chiefly consumption identified by Durrenburger are fine clothes, weaponry and wood for houses and churches. Textiles rarely preserve in medieval Icelandic archaeological sites. Nevertheless, a small fragment of finely-woven cloth was uncovered from the Hrísbrú longhouse floor. The people at Hrísbrú were able to acquire enough construction quality wood to build a very large longhouse as well as a wooden church. Weaponry is almost never found in domestic structure excavations because it is very valuable, rarely lost, and had a long use-life.

acquisition of barley for the production of beer was certainly a priority for ambitions chieftains.

In Iceland, barley production was labor intensive and required large investment of resources. The growing season is shorter in Iceland than in Scandinavia. The cold temperature and the relatively poor soil quality required fertilization. Fertilization evidence was identified in the pollen record from Hrísbrú as microscopic charcoal and bone fragments spread in the fields (see Chapter 7, section 7.1). These fragments are the remnants of the deposition of organic food waste in the cultivated fields. Simpson et al. (2002) have argued convincingly from study of historic soils that soil management and fertilization, rather than climate, were the limiting factors to grain cultivation in Iceland. They argue that shortages of labor and manure were the barriers to soil improvement and therefore also to the production of grains.

Confirmation that barley was a valuable commodity in medieval Iceland is provided by the importance of imported grain indicated in the texts and the scarcity of grain at other excavated high status sites in Iceland. Textual sources indicate that although barley was grown locally in some places until the 15th century, Icelanders were not able to grow adequate amounts of grain to support their consumption (Gelsinger 1981: 14; Sveinbjarnardóttir et al. 2007: 202). Because of the high labor investment necessary for fertilization of fields, the cultivation of grain was limited to high status farms (Sveinbjarnardóttir et al. 2007). The relative scarcity of barley seeds at the high-status Hofstaðir site provides further evidence that barley was an expensive commodity (Guðmundsson 2010: 332). This is particularly noteworthy, since Hofstaðir is interpreted

as a feasting hall (Lucas 2010). At Reykholt in Borgarfjörður, another high status site, barley was imported despite cultivation of grain locally as indicated by medieval church charters and the local pollen record (Sveinbjarnardóttir et al. 2007: 192, 198, 202-203).[251]

The pollen profile taken below Hrísbrú in the Mosfell Valley indicates that barley cultivation and concomitant soil fertilization began immediately at the settlement of the landscape, intensified in the late11th century, and disappeared by the late12th century or early 13th centuries (see Figure 7.1). Barley seeds were found in large quantities in the floor layers of the 10th-11th century longhouse, but were also recovered from 11th century midden layers dumped into the cavity of the abandoned longhouse, showing the continued local use of barley in the 11th century. Analysis of the textual sources presented in Chapters 4 and 5 suggested that the power of the Mosfellingar declined around the end of the 12th century. This waning power would have resulted in a decline in available attached laborers. Using scarce labor and possibly also the increasingly scarce manure from dwindling herds to fertilize the grain fields of Hrísbrú may have been too costly an investment. A decrease in available labor and livestock would lead to less soil improvement possibilities, less grain, and a decreased potential for feasting and therefore also a decreased potential for generating new social bonds and sustaining political power. The disappearance of barley from the pollen record therefore may signal the collapse of a chiefly economy.

The driving force for the production of barley in the Mosfell region should therefore be interpreted as political rather than subsistence based. Barley production and

[251] This farm is the same as the Reykjaholt discussed in Chapter 5 as the home of the *stórgoði* Snorri Sturluson. The variation in spelling is due to a historical change from Reykjaholt to Reykholt.

political power were mutually reinforcing. With the decline of political power, labor for soil improvement became scarce and the people of Hrísbrú could no longer afford investing in barley production for necessary for political action. As suggested by the pollen record, which showed an increase in grasses common in grazing lands, the local population changed their subsistence strategy to focus on sheep-herding, which was less labor intensive and yielded more subsistence products than barley cultivation. The social cost of this shift was less products destined for feasting and political action.

8.3.2.2 Feasting on Beef: the Cattle to Caprine Ratio

The faunal assemblage of Hrísbrú has a relatively standard subsistence profile from Icelandic houses, but underlying this is a signature that speaks of higher levels of beef consumption. A profile of beef and pork consumption has been used to argue for feasting activities for the Hofstaðir house (McGovern 2010). At Hrísbrú the evidence for beef consumption derives from a relatively very high ratio of cattle to caprine bones in the zooarchaeological assemblage (see Figure 7.10 cattle to caprine ratios). A detailed discussion of the quantitative analysis and the plausible causes of this ratio were presented in Chapter 7, which concluded that the faunal assemblage was consistent with a high status household with a high potential for beef consumption. The focus in this section is on the political motivation for absorbing the high economic cost of maintaining a large number of cattle, particularly in relation to sheep.

In medieval Iceland, sheep could find food free range for most of the year while cows had to be kept indoors during winter months and provisioned with hay. The hay had

to be collected during the summer from wetlands meadows and homefields and stored for the winter (Vésteinsson 2000:171; Byock 2001). Raising cows rather than sheep would therefore have been more expensive, requiring more labor, access to productive hayfields, and infrastructure for hay storage. Subsequent to the settlement of Iceland, households seeking to optimize their subsistence production would favor sheep-herding. Since the pure subsistence economic pressures favored caprine pastoralism, other cultural and political preference or need for cows and cow products must have outweighed subsistence considerations at high status farms.

Ethnohistoric documents and zooarchaeological evidence indicate that cattle were status markers in the whole Norse North Atlantic (McGovern 1980: 260). Distinct status related differences in cattle barn sizes found at high, medium, and low status farmsteads in Norse Greenland also provide corroborating archaeological evidence for this fact (McGovern 1980). Consumption of meat during feasts is one of the key aspects of Norse feasting following the Germanic traditions (Ervynck et al. 2003). The cultural preference for cattle expressed particularly at high status farms is therefore most likely related to beef consumption during feasts. Following this logic, the feasting hall excavated at Hofstaðir showed clear focus on cattle for feasting including importing beef cows and ritual slaughter of large cattle (McGovern 2010; Lucas and McGovern 2007). Over time in Iceland, an economic focus on cattle was retained by households with enough wealth and resources to invest in rearing animals that displayed status and provided the culturally preferred feasting meat.

The Hrísbrú faunal assemblage has a cow to caprine bone ratio at the high end of the variation shown from the fauna documented from other 9th-10th century Icelandic farms (see Figure 7.10). The Hrísbrú fauna shows a ratio of 1.18 cow bones to 1 sheep bone, whereas the high-status feasting hall at Hofstaðir displayed a much lover ratio of 1 cow bone to 3.04 sheep bones. It is difficult to conclusively prove that the high ratio of cattle to sheep maintained at Hrísbrú was driven solely by chiefly consumption patterns related to feasting, particularly because the early date of Hrísbrú house and the location of the Mosfell Valley in a relatively favorable climate compared to other regions of Iceland could contribute to more cattle being kept at Hrísbrú (see Chapter 7, section 7.3.5). It is clear, however, that the faunal assemblage from Hrísbrú is consistent with high status farmsteads and that significant economic investment was made into retaining and eating beef. In this respect the Hrísbrú farm economy was well-suited for chiefly feasting and status competition.

8.3.3 The Hrísbrú Longhouse as a Monumental Symbol of Power

Beyond allowing a relatively large permanent population and a large number of attendees for occasional political feasting events, the large size and prominent location of the Hrísbrú longhouse signaled the power of the local chieftain to the inhabitants of the longhouse, the population of the valley, and visitors. This section addresses how the Hrísbrú longhouse might have been perceived as a symbol of the power of the chieftain by passers-by, visitors, inhabitants, and the people who built the house. Conspicuous displays of wealth, access to resources, and abilities to mobilize labor were materialized

and embedded in the longhouse. To a certain degree the chieftain and the Hrísbrú household made conscious efforts and invested significant amounts of energy to transmit these messages. As a prominent materialized statement the longhouse was a monument to chieftain's power.

8.3.3.1 Evidence of a Large Superstructural Addition to the Hrísbrú Longhouse

A particularly noteworthy aspect of the Hrísbrú longhouse is that the archaeological evidence provides an uncommon suggestion that the house may have had two stories. The walls of the longhouse were remodeled at some point by the addition of regularly spaced large stones dug into the outside of the turf walls of the western half of the house. The function of these stones must be related to stabilizing and supporting the superstructure of the house. These stones represent an effort by the inhabitants of Hrísbrú to modify the house architecture either to strengthen a structural weakness, or to add structural stability for a superstructural expansion. Almost all the large stones had a 'face' that was slanted in towards the center of the longhouse. These stones are therefore not similar to the stones seen in the façades of walls in some medieval Icelandic turf houses (Stenberger 1943; Ólafsson and Águstsson 2003). The size of the stones, their regular spacing, and their inward turned faces, suggest that these stones may have supported a system of wooden buttressing. This would be an unusual aspect in an Icelandic turf house, but is quite common in Viking Age houses in mainland Scandinavia (Schmidt 1999; see also e.g. Elsner 1992). Although additional levels or lofts are virtually impossible to recognize archaeologically in medieval Icelandic houses, it seems plausible

that the extra superstructural support provided to this western part of the house may have been designed to support a second story. Having two stories even over half of the house would have expanded the number of possible inhabitants, and have made the home of the chieftain more visually striking.

8.3.3.2 The Longhouse as a Monumental Construction

The construction of the large Hrísbrú longhouse was a significant task that required collecting quality wood, harvesting large amounts of turf, and hauling huge quantities of stones. A large portion of the work mobilized for this construction project would have been visible in the impressive appearance of the house itself. But a significant portion of the invested labor remained invisible. This section addresses the statement made by the event of the building's construction. In so doing, the focus will be the cobble stone component of the walls as a visible and highly unusual feature that has not previously been observed in turf houses in Iceland or anywhere in the North Atlantic. When looking at the ruins of the longhouse today, the most visually impressive aspect is the vast number of fist-sized basalt cobble stones used in the construction of the walls (compare Figures 8.9, 8.2, and 8.3). The closest available source for these stones is a ravine in the Mosfell mountain located approximately 200 m northeast of the longhouse. This wall component would have been hidden between the turf walls and the internal wooden paneling, but would in itself have required a large-scale labor mobilization. The labor invested in the construction of the cobble stone wall component may have been more symbolic than practical, and may suggest that the leader of this construction project

was embedding exaggerated statements of power and the importance of the house within the building process.

In order to quantify the volume and weight of stones used for this component of the longhouse walls, the Mosfell Archaeological Project collected and measured the volume of the cobble stone wall and collapse from a meter-wide cross-section across the central hall of the longhouse. The total volume of collapsed stone from the meter strip perpendicularly across the longhouse is 280 liters, which divided between the two walls leaves 140 liters of stone collapse to each 1 m section of each of the north and south walls. This volume added to the remaining in situ cobble stone wall brings the total estimated volume for a meter of wall to at least 200 liters or 0.2 m^3. The total wall length for the cobble walls of the Hrísbrú longhouse is approximately 63.6 m (27 m for each of the long walls and 4.8 m for each of the gable walls). Multiplying 63.6 x 200 we arrive at 12,720 liters (12.72 m^3) as an estimate for the total volume of cobble stones used in the construction of the Hrísbrú longhouse walls. Basalt rock has a specific gravity of 3.0, which means 1 m^3 of basalt weighs 3,000 kg. Therefore the 12.72 m^3 of rock used in the construction of the wall would have weighed 38,160 kg or 38.16 metric tons.

The function of the cobble stones in the structure is difficult to explain. The lowest layers of cobble collapse and the intact cobble wall had no soil or turf intermixed, which indicates that this component was constructed exclusively from stone (see profile of excavated house in Figure 6.12). The cobble stones were located in a thin 50 cm wide area between the outer turf wall and the inner plank frame. Based on the amount of stone collapse that had fallen into the house, the cobbles may have been piled up as high as

120 m. Stacking cobbles to a height of 120 cm on top of a foundation no wider than 55 cm, would clearly not have been done for the purpose of creating a structural foundation for a turf wall or to provide structural stability. The best interpretation is that the stones may have been a local solution to insulation, drainage, and keeping the internal wooden paneling from rotting from direct contact with the turf walls. In most turf houses, however, a narrow air space serves this purpose (Byock 2001: 366). If an air space would work just as well, then collecting over 38 tons of cobbles and laboriously employing them in construction of the house might have been superfluous and unnecessary. It is possible therefore that the work required for the construction was a statement in itself.

Moving over 38 metric tons of stone 200 m from the ravine in the Mosfell mountain to the longhouse would have been a rather arduous task. Certainly it would have required enough work to make a builder question the logic of this strategy. Pursuing this strategy seems to suggest that that leader of the construction project had plenty of labor, possibly slaves, but at least a significant amount of attached laborers. Whether or not the chieftain in charge of planning this structure believed that these stones would serve a vital purpose, the construction project itself made a statement to the community involved in the project that this was an important event and a significant structure.

8.3.3.3 Experiencing the Longhouse: A Visitor's Perspective

The chieftains of Mosfell, with their farmstead prominently visible at the southern foot of Mosfell mountain at the seaward entrance of the valley loomed large in the experience of people living in or travelling through the Mosfell valley. The large

longhouse, particularly after the addition of a possible second story, would have been impressively visible on the high ground below the mountain. A visitor approaching the Mosfell valley from the modern Reykjavík area would see the Hrísbrú farmhouse long before entering the Mosfell Valley itself. Upon entering the valley on the road running along the Kaldakvísl stream, the farmstead of Hrísbrú and the local landscape would have come into focus. After the construction of the Christian church around AD 1000, the traveler would recognize the distinct form of the timber structure standing out on a high knoll immediately in front of the large longhouse.[252] The church as well as the size of house signaled the power and status of the chieftain, while the prominent location of the farm on the southern slopes of the Mosfell mountain overlooking the entrance to the valley demonstrated the household's dominance over the region.

Visitors to the farm as well as the permanent inhabitants entered into the longhouse by one of two entrances on the long axis on the south side. The main entrance to the west had a covered and walled entryway paved with wooden planks. Entering through the western doorway, a visitor would walk onto a wooden floor in the eastern end of the western gable room and see a series of barrels for storage of food products and probably also at least one weaving loom. The wooden floor of the eastern gable demonstrated a significant investment in the arrangement of the internal features, while the barrels signaled the wealth and showed off the resources available to the farmstead. The visitor would also realize at this point that the inside of the walls were covered with planks in another significant show of resource availability.

[252] See Chapter 9 for a detailed discussion of the church at Hrísbrú and the local conversion to Christianity.

Another door to the east led towards the center of the house. When opening this door a visitor familiar with other longhouses would expect to enter into the main central hall, but instead, the visitor would find himself in an ante-room where he would observe another storage barrel. In this room, the visitor might also find a ladder leading up into the second storey of the longhouse, where some people probably slept. He would have noted this second story when approaching the house, and now inside the house this ladder would remind him that the Hrísbrú farmstead could support and house a larger number of permanent inhabitants than most farms.

Through yet another door, the visitor would enter into the large central hall divided into three aisles and walk onto a lower central aisle consisting of compacted ash with a large fireplace in the center. He would see large structural posts rising to the roof from either side of the central hearth and a barrel containing materials for food preparation at the eastern end of the hearth. A cooking pot was suspended over the fireplace. Two rows of posts divided the central aisle from the raised side aisles that served as living platforms and benches. The side aisles, approximately 1 m wide, had wooden paneling along the inside and were probably covered on top by wooden planks and skins. If it was a normal day, people might be working, resting, or eating on these benches. Spindle whorls found here, suggests that the visitor might see people on the benches spinning wool for the loom he had seen in the western gable room. If the visitor had come to attend a feast, the fire would be blazing and the benches would be filled with people eating beef-heavy meals and consuming locally produced beer. The chieftain

would likely be sitting prominently in the center of the hall facing the middle of the fireplace.

The eastern end of the hall was demarcated by a wooden internal division and a door that lead to the eastern gable room. This division of the house probably marked the end of the public space and therefore the end of the visitor's experience. Beyond this wall, lay the realm of purely domestic activities. The eastern gable was clearly a multi-purpose room from the perspective of the internal organization and artifactual remains recovered in this room (see section 8.3.1.2). Had a visitor caught a glimpse inside this room he may have seen inhabitants reworked iron tools and stored objects and fodder related to their animal herds. The floors in this room were the least prepared and therefore also the least attractive of the floors in the house. The uneven floor may have been partially caused by animal traffic, but is also a manifestation of less investment in the appearance of the floor. This evidence suggests that even though the spatial units of longhouses had to serve simultaneous private and public purposes, the Hrísbrú longhouse shows a layout and internal design that draws a distinction between the public and the domestic spheres and focuses wealth and status displays in the public domain.

8.4 Prestige Goods from the Hrísbrú Farmstead and Access to Overseas Trade

The finds recovered from the Hrísbrú longhouse provide insight into the organization of daily activities in the household and indications of the chieftain's status and access to international trade goods. This section presents an overview of the artifact

materials and their distribution across the distinct domestic spaces in the longhouse, followed by a more in-depth discussion of the prestige goods found in the house.[253] A broader question addressed here is whether social status is detectible in the artifact assemblage of houses in Iceland. The shortage of finds from Icelandic medieval domestic contexts when compared to other regions and cultures, including mainland Scandinavia in the Middle Ages, has thwarted previous attempts at detecting status in artifact assemblages.

In the recent analysis the artifact assemblage of the large high status house at Hofstaðir, Colleen Batey concludes, "[t]he potential for Hofstaðir to be seen as a site of special significance, a site of a substantial and powerful farm considered previously to be a centre of ritual and high status, sadly cannot readily be supported by this artifact assemblage" (Batey 2010). This section argues, however, that to detect status in the artifacts from medieval Icelandic houses, the Icelandic domestic artifact assemblages must be compared to each other and not to sites from mainland Scandinavia. In so doing, the comparison takes into consideration the relative material poverty in Iceland resultant from the lack of local resources and the remote location of Iceland at the outer reaches of the medieval European trade networks. The re-use of imported metals found at Hrísbrú shows the value of goods imported to Iceland through the trans-Atlantic trade networks (Wärmländer et al. 2010). The maximization of metal is also noted in the Hofstaðir assemblage as chemical analysis indicates that smelters were taking considerable efforts

[253] The TUN site area where the Hrísbrú longhouse was found includes several broad phases, including the occupation of the longhouse, a period of midden deposition, a long-term low grade activity from around the 12th century up until AD 1500 when the Katla tephra fell, and a post-1500 phase with increased amounts of activity and a return to dumping domestic trash in the area. The largest portion of the finds derives from contexts related to the longhouse. This section focuses on the artifacts found in the longhouse.

to maximize iron production from iron ore (McDonnell and Macclean 2010: 271-289). To detect the value of objects to medieval Icelanders and the potential of archaeological finds to shed light on questions of status, it is therefore necessary to employ new methods from material science and to focus on comparisons between Icelandic sites.

The comparison of Icelandic houses based on artifact assemblages can be difficult because of the scarcity of finds and the variation in finds. These problems can at least partially be avoided by quantitatively comparing particular classes of finds recovered from house contexts. Milek (2006: section 3.3.1.3) presents such a comparison of finds from Icelandic houses, but does not attempt to detect status differences and in the end makes her conclusions about social stratification based solely on architecture alone: "[t]he earlier Viking Age houses in Iceland are so similar in size and complexity that there appears to have been little difference in the wealth or status of the heads of the households" (Milek 2006: section 7.2). This dissertation obviously disagrees with Milek, and this section will show significant differences in artifact assemblages between households that are correlated with status of the households.

8.4.1 The Find Assemblage from the Hrísbrú Longhouse

The presence and distribution of the finds across the Hrísbrú longhouse shows spatial differences in function and use. The longhouse contains clear spatial divisions marked in the house by doors, dividing walls, and changes in surface elevation. There are five main domestic spaces: 1) the central hall, 2) the eastern gable room, 3) the western gable room, 4) the ante room or intermediary area between the hall and the western gable

room, 5) the western entryway. These five spatial units contained distinct artifact assemblages that shed light on the activities that took place in each room (Table 8.2).[254]

The central hall in the longhouse contained the highest density and variation of finds of any of the rooms of the house. The finds therefore reinforce all other indications that this room was the center of activity in the house. Daily activities including food preparation concentrated around the central hearth have left remains of numerous strike-a-light jasper and flint chips and fragments, an iron knife, and twenty-two whetstone pieces. Sedentary daily activities also clustered around the central fireplace are represented by four spindle whorls.

The eastern gable room had an artifact density and variation second only to the central hall. The density of artifacts in this room reflects the various domestic activities taking place in this room. A particular density of hammer scales combined with several pieces of iron slag indicates that small scale iron-working took place in this room. A small lead weight employed in weighing valuable materials indicates that the people of Hrísbrú were engaged in trading at some scale, although it seems unlikely that the trading would have taken place in this room.

The western gable room, which contained few floor layers, also contained relatively few artifacts. Most noteworthy among the finds in this room for reconstructing activities in the house is the concentration of loomweights that make it seem probable that weaving took place in this room on a loom placed along the northern wall. The four

[254] Table 8.2 shows the finds that can clearly be related to a particular room. The few finds that had an unclear room provenience were found either in structural collapse debris that stretched between rooms or in collapsed wall deposits. The floor layers all had clear breaks between the rooms, allowing for a high level of confidence in the attribution of finds to particular rooms.

visually striking eye-beads found in the fill of a barrel pit along the eastern wall of this room were certainly accidentally forgotten or left behind when the house was abandoned.

Finds from the “anteroom” include a relatively high number of whetstones when compared to the otherwise small sample of finds, suggesting that some work took place in this room. This activity should probably be related to the earlier phase of occupation in this room contemporaneous with a fire-pit that predated the conversion of this room into a storage space and an anteroom in which people spent much less time.

The western doorway contained the fewest number and diversity of finds. The lack of find variation from this space shows the use of the space as a passageway into the house. The few finds recovered from this area were either accidentally lost or ended here because of the deposition of hearth material to create the ash finish to the floor of the passageway.

Find Type	Unit of Domestic Space					
	Central Hall	E. Gable Room	Anteroom	W. Doorway	W. Gable Room	Total
Bone	**4**					**4**
Worked bone	4					4
Copper	**1**					**1**
Fragment	1					1
Crystal		**1**				**1**
Bead		1				1
Glass	**12**	**11**	**1**		**5**	**29**
Bead	12	11	1		5	29
Iron	**104**	**125**	**7**	**4**	**3**	**243**
Fish hook			1			1
Fitting	3					3
Fragment	61	27	3		1	92
Hammer scale		52				52
Knife blade	1	2	1		2	6
Nail	30	23	2	3		58
Rivets		10				10
Rove	2			1		3
Slag	5	11				16
Staple	2					2
Lead		**1**		**1**		**2**
Fragment		1				1
Weight				1		1
Metal	**2**					**2**
Fragment	2					2
Silver	**2**	**1**				**3**
Decoration		1				1
Finger ring	1					1
Fragment	1					1
Stone	**56**	**21**	**14**	**1**	**9**	**101**
Flint	4	1				5
Jasper	20	14				34
Loomweight	1	2			9	12
Quernstone	1					1
Possible loomweight	2	1	1			4
Sandstone			3			3
Soapstone fragment	1					1
Spindlewhorl	4		1			5
Whetstone	22	3	9	1		35
Worked quartz	1					1
Textile	**1**					**1**
Textile	1					1
Total	**182**	**160**	**22**	**6**	**17**	**387**

Table. 8.2. Finds recovered from each of the five spatial units of the Hrísbrú longhouse.

8.4.2 The Prestige Goods from the Hrísbrú Longhouse

The Hrísbrú assemblage contains several find categories of imported and decorative prestige goods. Glass as well as all metals, except iron, was imported from Europe or Asia. The longhouse yielded three finds of silver including one finger ring and a decorative element probably strung on a bead necklace. In addition, twelve beads known as metal-foiled beads contain silver foil. A lead weight found in the eastern gable room is significant because of the obvious connection to trading at some scale. Other finds that could be produced in Iceland but still indicate status include a quernstone used to grind grain. The quality of the finds and the quantity of metal and glass imports are consistent with a high status household in Viking Age Iceland. A comparison of find types indicating status and prestige from Hrísbrú and previously excavated longhouses in Iceland shows clear distinctions in the material wealth of the households (see Table 8.3). In terms of artifacts, the Hrísbrú, Hofstaðir, and Skallakot distinguish themselves by containing the greatest number and diversity of prestige goods. These three houses are also the three longest of the Viking Age longhouses in Iceland. The Hrísbrú find assemblage certainly falls in the upper echelon of household wealth and may in fact represent the upper level of material wealth attainable in resource impoverished Viking Age Iceland.

The most suitable finds for comparisons of status across the corpus of Icelandic farmhouse sites are accidentally lost, valuable imports that are quantifiably present in most assemblages and preserve uniformly well regardless of site conditions. Reflecting on the potential find types that indicate status and prestige in Table 8.3, it is clear that

glass beads provide the most quantifiably comparable dataset of imported prestige goods. Most households had at least one bead find and quantitative differences may indicate status differences. On the other hand, it is much more difficult to interpret the meaning of a single sword found in a single household, or even the noteworthy but limited appearances of quernstones that may have been employed to grind grain for beer production. Beads found in household excavations are almost exclusively accidental losses that reflect the personal adornment worn by inhabitants in the households. According to the Arab envoy Ibn Fadlan, one of the only cotemporary ethnographic observers of Viking Age Scandinavians, beads were the most highly prized ornaments to the Vikings, who would buy them for one dirham each and display them on necklaces around the necks of their women (Frye 2005: 64-65).

Quantitative differences in glass beads may be able to provide a proxy for status. Clearly, other factors in addition to status determine the deposition and recovery of beads. Furthermore, status should not be determined based on artifact assemblage alone. But from the artifactual perspective, imported glass beads appear to be the most reasonable and representative relic of status in the archaeological record of Icelandic households. Beads types vary in raw materials and in style, allowing for provenience of production and use in typological dating. Because of the potential for glass beads to reflect the status of the Hrísbrú inhabitants and shed light on long-distance trade contacts, the bead assemblage from Hrísbrú is treated in greater detail in the following section.

Excavated House	Beads	Silver	Sword Fragment	Quernstone	Metal Pendant	Weight (lead)
Aðalstræti	1					
Bessastaðir 19						
Eiríksstaðir						
Granastaðir 9	1					
Grelutóttir	2					
Herjólfsdalur II				1		
Herjólfsdalur V						
Hrísbrú	30	3		1		1
Hofstaðir	12	1			2	
Hólmur						
Hvítárholt III				2		
Hvítárholt VIII	1					
Hvítárholt IX	2	1		2		
Ísleifsstaðir				2		1
Skallakot	4		1			1
Snjáleifartóttir	1					
Suðurgata	3					
Sveigakot S4						
Sveigakot MT 1						
Vatnsfjörður	2					

Table 8.3. Prestige good finds from each of 20 excavated Viking Age houses from Iceland. Hrísbrú and Hofstaðir, and possibly also Skallakot distinguish themselves with the largest number of prestige goods (Table based on data in Milek 2006: Table 3.4 and supplemented with data from the Mosfell Archaeological Project and Lucas 2010).

8.4.2.1 Beads of Glass and Crystal from the Hrísbrú Longhouse

The beads found in the occupation layers of the Hrísbrú longhouse outnumber the beads from all other excavated Viking Age Icelandic houses (Table 8.3). The 30 beads from the Hrísbrú longhouse include 29 glass beads and a single bead made from rock crystal (see Figures 8.10 and 8.11). The beads all date to the Viking Age and most of them are of a style that was most common in the second half of the 10th century and into the early 11th century. According to the current state of research, the majority were not made in Scandinavia, but imported from the Eastern Mediterranean and Central Asia

(Western Turkestan) (Hreiðarsdóttir 2009, 2010).[255] The bead types found at Hrísbrú are of importance because they provide indications of the location and date of production. This information yields insight into the access the people of Hrísbrú had to goods of international trade and the prestige of the household.

Glass was not produced in Scandinavia, but bead workshops did exist that remelted imported glass from other regions to make new beads. All raw material glass was imported into Scandinavia until the Renaissance (Sode 2004: 87). The raw material imported to Scandinavia took the form of glass rods, tesserae (cubes of glass intended for mosaics in Italy, the Byzantine Empire, and North Africa), and broken blown glassware probably originating from Frankish workshops (Sode 2004: 88). Chemical analyses of the glass from Ribe in Denmark for instance indicate that the glass tesserae were produced in Italy (Sode 2004: 88). According to chemical analyses conducted by MAP, at least some of the Hrísbrú beads may also be manufactured from raw glass originating in Northern Italy (Wärmländer et al. 2010).

The typological systemization of the beads used for the Hrísbrú beads relies on the Johan Callmer's analysis of a vast number of beads in Scandinavia, Europe, and Central Asia (Callmer 1977). Based on the distribution of the various bead types and the traditions of bead manufacture, Callmer determined the most likely origin and date for each bead type. A basic distinction in glass bead types is drawn by their method of manufacture: i.e. blown, wound, or drawn. The assemblage of beads from the Hrísbrú

[255] This section on beads is based on the analysis of the Hrísbrú beads conducted by Elín Hreiðarsdóttir (2009, 2010). Hreiðarsdóttir identified the bead types according to Johan Callmer's (1977) bead typology and described the appearance, manufacturing technique, and origins of the beads.

longhouse area includes 21 blown beads (types with the prefix “E”), 9 wound beads (prefixes “A,” “B”), and 1 drawn bead (prefix “F”). Further typological distinctions detailed below and presented in Table 8.4 and Table 8.5 are made by color, raw materials, and size, shape, and decorations of the beads.

The vast majority of the beads from Hrísbrú were produced outside of Scandinavia. Two beads appear to have been produced in Scandinavia or in Western Europe, 21 in the eastern Mediterranean, and 5 in south and central Asia. The bead class, types, dates and origins uncovered at Hrísbrú summarized in Table 8.4 consist mostly of monochrome blown beads belonging to Callmer’s class E blown segmented beads with a wall thickness of more than 0.05 cm. At least three of Callmer’s class A wound undecorated beads were found at Hrísbrú. The Hrísbrú longhouse assemblage contains five clear examples of Callmer’s class B beads that were wound and decorated. Single examples of a class F drawn, undecorated, simply cut bead, and a class S rock crystal bead were uncovered from the eastern gable room. The majority of these beads were produced in the Mediterranean area, although a number of them were imported from more distant areas of Central Asia. A few of the bead types, including the exotic eye-beads and the Islamic metal foil beads provide a particularly tight seriation date and lend insight into trade connections accessed by the Hrísbrú household that extended beyond Europe.

Cat #	Mat.	Type	Group	Date	Origin	Make	Context
F 2007-103	Glass	A171	A n	800-1050	Scandinavia/ W. Europe	wound	49
F 2006-022	Glass	A or B				wound	5
F 2008-060	Glass	A or B				wound	147
F 2007-144	Glass	B088	B h	960 to early 11th	Western Turkestan	wound	80
F 2007-145	Glass	B088	B h	960 to early 11th	Western Turkestan	wound	80
F 2007-142	Glass	B090	B h	960 to early 11th	Western Turkestan	wound	80
F 2007-143	Glass	B090	B h	960 to early 11th	Western Turkestan	wound	80
F 2008-095	Glass	B new			Near East?	wound	11
F 2006-009	Glass	E030	E a	950 to 11th	Eastern Mediteranean	blown	11
F 2006-054	Glass	E030	E a	950 to 11th	Eastern Mediteranean	blown	21
F 2007-204	Glass	E030	E a	950 to 11th	Eastern Mediteranean	blown	94
F 2008-255	Glass	E060	E a	800-1050	Eastern Mediteranean	blown	12
F 2007-205	Glass	E060	E a	800-1050	Eastern Mediteranean	blown	94
F 2008-214	Glass	E060	E a	800-1050	Eastern Mediteranean	blown	94
F 2008-249	Glass	E060	E a	800-1050	Eastern Mediteranean	blown	137
F 2008-263	Glass	E110	E a	800-1050	Eastern Mediteranean	blown	11
F 2008-043	Glass	E110	E a	800-1050	Eastern Mediteranean	blown	14
F 2006-053	Glass	E110	E a	800-1050	Eastern Mediteranean	blown	21
F 2008-096	Glass	E110	E a	800-1050	Eastern Mediteranean	blown	94
F 2008-117	Glass	E110	E a	800-1050	Eastern Mediteranean	blown	94
F 2008-250	Glass	E110	E a	800-1050	Eastern Mediteranean	blown	94
F 2008-080	Glass	E110	E a	800-1050	Eastern Mediteranean	blown	194
F 2008-251	Glass	E110/E130	E a	800-1050	Eastern Mediteranean	blown	94
F 2008-022	Glass	E130	E a	800-1050	Eastern Mediteranean	blown	14
F 2007-179	Glass	E130	E a	800-1050	Eastern Mediteranean	blown	94

Cat #	Mat.	Type	Group	Date	Origin	Make	Context
F 2008-256	Glass	E130	E a	800-1050	Eastern Mediteranean	blown	94
F 2008-042	Glass	E130	E a	800-1050	Eastern Mediteranean	blown	145
F 2008-040	Glass	E new			Near East?	blown	52
F 2008-254	Glass	F070	F a	950 to 1050	Eastern Mediteranean	drawn	94
F 2008-061	Crystal	S001	S b	915 to 1000	India or Iran	cut, polish	63

Table 8.4. Beads of glass and crystal found in the Hrísbrú longhouse.

Eye Beads: Imports from the Samanid Caliphate East of the Caspian Sea

The eye-beads from Hrísbrú are black or more accurately dark purple, and have two zig-zagging white lines drawn as mirroring waves that form three separate compartments. In each of these compartments is an eye or a sun. The eye-beads from Hrísbrú are of two different types: type B088 has framed circular eyes without rays; while the type B090 has circular eyes with multicolored rectilinear rays extending from the eye (see Figure 8.11). Bead types B088 and B090 fall into Callmer's bead group B h (Callmer 1977: 85). These eye-beads provide the narrowest chronological window of any artifact types in the Hrísbrú longhouse assemblage. They occur only after 960 (Callmer 1977: 85; Näsman 2003: 236) and into the early 11th century (Callmer 1977: 85; Hreiðarsdóttir 2009). Beads belonging to bead group B h were produced in the lands of the Samanid Caliphate to the east of the Caspian Sea in Western Turkestan. The find location of these eye beads mirrors the finds of 10th century Samanid dirhams, implying that the beads were imported through the same trade network as the Islamic silver coins. This trade network undoubtedly ran up the Volga river from the Caspian Sea to the Baltic and then on to Scandinavia. The beads probably passed through a Scandinavian emporium such as Birka or Hedeby before making their way to Iceland.

Similar eye-beads of the B090 and B088 types have also been at found at sites across Scandinavia and Eastern Europe. In Iceland, 14 B090 beads have been found mostly in the south and southwest, while two B088 beads were found as stray finds from eroded farmsteads in Rangárvallasýla (Hreiðarsdóttir 2009). In mainland Scandinavia they have been uncovered at Borg in Northern Norway (Näsman 2003: 235-236), Birka in Sweden (Arbman 1940), and Fyrkat in Jutland (Roesdahl 1977: 37). These types of eye beads are found in Eastern Europe (Callmer 1977: 97) and were particularly common among the Hungarians during the 9th century in the Volga-Kama region and followed the Hungarian migration in the 10th century into modern-day Hungary (Näsman 2003: 236; Szilágyi et al. 1995). The Volga-Kama region lies along the eastern trade-routes of the Viking Age Scandinavians and supports the origin of the beads in the Caspian Sea region as well as the import of the beads via the Volga River.

Metal-Foiled Beads: Imports from the Byzantine Provinces of the Caliphate

A large proportion of the Class E beads from Hrísbrú were produced by adding silver foil between two layers of glass to give the bead a textured silver or gold appearance (see Figure 8.10). The Hrísbrú assemblage of foiled beads contains 7 “silver” foil beads of the E110 type and 4 “gold” foil beads of type E130. Type E110 and E130 beads are only generally stylistically datable to the Viking Age (800-1050).The metal foiled beads are thought to be produced in the Near Eastern ex-Byzantine provinces of the Islamic Caliphate (Sode 2004: 95; Callmer 1977: 98). These beads arrived in

Scandinavia either through the trade routes up the Russian rivers from the Black Sea to the Baltic or through various overland routes through continental Europe.

Gold and silver foiled beads were produced throughout Antiquity and appear as trade goods in Northern Europe. By the 6th and 7th centuries this type disappears from Scandinavia. When the foiled beads reappear in Scandinavia and throughout Europe in the end of the 8th century they employ only silver foil (Sode 2004: 97). This shift necessitated the use of colored glass to cover the foil in order to attain the golden color of the "gold foil" beads, while clear glass continued to be used to achieve the silver color (Callmer 1977: 98; Sode 2004: 97). X-ray florescence analysis on one "gold" foil bead (2006-53) and one "silver" foil bead (2007-179) from the Hrísbrú assemblage revealed that the metal foil used in both beads was silver. Silver sulfide (Ag_2S) formed on the foil in the "gold" bead appears to have given the bead a golden color (Wärmländer et al 2010: 2288). This suggests that at least for one of the beads from Hrísbrú, the gold color was produced by discoloration of foil, possibly through post-depositional conditions, rather than the application of an outer layer of colored glass.

A Rock Crystal Bead from India or Iran

The single rock crystal bead (2008-61) from Hrísbrú was probably produced in Iran or India and is therefore the most distant import to Iceland in the Hrísbrú assemblage (Hreiðarsdóttir 2010; Callmer 1977: 99). There is a slight possibility that local Scandinavian resources could have been exploited for the manufacture (Callmer 1977: 99), but the wide distribution of this bead type in Central Europe, Southeastern Europe,

and Western Asia, supports a distant origin in West or South Asia. The rock crystal bead is most common after 915 and into the 11th century. Ten rock crystal beads of this type have been found in Iceland and all of them derive from pagan burials (Hreiðarsdóttir 2010) where they were employed as wealth displays.

Bead Groups / Types	Counts
A n	**1**
A171	1
B h	**4**
B088	2
B090	2
E a	**19**
E030	3
E060	4
E110	7
E110/E130	1
E130	4
F a	**1**
F070	1
S b	**1**
S001	1
Unknown	**4**
A or B	2
B new type	1
E new type	1
Total	**30**

Table 8.5 Beads from the Hrísbrú longhouse organized by their types and groups. The B h bead group is made of the distinct "eye beads" from Turkestan, while types E110 and E130 are metal-foiled beads.

The imported materials uncovered at Hrísbrú, particularly when compared to the finds from other excavated longhouses, show that the chieftain and his household had a high level of access to foreign prestigious trade goods. Some scholars have suggested that most of these goods were brought over with the first settlers to Iceland and became increasingly rare over time (Batey 2010). The value of these goods no doubt increased

with time as the sumptuary goods of the first generation had to be replaced, but continued contacts and trade with the Scandinavian homelands and the typological dating of some of the bead material to the second half of the 10th century strongly suggests that many of the prestige goods at Hrísbrú were acquired through overseas exchange. The most likely port of import for these goods is discussed in the following section.

8.4.3 The Viking Age Harbor in Leirvogur: the Port of Import for Trade Goods to the Mosfell Valley

The Mosfell Archaeological Project has identified the general location of a Viking Age port in the Leirvogur bay at the mouth of the Mosfell Valley (Figure 8.12). This medieval ships-landing and natural harbor is the most likely port of import for the foreign prestige goods uncovered from the Hrísbrú longhouse. Multiple sources of information and data sets complement each other in suggesting the location of this harbor on a small peninsula called Skiphóll on the southern shore of the Leirvogur Bay. According to written sources, the medieval port in Leirvogur (Clay Bay) located at the western end of the Mosfell valley and within sight of the farm of Hrísbrú, was controlled by the Mosfell chieftains. Saga texts recount a medieval tradition that the chieftains collected a toll from visiting ships; and that when it was necessary, the people of Mosfell were ready to extract the dues by force. The local place name traditions suggest two specific locations for the port, while the natural geography indicates that particularly the Skiphóll peninsula would have been an ideal site for a Viking Age and medieval port. The unique local flora around the southern shore of the Leirvogur bay may have spread in association with Viking Age

clinker-built ships.[256] Since the saga evidence for the port has already been covered in Chapter 4, this section presents the evidence for the existence and character of the Viking Age port on the southern shores of Leirvogur bay from a landscape archaeological perspective focusing on the local geography in relation to the place name traditions, as well as the corroborating evidence from the archaeological testing and the flora of the Leirvogur bay.

The geography of the Leirvogur bay provides an attractive location for a ship-landing. Leirvogur is one of two fjords located at the back of the larger bay that opens between the Kjalarnes and Seltjarnarnes peninsulas (see Figures 6.1 and 8.1). The other fjord, Kollafjörður, lies just to the north and has no natural protected harbors. The islands west of Leirvogur bay, such as Viðey and the peninsulas of Gufunes and Langitangi, provide shelter from the open ocean. The geography of the Skiphóll peninsula bears resemblance to other Icelandic port sites, most notably the site of Kolkuós in Skagafjörður, which also would have been a peninsula in the Middle Ages with the possibility of sheltering ships from the open ocean. The geographic position of the Leirvogur port in the upper reaches of bay would also have been beneficial to the local population controlling this sea traffic since the narrow peninsula was visible and could be monitored from the upper field at the Hrísbrú farmstead or from the Leirvogstunga

[256] Professor Jesse Byock, my advisor, proposed this hypothosis based on his study of Icelandic coastal flora. In the marshy land to the east of the Skiphóll peninsula grows a grass called *Juncus gerardi* (salt marsh rush), which is native to the North Atlantic region (Britton 1896: 385; Silberhorn 1982: 113) and possibly spread along Viking Age shipping routes (Byock personal communication). This grass does not grow commonly in the coastal regions of Iceland.The Mosfell Archaeological Project is still in the early stages of working out a protocal for testing this theory.

farmstead. In this sense the local geography is consistent with the textual record of the Mosfell chieftains exerting control over the port.

The geography of the upper Leirvogur area has undoubtedly changed significantly since the Viking Age, primarily as a result of continued isostatic uplift and the accelerated deposition of sediments after human settlement in the area, particularly from the large number of horse stables located just upstream from the Skiphóll peninsula. Today, the Skiphóll peninsula is bordered on the west by a broad and shallow intertidal mudflat that is sheltered by another low spit of land called Langitangi (see Figure 6.1). The Skiphóll peninsula is anchored by a low bedrock outcrop at its northern tip, the surface of which has prominent glacial striations oriented from east to west, roughly parallel with the strike of the Mosfell Valley. During low tides, the streams that drain into the upper reaches of Leirvogur flow around this bedrock outcrop in a shallow channel that may have blocked further progress of ships. To the east is a broad expanse of shallow brackish and freshwater marsh that is partly submerged during high tides (see Figure 8.12).

According to one oral tradition, Skiphóll, meaning “ship stony-hill (or ridge),” is located close to the mouths of the Varmá and Kaldakvísl rivers. Here a small mound is visible and a historical interest sign has been set up. During early investigations into the oral history of the area, inhabitants at the Leirvogstunga farm explained that the mound with the sign had been recently created by bulldozing, while the Skiphóll of their memory was a spit of land a little further out in the fjord that used to have a large boulder on top. This boulder has now toppled over to the east of the peninsula, but is still visible (see

Figures 8.13 and 8.14). The boulder would explain the place name “stony-hill,” and it is very likely that this boulder could have been used to secure ships. The Skiphóll peninsula (referred to here as “Outer Skiphóll”) appears to be a better candidate for a medieval port than the previously mentioned “Inner Skiphóll,” since it provided shelter and water deep enough for ocean going vessels. One possible scenario is that goods were unloaded at the Skiphóll peninsula and then freighted in smaller boats to the mouths of the two rivers to be traded at Inner Skiphóll at the mouths of the Vármá and Kaldakvísl rivers (see Figure 8.12).

The Mosfell Archaeological Project has carried out several seasons of sub-surface testing and archaeological excavation to locate the exact position of the Leirvogur port and to investigate the character of this port (Byock et al. 2005: 25-26). Archaeological surveys have identified specific locations of particular promise, but no material remains of the port have been uncovered. Test-coring transects on either side of the canal on the east side of the Skiphóll peninsula revealed no cultural remains of the Viking port, but indicated that despite the recent deposition of large amounts of silt, the large features of the landscape have remained stable. The silt may in fact have covered and preserved any medieval archaeological remains from modern disturbance. Medieval sailors would have pulled their ship into the canal east of Skiphóll peninsula at high tide and onto the shore on either side of the canal (compare Figure 8.13 showing the canal at low tide with Figure 8.14 showing high tide). The remains of their activities would most likely be found on either side of the canal, and probably on the side of the Skiphóll peninsula. The natural sequence of sediments in the area consistently appeared as a brown silt overlying

gray clayey silt, followed by grayish black sandy mud. No tephra layers could be documented, making it difficult to illuminate the sediment accumulation rate or history in this area.

Although no diagnostic or datable cultural remains of the harbor at Leirvogur have been identified, the information from the landscape, the place name tradition, the medieval sagas, and the archaeological testing combine to make it all but certain that the Viking port is located on the southern shores of the Leirvogur bay. The archaeological remains of activity at the Viking Age port will probably be ephemeral because of its seasonal and temporary occupation. In light of the landscape archaeological work of MAP that shows the natural advantages of the Skiphóll peninsula as a ship-landing and the evidence from medieval texts and oral tradition, there can be little doubt a Viking Age port existed in Leirvogur. Future work in this area to identify the archaeological remains of this port is nevertheless justified by the scientific value of defining the character of such as rare Icelandic trading site and for the contribution that finds from this port would have in understanding the trade good economics of the Mosfell Valley and its chieftains.

8.5 Conclusion: Material Remains of the Political Power and Prestige of the Mosfell Chieftains

Political power in Iceland from the initial settlement up until the end of the Free State was diffuse, particularly in the sense that there were no permanent administrative and geographic centers of power. The regional assemblies as well as the national Althing were important meeting places, but there was no permanent presence at these sites and

the political power followed the chieftains as individuals. As such, the centers of political power were located at the private farmsteads of the chieftains. The private home of the Mosfell chieftains has been excavated by MAP and the analysis in this chapter shows that the uncovered remains, including the large longhouse, the artifacts, and the ecofacts illustrate the political power potential of the inhabitants.

Although the assembly sites were not loci of permanent centralized power, they were significant as arenas for chiefly political action. The assembly sites attended by the chieftains of Mosfell include the regional Kjalarnes Assembly and the Althing. Both of these two sites are within a few hours ride on horse from the Mosfell chieftains' home in the Mosfell Valley. The location of the Kjalarnes Assembly shifted at least once, but both of the most likely geographical positions of this regional assembly were within the core territory of the kinship-alliance network of the earliest settler of the Mosfell Valley and within the area dominated by the Mosfell chieftains recorded in the sagas around AD 1000. The quick access the chieftains of Mosfell had to the regional and the national assembly sites would have served as a clear advantage when mounting court cases and lawsuits that often depended on the strength of military presence.

The size of the longhouse of the Mosfell chieftains at Hrísbrú and the finds recovered from within the house indicate that the inhabitants belonged to the upper echelon of Viking Age Icelandic society. Comparisons with the other excavated houses and prestige good assemblages from Iceland, identify the Hrísbrú household as belonging to a class of higher status households that also includes Hofstaðir in Mývatn and probably also Skallakot in Þjórsádalur (see Tables 8.1 and 8.3). The monumental size and

construction of the Hrísbrú longhouse illustrates the power of the Mosfell people on three levels. The structure housed a large permanent population, functioned as a materialized statement of power, and served as a large feasting hall.

Political action and a household's potential political power can be approached from the material remains of feasting practices. In fact, the qualitatively larger hall, exemplified by the Hrísbrú, Hofstaðir, and Skallakot longhouses, are a correlate of the "patron-client" type feasts hosted by chiefs. Patron-client feasts are an order larger than the more common "entrepreneurial feasts" potentially hosted at any of the houses excavated in Iceland and indicate chiefly political action rather than reciprocal alliance building. The presence of large numbers of barley seeds and a faunal assemblage with a high proportion of cow bones that speaks of beef and alcohol consumption allows the identification of a chiefly feasting economy within the domestic deposits at Hrísbrú.

Trade goods in the Mosfell Valley employed as symbols and displays of status were uncovered at Hrísbrú. The analysis in this chapter employed the numbers and provenience of imported glass and crystal beads as a proxy for status and a means for shedding light on the long-distance exchange accessed by the Mosfell chieftains. Imports from Asia and Mediterranean Europe show long-distance connections. The modes of exchange by which these goods reached medieval Icelanders varied from gift-gifting to trade, but they must have arrived to Iceland through the island's natural and protected harbors such as the ship-landing currently under archaeological investigation in the Leirvogur bay at the mouth of the Mosfell Valley. The proximity of the Hrísbrú site to this port and the postulated control over port traffic exercised by the Mosfell chieftains

would have provided primacy of access to prestige goods, as well as a measure of control over which other individuals accessed these goods. The ability to determine the distribution of such sumptuary items provided additional means to indebt and attract allies and supporters.

Chapter 9 From Paganism to Christianity in the Mosfell Valley: Ideological Power in the Archaeological Record

9.1 Introduction

The ideological system and therefore also the ideological sources of power in the Mosfell Valley underwent a dramatic change in the medieval period. In the year AD 1000, Iceland officially converted from paganism to Christianity. Although the public conversion took place as a legal decision at the Althing, the Christianization of Iceland was a gradual process involving individual choices of worship as well as a degree of syncretization of paganism and Christianity. Archaeology is particularly well suited to explore this process of Christianization that is often flattened in the textual record. All sources agree, however, that as a result of this process, the pagan ritual landscape was completely transformed and the ideological symbols of power and the loci for exhibiting and exercising ideological power shifted dramatically.

In the pagan period, claims to status, group membership, and territory were expressed in mound burials, along routes of travel, and at the borders of old territorial divisions. The location of pagan cult practice, which has been a source of much scholarly debate,[257] probably took place in multiple arenas, including the chieftain's hall, in specialized ritual structures, or outside in sacred places. The character of ideological power changed dramatically as the ritual system shifted from the relatively diffuse power of pre-Christian paganism to the hierarchically organized and institutionalized Christian church of the end the Icelandic Free State. After the conversion to Christianity, the locus

[257] See Chapter 1 (section 1.5.5) for a discussion of the debate over the location of pagan ritual practice.

for burial and for worship became centralized around the chieftains' churches. This centralization of ritual practice and the material expression of ideology yielded a new and stronger potential for the creation of social power as access became limited.

In the Mosfell Valley, the archaeological data from the pagan period consists of a cremation grave associated with the Hrísbrú farmstead, ship-shaped landscape modifications, and several probable, but unexcavated grave mounds. For one valley in Iceland, this is a large amount of data for a period that lasted for little more than 100 years. These sites were placed prominently in the landscape as markers of territorial boundaries and visible signals of status and power along roads and travel routes. The sites where pagan ideology was materialized in mounds, ship-settings, and a costly cremation ritual, clearly played a role in articulating the power relationships in the Mosfell Valley, but the power of these sites is not as easily controlled and employed to exert control over others as would be the Christian materialized ideology.

The symbol of the ship was particularly important to the people of Mosfell Valley, and it is likely that the chiefly family at Hrísbrú, who modified the Hulduhóll cremation mound to appear more like a ship, were also responsible for the ship-setting further up the valley. This ship setting may have marked their early territorial boundary with the Skeggjastaðir farmstead and served as a site for pre-Christian worship. The distinct pre-Christian ideological connection that the people of Hrísbrú felt with the symbol of the ship becomes further apparent in the early Christian conversion-period burials at Hrísbrú that contain parts of boats.

The Christian churches and churchyards at the Hrísbrú and Mosfell farmsteads provide the archaeological data for the investigation of ideological power in the Mosfell Valley during the pagan period. The Hrísbrú church is from the early conversion period and contains clear elements of ritual synchronization of pagan and Christian ideology. Reburials of skeletons from pagan graves into places of prominence in and around the church at Hrísbrú show the importance of establishing a link with pagan ancestors for the continuity of chiefly power. The church at the modern Mosfell farm as well as evidence of exhumation from the Hrísbrú churchyard provide data from the period of institutionalized Christianity starting in the 12th century. The size of the church in this last phase increased as a correlate of increased wealth opportunities through church ownership, while continuity with the venerable ancestors remained important for continuity of power.

This chapter addresses the archaeological evidence of the materialization of ideology in the Mosfell Valley from the initial settlement until the middle of the 13th century. The ideological power addressed in this chapter can be divided into three temporal periods: 1) the Pagan Period (870- around 1000); 2) an early Christian period or Syncretization Period where the ritual systems are synchronized as ideological power is transferred from pagan to Christian practices (around 1000-1100; 3) the period of institutionalized Christian ideological power, called here the Institutionalized Church Period (approximately 1100-1262).[258]

[258] This period division is my own and is designed specifically to deal with the ideological power discussed in this chapter and is not meant as a general temporal division of the Icelandic Free State Period.

9.1.1 Materialized Ideology and the Mosfell Valley

Individuals and groups who achieve unequal access to the creation, management, and control of ideology and its materialized forms gain social power.[259] An ideology is a system of ideas that provides explanations of the natural world, human society and the spiritual realm. The materialization of ideology is a particularly visible aspect of belief systems that can be effectively manipulated to make ideological statements and create unequal access to ideological power (DeMarrais et al. 1996; Earle 1997). In Iceland, very little hegemonic control existed over religion in the pagan period, making the ideological power diffuse. During the early years of Christianity, centralization of ideology began, but the institutionalized church was slow to develop. Nevertheless, in both the pagan and the Christian periods, the chieftains who owned land, possessed expendable wealth, and functioned as political leaders at the assemblies, were best-placed to harness the collective ideology and take advantage of various manifestations of materialized ideology.

The materialization of ideology allows it to be effectively employed as a source of power. Earle (1997: 10) explains, "[t]o mold beliefs and guide social action, ideologies must be manifested in material form that can be manipulated centrally and experienced in common by a targeted group." For Earle, materialization is particularly important because of his belief that power ultimately derives from the economic sphere: "It is this materialization that embeds ideology in the economic process of production and gives it a

[259] See Chapter 1 for an in depth treatment of the theories of ideological power, the materialization of ideology, and background information on the ideological sources of power in Scandinavia and Iceland in the pagan and the Christian periods.

central role in the competition for political power." This materialist approach does, however, rightly point out the constant interaction and interplay between the various sources of power. Anthropologist Eric Wolf (1997: 390) also notes the interplay between sources of power and the potential of ideology, stating that there is "an economic and political side to the formation of idea-systems, and idea-systems, once produced, become weapons in the clash of social interests." But the ideas do not have to be materialized and even ideology that is not materialized can be a source of power.

Materialization of ideology is also a "strategic process in which leaders allocate resources to strengthen and legitimate institutions of elite control" (DeMarrais et al. 1996: 16). DeMarrais et al. (1996: 16) state that materialization is "usually undertaken by dominant social segments" with the goal being to "facilitate shared experiences of political culture…", but materialization can of course be undertaken by anyone with requisite resources. Access to these resources is the key to explaining why all segments of society cannot effectively engage in materialization with high symbolic value. Unequal access to resources can easily translate into unequal access to symbols that confer status, authority, and power. For example, in Icelandic society only the landowning *bændr* and *goðar* could invest the needed resources to efficiently materialize their religion in larger monuments whether they were pagan burial mounds equipped with expensive grave goods or Christian churches constructed with high quality wood.

The materialized ideology from the Mosfell Valley discussed in this chapter stresses prominently visible sites of worship and burial. In the pagan period, mounds and ship settings mark territory, while the wealth expenditure and visibility of the cremation

mound at Hrísbrú marks status. The form of the ship, which is recurrent in both pagan and Christian monuments, ties the people of the Mosfell Valley to a deep Scandinavian tradition of the religious importance of ships as conveyors of the dead to the afterlife. The ship symbol also marks status and suggests that the chieftains of Mosfell cultivated the image of their connection to ships and the sea. In the Christian period, expensive churches were built at the two leading farms in the valley, thereby centralizing burial and worship at the chieftain's establishment, and directing a new flow wealth to the chieftain from tithes and service fees.

9.2 The Materialization of Ideology in the Pagan Period in the Mosfell Valley

Materialization of Norse pagan ideology occurred in all four arenas addressed by DeMarrais et al. (ceremonial events, symbolic objects, monuments, and writing), but the manifestation of the power potential in Iceland can be traced particularly in monuments and ritual events. Pagan burials were especially significant for pagan ideology, and are therefore also probably the most useful locus to look for materialized ideology in the form of monumental graves and ritually deposited grave good assemblages. Pagan burials were both a preparation of the dead person for the afterlife and an arena for the living to make political statements about authority, kinship as well as claims to land.

The diffuse control of ideology in the pagan period allowed a relatively broad spectrum of people to materialize ideological statement across the landscape. Individual farmsteads in the Mosfell Valley marked boundaries of their territory with pagan burials,

but the most prominent and dramatic displays of materialized ideology were the works of the Mosfell chieftains. The use of the ship as a symbol was particularly important for the Mosfell chieftains. The symbolic ship appears in two places during the pagan period. The re-shaped burial mound at Hrísbrú has been built up to look like a ship pointing towards the sea. A ship-setting in the low highlands has a similar shape, size, and orientation, suggesting a link between the builders of these two monuments. The appearance of a third arena of the symbolic ship in the graveyard at Hrísbrú, further suggests that all three of these ideological statements should be attributed to the Mosfell chieftains and be connected with their conception of their regional power.

Although only the Hulduhóll mound has yielded clear evidence of pagan burial (Figure 9.1), several other probable burial mounds in the valley suggest that pagan burials were placed close to travel routes and along territorial boundaries. Placement of mounds near travel routes assured a maximal audience for materialized messages of territorial claims and local status. The highly visible Hulduhóll mound was placed on a local road leading past the Hrísbrú farm. The Kollafjörður mounds were also located on along a road leading north out of the Mosfell Valley. Furthermore, the Kollafjörður mounds are positioned at the regional boundary of the local *hreppr* of the Mosfell community, and may originally have marked the boundary between the Mosfell, Leirvogstunga, and Kollafjörður farms. The ship-setting at Borg is positioned next to one of the two main east-west roads in the valley. The Hraðaleiði mound is located at the boundary between the Hraðastaðir, Mosfell, and Æsustaðir farms, but not along a travel route. If the people of Hraðastaðir were responsible for the construction of this mound, then the less

prominent position of the mound could be explained by the non-elite status of the builders. The construction of chiefly monuments, burial mounds and ship settings, along travel routes may suggest that this was a specific strategy for claiming and maintaining local power.

9.2.1 A Symbolic Stone Ship Setting: A Monument of Pagan Ideology

A large ship setting is located on the north side of the Mosfell Valley, about 1.5 km east of Hrísbrú, where a small iron-stained creek drains a heavily eroded area that is known as *Hryggir* (Ridges) or Borg.[260] This clearly delineated ship-shaped feature, roughly 29 meters long and 9 meters wide, was created with a single row of 69 small boulders and large cobbles (Byock et al. 2005b: 27-28; Figures 9.2, 9.3, 9.4, and 9.5). The stones form an outline in the shape of a ship with a pointed prow and a rounded stern. This stone alignment has a long axis oriented roughly east-to-west, with the "prow" pointed towards the west and the sea. The feature was constructed partially with large cobbles taken from a 2-3 meter wide band outside the outline of the ship, where very few large stones are now found. Another possible ship-like feature, which is smaller (ca. 10 meters long and 5 meters wide) and less clearly defined, lies just to the south of the larger ship setting (Figure 9.5). The larger of the two stone alignments is of cultural origin and

[260] This section is based on conclusions reached about the ship setting at Borg in the annual reports of the Mosfell Archaeological Project from the excavation seasons of 2004-2008. Byock and Zori surveyed the site in 2004. In 2005-2006, Max Farrar mapped the site while Jon Erlandson conducted test excavations and drew the vital conclusions about the erosional history of the site. In 2008, MAP conducted excavations in the center of the ship setting. The feature was initially recorded in 1986, by Guðmundur Ólafsson, who concluded that it was probably of recent origin (Ólafsson, personal communication). Since then MAP uncovered clear evidence that the feature is much older.

predates the historical erosion of loess soils in the area. The cultural origin, considerable age, and placement of the stone alignment within the landscape strongly suggest that this feature is a ship setting known from Scandinavian pagan tradition.

The ship setting at Borg is consistent with the tradition of Scandinavian symbolic ship constructions common in pre-Christian Scandinavia. Stone ship settings of the kind documented at Borg have not been found before in Iceland, but are present in mainland Scandinavia at many sites such as the Lindholm Høje in Denmark and the Ales Stones in Sweden (Ramskou 1976; Strömberg 1997). In the Viking Age elsewhere in Scandinavia, similar features were sometimes associated with assembly and ritual sites, as well as human cremation burials (see for example papers in Crumlin-Pedersen and Thye 1995).

Since the ship setting at Borg may have served a similar function, the Mosfell Archaeological Project has conducted several seasons of small scale targeted excavations at the site in search of remnants of charcoal, burned bone, or artifacts that would help document the nature and the age of the ship setting. The stratigraphic relationships uncovered by excavation showed the ship setting to be of considerable age and revealed an environmental history of severe erosion that has led to the natural uncovering of these stones, but unfortunately probably also to the weathering and disappearance of any activity related features and artifacts as well as historic tephra layers from the site.

The placement of the stone ship setting in relation to an old road, an iron-rich creek, and the sub-valley called Helgadalur (Holy Valley) suggests that this feature had a meaningful placement in the conception of the pre-Christian landscape. The old road running east-west just south of the Borg site south of the slope where the ship feature is

situated would have heightened the visibility and prominence of the ship stone site. Pagan burials are often placed close to old roads (Friðriksson 2009) to maximize visibility and transmit clear messages of territorial claims and status to passersby. Iron-working and iron extraction had supernatural associations in Viking Age Scandinavia (Hall 1992).The concentration of oxidized iron in the nearby stream and adjacent marshy areas are unmatched by any other area in the Mosfell Valley and these concentrated deposits of bog iron would have been of considerable interest to Viking Age and medieval residents of the valley. These iron oxide deposits may have been economically valuable and have conferred special significance on the stream that yielded the iron. The view from the ship setting towards the south is directly into the Holy Valley and probably not accidental.

9.2.1.1 Construction of the Ship Setting before the Formation of an Erosion Pavement

MAP investigations of the site history at Borg indicate that the ship setting was built before the formation of an erosional pavement that covers the site and the surrounding area. In the wider Borg area erosion of soils on the valley margins has left extensive areas of sparse vegetation and stony pavements consisting of gravel and angular basalt cobbles and boulders. On the ground surface, a gravel and cobble pavement has formed in and around the ship-like features. This pavement formed as the overlying soil was blown and/or washed away, concentrating the small stones scattered through the soil onto a deflated surface. When a continuous stony pavement formed on this lower surface, it stabilized the soil, preventing further erosion. Many of the stones within the large ship feature project well into the underlying soil and below the deflated

pavement of gravel and cobbles formed by the erosion of natural soil profiles in the area, indicating that the stones were placed in their current location sometime before the erosional pavement formed.

Support for the significant age of the ship setting was provided by three test units excavated east of the stone features that yielded intact soil profiles and clarified the processes that formed the gravel pavement (Figure 9.6). The intact soil profiles contained relatively thick soil sequences capped by brown loess as much as 40-50 cm thick, but did not include a gravel layer such as the gravel layer that exists on the surface of the eroded areas. Ambient stones throughout the soil, however, support the theory that erosion concentrated these ambient stones on a deflated surface to create the gravel layer. Profile 1, for instance, which was excavated on the side of a knoll of un-eroded soils rising up over an eroded area, contains disperse low-density gravels and cobbles in the soil matrices both above and below lenses of in situ Katla AD 1500 tephra (Figure 9.2). On the ground surface immediately north of Profile 1, a gravel and cobble pavement has formed that is identical to the pavement found in and around the ship features to the west. In situ Katla 1500 tephra found in the intact soil profile but absent in the eroded areas shows the extent of erosion at Borg and strongly suggests that all historic layers have been eroded away.

The date of the gravel pavement's formation is unknown, but it clearly formed some time before the 1950s when an aerial photograph shows the outline of the feature. Examination of aerial photos of the area taken in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s suggests that the two stone alignments were present at least 40 years ago and might be of

substantial age. The outline of the northern ship setting is clearly visible in the photo from the 1970s and the outline can be seen in photo from 1954. Substantial soil erosion appears to have occurred between the 1950s and 1970s, suggesting that the ship setting may have been buried beneath soil until exposed by erosion in the mid-twentieth century. The ship setting was clearly not built recently and no material evidence contradicts the construction of the ship setting in the Viking Age.

9.2.1.2 Targeted Archaeological Excavations of the Borg Ship Setting

To investigate the stratigraphy of the ship setting, MAP excavated a 50 x 100 cm test unit (Test Unit 1) inside the pointed "prow" of the ship feature (Figure 9.6). This unit was placed immediately adjacent to four stones that form part of the well-defined prow of the ship. All sediments were screened but no archaeological materials were recovered. The deflation surface of gravels and cobbles that exists across the Borg site formed a continuous layer in the upper 4-6 cm in Unit 1. Underneath the gravel surface is a brown loess soil layer, and underneath that, gray glacial sand appeared. Significantly, the four stones visible in the south wall of Unit 1 that were placed by humans as part of the ship setting outline, penetrate this erosional deflation surface. The bottom of the larger boulder extends nearly to the base of the brown loess soil while the other cobbles are also set in the underlying soil and not on the surface of the eroded pavement (Byock et al. 2006: 20-24).

In 2008 MAP conducted a targeted excavation in the center of the large ship setting to collect any available data that would help to establish the date or function of the

site (Figure 9.7). MAP excavated eight contiguous 2 x 2 units running across the short axis of the gravitational center of the ship setting (Figure 9.5). Screening of 100% of the gravel surface layer from all eight units yielded no finds. Beneath the gravel layer no indications of subsurface features remained. If any such feature was present then it must have been eroded with the rest of the site. MAP removed and screened the brown loess soil layer below the gravel and down to the transition with underlying gray sand and gravel. No finds appeared in this layer and no datable organic materials were recovered. Underlying the brown loess soil, excavators encountered natural gray glacial sand with gravels and cobbles that appears to be of glacial origin.

The excavations of the Borg ship setting yielded clear indications that the stones were put in place before the erosion pavement formed. The excavations in the center of the eroded feature, however, yielded no finds to shed light on the use of the site and did not provide any datable material. The evidence thus far accumulated from the ship shaped feature at Borg suggests that this is in all likelihood a pre-Christian ritual site that should be understood in same context as other Viking Age ship setting found across Scandinavia.

9.2.2 The Cremation Grave at Hrísbrú Set in a Symbolic Ship

An unusual and striking mound called Hulduhóll located about 40-50 meters from the excavated Christian church at Hrísbrú is the subject of several local oral traditions related to the folkloric *Huldufólk* (hidden people or elves; see Figure 9.1). Early examination of the mound in 2001 led members of the Mosfell Archaeological Project to

conclude that the mound was at least partially man-made. The clearest indication of this was the discovery of a line of curbstones along the northwestern tip of the mound. The shape of the top of the mound in itself is suggestive of the shape of a ship pointing west towards the sea. It might not be an accident that the top of this mound is almost exactly the same size and shape as the stone ship setting at Borg (see the scaled overlay of the ship-setting over the mound in Figure 9.8). Test excavations in 2001-2004 revealed that the center of the Hulduhóll mound was the site of a human cremation burial in the pre-Christian Scandinavian tradition.[261] The cremated individual must have been of significant status considering the prominent burial location, the association with the ship symbol, the quality of the artifact finds, and the cost of cremation in Iceland, where wood was a precious commodity.

Excavations in the center of the Hulduhóll mound uncovered four human burned skull fragments within a 20 to 30 cm thick layer containing large chunks of charcoal, wood and peat ash, burned earth, burned animal bones, and iron and copper artifacts. The skull fragments all derive from the same person. The cranial sutures visible on the skull fragments indicate the cremated individual died between the ages of 30 and 40. The sex could not be determined. To destroy a human body by cremation, a temperature of over 700 degrees Celsius needs to be reached on the pyre. Before this temperature is reached the skull usually explodes, scattering skull fragments of 2-3 centimeters (Hock 1996). This shattering does not occur if the skull is burned without the tissue still intact. The size

[261] The cremation burial from Hrísbrú has been previously summarized in print (see Byock et al. 2005). This section reviews the data briefly and employs the detailed description of the feature by Jon Erlandson in Byock et al. 2004 and my own notes from the site excavation to draw conclusions about the feature.

of the skull fragments from Hrísbrú as well as their maximum separation of over 2 meters is consistent with the rite of cremation carried out with a body of a recently deceased individual.

Analysis of the wood and metal finds from the cremation burial shows that significant investment was expended in the burial event and the grave goods. The large charcoal chunks recovered during excavation are the remnants of large pieces of wood employed in the pyre. Small iron fragments with a burnt appearance were shown by Raman spectroscopy of the surface corrosion to have incorporated charcoal particles from the cremation event (Wärmländer et al. 2010: 2287). Remnants of a copper sheet imported from Europe were found in the cremation feature. Metallographic analysis of the copper sheet revealed indications of cold-working and annealing, including annealing twins, small grain size, and strain lines in the microstructure. X-ray fluorescence revealed these to be fragments of a tin-bronze alloy showing a high level of manufacturing skill (Byock et al. 2003). The remains of riveted sheets of iron, possibly from an iron bowl, were also found in the cremation deposit. The broken or fragmented nature of the copper sheet and the riveted iron sheets may be the result of the ritual “killing” of grave goods that has been previously observed in the Scandinavian tradition.

A cremation rite carried out the top of the prominent Hulduhóll knoll would have been visible from most parts of the lower valley down to the coast. The cremators had a direct view down to the sea. The impressive setting would have been accentuated by the suggestive ship-shaped nature of the Hulduhóll knoll. Hulduhóll was modified to look like a ship by the placement of nine curbstones (with an average length of 39.2 cm)

around the peripheries of the top of the mound. Inside these curbstones basalt cobbles distinct from the bedrock of the knoll were deposited between the curbstones. Although it has not been possible to date the modification of the prow-like tip of the mound, the cremation grave and the modified mound clearly reference each other. The modified ship-shaped mound and the cremation grave should therefore be seen as a single monument following the pagan tradition of high-statue ship burials.

9.2.3 Mounds on Territorial Borders and Travel Routes

Although the mound at Hulduhóll is the only pagan burial verified by excavation in the Mosfell Valley, archaeological survey and oral traditions research has identified several additional likely burial mounds. Three sites from oral tradition are remembered as pagan burial mounds: Hraðaleiði ("Hraði's Mound"), Æsuleiði (Æsa's Mound), and an unnamed mound at the promontory called Tjaldanes (Tenting-promontory). The personal names in the prefixes of the Hraðaleiði and Æsuleiði are the same as the closest farms (Hraðastaðir and Æsustaðir) and are believed to be the final resting places of the first settlers at each of the associated farms. Archaeological survey at the northwestern peripheries of the Mosfell Valley has identified two other artificial mounds located adjacent to an old road and at the edge of the traditional border of the Mosfell region.

Archaeological investigation at Æsuleiði revealed that the mound is a cultural construction, but that it was built after AD 1500 and is not a pagan burial mound (Byock and Zori 2010; see Chapter 6 section 6.4.2.1). The location of this mound in low wetlands close to the Æsustaðir farm does not correspond to the patterning of the other potential

burial mounds in the Mosfell Valley or the pattern of pagan burials in the rest of Iceland. The locations of the rest of the mounds discussed in this section, however, are consistent with criteria for the placement of Icelandic pagan burial mounds on the boundaries of farms, outside of cultivated fields, and in a prominent places in the landscape (see Eldjárn 2000; Friðriksson 2009).

9.2.3.1 The Kollafjörður Mounds: Burials on the Northern Boundary of the Valley

Two low mounds of cultural origin lie north of an old prepared road and causeway that connects the Mosfell Valley with the adjacent valley and fjord (Kollafjörður) to the north (Figures 9.8 and 9.9). One of the two mounds, Mound Koll 1, lies immediately adjacent to the road, which curves around the mound (Figure 9.10). The second of the two mounds, Mound Koll 2, is located 160 m to the northeast in an eroded gravel field (Figures 9.10 and 9.11). Both mounds are approximately 1 m high and constructed from earth and a number of purposefully placed cobbles. The mounds have not been excavated, but their location and the relationship of the mounds to surrounding natural and man-made landscape features shows that their position is consistent with the spatial pattern of Icelandic pagan burials and that they are of significant age.

The location of these possible cultural mounds, referred to here as the Kollafjörður mounds, is consistent with the placement of other pagan graves in Iceland (see Eldjárn 2000; Friðriksson 2009). They are 1) close to a road and visible to travelers, 2) on a low natural plateau in the landscape, 3) placed at the boundary of old territories-between Mosfellshreppr and Kjalarneshreppr, 4) on the possible boundaries of old farms-

Kollafjörður, Hrísbrú, and Leirvogstunga, 5) outside of the cultivated homefields, and 6) placed with view of the ocean. An analysis of the landscape features of this area, including the mounds, the road, and a large old peat-cutting depression allows for a reconstruction of the temporal order of the cultural activity in the area. The southern mound predates the final form of the road which changes direction and bends around the mound. The road went out of use before the peat cutting removed a portion of the road at some point in the pre-modern period.

The landscape in this area west of the Mosfell mountain consists of marsh-lands and eroded gravel fields with isolated concentrations of large boulders. In the areas where the road crosses the wetlands, it has clearly been built up and has the appearance of a causeway. The causeway appears to have been constructed from soil from either side of the road as well as stones collected from the wider area. The road also crosses a few streams, across which large flat slabs of specially selected stones have been placed over the stream and perpendicular to the road (Figure 9.12). The road, which can be followed for about half a kilometer, is generally approximately 2 m wide and periodically lined with stones. The road has been covered up and destroyed by modern warehouse construction to the south (see Figure 9.11). To the north the road appears to join with a currently used gravel road that continues north on the east side of the main modern road and towards the Kollafjörður bay.

The extraction of peat in a large area in the center of the marsh-lands has truncated and removed a segment of the causeway (see Figures 9.9 and 9.10). This peat cutting area is clearly visible and measures approximately 100 x 50 m. The removal of

the road by the peat cutting shows that the peat cutting event post-dates the abandonment of the use of the causeway/road. The peat cutting surely ceased at least before the early 20th century and probably much earlier. This chronology indicates that the road is of significant age. The southern mound is still older since the final form of the roads bends around the mound. Since this area is the logical pathway for a route of travel from the Mosfell Valley to the Kollafjöður bay and the Kjalarnes penninsula where the earliest regional assembly site (*várþing*) is supposed to have stood (see Chapter 8 section 8.2.1), there probably was an earlier road or path here before the more formalized road was constructed. The position of the burial mounds on the boundary of the modern Mosfellsveit region, which conforms to the much older Mosfellshreppr boundary, suggests that the mounds mark a territorial boundary. The mounds might also mark a boundary between the old Mosfell, Kollafjörður, and Leirvogur farms. Whether the mounds were built by the people of the Mosfell Valley or the adjacent region, they are the materialized ideological statement of territorial boundaries positioned in a highly visible place along major travel route.

9.2.3.2 The Hraðaleiði Mound: Marking the Boundary between Ancient Farms

The Hraðaleiði mound rises as a distinct man-made mound on the otherwise flat central valley bottom between the Suðurá and Kaldakvísl rivers (see Figures 6.42 and 6.43). The Hraðaleiði mound, remembered in oral tradition from at least as far back as the late 18th century, has implications for understanding the old boundaries between three of the original farms in the Mosfell Valley as well as the process of marking territories in

the pagan period. The Hraðaleiði mound is situated close to the Suðurá river and is 1.7 m high, 10-12 m long and 6 m wide (Stefánsdóttir 2006: 64). The mound has partially eroded, exposing loose, gravelly soil that appears to be purposefully re-deposited soil. The Hraðaleiði mound was described in detail in Chapter 6 and employed for the temporal reconstruction of the historical settlement pattern in the valley. In this section, the mound is briefly discussed in terms of the function of materialized pagan ideology in marking farm boundaries.

For the understanding of pre-Christian ideological power, the mound is particularly interesting in the light of its location at the intersection of the traditional boundaries of the Mosfell, Hraðastaðir, and Æsustaðir farms. The mound monumentalizes a pivotal point in the territorial boundaries of three old farms in the valley. The placement at the boundaries of the three farms indicates that the mound is either a genuine pagan burial or an unusual natural feature that generated an oral tradition in antiquity that was subsequently co-opted into the land division of the Mosfell Valley. The oral tradition remembering this mound as a burial mound appears to have been widely accepted. If so, then the Hraðaleiði mound would have been equally effective as a boundary marker of the Hraðastaðir farm irrespective of whether it actually contained a human burial. In either case, the mound is intimately tied into the medieval land division system in the valley and therefore provides a fascinating example of the effectiveness of materialized ideology in structuring the cultural landscape of the Mosfell Valley.

9.2.3.3 The Tjaldanes Mound: the Oral Memory and Archaeology of the Burial of a Saga Hero

Egils Saga states that a mound located at a place called Tjaldanes was the initial burial site of the Icelandic saga hero Egill Skallagrímsson.[262] After the conversion to Christianity, Egill was supposedly exhumed from his pagan resting place and reburied under the altar at the church at Hrísbrú (Byock 1995, 1993). The promontory at the confluence of the Kaldakvísl and Suðurá rivers south of the Hrísbrú farm maintains the place name Tjaldanes. A low mound visible on this promontory was identified by local oral tradition as being the burial mound of Egill Skallagrímsson (Figure s 9.13 and 9.14).[263] The mound is situated on the border between the Hrísbrú and Norður Reykir farms, which is a relic of the even older boundary between the Viking Age farms of Mosfell and Æsustaðir.[264] The site is also located directly on the main east-west travel route through the valley. The location therefore corresponds well to the pattern of a pagan mound placement along old farm borders and at significant spots on travel routes to maximize the signaling of territorial claims and local power.

The place name Tjaldanes, meaning "Tenting-promontory," retains the memory of travelers in the medieval and pre-modern period staying the night here (Grímsson

[262] The saga record of this burial act is addressed in Chapter 4 section 4.5.1.

[263] The oral tradition concerning Egill's mound at Tjaldanes was recalled by Ólafur Ingimundarson, the farmer at Hrísbrú, who maintains that his grandfather passed this knowledge on to him.

[264] See Chapter 2 for the argument based on place names that Æsustaðir is older than Norður Reykir.

1861: 259; Nordal 1933: LIII-LXX).[265] The placement of a burial mound in such a location on the main east-west road through the valley and in a location frequented by overnight travelers can hardly have been accidental and would have been a clear signal of authority and claim to the land. Furthermore, the mound would have been on the border of the Hrísbrú and Æsustaðir farms, which was demarcated by the Suðurá river. The mound is on the north side of the river and therefore should be associated with the Hrísbrú farm.

Archaeological test excavation has shown that the mound identified by local oral tradition is a natural mound. Considering the medieval tradition and features of the Tjaldanes promontory, however, it seems likely that there may in fact be or have been a pagan burial in this spot signaling power and territorial claims. In 2005, MAP sectioned the potential burial mound of Tjaldanes identified by local tradition with a one-meter wide trench oriented east to west across the mound. The trench, measuring 9.80 m long and 1 m wide, was designed to examine the depth and character of the deposits of the mound (Figure 9.15).The mound contained no indication of cultural activity except the foundations of a modern fence post. The soil underneath the sod consisted of a brown sandy silt with lenses of more granular and grayish brown sand. Underneath this topsoil at varying depths, but following the contours of the mound, was a dense gravel layer consisting of natural stream gravel. Single-context excavation of the trench fill and 100% screening of all soil over ¼-inch mesh yielded no cultural material.

[265] See Chapter 2, section 2.3.6.2 for a discussion of this and other place names along the old travel routes in the Mosfell Valley.

The natural origin of the stream gravel was verified by a test unit excavated to a depth of 120 cm below the surface. Trench 1 showed clear stratigraphic horizons, with alternating layers of heavy gravel and light gravel in sand. This type of sediment layering is a normal flood cycle phenomenon with the heavy stones settling first to the bottom of the riverbed and the smaller sediments settling on top as the energy of the flood abates. Excavation did not support the oral tradition that this specific mound at Tjaldanes was a pagan burial mound. Nevertheless, the tradition of a pagan burial in this area may still hold some truth considering the qualities of the site are consistent with placement of Icelandic pagan burials. The medieval tradition records that the mound was dug up when Egill was transferred to the new Christian church at Mosfell. Frequent flooding in this area as indicated by the deposition of alternating gravel and sand deposition observed during the excavation of the mound, may also have washed away the remains of any man-made mound in the area.

9.3 Power, Cult Continuity, and the Materialization of Christian Conversion

The conversion of Iceland to Christianity was decided by an arbitrated communal decision at the national Althing assembly in AD 1000, but the Christianization process had begun much earlier and continued into the 11th century. The effect of the Christianization process on the ideological landscape appears to have been rapid and many chieftains across Iceland quickly began building Christian churches and assuming the leadership roles as Christian priests. The Christian churches, as privately owned

arenas of worship and centralized locations of burial, provided increased potential for controlling materialized ideology. Early Christian churches from the early 11th century have been excavated at five locations in Iceland, including Hrísbrú in the Mosfell Valley, Neðri Ás and Keldudalur in Skagafjörður, Hofstaðir in Mývatn, and Þórarinstaðir in Seyðisfjörður (Byock et al. 2005; Gestsdóttir 2006; Kristjánsdóttir 2004; Roberts 1998; Guðný Zöega, personal communication). The first churches at these sites are all small wooden stave churches with earth-dug post holes and a surrounding inhumation grave field. Section 9.3.1 on the Syncretization Period focuses on the evidence from the excavation of the Hrísbrú church and graveyard in the Mosfell Valley. Section 9.3.2 on the Institutionalized Church Period employs the evidence from the last phase of the Hrísbrú church as well as the archaeological remains of the 12th century church at the modern Mosfell farm.

Egils Saga and *Gunnlaugs Saga Ormstungu* both mention a church at Hrísbrú/Mosfell that appears to correspond to the excavated church at Hrísbrú. These saga sources have been discussed in the framework of ideological power in Chapter 4. The material remains of the excavated churches at the modern Hrísbrú and Mosfell farms were presented in detail in Chapter 6. This chapter employs the archaeological remains from the two churches and the Christian graveyard at Hrísbrú to show how the chieftain at Hrísbrú used the new ideology to increase his power over the local region. Particular focus is placed on the material signs of Christianization and manner in which the pagan ritual system was partially integrated into the practice of the new religion. This should not be interpreted as a form of “resistance” to Christian ideology, but rather an important

way that the newly Christianized people at Hrísbrú maintained the ties to the ancestors and with that, their ancestral claims to power in the region.

The presence of a very early church at Hrísbrú indicates that the chieftain who lived there was quickly adapting to the Christian conversion and probably saw the advantages for the control of ideological power provided by a church. Construction of a church in the early 11th century was expensive and limited to farms with enough resources to acquire quality wood for construction and the requisite imports for church services. Owning a church therefore would have been a display of wealth and status. Burial in a common graveyard brought burials into the private sphere and control of the owner of the church. The burial ground may have served only the local farmstead, but considering Christian laws requiring burial in churchyards (Jóhannesson 1974), some of the dead from surrounding farms would in all likelihood have been brought to this church. The church owner would thereby be asserting a control over the dead only thinly masked by the ideological unity of Christianity. Burial in centralized Christian holy ground removed the ancestral remains from their active role in defining territorial boundaries. The remains for the dead were brought from the peripheries of farmsteads into the center of the farmsteads owned by chieftains and powerful farmers.

9.3.1 The Syncretization Period: Constructing Continuity of Ideological Power during Christianization

The change in ideological system from paganism to Christianity was a gradual process of adaptation of Christianity and accommodation of old symbols and practices

that resulted in a period of intermixed ritual systems. The materialized symbols of ideological power that tied the local leaders to the landscape, their ancestors, and their claims to land and status needed to be intertwined with the Christianity in order that the power wielders could continue to maintain their unequal access to ideological power. The syncretization of pagan and Christian ritual systems as well as the role of this syncretization in the continuity of power is visible in the archaeological record from the Hrísbrú churchyard. Specifically, two processes are evident: retroactive Christianization of venerable ancestors and the continued use of the ship-symbol in graves.

9.3.1.1 Reburial of Pagan Ancestors in Christian Contexts: Retroactive Christianization and Power Continuity

The chieftain and the inhabitants of Hrísbrú employed a strategy of retroactive Christianization of ancestral remains as one means to maintain ideological power in the Christian period (Geary 1994a: 37). As the old pagan methods of displaying status with rich graves and marking territory with visible burial sites on the farm borders gave way to centralized burial in the churchyard, the chieftains needed to articulate the materialized ideology with the new ritual system. The strategy of retroactively Christianizing ancestors established a degree of cult continuity and a firm link to their ancestors that legitimized their claims to power and land. This link to the ancestors could be maintained by placing new Christian cult sites on top of pagan cult places, but individual ancestors also had to be linked to the new religion. At least one solution to this problem was to translate the ancestors' remains into Christian contexts.

The effort to bring pagan ancestors into the new forms of materialized Christianity is visible archaeologically in two reburials found in the church graveyard at Hrísbrú (see burial features 4 and 46 on map in Figure 6.9). One reburial was placed next to the northern chancel wall, while another was inhumed on the opposite side of the chancel next to the southern wall (Figure 9.16). Both burials consisted of the disarticulated skeletons of tall adolescent males. The reburial beside the southern chancel has a calibrated ^{14}C date range of AD 780-980, indicating that the individual died well before the official conversion to Christianity (see Table 7.11). The early date of this burial, as well as the very early date of the church, strongly suggests that these reburials could only have come from pagan sites. Moreover, the grave to the south of the chancel included a whale bone with several lines incised on the surface, which may be a talisman relating to pagan cultic belief. The theory of a curative talisman is strengthened by the fact that the young man in this reburial died of an ear infection that evolved into a gruesome brain abscess.

The chancel, which contained the altar, was the holiest part of the church. The placement of these two reburials in symmetrical positions on either side of the holiest part of the church indicates the two reburials were afforded significant importance and status. Although the two reburied individuals were young, there must have been something special about their large stature, their early deaths, or their status in life that inspired family stories and the will of the chieftain to exhume them and retroactively Christianize their remains.

Egils Saga contains an account of retroactive Christianization at Hrísbrú of the heroic ancestor Egill Skallagrímsson. Egill was a pagan buried in a mound in classic pagan fashion. When Iceland was Christianized, the chieftain at Hrísbrú built a church and had Egill's remains exhumed and reinterred under the altar of the new church.[266] The story from *Egils Saga* shows that retroactive Christianization was a concept that medieval Icelanders understood, while the archaeologically excavated reburials at Hrísbrú corroborate the text by demonstrating that this process was not just a perception, but a reality.

The process of retroactive Christianization is further illustrated by a famous example from Viking Age Denmark. In ca. AD 960 King Harald Bluetooth declared that Denmark had been converted to Christianity by erecting a large rune stone, which he placed in the center of a gigantic pagan ship setting and between two large memorial mounds. The runic inscription reads: "*King Harald had these memorials made for Gorm his father and Thyre his mother- that Harald who won for himself all Denmark, and Norway- and made the Danes Christian*" (Roesdahl 1997: 227). Harald built a wooden church beside his rune stone and had the body of his dead father, King Gorm, exhumed from the pagan mound to the north and placed under the floor of the church (Krogh 1983). With his monument, Harald announced the arrival of the new faith and by placing the church in the middle of a ship setting he maintained a continuity of place and tied his new royal power to the existing pagan monuments. Harald cultivated his inherited

[266] See section 4.5.2 in Chapter 4 a full analysis of the account from *Egils Saga*. See section 9.2.3.3 in this chapter for the archaeological investigation of a mound associated with Egill Skallagrímsson.

legitimacy and continuity with his father and predecessor by placing his skeletal remains in a place of honor in the new church.

The example from the Hrísbrú church is on a chiefly scale while the Danish example is on a grander royal scale. Nevertheless, the concept is the same. During the changes in the ritual system involved in Christianization, powerful individuals who took a leading role in ideological change could maintain their traditional legitimacy and status from the old religion by incorporating and appropriating materialized pagan ideology into new monuments. These acts must have been public events meant to demonstrate ownership of the materialized pagan past and the willing support of the venerable ancestors for the religious change.

9.3.1.2 Ship Symbols in Christian Graves: Ideological Continuity of Ritual and Status Markers

In the Christian graveyard at Hrísbrú, a number of excavated burials included objects that suggest that the symbolic ship from pagan ritual was being incorporated into early Christian burials. Five of the 26 burials uncovered at Hrísbrú contained a type of rivet called a clench bolt, which is most commonly employed in ship construction (see Table 9.1). Clench bolts consist of round-headed nails which have been passed through boards and then hammered over an iron square or diamond-shaped rove placed around the nail (Figures 9.17 and 9.18; Bill, 1994; Lundström, 1972; McGrail, 2004). The inclusion of this artifact type in the Hrísbrú graves strongly suggests that these people were buried with pieces of ships or boats (Zori 2007). The ship symbol in pre-Christian

Scandinavian culture had ritual significance at least as far back as the Bronze Age (Crumlin-Pedersen and Thye 1995) and was frequently employed as a marker of high status (Randsborg 2009: 2). The burials at Hrísbrú mark high status males and connect the newly Christianized population with the pagan symbols in general and more specifically with the people of the Mosfell Valley who constructed the ship mound at Hrísbrú and the ship setting at Borg.

In the Christian Hrísbrú inhumation graves, the clench bolts, which are unsuitable for making square boxes, were found on top of the skeletons, indicating that they were part of wooden constructions other than coffins or burial biers. It is difficult and ineffectual to build a coffin with clench bolts. Coffins are easily constructed with a few iron nails whereas building a coffin with clench bolts would require iron angled mounts, which were not found in any of the burials (Figure Sync 9.19). Some burials at Hrísbrú do appear to have been interred in classic coffins built with standard nails. In these coffin burials, iron nails were found along the edges of the burials, often in association with linear organic soil stains from decayed wood (see Table 9.1). Therefore, the clench bolts in burials must be the remnants of an object interred in the graves other than a traditional box-shaped coffin. The most common use of clench bolts in the Viking World is for clinker boat and ship construction, suggesting that the clench bolts and the decayed wooden planks that they bound together are recycled material from boats (Zori 2007).

In Burial Feature 5 from Hrísbrú, the clench bolts are distributed in three clear lines aligned with the vertical axis of the grave. This alignment supports the idea that these objects held together planks that in all probability are pieces of boats. The

alignment of the bolts into lines was less clear in other burials. The majority of the clench bolts from Hrísbrú clench a length between 10 and 20 mm, which is shorter than would be expected for the planks of large clinker built ship, but fit more consistently with boards from a smaller boat. Re-use of material from small Viking Age boats in Christian burials has previously been postulated based on clench bolts in graves at Caister-on-Sea and Barton on Humber in England (Carver 1995: 111-112; Richards 1991: 115), and Sebbersund in Denmark (Birkedahl and Johansen 1995: 162-163).

The investment of energy into these burials represented by the deposition of clench bolts suggests a purposeful symbolic statement (see e.g. Sinclair 1995: 55). Metals were a valuable commodity in Iceland and metallurgical analysis of the finds from Hrísbrú indicate a high degree of reuse. At the Hrísbrú site the five burials contained a total of 63 clench bolts, 3 clench nails and 5 nails (see Table 9.1). The use of unnecessary quantities of recyclable iron hardware in the Hrísbrú graves did not have a functional purpose and were not deposited carelessly. The reused boat planks could have served as overlying covers for the burials, but as argued for the burials containing clench bolts in the English cemeteries, "this is really too mundane an explanation. Given the Scandinavian tradition of ship burial it seems reasonable that the symbolism of the boats' timbers was intentional."

In Scandinavian culture, the boat had great symbolic significance from the Bronze Age to the Viking Age (Crumlin-Pedersen and Thye 1995). Ole Crumlin-Pedersen (1995) sees burials with parts of boats as belonging to the same tradition as larger ship burials (Oseberg, Gokstad, Sutton Hoo) and stone ship settings (Lindholm Høje, Jelling) that are

collectively a religious reference to the Germanic god Frey's ship, Skiðblaðnir. Any burial with associated ship planks with clench bolts should be seen as part of this tradition. The inclusion of boat timbers in burial contexts was meant to convey the same symbolic message as the whole ship, only at a different scale and at a more affordable cost. It would have been impossible to include an entire boat in a Christian burial, but a piece of a boat could easily be placed on the body as symbolic gesture referencing the significance of boats in pagan ideology.

In the Hrísbrú graveyard, the rite of burial that included clench bolts is limited to males and appears to mark status (Table 9.1). The males given these special symbolic ship burials were probably chieftains and other high status males from the Hrísbrú farmstead. These symbolic boat graves is probably a continuation of the association of the ship symbol with high status individuals, which was also seen in the pagan cremation grave placed in the center of the ship-shaped Hulduhóll mound (see section 9.2.2 above). Three of the five burials with clench bolts contained skeletal material that allowed age and sex to be determined. In all of these burials, the buried individual was a mature male. The person inhumed in Burial Feature 15901 that included 26 clench bolts and four nails was over 60 years old and was the oldest individual uncovered in the Hrísbrú graveyard.

The clench bolts present in the Hrísbrú graves are remnants of ritually deposited boats that are symbolic references to male status and the pagan tradition of boat burial and the ship as a vehicle to the afterlife. The people of Hrísbrú appear to have had a specific focus and ritualized relationship with the boat symbol. This association was visible in the pagan period in the ship setting at Borg and the cremation burial on the

ship-shaped mound at Hrísbrú and carried on into the Christian period through burial with pieces of boats. The energy investment represented by the boat burials suggests status signaling while the apparent exclusive application of the ritual to adult male burials ties the rite to male power.

Burial ID	Skeletal Material	Sex	Age	Facing	Artifacts	Wood	Primary	Secondary	Hands	C14 (Calibrated)
1	x	F	35-50	south	5 nails with wood	coffin lines	x			
2	x	M	mid 40s	south			x			AD 890-990
6	x		infant		wood, metal	possible coffin				
3	x	M	late 30s-mid 40s	south	holding wood stick, iron nail above	coffin lines	x			
4	x	M	early to mid 20s		whale bone			x		AD 780-980
5	x	M	45-50	south	18 clench bolts; 3 distinct rows	rectangular stains	x			
7	x	M	40-50	south	wood, coffin?	probable coffin	x		over pelvis	
18	x	M	35-50		2 iron nails with wood	probable coffin	x			AD 1320-1350
24										
25	x									
37										
39						coffin line				
41	x	M	adult			coffin lines				
43	x	F	early 20s	up						AD 810-1010
46	x	M	12-15					x		AD 660-870
47	x	F	40s	south	iron nail				left over	

Burial ID	Skeletal Material	Sex	Age	Facing	Artifacts	Wood	Primary	Secondary	Hands	C14 (Calibrated)
									pelvis	
49	x	M	35-50	south	bowl on top of coffin	coffin lid	x *			
52	x		7-8	south	iron nail	coffin lines, staining	x		over pelvis	
4852	x		adult		17 clench bolts, 3 clench nails, 1 nail					
6514	x	M	30-40				x			
15901	x	M	60 or more		26 bolts, 4 nails		x		over pelvis	
8830	x	F	around 50				x			
12000	x		20s-early 30s							
2005-2										
2007-5	x	M	adult		29 clench bolts, 1 clench nail	planks	x			
2007-3					2 clench bolts					
Sum	**21**	**4 F 12 M**		**8 south 1 up**	**5 with clench bolts**	**wood in 7 or 8**	**12**	**2**	**4 over pelvis**	

Table 9.1 Summary presentation of information concerning mortuary practices from the 26 graves from the Hrísbrú cemetery. Note that 5 burials contain clench bolts, objects used in ship construction. All burials containing this artifact type are of adult males. Most burials were facing south and when the location of the arms could be determined they were usually found crossing over the pelvic region. For additional information see Table 7.11 in Chapter 7.

* Left humerus was upside-down in burial Feature 49.

9.3.2 The Institutionalized Church Period: Chieftains and the New Economics of Christian Ideology

Archaeological material for this section about the period after the Christian faith became firmly entrenched derives from the abandonment phase of the Hrísbrú church and the medieval church excavated at the modern Mosfell farm. From the abandoned Hrísbrú church and the disturbed remains of the new Mosfell church, it is possible to ascertain that the ideological center of the Mosfell Valley shifted from the Hrísbrú farm to the current Mosfell farm. This shift is associated with the movement of the chieftain's establishment from Hrísbrú to Mosfell. Significantly, this shows a continued domination of the church institution by the secular power of the chieftains. The archaeological remains (see Chapter 6) and the textual sources (see Chapter 5) agree that the church was moved at some time around the middle of the 12th century. At this time, the local church institution along with the physical church and the Christian burial ground was tied to the habitation site of the local chieftain. The local ideological power of the church is therefore firmly tied to the secular leaders, who assumed a large degree of control over the physical manifestations and the overall institution of the Christian Church.

Through the process of moving the valley's Christian center from Hrísbrú to Mosfell, the link to the past was maintained by the exhumation and reburial of what appears to have been the first grave from the Hrísbrú church. Bringing the "founder's grave" from the Hrísbrú church to be reburied in the new Mosfell church solidified the link to the ancestral power structures and territorial claims. The possibility that this founder's grave from Hrísbrú may already have been a secondary burial reinterred from a

pagan burial extends this effort to maintain continuity back into the pagan period. The new church and churchyard at Mosfell were larger than the older church and graveyard at Hrísbrú. The difference in size indicates that the new church and churchyard were designed to service a much larger population, possibly the entirety of the Mosfell Valley. Previously at Hrísbrú the churchyard may only have held inhabitants of the Hrísbrú farmstead. The centralization of burial rites, Christian service, and the final resting places of the dead at one site in the valley increased the control of the Mosfell chieftain over ideological power. In a parallel development, the institutionalized church was providing more permanent sources of economic wealth by the imposition of the formalized church tithe.

9.3.2.1 Emptied Graves and the Lasting Importance of Ancestral Ties in Christian Burial

Excavated empty grave shafts from the Hrísbrú churchyard show that the remains of some of the dead were moved with the church to its new location at the current Mosfell farm. Five grave shafts out of the 26 total graves were empty, but the extremely variable skeletal preservation at the site makes it difficult to establish with certainty that all of these were emptied. The only clear example of this practice was an empty grave shaft uncovered underneath the church chancel in which the altar would have stood (see Figure 6.9). Even without the account from *Egils Saga* of a special burial underneath the altar at the Hrísbrú church, this grave would have still been highly significant because of its particular reverential placement under that altar. Furthermore, this burial predates the

construction of the church chancel, meaning that it should probably be interpreted as a "founder's grave" for the Hrísbrú churchyard (Figure 9.20 and 9.21).

The archaeological investigations of the Hrísbrú stave church, suggested that the church was built in two phases and that the first phase may have consisted only of a rectangular nave. Little time elapsed before the square chancel was added to the eastern end, since two reburials from previous pagan graves (see section 9.3.1.1), which must be among of the first graves at the site, were placed up against the sides of the chancel. All other burials surrounding the Hrísbrú church also appear to be oriented to respect the existence of the church chancel. The grave underneath the chancel is the only exception and the only burial that clearly predates the chancel's construction. Therefore, the available evidence suggests that the burial under the chancel was the first grave dug at the Hrísbrú site.

The grave underneath the chancel of the Hrísbrú church was emptied as the church was being abandoned. Gravel spray from the gravel floor of the chancel extended over and beyond the wall foundations of the chancel. Excavators recognized the exhumation event as a clear hole in the built-up gravel floor of the chancel. The hole culminated in the grave shaft underneath the chancel. The sides of the grave shaft were unmistakable since the grave had been cut down well into the prehistoric natural sediments. The grave shaft, measuring 192 x 45 cm was rather long compared to other grave shafts, which may be an indication of the size of the person originally buried here or the status of that individual (see Figures 6.9 and 9.21).

The Icelandic lawbook *Grágás* states that all human remains from a graveyard that is being abandoned must be moved to consecrated ground at another church (Dennis et al. 1980, 1995; Jóhannesson 1974: 168). Clearly this law was not followed at the Hrísbrú church for all burials, but probably just for the particularly important and revered ancestral dead. The dead person buried under the chancel and exhumed for reburial elsewhere must have been destined for the new church at Mosfell. The fact that this prominently placed burial showed clear indications of exhumation at the time of the abandonment of the church indicates that this person must have held a place of importance in the power claims and ancestral ties of the chiefly establishment that moved the church to Mosfell.

The story concerning the exhumation of this prominently placed individual reconstructed from archaeology is particularly intriguing because of the existence of an account in *Egils Saga* that closely parallels the interpretation of the archaeology. The saga states that Egill's bones were exhumed from under the altar of the Hrísbrú church and then transferred to the new 12th century church at Mosfell (see section 5.2 in Chapter 5). The saga, however, begins in the pagan period with the burial of the warrior-poet Egill Skallagrímsson in a mound at Tjaldanes (see section 9.2.33 above and section 4.5.1 in Chapter 4). Subsequently Egill is reburied by the people of Hrísbrú underneath the altar of their newly built church just after the conversion to Christianity. This church from the saga matches the location and date of the church excavated at Hrísbrú, and enticingly, the archaeological excavations unearthed the grave underneath the altar area. Since no bones were recovered under the altar at Hrísbrú it is impossible to say archaeologically whether

this grave was a reburial, but it is possible, especially considering that the burial event probably took place as a founder's grave immediately before the construction of the chancel.

The grave underneath the altar was a full size grave seemingly meant for burial of an articulated skeleton. The size of the grave, however, does not rule out the possibility that this was a secondary burial since full sized secondary burials have been previously excavated (see e.g. Krogh 1983). Furthermore, considering that only a short time may have passed between the original burial and the reburial event at Hrísbrú, it is very likely that the skeletal elements would have still been articulated at the time of reburial. The grave underneath the Hrísbrú chancel may have been the second of three resting places of Egill Skallagrímsson, although this fact can never be proven. Whoever the historical person buried under the chancel was, the archaeological record and the textual sources agree that the earthly remains of certain special ancestors were important in retaining and reconstituting the ideological claims to status, power, and land.

9.3.2.2 Ideologically Based Economic Power of the Institutionalized Christian Church

As Christianization progressed and a loose church administration began to become institutionalized, church owners gained several tangible economic advantages, including fees charged for burial and payment for church services.[267] These economic benefits depended on the acceptance of the institutionalized nature of Christianity and would not have been available in the early period of conversion during the early part of

[267] According to the Code of Church Law in Iceland, a burial plot cost 12 ells of homespun wool while a burial service cost an additional 6 ells (Jóhannesson 1976: 168).

the 11th century. The increased ideological power in the 12th and 13th century is visible archaeologically in the Mosfell Valley by a comparison of the sizes of the early church and churchyard at Hrísbrú with the church and churchyard at the later Mosfell site. The character of the church construction changed from the smaller wooden stave church at Hrísbrú designed for status display to the larger turf-insulated church at Mosfell designed to encompass larger numbers of people and bring direct economic benefits through service fees.

The graveyard at Hrísbrú appears to have contained around 30 inhumation graves buried over a period of about 100 years. If the permanent population of Hrísbrú was about 20 individuals, it is quite possible that only the people living at Hrísbrú were buried in this churchyard. This means that burial services may in fact not have generated much additional income. It is possible that churches existed at the other early farmsteads in the valley, although they are not mentioned in the texts and have not been identified archaeologically. Even without another churchyard option, people in the early Christian period may have resisted bringing their dead to the chieftain's church. The Code of Church Law written down in AD 1117-1118 limited the right of burial to certain churches selected by the bishop of Iceland (Jóhannesson 1974: 160-166). The law may not have been effective in forcing everyone to bury their dead at the appointed churches, but the chieftain's church once moved from Hrísbrú to Mosfell, was recognized by the bishop as the only church in the valley with rights to burial in AD 1200 (*Dip. Ís.*12: 9; see section 6.3.1.1 in Chapter 6).

The Mosfell church appears to have been the only church and the only possible place of burial in Mosfell Valley towards the end of the Icelandic Free State. The use of the current Mosfell graveyard that stretches over the medieval graveyard frequently disturbs older graves and has made it impossible for archaeological work to estimate the original numbers inhumed at the site. Nevertheless, the identification of the medieval churchyard walls that extend beyond the current graveyard on both the southwest and north sides suggest that the medieval graveyard was designed with a capacity to hold the dead of the whole Mosfell Valley (see section 6.3.1 in Chapter 6). A comparison of the size of the Hrísbrú graveyard from the 11th century with the Mosfell graveyard, which dates from the 12th to the 15th century, shows that the later medieval graveyard at Mosfell covers an area almost six times the size of the Hrísbrú churchyard.[268] In the 12th century when the medieval Mosfell graveyard was established, there were probably seven farms in the valley, a number consistent with the six fold increase in the churchyard area meant to encompass the valley's whole population.

The church itself was also enlarged when it was transferred from Hrísbrú to Mosfell. The stave church at Hrísbrú measured 6.8 x 3.2 m. Although only the northeast corner of the walls from the later church at Mosfell has been uncovered, the walls were much more massive. The excavated portion of the nave's northern wall consisted of a large stone foundation measuring approximately two meters in width. The width of the foundation cannot be directly correlated with the overall size of the structures, since the

[268] The estimate of the area of the Hrísbrú churchyard is based on the extent of the burials encountered during the excavations. The estimate of the area of the Mosfell churchyard is based on the observations by Magnús Grímsson in the 19th century, who wrote about the farm when the ruins were still visible on the surface (see section 6.3.1.2 in Chapter 6).

two churches were constructed in different styles. The Hrísbrú church was a wooden stave church with narrow wall trenches for staves set into a sill beam. The church at Mosfell would have had turf walls on the north and south, while only the eastern façade appears to have had exposed wood. This structural style change follows the shift away from pure wooden churches that characterized the conversion period (see e.g. Roberts 1998; Krístjansdóttir 2004) to churches with turf walls (see e.g. Rafnsson 1970; Vilhjálmsson 1996). The turf walls make structural sense in Iceland and would have made the churches substantially warmer. It seems likely that the small early churches were partially status displays partially designed to exhibit the costly wood used in construction. On the other hand, the builders of the later medieval church at Mosfell appear to have prioritized function and size as the primary source of power derived from the churches began to shift away from pure status display to the accommodation of larger numbers for church services.

The large size of the churchyard at the new Mosfell church appears to be temporally correlated with the introduction of the Tithe Law in 1097. The tithe is traditionally recognized as the most dramatic and quantifiable of the economic effects of the introduction of Christianity to Iceland. The tithe benefited primarily the bishops and maybe even more so the owners of the local parish churches. The tithe from each area was split into four equal parts for the bishop, the owner of the local church, the local priest, and the poor. Since the early priests were often chieftains or the sons of chieftains and most parish churches were on the land of chieftains or powerful farmers, in general, the secular elite received half of the tithe. Moreover, the local parish church was

responsible for the distribution of the tithe, meaning that this last quarter of the tithe also flowed through the hands of the chieftains and even if they redistributed the entirety of the allotted wealth, the role of redistributor certainly provided additional status to the chieftains. Wealth from the tithe may have facilitated the increase in size of the church at Mosfell. In any case, the centralization of burial and ritual at the Christian church and churchyards in the 12th century went hand in hand with the economic benefits of the tithe as two interlinked parts of the increased institutionalization of Christianity in Iceland.

From the perspective of ideological power, the power of the Mosfell chieftains over the local region increased with the introduction of Christianity and particularly as the Christian faith became institutionalized. The size of the church and most dramatically of the churchyard increased from the small private church at Hrísbrú to the larger 12th century parish church constructed at Mosfell. The centralization of the bodies of the deceased and ritual services at the home of the Mosfell chieftains greatly augmented their unequal access to ideological power. The ideological power over the local region would have increased the potential of the Mosfell chieftains to compete at the wider national stage. The same shift was occurring across Iceland, however, meaning that other successful chieftains would have benefited from this process as well. The result is a firmer regional control over the local population but not necessarily an equivalent increase in power compared to chieftains in nearby regions.

9.4 Conclusion: Ritual Continuity and the Centralization of Ideological Power in the Mosfell Valley

The character of ideological power changed dramatically from the disperse power of Norse paganism in the Settlement Period to the centralized power of institutionalized Christianity at the end of the Icelandic Free State. The secular chieftains of Mosfell benefited from this change by syncretizing the ritual systems, and harnessing and controlling the sources of ideological power inherent in Christianity. The archaeological evidence from the Mosfell Valley shows the role of ideologically charged monuments in the pagan period as markers of status and territory. The analysis of the archaeological remains of churches and churchyards at Hrísbrú and Mosfell, in particular, provides a high-resolution illustration of the strategies the Mosfell chieftains employed through the Christianization transition and into the period of institutionalized Christianity.

In the Pagan Period, ideology materialized in the form of ship-settings and low mounds helped structure the cultural landscape of the Mosfell Valley by signaling territorial claims and status. Pagan monuments and burial mounds identified in the Mosfell Valley were prominently placed at the borders of territories of farms and regions and along travel routes. In the Pagan Period, control over materialized ideology was decentralized and most farmsteads appear to have had the capability of constructing visible monuments, such as for example the Hraðaleiði mound, presumably constructed by the people of Hraðastaðir. A central hypothesis of this chapter, however, is that the chieftains of Hrísbrú/Mosfell were particularly effective in displaying power through pagan monuments. I suggest also that the symbolic ship seen in the cremation mound and

the stone ship setting at Borg was appropriated by the Mosfell chieftains who also employed this symbol in the graves of adult males in the early Christian graves at Hrísbrú. The ship, as a symbol with deep Scandinavian ritual roots, represented high status and a vehicle to the afterlife, but also more directly associated the Mosfell chieftains with the initial trans-oceanic settlement of the region and legitimized their control over the valley. It is probably not accidental that the symbolic ships at Hulduhóll and Borg both point to the Leirvogur port and the ocean from where the Mosfell chieftains derived economic benefit and contact with the wider Viking World.

In the Syncretization Period of transition between paganism and Christianity, the chieftains of Mosfell displayed their new status by building an expensive wooden stave church, while maintaining continuity with the previous ritual system by reburying important pagan ancestors in the new Christian graveyard and by incorporating the pagan imagery of the ship. The chiefly household at Hrísbrú deposited parts of boats in the Christian burials of some adult males as a syncretization strategy that allowed the continued display of their traditional symbol of male power within Christian contexts. Maintaining this continuity linked the power wielders of the early Christian period to the ancestral power claims. Even more importantly, the whole pagan landscape was restructured and appropriated by the purposeful excavation of pagan burials and the transfer of the ancestral remains to positions of prominence within the new Christian burial ground.

In the final phase of institutionalized Christianity, the Mosfell chieftains benefitted from the centralization of ritual practice and materialized ideology in the

church and churchyard at Mosfell. The center of ideological power in the valley followed the chieftain's household and shifted from Hrísbrú to Mosfell, showing the link between the personal power of the chieftain and the ideological power of medieval Icelandic Christianity. The movement of the Mosfell farm occurred around the same time as the institutionalization of the tithe in 1097 and the legislation of exclusive burial rights to parish churches in 1117-1118. The centralization of ideology at this time was yielding significant economic power beyond the public status display and territorial land claims that were the objectives of the materialized ideology of the Pagan and the Syncretization Periods. The importance of the material forms of Christianity for overall chiefly power in the Institutionalized Church Period is visible in the size increases of the church and the churchyard at the new Mosfell farmstead. Harnessing both the legally institutionalized Christian ideological power and the materialization of that power consolidated the control of the Mosfell chieftains over the Mosfell region.

Chapter 10 Conclusion

The history of the Mosfell Valley from the original Norse settlement in the 9th century to the end of the Icelandic Free State in the middle of the 13th century is a story of colonization, adaptation, and construction of a new society. This dissertation pursued a regional perspective on the Mosfell Valley, integrating archaeological information from the excavations of the Mosfell Archaeological Project with evidence from medieval texts, oral traditions, and place name studies. This high-resolution data allowed the examination of the evolution of chiefly power in the region from the kinship-based alliances that characterized the early settlement period to the territorial struggles of the 13th century. The shift from personal power to institutionalized territorial power was an underlying process visible in both the textual sources and the archaeological evidence.

The analysis in this work has illuminated the diversity of strategies that early Icelandic chieftains drew upon to both support and advance their positions in the social hierarchy. These strategies included the manipulation of kinship ties, land ownership, and debt obligations; control of ports and access to prestigious trade goods from overseas; and the increased potential for wealth centralization and the materialization of power provided by the adoption of Christianity in AD 1000. This study demonstrates that the particular combination of strategies used by the Mosfell chieftains shifted with the increasing stratification of Icelandic society and that the region was gradually marginalized as chieftains in other regions became more powerful. Nevertheless, the agency of local leaders in the broader Kjalarnesþing area allowed the power in the Mosfell region to remain more tied to personal authority and less dominated by

territoriality than in the neighboring regions of Borgarfjörður and Árnesþing where *stórgoðar* consolidated power into territorial chieftaincies or *ríkjar*.

The social stratification occurring throughout Iceland from the 9th to the 13th century was discernable in the Mosfell Valley. Archaeological survey indicates that the number of farms in the valley increased gradually from the initial three large primary farms, to six before the end of the 10th century, and eight or nine by the middle of the 13th century. The stratification of these farms suggested by the place names is supported by the textual focus on the chiefly farm at Mosfell and by the archaeological evidence of wealth and status recovered during the excavation of the Hrísbrú/Mosfell farmstead. The social stratification is visible also in the success of chiefly efforts to centralize ritual practice from disperse pagan sites into the privately owned parish church and churchyard at the Mosfell farmstead. The direct economic benefit from the tithe that went to territorial parishes after 1097 was both an incentive and a contributing factor in this centralization.

This dissertation illuminates the nature of the power of the Icelandic chieftains through analysis of the separate sources of social power and their articulation into a network of interdependent strategies. The individual power sources may have waxed and waned, but the ability of the chieftains to combine these sources into mutually supportive networks determined their success or failure. For example, the economic power derived from the successful management of the subsistence economy at Hrísbrú provided products for investment into chiefly feasts and the formation of political obligations and potential for military power. Investment of economic resources in church construction

and import of luxury goods for Christian ritual, including the altar stone, books, and wine, were necessary for the ideological power of the Mosfellingar. In turn, this ideological power provided legitimization of the economic wealth collected from church attendance, burial fees, and eventually also the official tithe. The Mosfellingar used the military power derived from the political authority of the *goði* position to defend the economic rights at the Leirvogur port, while the economic power derived from the Leirvogur port provided access to prestige goods that could be invested in the political economy to generate and sustain social obligations of military and political support.

Multiple pathways to power existed and each chieftain could focus on separate sources of power in general or even in individual instances. Competition in the wider Mosfell region during the 13th illustrates the potentials of chiefly reliance on particular sources of power. The Sturlungar tried to subdue the region by military force and direct economic control. On the other hand, the Haukdælir chose to invest economic resources in ideological power by founding the Viðey monastery over which they retained a measure of control. Access to the various types of social power provided the foundation for power centralization, but the successful use of the resultant power depended on the manner in which chiefs intertwined their power sources. Ultimately, the Mosfellingar and other Icelandic chieftains succeeded and failed as a result of their access to as well as their individual abilities to manipulate the sources of social power.

10.1 Chapter Summaries

The data chapters of this dissertation are divided into three sections based on source material. Section I, consisting of Chapter 2, covers the place name evidence. Section II, which includes Chapters 3, 4, and 5, analyses the textual sources in three chronological periods starting with the Settlement Period, followed by the Saga Age, and the 12th and 13th centuries. Section III, made up of Chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9, treats the archaeological evidence from the valley focusing on the material recovered by the surveys and excavations of the Mosfell Archaeological Project. The following paragraphs summarize the conclusions of each chapter.

Chapter 2 provides a three-stage model for the settlement order and hierarchy of the farms in the Mosfell Valley based on place names. The primary farms in the valley include the three farms with macro-topographical names: Mosfell, Tunga (Leirvogstunga), and Helgadalur. Mosfell was the first settlement in the valley as suggested by the prominence of the mountain and the use of the Mosfell name as the appellative base of all large regional place names (i.e. Mosfellsheiði, Mosfellsdalur, Mosfellsveit, Mosfellshreppr, and Mosfellsveit). The other two primary sites followed soon after in opposite ends of the valley. Before the 11th century, three secondary settlements, which employ the habitative suffix –staðir preceded by a personal name, appear evenly spaced across the landscape to take advantage of available pastureland and riverine resources. The secondary farms, parceled out from the primary Mosfell farm, contain the names of the owner or the tenant of these farms. The tertiary farms, including Hrísbrú, Laxnes, Minna-Mosfell, Norður Reykir, and Hlaðgerðakot, appeared in the late

Middle Ages and the early modern period. Of these probably only Hrísbrú and Laxnes are of medieval origin. These tertiary farms were products of the gradual agricultural intensification leading to the division of the lands of the primary and secondary farms.

The focus in Chapter 3 on genealogical material presented in the account of the initial colonization in *Landnámabók* and the sagas revealed that a kin-based alliance network controlled and structured the settlement of the larger Mosfell region. The first settler in the Mosfell Valley, Þórðr Skeggi, was part of this alliance network that centered on the direct descendents of a famous ancestor, Björn Buna, who settled within Ingólfr Arnarson's original land claim. The high status marriage alliances made by Þórðr's daughters confirms Þórðr's role in the new Icelandic proto-elite. Kinship relationships, which provided access to land and allies, were a key determinant in the settlement pattern and alliance formation during colonization. Therefore, kinship bonds provided a particularly important source of power. Although leveling processes set in motion by the extensive land availability in the large uninhabited island prevented the early kinship-based proto-elite from becoming firmly entrenched, the claims to kinship relations continued to be of paramount importance. In fact, Önundr Eilífsson's kinship relationship to Þórðr Skeggi probably allowed him to become the chieftain of Mosfell in the first years of the 11th century.

Chapter 4 employs the rich Family Saga tradition covering the period between 930 and 1030 to show how the Mosfell chieftains secured unequal regional access to the five sources of social power and created a network of mutually reinforcing power bases. The Mosfellingar used kinship bonds and marriage alliances to forge regional alliances

with the neighboring chieftains in Borgarfjörður, Ölfus, and Grímsnes. The political power of the Mosfellingar derived from the ownership of a chieftaincy that provided non-territorial authority over men from the area called the Nesses, stretching from Akranes to Álftanes. Grímr of Mosfell's possession of the national Law Speaker position and his unprecedented ability to dictate his successor illustrates the political prominence of the Mosfell chieftains. Önundr and his son Hrafn of Mosfell translated this political power into military power to defend their control over the local exchange system and their economic rights to charge a toll at the port of Leirvogur. The manner in which chiefs intertwined their power sources to form a mutually supportive network and their successful use of the resultant power determined chiefly success or failure. The sagas indicate that the Mosfellingar very successfully managed their power network for most of the Saga Age, but Önundr's failure in power management in the feud against Illugi from Gillsbakki may have resulted in their fall from prominence and their concomitant disappearance from the textual sources.

Chapter 5 broadens the lens to illuminate the position of the people from the Mosfell Valley in the changing power networks of the 12th and 13th century. The decrease in textual sources concerning the Mosfell region in this period is a relic of the decline in the prominence of the chieftains of Mosfell. By looking at the details of individuals this chapter reveals the manner in which the people from the wider region of Kjalarnesþing achieved a high degree of local power and political autonomy in a period otherwise marked by the formation of large territorial power structures. The only named person from the Mosfell Valley in the 12th century, Skapti, clings to waning regional power as a

member of the new class of chieftains who overtly combined the ideological power of the Christian clerical position with the old political power of the *goðar*. Church charters recording the early churches in the area indicate that the parish church at Mosfell would have brought substantial economic benefits to 12th and 13th century Mosfell through the tithe, religiously motivated gifts, and service and burial fees. In the 13th century the Mosfellingar's alliance networks break down and the Mosfell region becomes a no-man's land stuck between two emergent territorial chiefdoms (*ríkjar*) ruled by the Sturlungar and the Haukdælir. Scholars have assumed this region was under the sway of the Sturlungar, but this chapter argues that both *ríkjar* competed for influence in the Kjalarnesþing region, which maintained older power structures and a high degree of independence up until the end of the Icelandic Free State.

Chapter 6, the first of four chapters on the archaeology of the Mosfell Valley, explains the settlement history of the farms in the valley through a combination of information derived from large-scale excavations, surface survey, sub-surface core sampling, historical landscape research, aerial photographs, historic maps and 19th century accounts of archaeological remains. The results of the analysis fills the gaps left by the textual sources by determining the antiquity of many of the farms in the Mosfell Valley and expanding the number of known medieval farms. Norse settlers established at least four farms in the Settlement Period: Mosfell/Hrísbrú, Leirvogstunga, Helgadalur, and Skeggjastaðir. The archaeology agrees with the place name studies that indicate that Mosfell was the first farm in the valley, while also supporting the view from the textual sources that the chiefly establishment and the farm name was moved from the current

Hrísbrú site to present-day location of the Mosfell farm during the 12th century. The distribution of the other farms in the valley follows an economic logic that may suggest a chiefly design in settling supporters in specific areas to take advantage of local resources.

Chapter 7 synthesizes the multidisciplinary research on the subsistence economy of the Mosfell Valley and the chiefly site at Hrísbrú based on ancient pollen, botanical samples, zooarchaeological remains, and human skeletal material. Food production relied on a mixed sedentary pastoral economy, focusing on animal husbandry of cows and sheep supplemented by barley cultivation, and collection of wild resources. The subsistence profile of the chiefly Hrísbrú household in the 10th and 11th centuries showed enviable access to resources such as beef, barley, and wood, which were invested in the prestige economy and chiefly status display. Significant changes in the subsistence economy occurred during the medieval period, including the decline in marine food consumption, the disappearance of fertilization and barley cultivation at Hrísbrú, and the collapse of the management of the local birch forest in the 13th century. The dramatic reorganization of the resource base in the 13th century does not correspond to the 12th century movement of the chiefly farm from Hrísbrú to Mosfell, but correlates with the decline of the social power of the Mosfell chieftains in the 13th century. As grain cultivation ceased, marine resource exploitation declined, and birch forests were cut down, the Mosfell chieftains lost access to key resources that fueled the chiefly economy.

Chapter 8 approaches the political power of the Mosfell chieftains through analysis of the location and function of regional assemblies, and the feasting potential and access to prestige goods of the chiefly household at Hrísbrú. The assembly sites were the

temporary administrative centers of a diffuse political power structure, but when in session, they were the centers of political action and chiefly competition. The proximity of the Mosfell chieftain's power center to the local Kjalarnesþing assembly and the national Althing gave the Mosfellingar a distinct advantage in court cases and lawsuits that could be swayed by shows of military force. Since the true centers of political power in medieval Iceland were the chieftains' private longhouses, this chapter focuses on the excavated remains from the chiefly Hrísbrú household. A comparison of the house size and the find assemblage from the Hrísbrú longhouse with other excavated Viking Age houses indicates that the Hrísbrú household belonged to a small class of high status households, including also Hofstaðir and Skallakot. The qualitatively larger size of these houses correlates with "patron-client" type feasts hosted by chiefs and indicate chiefly political action rather than the more widespread feasts of reciprocal alliance building. Large numbers of barley seeds and a faunal assemblage with a high proportion of cow bones at Hrísbrú provide material correlates of chiefly consumption of alcohol and beef. Trade goods, specifically imported glass beads, which are analyzed as a proxy for status and access to prestige goods, suggests the Mosfellingar had access to and excercised control over the distribution of sumptuary items.

Chapter 9 analyses the archaeological evidence of dramatic changes in ideological power in the Mosfell Valley in three phases: 1) the pagan period (870-1000), 2) a period of ritual system syncretization after the Christian conversion (1000-1100), and 3) the period of institutionalized Christianity (after 1100). The diffuse ideological power of the pagan period was materialized in the form of ship-settings and low mounds that

structured the social landscape by signaling claims to territory and status. Although control over materialized pagan ideology was decentralized, the Mosfell chieftains were particularly effective at displaying power through pagan monuments. They employed the ancient Scandinavian ship symbol in the mirroring features of the Hulduhóll cremation mound and the Borg ship-setting to represent male status, their claims to regional authority, and the importance of the sea and trade for their power. In the Syncretization Period, the Mosfell chieftains embraced the inherent power in the new Christian religion by building a costly stave church, while maintaining continuity with the pagan ritual system by incorporating pagan ship imagery into male burials and reburying important pagan ancestors in the new Christian graveyard. In the period of institutionalized Christianity, ideological power yielded direct economic benefits beyond the status display and territorial claims that were the objectives of materialized ideology in the earlier periods. The size of the church and the churchyard increased from the small private church at Hrísbrú to the larger 12th century parish church constructed at Mosfell, suggesting that the chieftains had succeeded in centralizing burial and ritual services at their farmstead, augmenting their already elevated access to ideological power.

10.2 Implications for Future Interdisciplinary Research

The methodological thesis of this dissertation is that a thorough and truly interdisciplinary study treating archaeological evidence, textual sources, and toponymic data at a par would yield an unprecedented understanding of the history of a medieval Icelandic community. The micro-regional approach pursued in this dissertation allowed

for exhaustive study of all available source material from each of these disciplines. This level of detail is new for the study of Viking Age and medieval Iceland, and as such, I hope this work will stimulate interdisciplinary work in other regions and communities in Iceland. Further regional interdisciplinary studies and subsequent regional comparisons will provide the most promising potential for new contributions to the current understanding of the underlying processes of the social evolution of Icelandic society that has generated so much scholarly interest.

Previous regional studies have been based on textual evidence. Archaeologists successfully collecting vast amounts of material data are often hesitant to employ the available texts because of the concerns about the historicity of the sagas. There is no doubt that historical material exists in the sagas, and excluding this invaluable historical tradition only decreases our ability to achieve a nuanced understanding of the social processes of medieval Icelandic society. I divided this dissertation into three sections based on the three main categories of source material in order to emphasize the equal treatment of archaeology, textual sources, and the place names as independent data sets. Applying rigorous source critical methods to each individual data set allows them to speak independently and to contribute their full strength to the overall picture.

The textual information and archaeological data were mostly complementary and mutually supportive, providing information on different aspects of the social history of the Mosfell Valley. The texts provide insights into motivations and social relationships of the more powerful individuals and families in the Mosfell region. For instance, without the texts it would be impossible to understand the kin-based alliance network that

structured the settlement of the region or the political power that the chieftains Grímr Svertingsson and Önundr Eilífsson exerted over the Nesses. The textual focus on the more powerful farmers and chieftains led the saga record to mention only two medieval farms in the Mosfell Valley. Archaeological research filled the gap in the cultural landscape, showing that eight or nine farms existed evenly distributed across the Mosfell Valley in the medieval period. Furthermore, only archaeology could reveal the mobilization of the local subsistence economy to provide alcohol and beef to the chiefly political economics in the 10th-11th centuries. The texts recalled the control of the Mosfell farm over the port at Leirvogur, but only study of the artifact assemblage from the excavated Hrísbrú longhouse revealed the extent of the prestige good access provided by this control.

The saga texts often correlate with a remarkable degree of accuracy with the archaeological evidence. The saga descriptions of the Mosfell chieftains living at Hrísbrú are reinforced by the size of the longhouse and the wealth in prestige goods found during the Hrísbrú excavations. Even the descriptions of Grímr Svertingsson's house and household correspond enticingly accurately to the excavated longhouse. The archaeology and the saga tradition also agree on the timing of the transfer of the chieftain's establishment to the site of the current Mosfell farm. The saga recollection of the establishment of the first church at Hrísbrú and the transfer of pagan ancestral remains into the Christian graveyard was verified by archaeological excavation. Of all the archaeological findings, an emptied grave underneath the altar in the Hrísbrú church probably generated the most public and media attention because it corresponded to the

story from *Egils Saga* of Egill Skallagrímsson's burial under the altar and subsequent exhumation. The nature of the sources means that we will never know whether the excavated grave under the altar truly was the grave of the saga hero Egill Skallagrímsson. The high degree of correspondence between two source materials, however, indicates a shared understanding of cultural norms as well as the preservation of a specific social memory of the importance of venerable pagan ancestors in the Christianization process.

Significantly, the sociological picture derived from the textual, toponymic and archaeological evidence was only very rarely contradictory. The discrepancy in the identification of the first settlement site in the valley provides the clearest example. I argue, however, that this contradiction actually yields a much richer story. The *Landnámabók* text holds that the first settler to the valley, Þórðr Skeggi, established his farm at Skeggjastaðir. Place name evidence, on the other hand, suggests the Mosfell farm was the first settlement in the valley. The archaeological record provided a third candidate with the earliest datable evidence of human habitation coming from the Hrísbrú farm. The *Landnámabók* tradition appears to have lost the memory of first settler's farmstead. To compensate for this loss the tradition recreated the settlement history based on the place name of the farm Skeggjastaðir named after the first settler. Place name studies show that place names with –staðir suffixes were used for secondary settlements often owned by the original settlers, but not employed as their primary farms.

The ability to check and adjust imprecision derived from the oral traditions that inform sagas is one of the strengths of interdisciplinary research on medieval Iceland. Only reference back to the textual record, however, explained the incongruity between

the archaeological findings and the place name evidence. The medieval texts indicate that the place name Mosfell shifted from the location of the Hrísbrú farm to the current position of the Mosfell farm in the 12th century. Only the interdisciplinary analysis of all available sources provided a historically satisfying story. The first settler built his first farm at site called Mosfell located at the current Hrísbrú farm and established a secondary farm at Skeggjastaðir. In the 12th century, the chieftain moved his farmstead and the name of his farm to the site of the current Mosfell farm. The potential of the sources to check and provide explanatory power to each other should encourage more interdisciplinary research and put to rest the reluctance to employ medieval texts that has been a feature of much recent scholarly work.

Figures

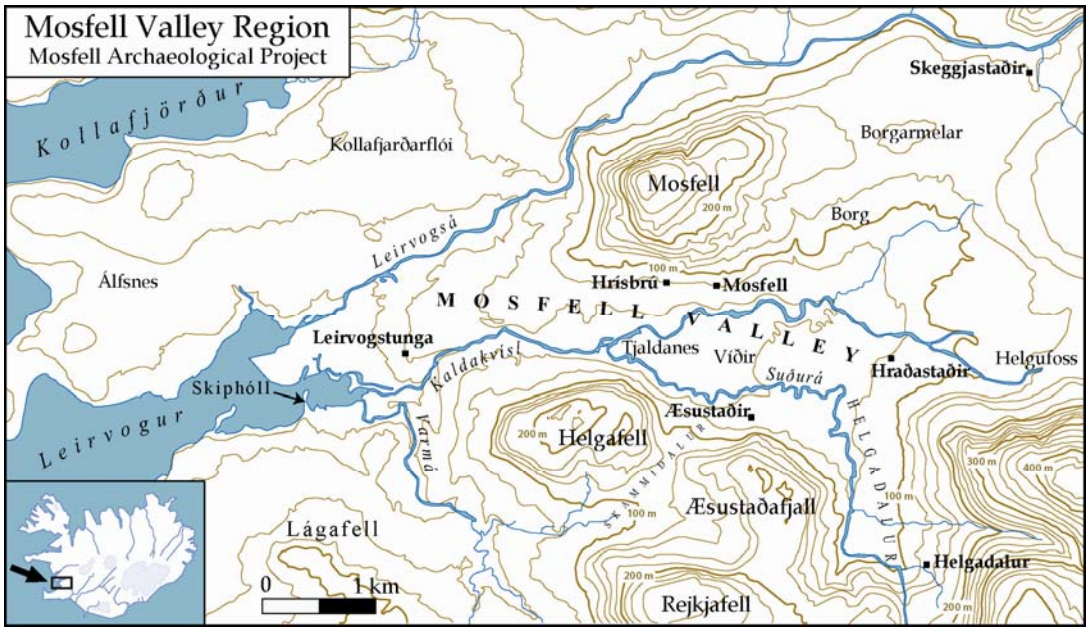


Figure 1.1 The Mosfell Valley region showing the major archaeological sites and geographic locations discussed in this dissertation (map by Robert Guillemette, Jesse Byock and Davide Zori).

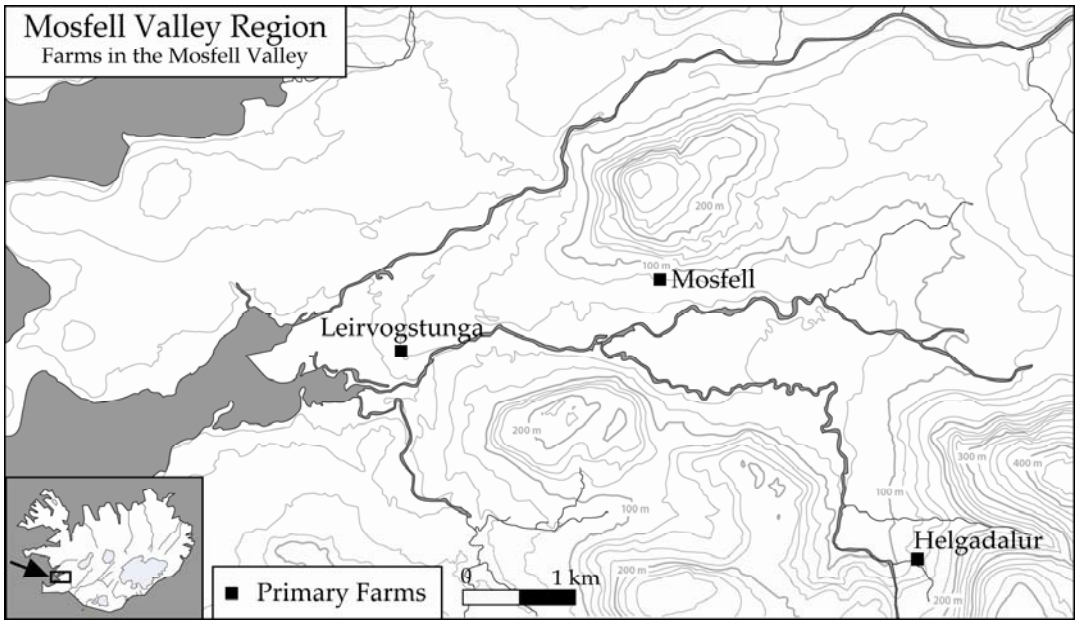


Figure 2.1 The primary settlements in the Mosfell Valley. Analysis of the place names suggest that Mosfell was the first farm established in the valley, followed soon after by Helgadalur, and Leirvogstunga (Tunga). The original Mosfell farm as depicted on the map was located at the site of the current Hrísbrú farm.

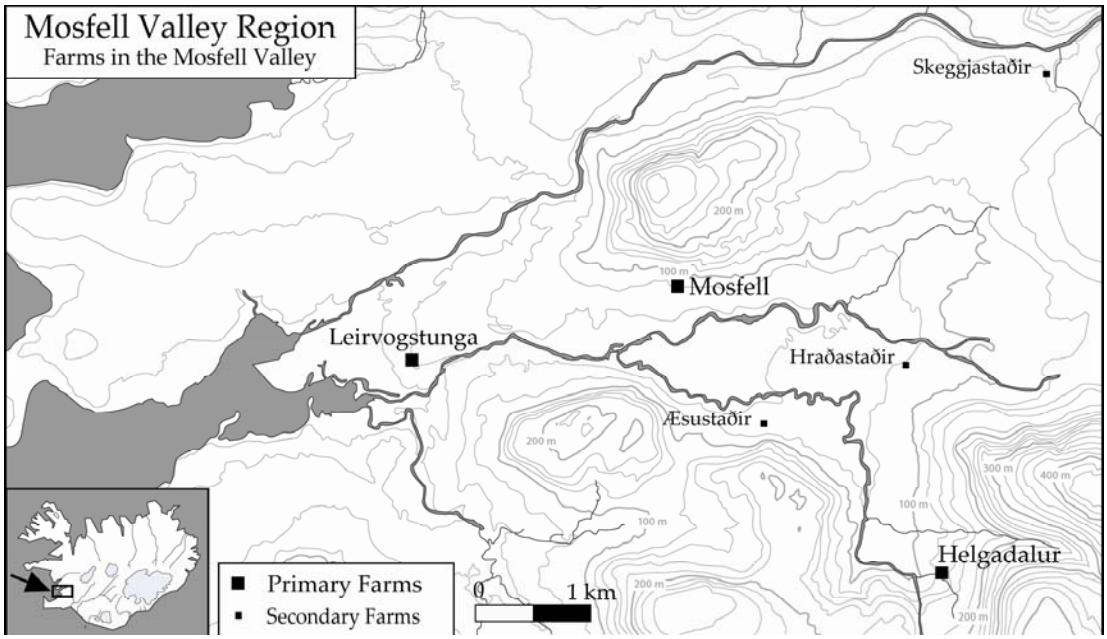


Figure 2.2 The primary and secondary settlements in the Mosfell Valley. Place name analysis suggests that the –staðir farms, Skeggjastaðir, Hraðastaðir, and Æsustaðir, were settled before AD 1000 as farms splintering from the lands of the Mosfell farm.

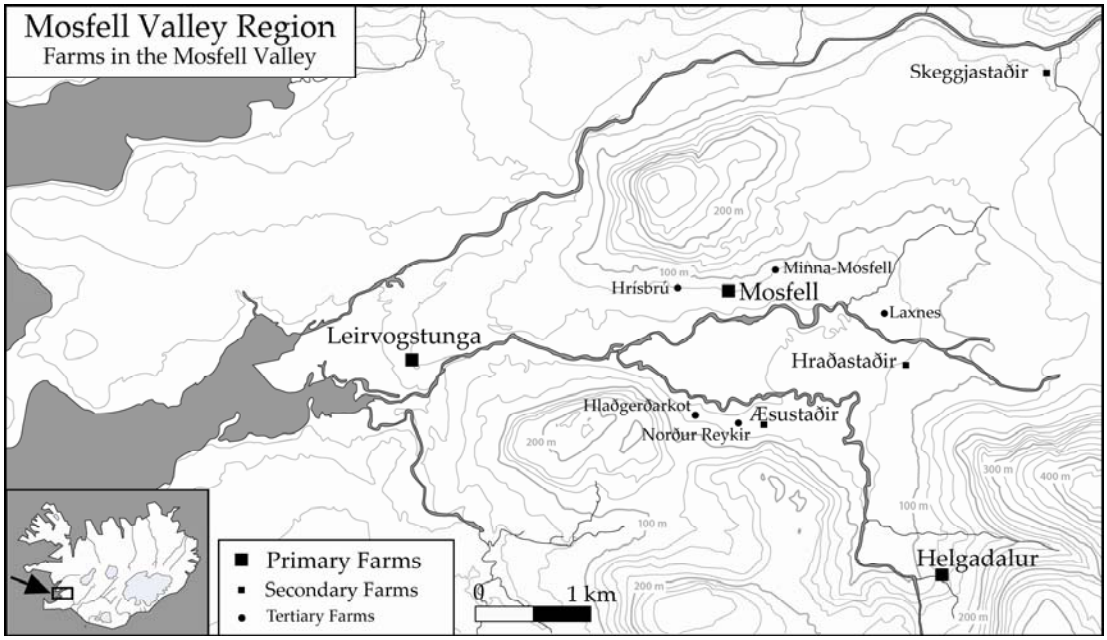


Figure 2.3 The primary, secondary, and tertiary settlements in the Mosfell Valley. The tertiary sites that cluster on the northern and southern slopes of the valley were products of the gradual intensification of the agricultural production in valley. In the 12th century, as depicted on this map, the Mosfell farm changed locations and the old farm site was renamed Hrísbrú.

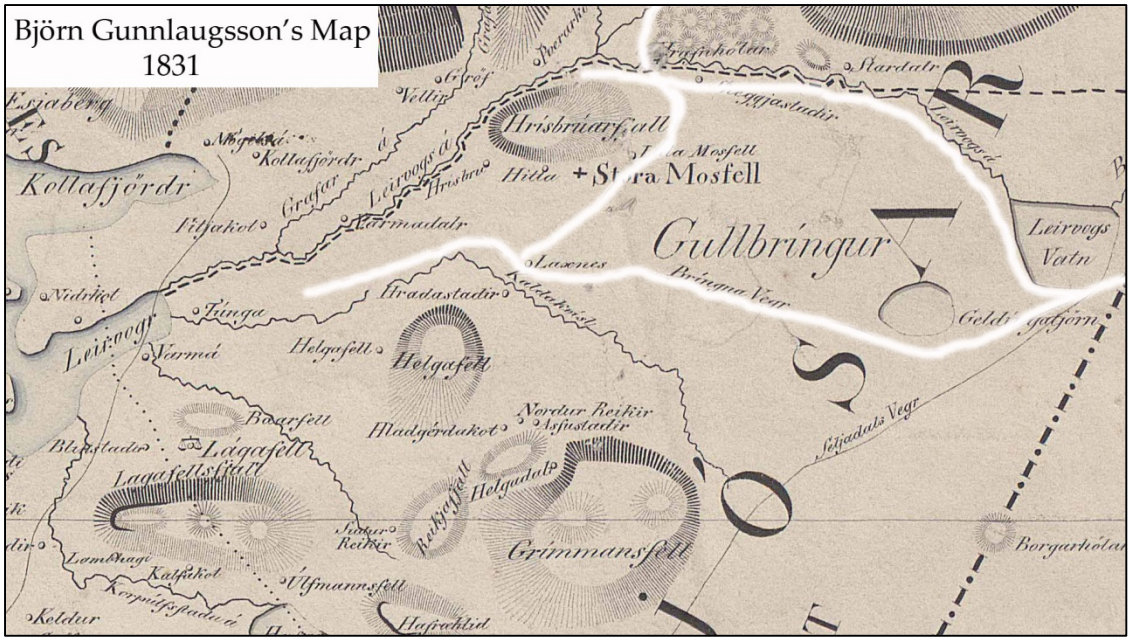


Figure 2.4 A close-up view of the Mosfell Valley from Björn Gunnlaugsson's 1831 map with the old roads through the valley highlighted in white.

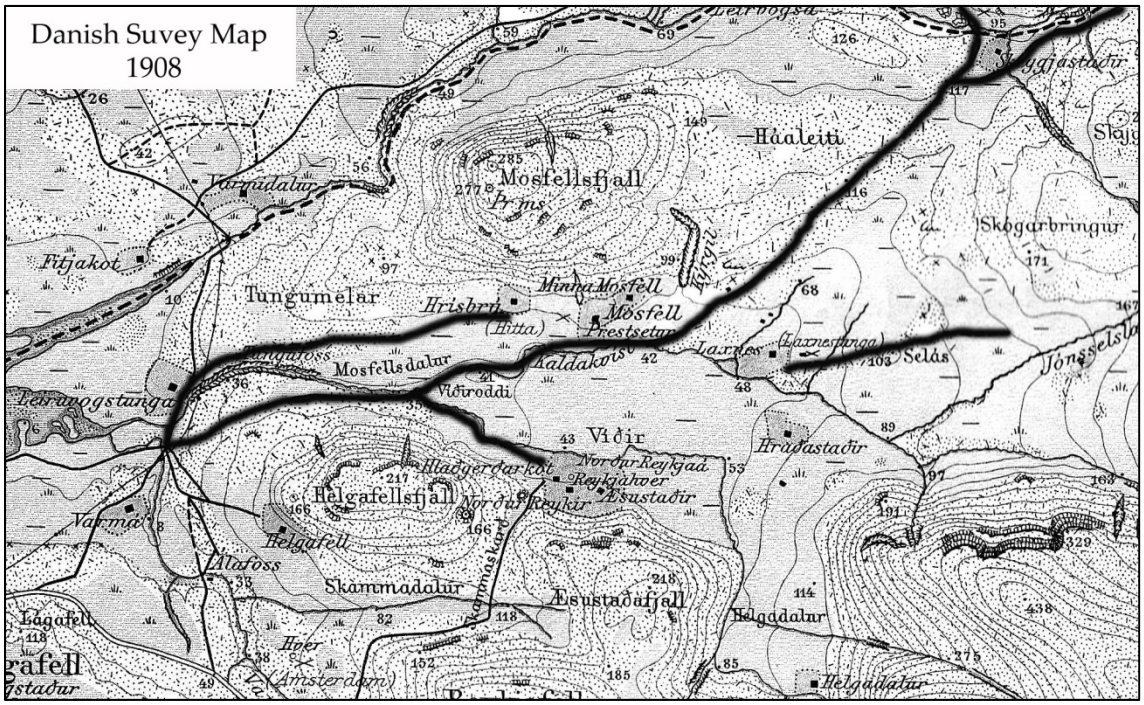


Figure 2.5 A close-up view of the Mosfell Valley from a Danish survey map from 1908 with the old roads through the valley highlighted in black.

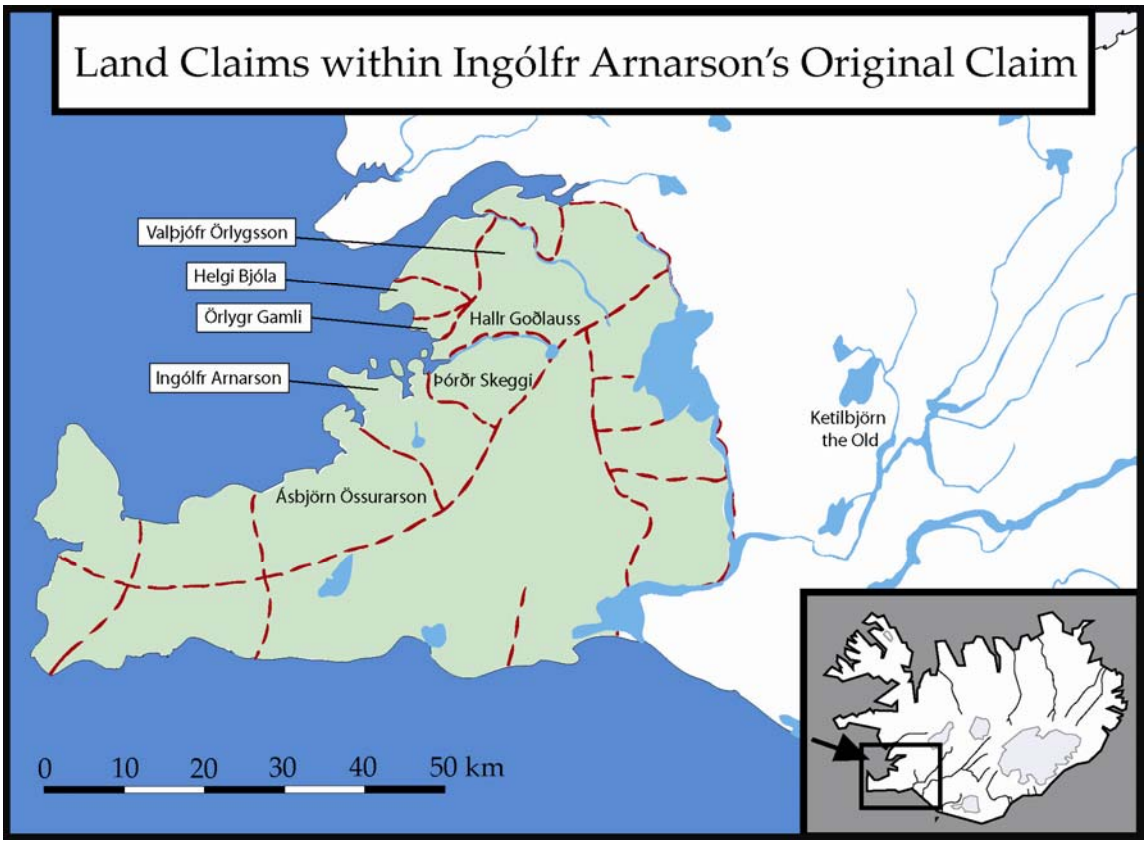


Figure 3.1 Map of the land claims of the *landnámsmenn* who settled within Ingólfr Arnarson's original land claim. Ingólfr's original land claim is shown on the map in green. The settlers who received land from Ingólfr in this region constructed a regional kin-based alliance network. The land claim of Þórðr Skeggi included the Mosfell Valley. Ketilbjörn the Old settled on land beyond Ingólfr's original land claim after spending a few years with Þórðr Skeggi in the Mosfell Valley. (The background landscape of this map and the borders of the land claims are after Júlíusson et al. 1991: 39.)

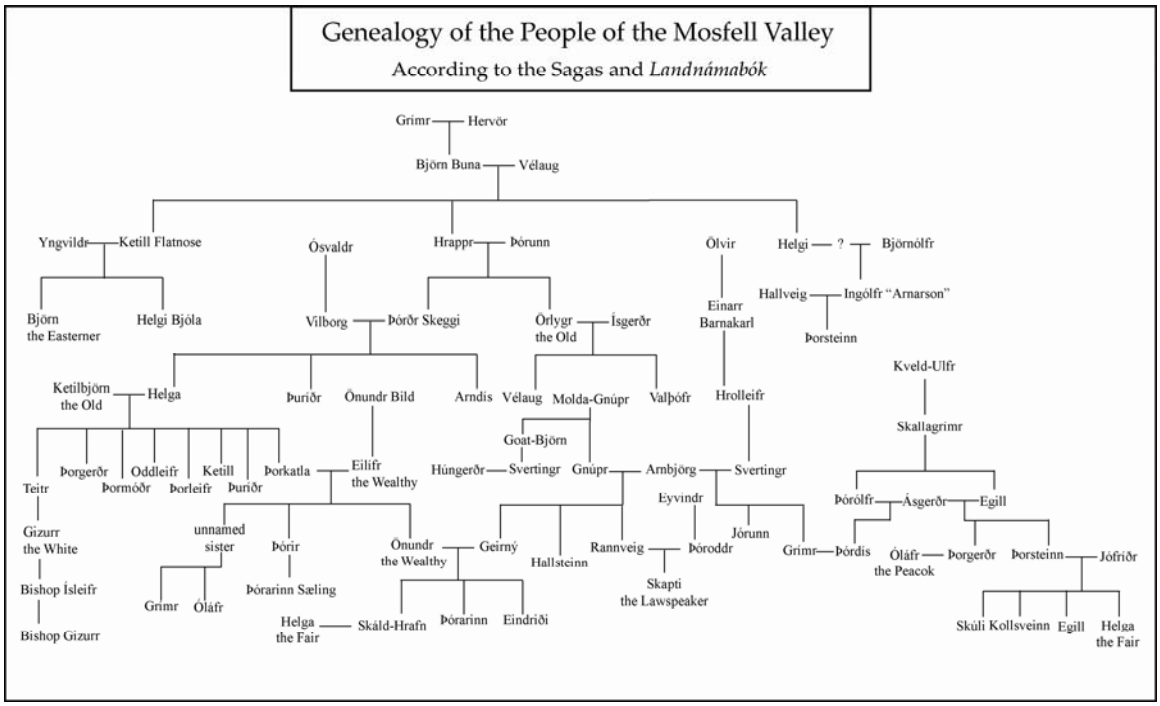


Figure 3.2 The genealogy of the people of the Mosfell Valley includes many of Iceland's initial settlers (*landnámsmenn*). The descendents of Björn Buna established a kin-based alliance network that included Þórðr Skeggi, who settled in the Mosfell Valley. In the later generations shown here, the chieftains Grímr Svertingsson and Önundr the Wealthy, who were related through marriage, lived at Mosfell.

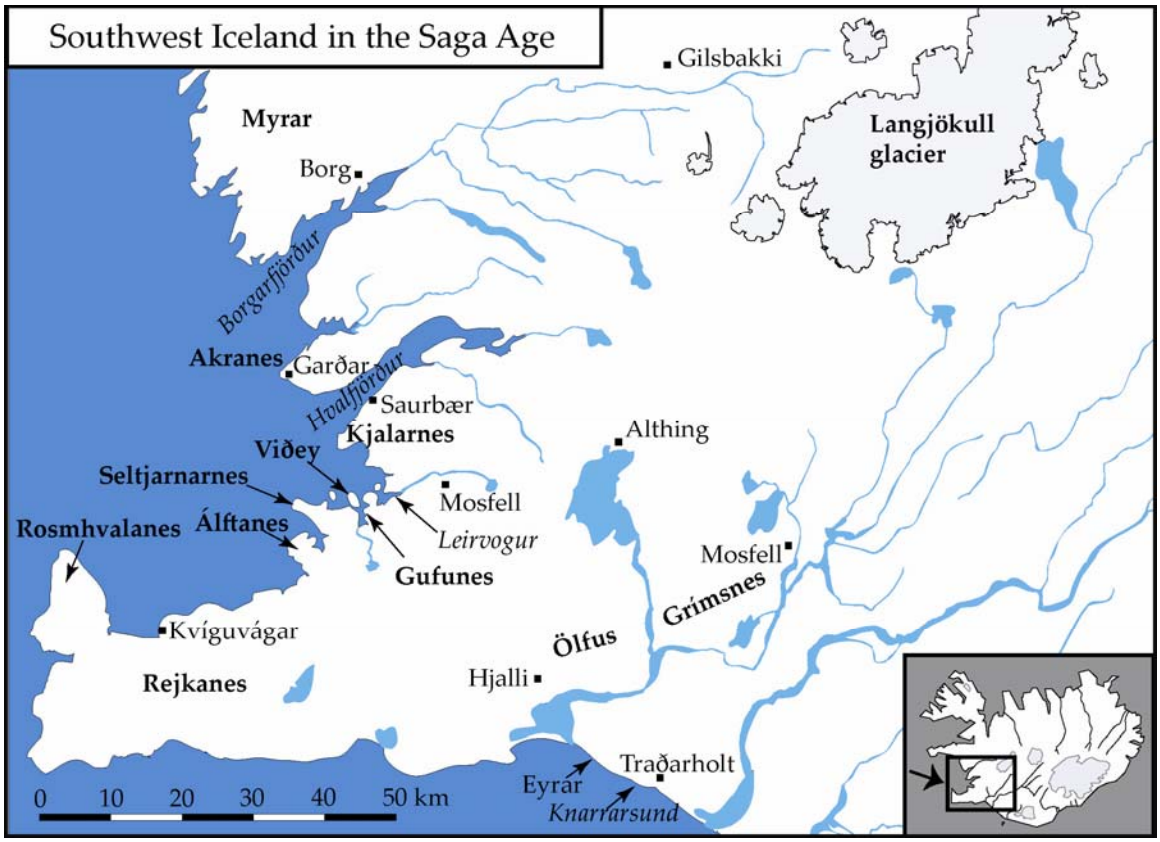


Figure 4.1 Map of the Mosfell region and the surrounding area in the Saga Age. Both Mosfell farms appear on the map. Mosfell in the Mosfell Valley is located to the west, between Leirvogur bay and the Althing. The other Mosfell is Mosfell in Grímsnes, which was the home of the descendents of Ketilbjörn the Old. The key family alliances for the chieftains of the Mosfell Valley during this period were with the chieftains living at Borg in Borgarfjörður, Hjalli in Ölfus, and Mosfell in Grímsnes. (The background landscape of this map is after Júlíusson et al. 1991: 39.)

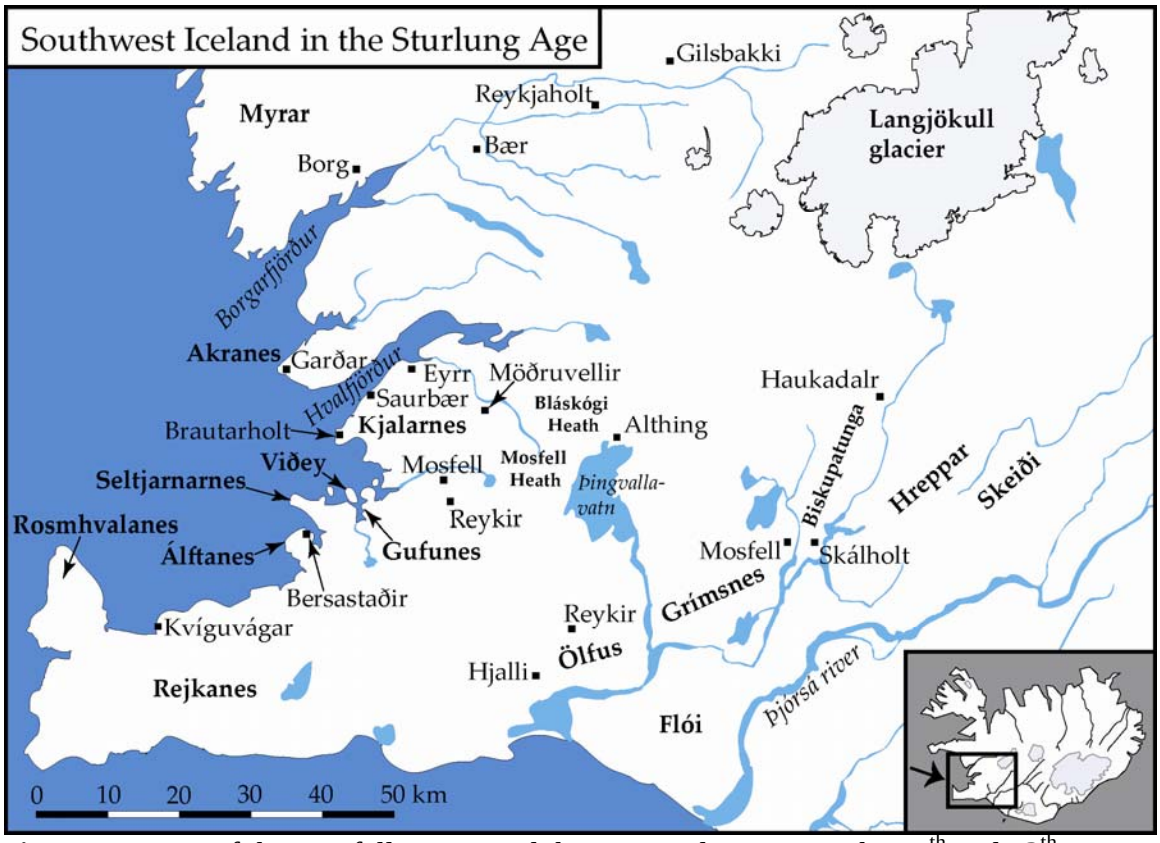


Figure 5.1 Map of the Mosfell region and the surrounding area in the 12th and 13th century. In this period, the Mosfell region and the wider Kjalarnesþing area retain a high degree of independence as competing territorial chieftaincies or *ríkjar* to the north in Borgarfjörður and to the east around Haukadalr compete for influence. (The background landscape of this map is after Júlíusson et al. 1991: 39.)

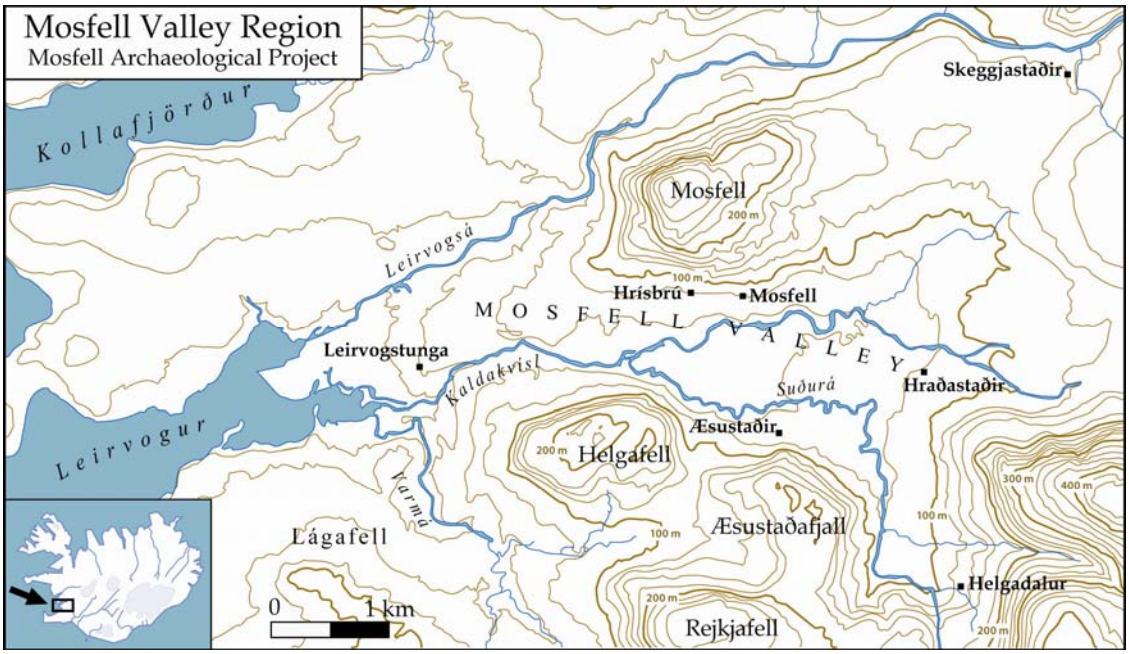


Figure 6.1 Map of the Mosfell Valley and the surrounding area (by Robert Guillemette, Jesse Byock, and Davide Zori).

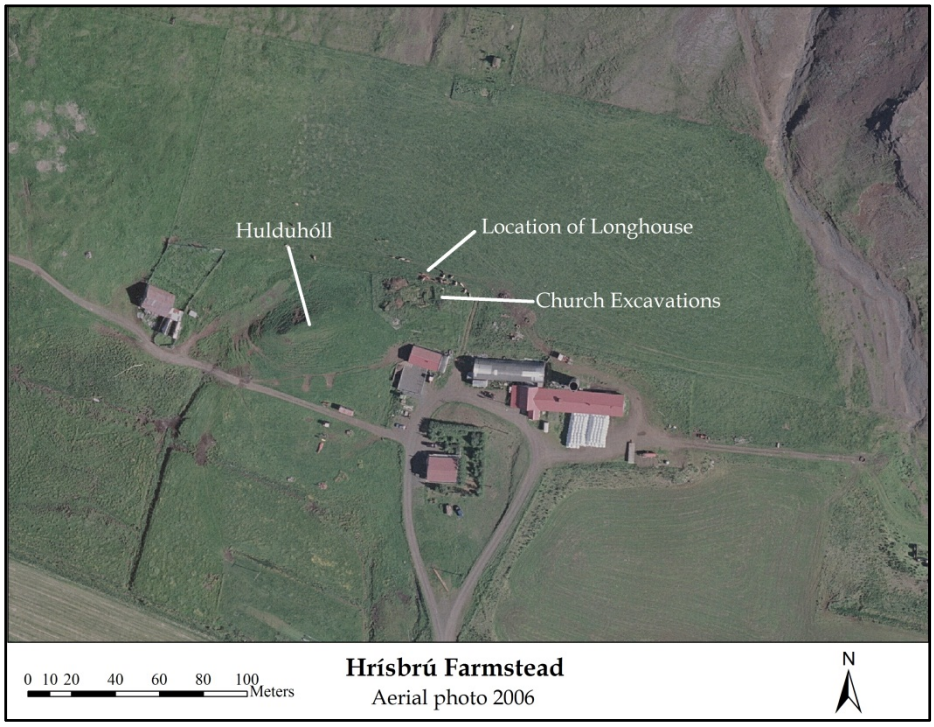


Figure 6.2 Aerial photograph of the Hrísbrú farmstead from the spring of 2006, showing the locations of the Viking Age longhouse, the conversion-period church, and the cremation grave (Hulduhóll). The excavation areas are visible as they appeared after they were covered at the end of the 2005 season.

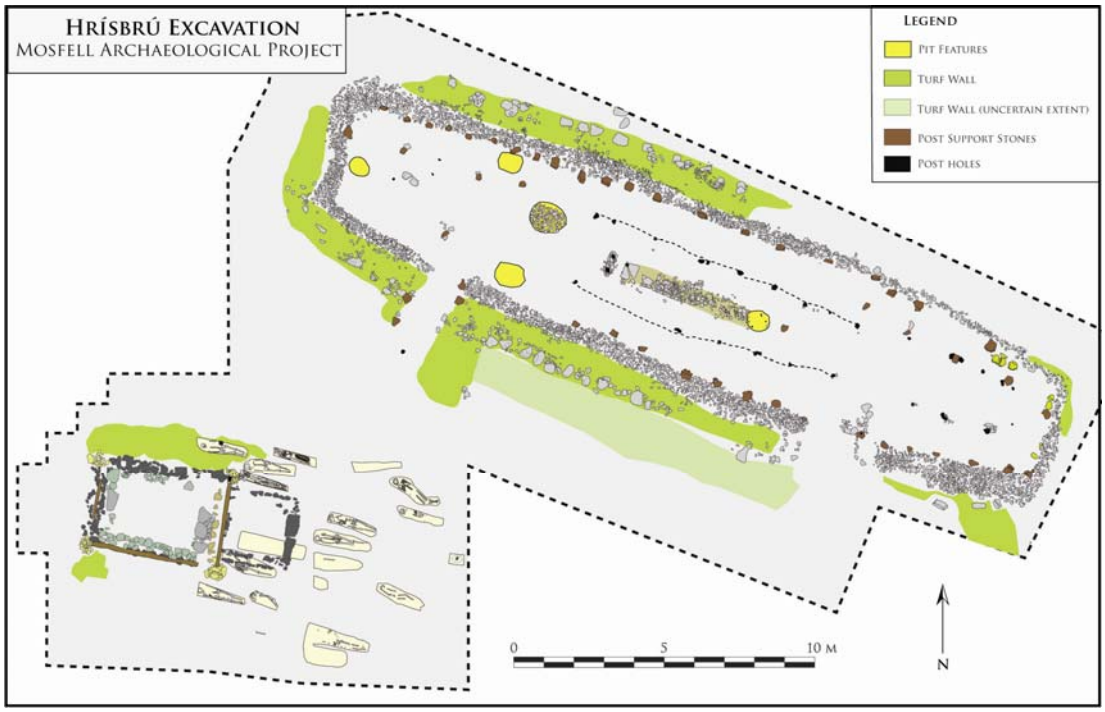


Figure 6.3 Map of the excavated Viking Age structures and burials at Hrísbrú (map by Davide Zori, Jesse Byock, Jennie Dillon, Max Farrar, Megan Dubois, and Francesca Conselvan).

Figure 6.4 Overview photo of the Viking Age longhouse at Hrísbrú taken from a crane (photograph by Brooks Walker).

Figure 6.5 Excavating the Viking Age longhouse at Hrísbrú in 2007.

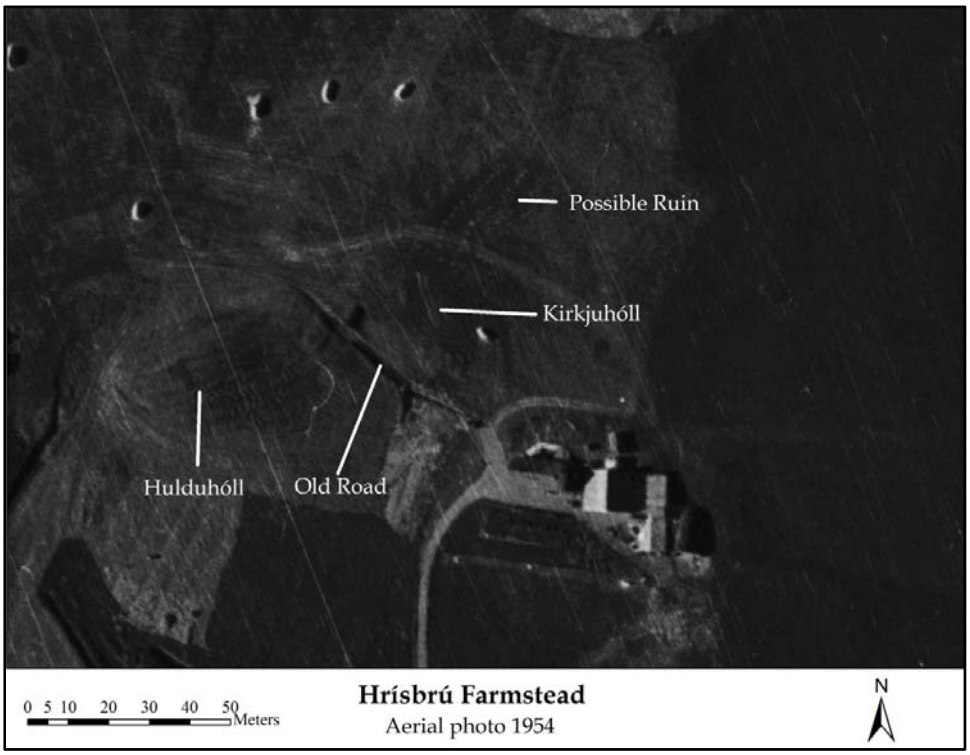


Figure 6.6 Aerial photo of Hrísbrú from 1954 showing the location of the two mounds where MAP discovered a pagan cremation grave (Hulduhóll) and a conversion-era church (Kirkjuhóll). The photo also shows the depression of an old road leading between the two mounds and the possible ruins of an elongated structure in the homefield.

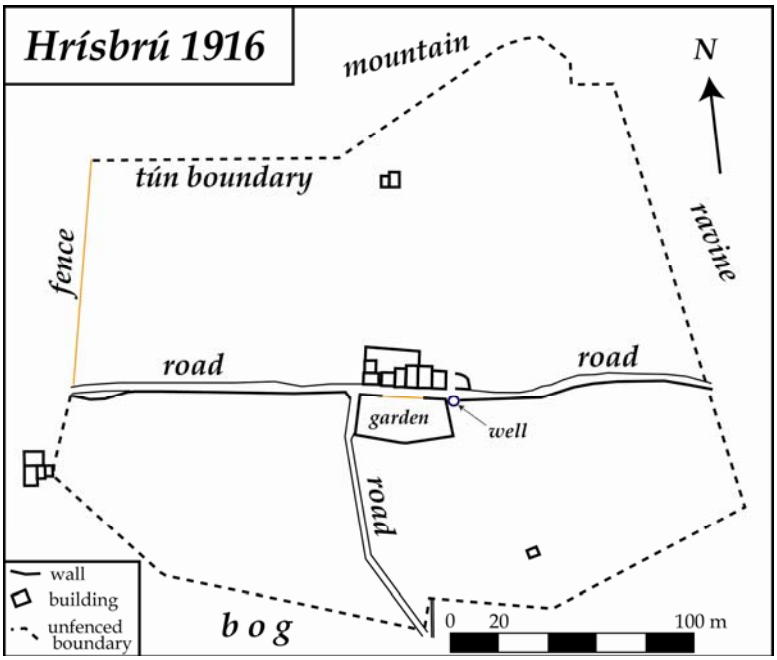


Figure 6.7 Farmstead map of Hrísbrú drawn in 1916. The map shows the location and layout of the farm when it still consisted of the traditional turf buildings that date at least to the 19th century. Two roads access the farm, one from the south and one from the west that continues east towards the Mosfell farm (map redrawn by Zori).

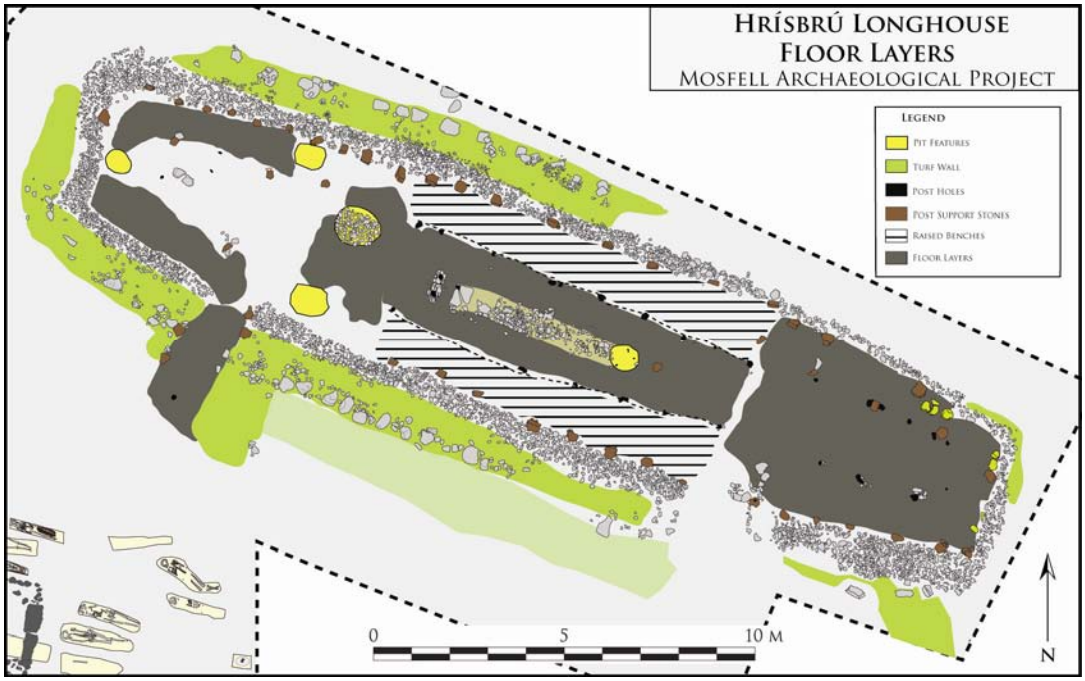


Figure 6.8 The longhouse at Hrísbrú, showing the extent of the floor layers and the internal features in the house (map by Davide Zori, Jesse Byock, Jennie Dillon, Max Farrar, Megan Dubois, and Francesca Conselvan).

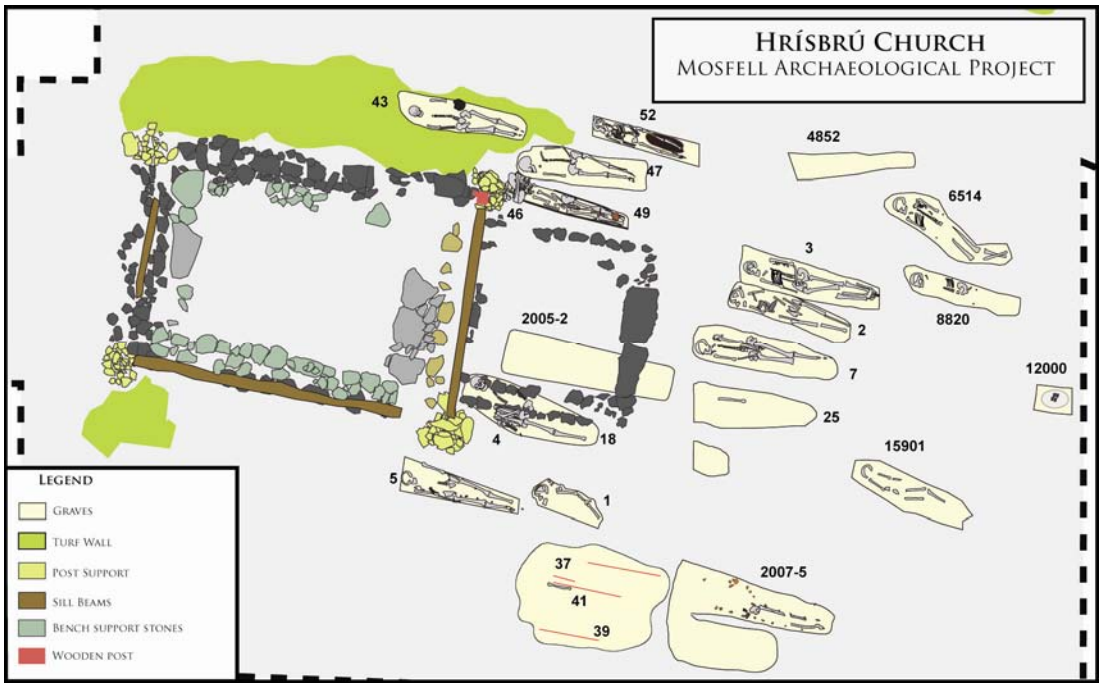


Figure 6.9 Map of the church at Hrísbrú showing church features and the surrounding burials (map by Davide Zori, Jesse Byock, and Phillip Walker).

Figure 6.10 Photograph of the Hrísbrú church looking east taken at the end of the 2004 season.

Figure 6.11 Standing in the nave of the church to illustrate the width of the nave that would allow five people to stand side-by-side.

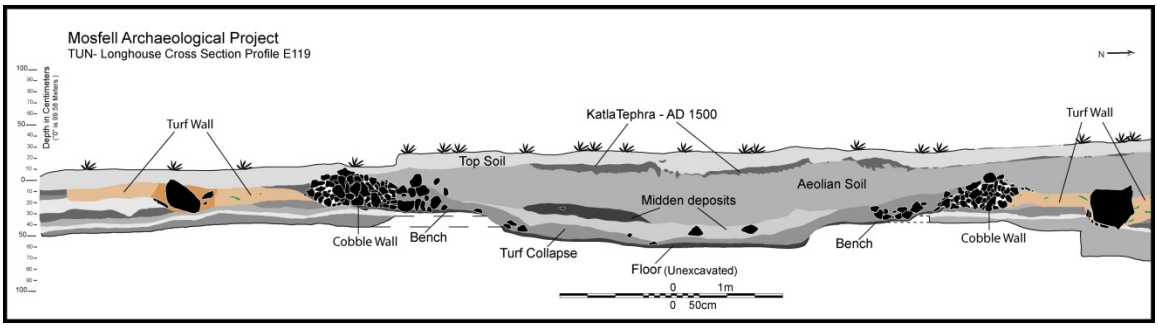


Figure 6.12 Profile drawing of the section across the center of the longhouse showing the features of the house and the overlying strata, including a few midden lenses, a long-term aeolian deposit, and the Katla tephra from AD 1500 (profile drawn by Davide Zori and Egil Marstein Bauer).

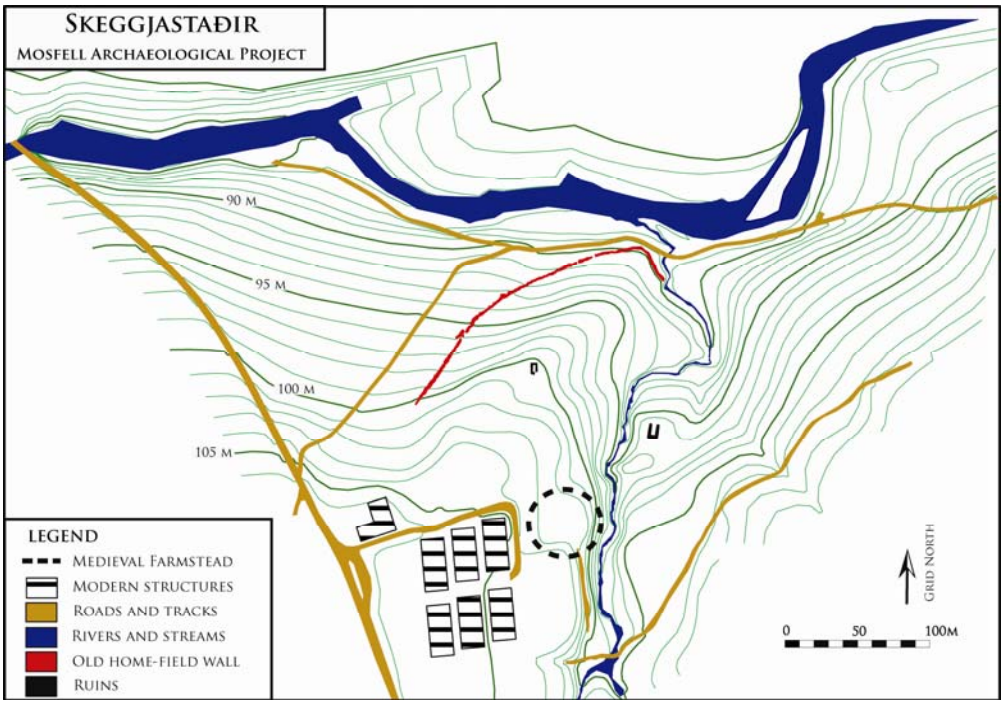


Figure 6.13 Map of Skeggjastaðir generated from the 2009 MAP survey, showing the location of the medieval farmstead discovered with sub-surface coring (map by Davide Zori and Max Farrar).

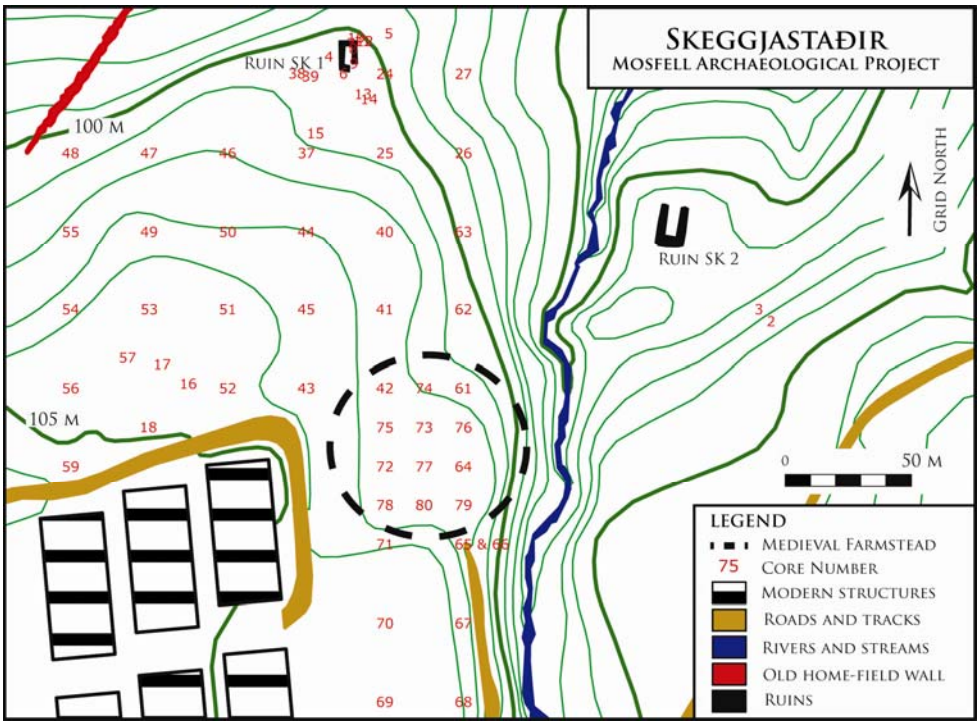


Figure 6.14 Skeggjastaðir map with sub-surfacing coring numbers shown (map by Davide Zori and Max Farrar).

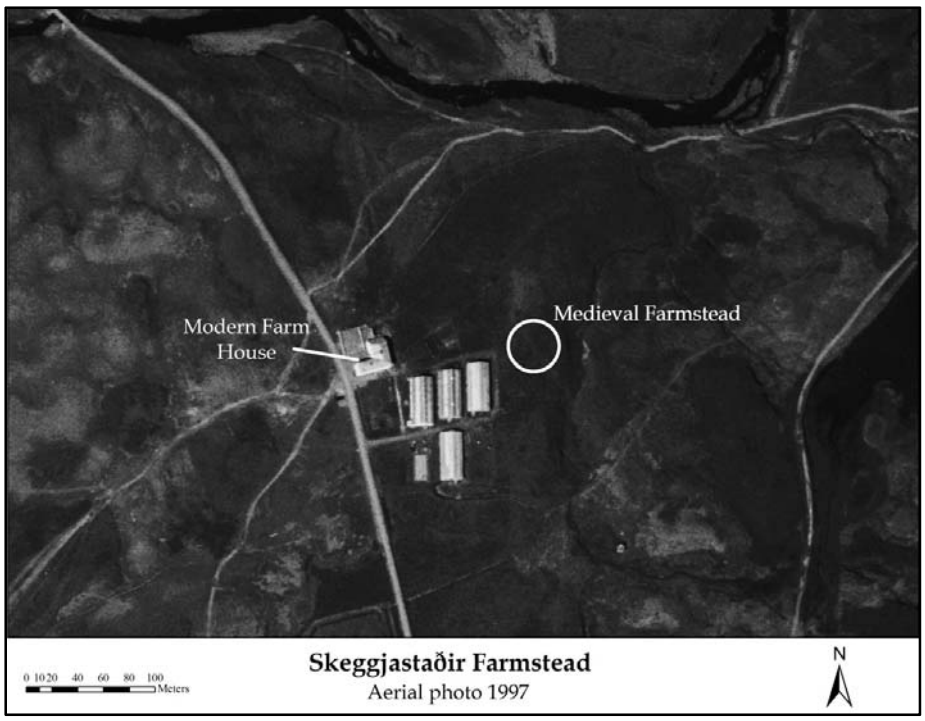


Figure 6.15 Aerial photo of Skeggjastaðir from 1997 with the location of the remains of the medieval farmstead marked.

Figure 6.16 Approaching Skeggjastaðir on the right side of the road. Further along the road on the left in the picture is the farm Hrafnhólar.

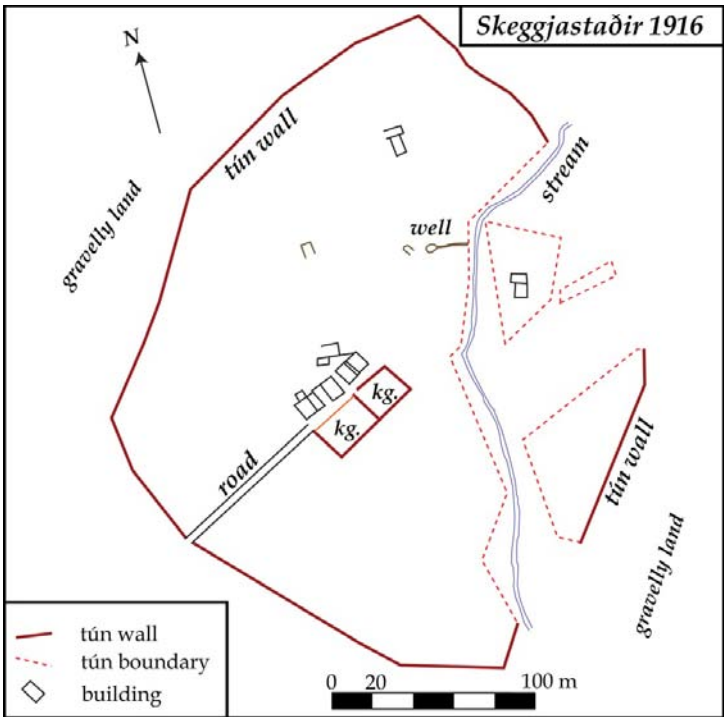


Figure 6.17 Farmstead map (*túnkort)* drawn of Skeggjastaðir in 1916. The farmhouses are located north of the farm access road while a garden divided in two appears south of the road. The homefield wall is shown as the outer dark line surrounding the farm (map redrawn by Zori).

Figure 6.18 Looking east at the modern vegetable garden, which partially overlies the 19th early-20th century farmhouses. The old *heimreið* (farm access road) can be seen to the right of the vegetable garden running between the garden and the barn seen to the far right.

Figure 6.19 Looking east along the homefield wall (*túngarður*) at Skeggjastaðir. The stone are of exceptionally large size when compared to other homefield walls in the area.

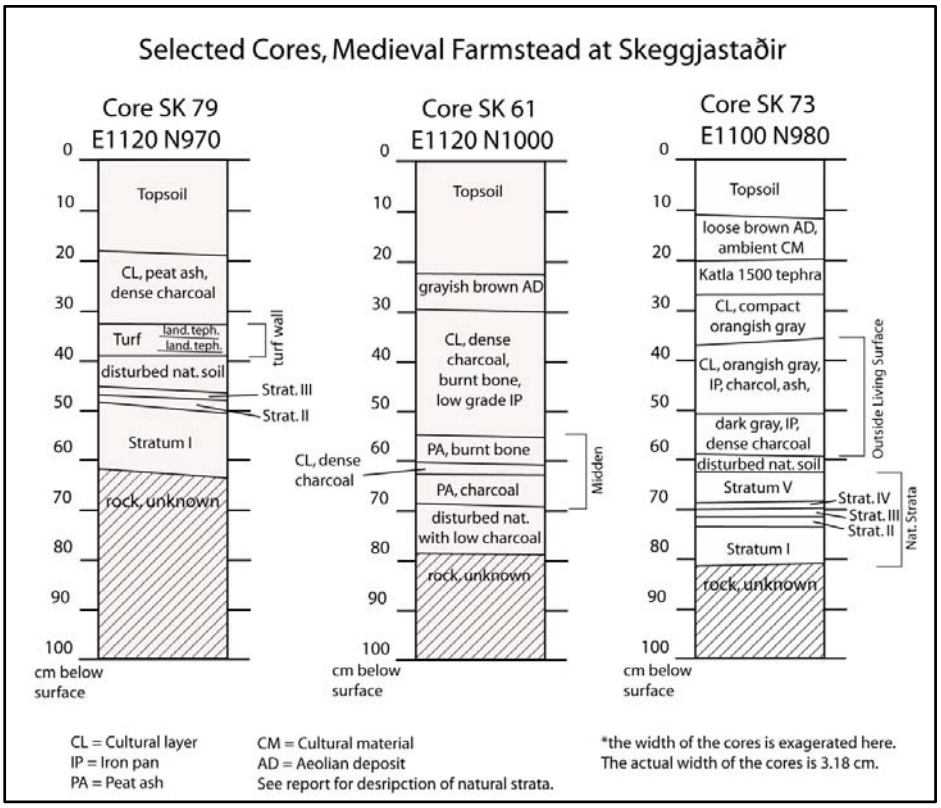


Figure 6.20 Section drawings of cores from the medieval farmstead at Skeggjastaðir. Note the turf wall in core SK 79, the midden in SK 61, and the outside living surface in SK 73.

Figure 6.21 Looking east from the Skeggjastaðir homefield. The river Leirvogsá can be seen below the mountains.

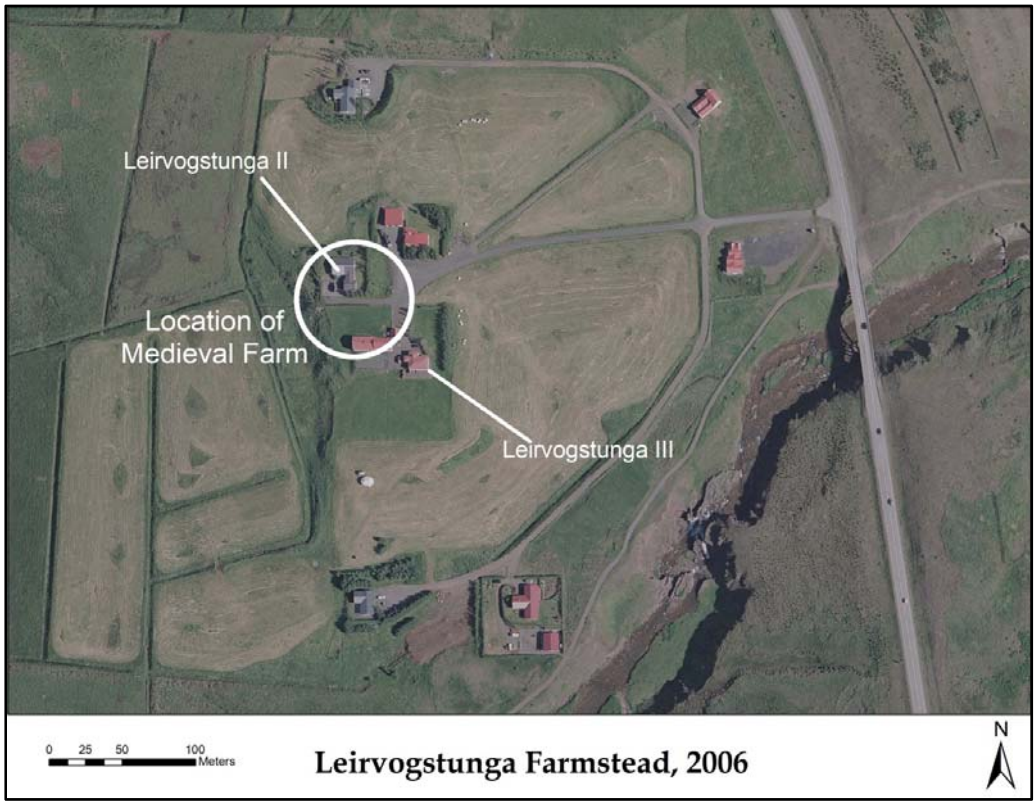


Figure 6.22 Aerial photograph from 2006, showing the location of the medieval farmstead. The modern Leirvogstunga farmstead is split into 6 separate homes named Leirvogstunga II-VII. The oldest farm building on the current Leirvogstunga farm is still located where the 1916 map (see Figure 6.23) shows the farmhouse and is today called Leirvogstunga III.

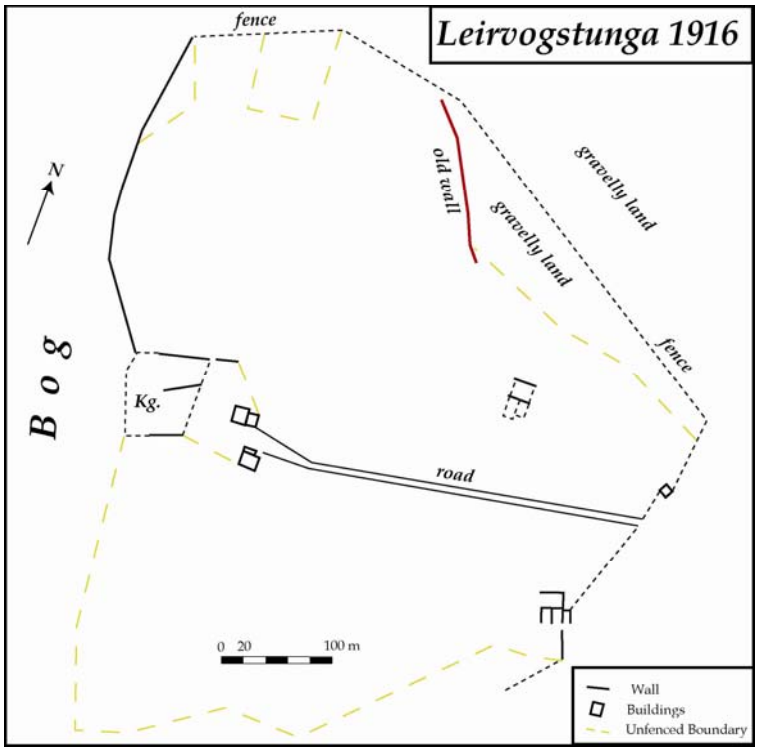


Figure 6.23 Farmstead map of Leirvogstunga drawn in 1916 and showing the traditional turf buildings of the old farm (redrawn by Zori).

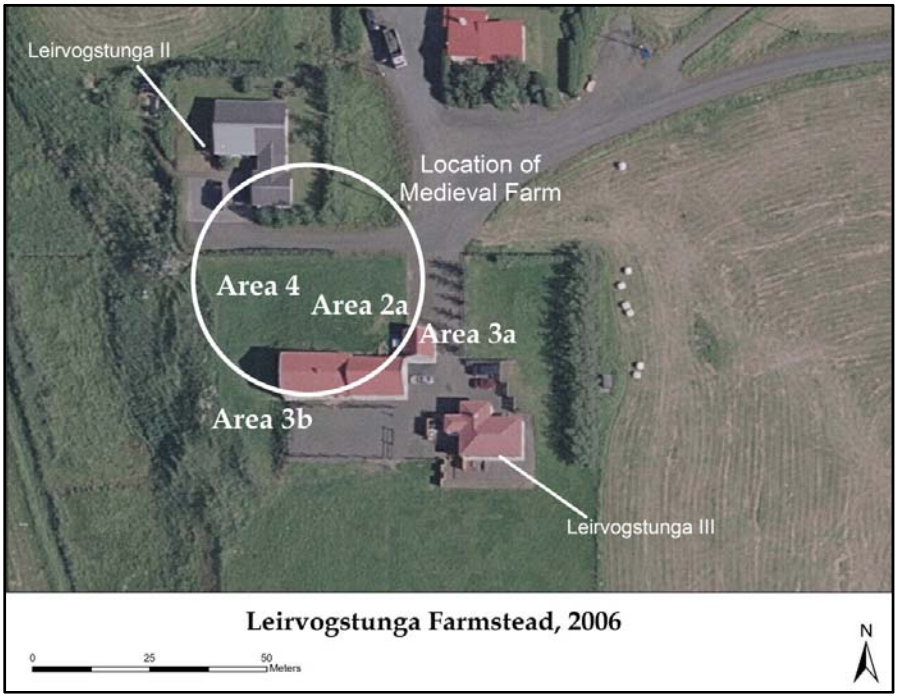


Figure 6.24 Close-up photo of the area at Leirvogstunga where the medieval farm was found, showing the locations of the excavation areas referred to in the text.

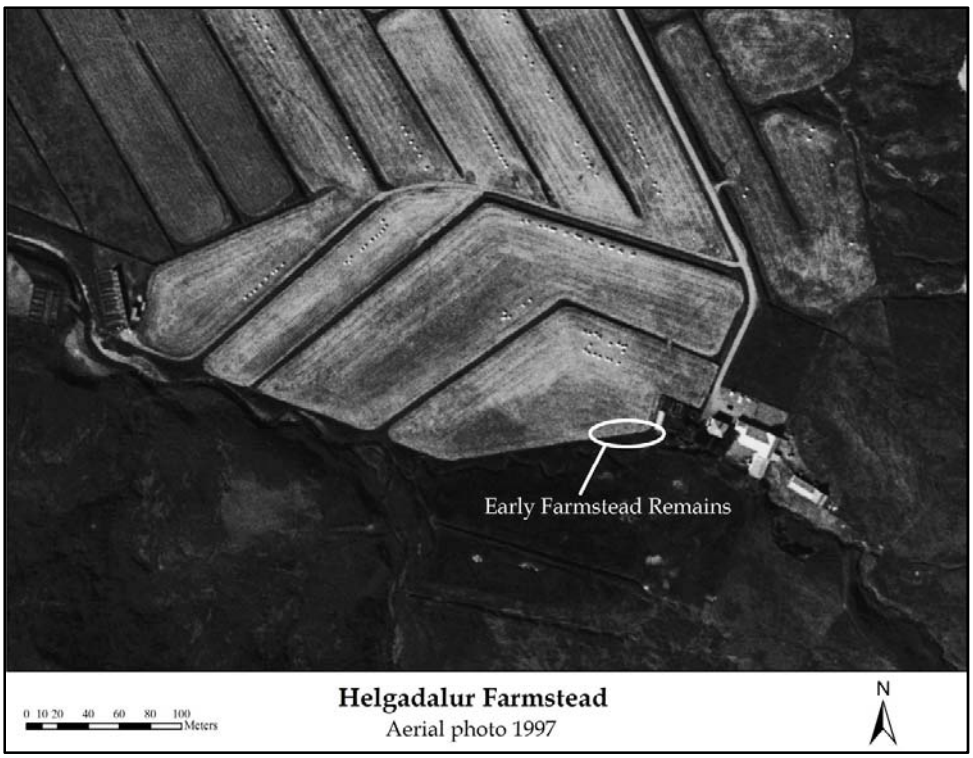


Figure 6.25 Aerial photograph of the Helgadalur farm from 1997 with the Settlement Period farmstead remains marked.

Figure 6.26 The Helgadalur farm looking west-southwest.

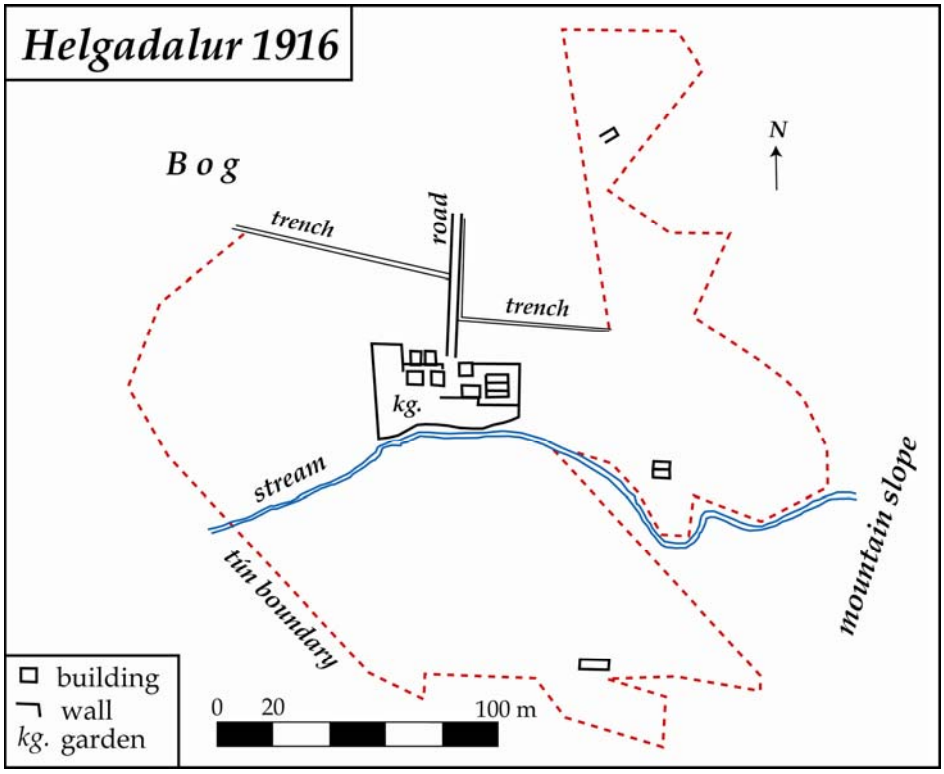


Figure 6.27 Map of the Helgadalur farm from 1916 (redrawn by Zori).

Figure 6.28 Sub-surface testing at Helgadalur on top of a ridge partially formed by the accumulation of cultural material. Here cultural activity just above the in situ Landnám tephra from AD 870 ± 2 indicates a Settlement Period occupation of the Helgadalur farm.

Figure 6.29 Looking northwest across the stream at the early occupation area at Helgadalur. The black arrow points to an exposed profile investigated during the 2009 season.

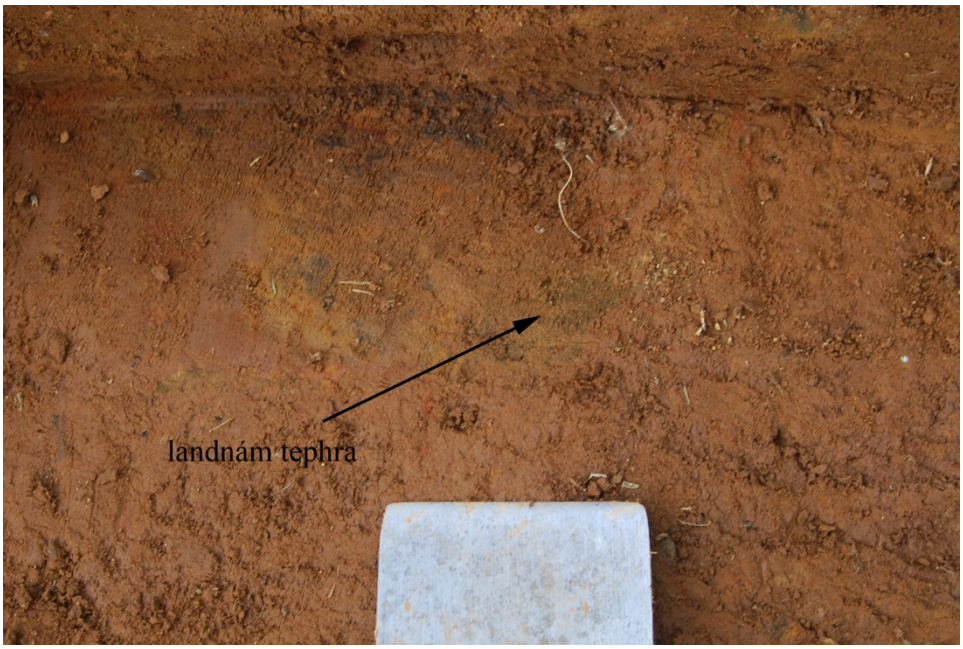


Figure 6.30 Landnám tephra appeared in part of a mixed midden and re-deposited turf layer towards the bottom of Profile HGD 1. Building turf containing both Landnám and Katla-R/Eldgjá-1 tephra revealed in this profile provided further evidence for an early settlement-period farm at Helgadalur.

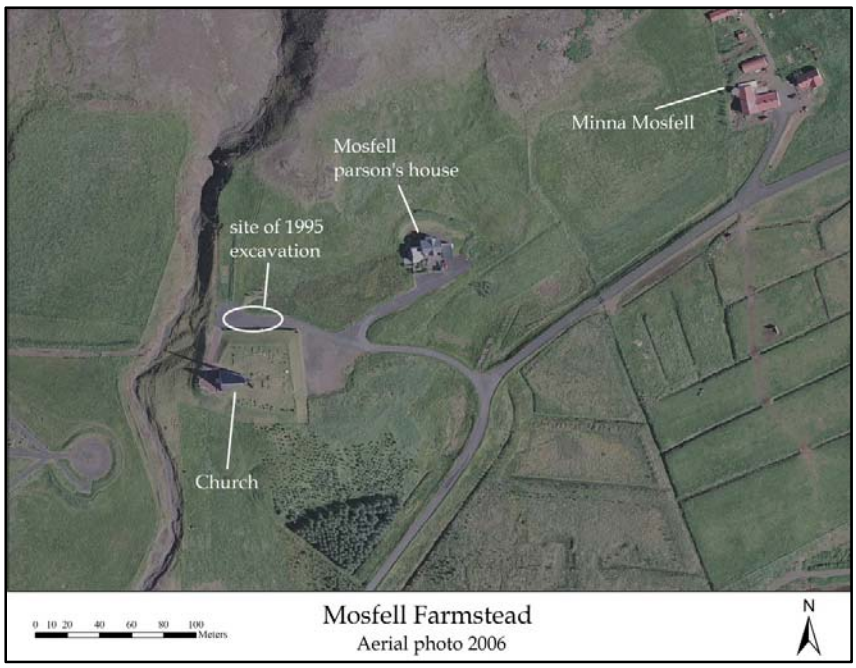


Figure 6.31 Aerial photo of the modern Mosfell farm from 2006, showing the location of the 1995 excavations where MAP uncovered the remains of a medieval church.

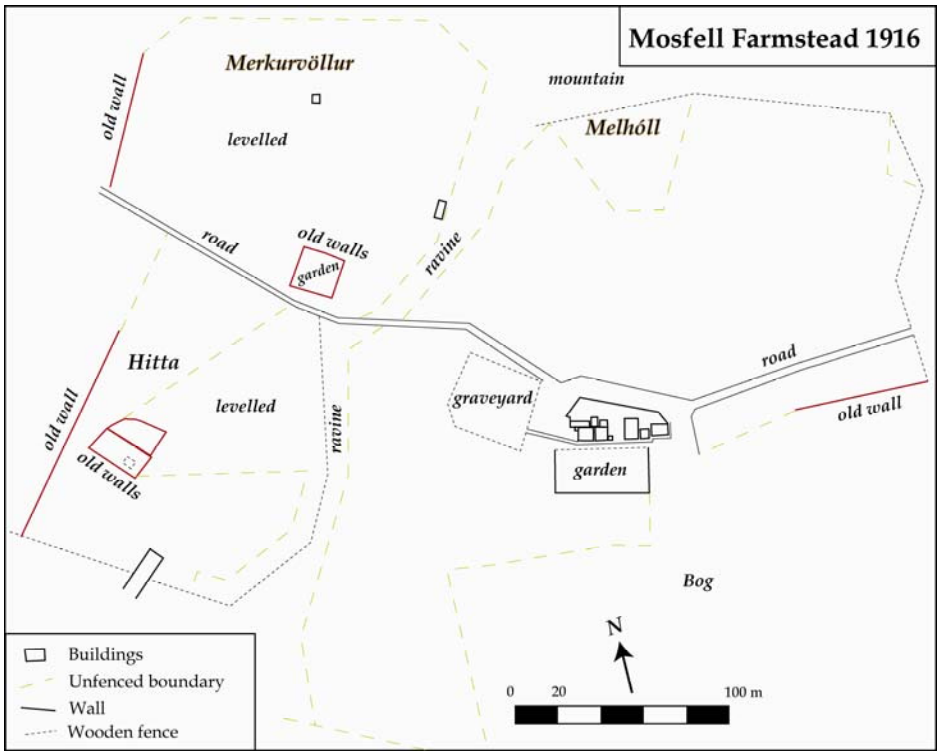


Figure 6.32 Farmstead map of the Mosfell farm drawn in 1916, showing the traditional turf farm, the desanctified churchyard, and the old road that leads west to Hrísbrú and east to Minna-Mosfell (redrawn by Zori).

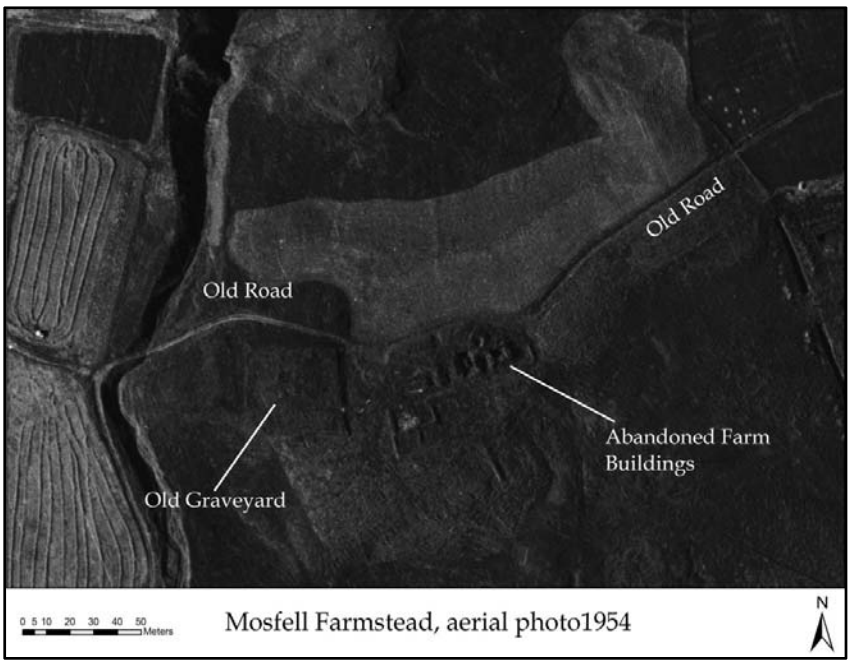


Figure 6.33 Aerial photograph of the abandoned Mosfell farm in 1954. The old road, which appears on the 1916 map (Figure 6.32) is visible here as a depression in the landscape. At this time, the Mosfell farm had moved down into the center of the valley.

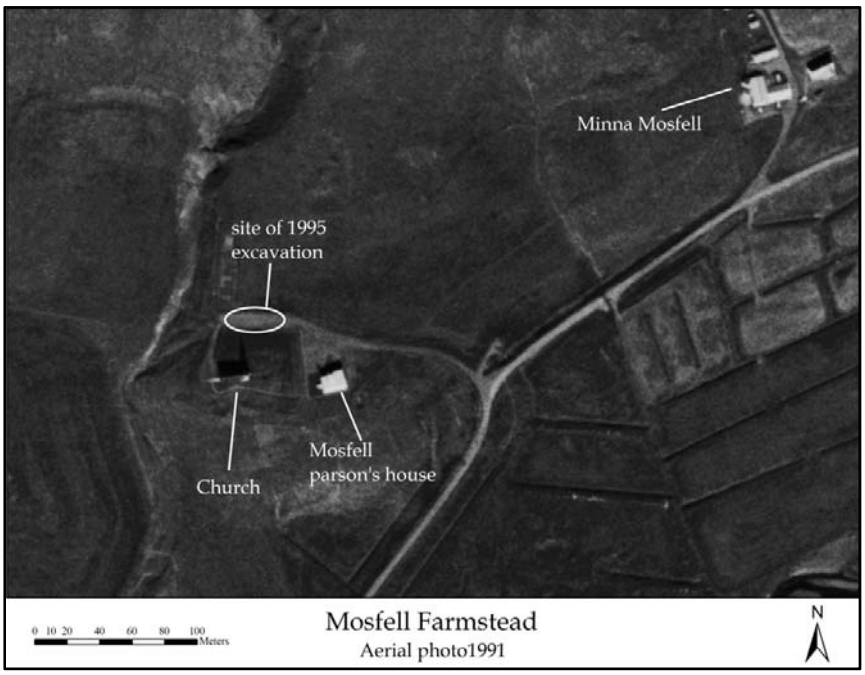


Figure 6.34 Aerial photograph of Mosfell from 1991, showing the concrete parson's house that was built on top of the old farm remains seen in Figures 6.33, 6.32, and 6.35. The modern Mosfell church has been rebuilt on almost the same location as the 19th century church.

Figure 6.35 Overlay of the 1916 map of the Mosfell farm on top of the aerial photograph from 1954. The overlay illustrates that the ruins visible in the photograph are the same as the active buildings shown in the map.

Figure 6.36 Northern wall foundation of the medieval church partially excavated at the Mosfell farmstead. This wall foundation supported a wide turf wall.

Figure 6.37 Aerial photograph of Hraðastaðir from 2006, indicating the location of the old farmhouse and the post-medieval ruins of a likely animal shed (HRĐ-1). Significant modern home construction at this site makes archaeological work difficult. Midden deposits dumped into the abandoned ruin HRĐ-1 might indicate that the older pre-modern and medieval farm was located closer to this ruin than the current farm.

Figure 6.38 Looking west at the Hraðastaðir farm. The red house with the black roof is the old Hraðastaðir farm while the rest of the buildings are modern developments. The ruins of a post-medieval building (HRĐ 1) are visible to the left. The Mosfell mountain is seen to the far right and the Helgafell Mountain is center left.

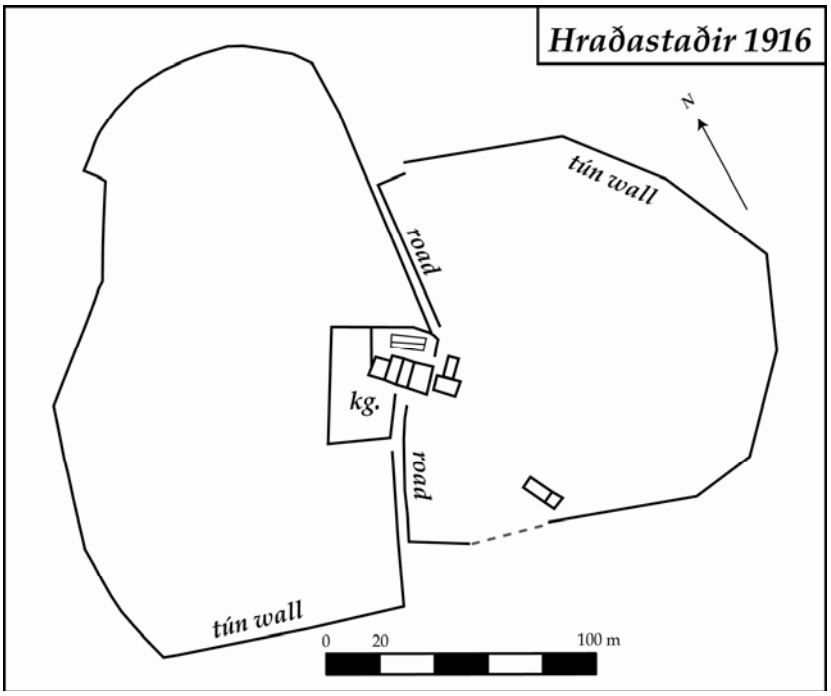


Figure 6.39 Farmstead map of the Hraðastaðir farm drawn in 1916 (redrawn by Zori).

Figure 6.40 Aerial photograph of Hraðastaðir from 1954 showing the site before the construction of the many private homes seen in the 2006 aerial photo (see Figure 6.37). The 1954 photograph shows clearly the traditional boundaries of the farm's homefield, which matches the boundaries drawn on the 1916 farm map (see Figure 6.39).

Figure 6.41 The old barn behind the Hraðastaðir house was built in 1915. Bjarni Bjarnason of Hraðastaðir believes the old farmhouse had at one point been situated here.

Figure 6.42 The Hraðaleiði mound looking northwest after the surrounding field has been mowed. According to Bjarni Bjarnason of Hraðastaðir, modern machinery has never been used on this mound.

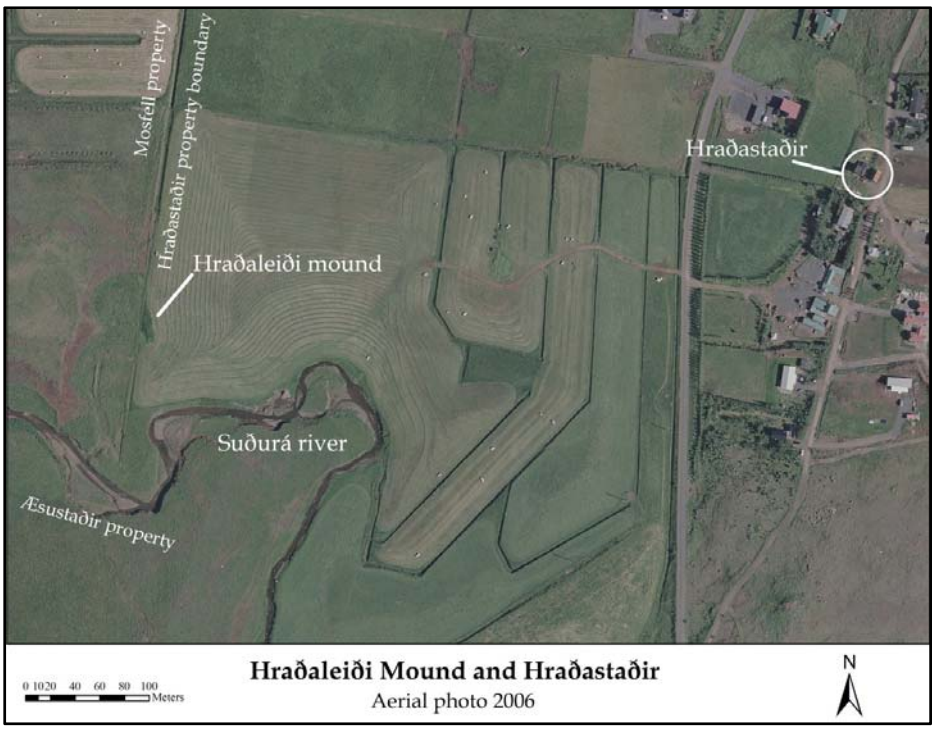


Figure 6.43 Aerial photograph from 2006 showing the location of the Hraðaleiði mound at the intersection of the traditional boundaries of the Mosfell, Hraðastaðir, and Æsustaðir farms. The placement is consistent with criteria for the placement of Icelandic pagan burial mounds on the boundaries of farms, outside of cultivated fields, and in a prominent place in the landscape.

Figure 6.44 Looking north at Ruin HRÐ 1 at Hraðastaðir. The north wall can be seen in center left of the picture. The white flags left of the wall mark locations of cores taken inside the ruin that showed kitchen trash had been dumped inside the structure.

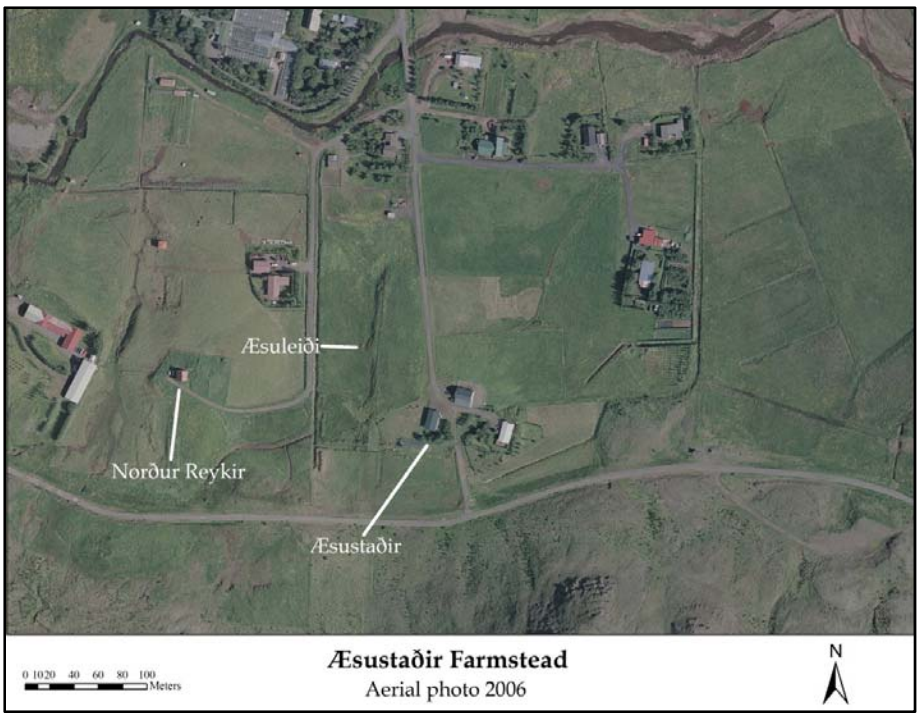


Figure 6.45 Aerial photograph of Æsustaðir from 2006, showing also the location of the neighboring Norður Reykir farm and the Æsuleiði mound, which is remembered in oral tradition as a pagan burial mound.

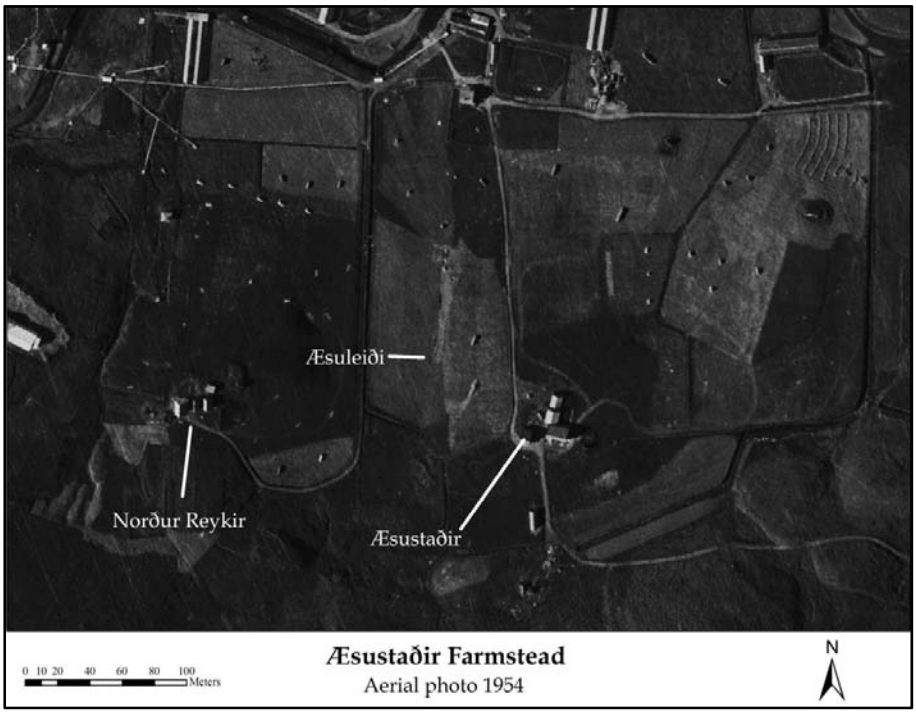


Figure 6.46 Aerial photograph of Æsustaðir from 1954.

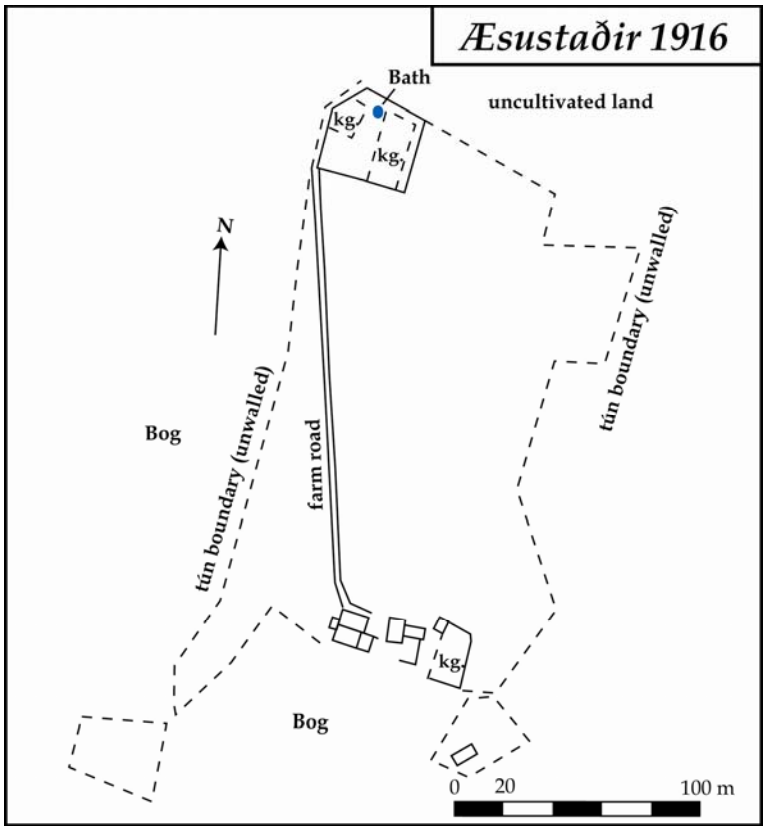


Figure 6.47 Farmstead map of Æsustaðir drawn in 1916. Note the warm bath to the north of the farm (redrawn by Zori).

Figure 6.48 Interviewing the current inhabitants of Æsustaðir about the history of their farm. The 19th and early 20th century farmhouses were located to the left in the photo and north of the gravel parking area where the yellow flowers are growing.

Figure 6.49 Looking north at the western slope of the hill on top of which Æsustaðir sits. The black arrow points to the Æsuleiði mound. Note also the higher vegetation with the yellow flowers just to the right of the fence. This linear vegetation marks the location of the old homefield wall.

Figure 6.50 Section of Æsuleiði mound, consisting of mixed cultural and natural deposits including urine-bleached hay, manure, wood pieces and branches, as well as clumps of clay, peat, loose dark brown organic material, and iron stained soil from the marshy surrounding landscape.

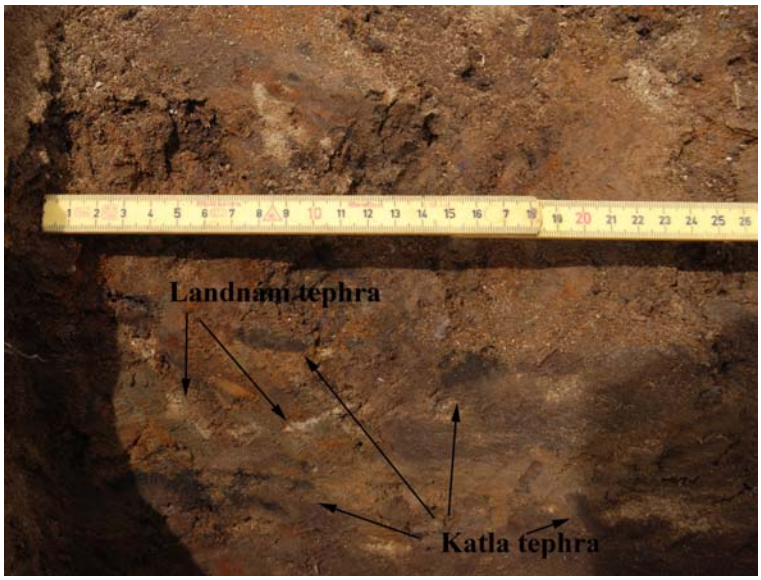


Figure 6.51 Close-up of mixed Landnám and Katla 1500 tephra stringers and clumps in the fill of the Æsuleiði mound. Note that the Katla tephra from 1500 also appears below the disturbed Landnám tephra from AD 871±2, clearly indicating post-1500 redeposition.

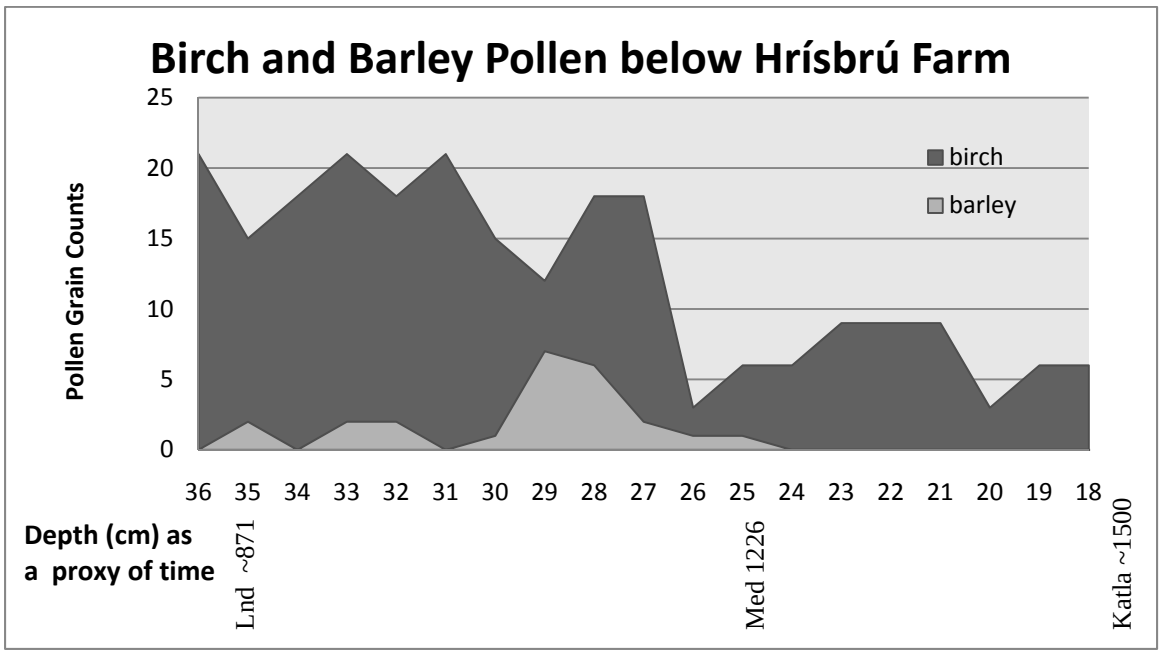
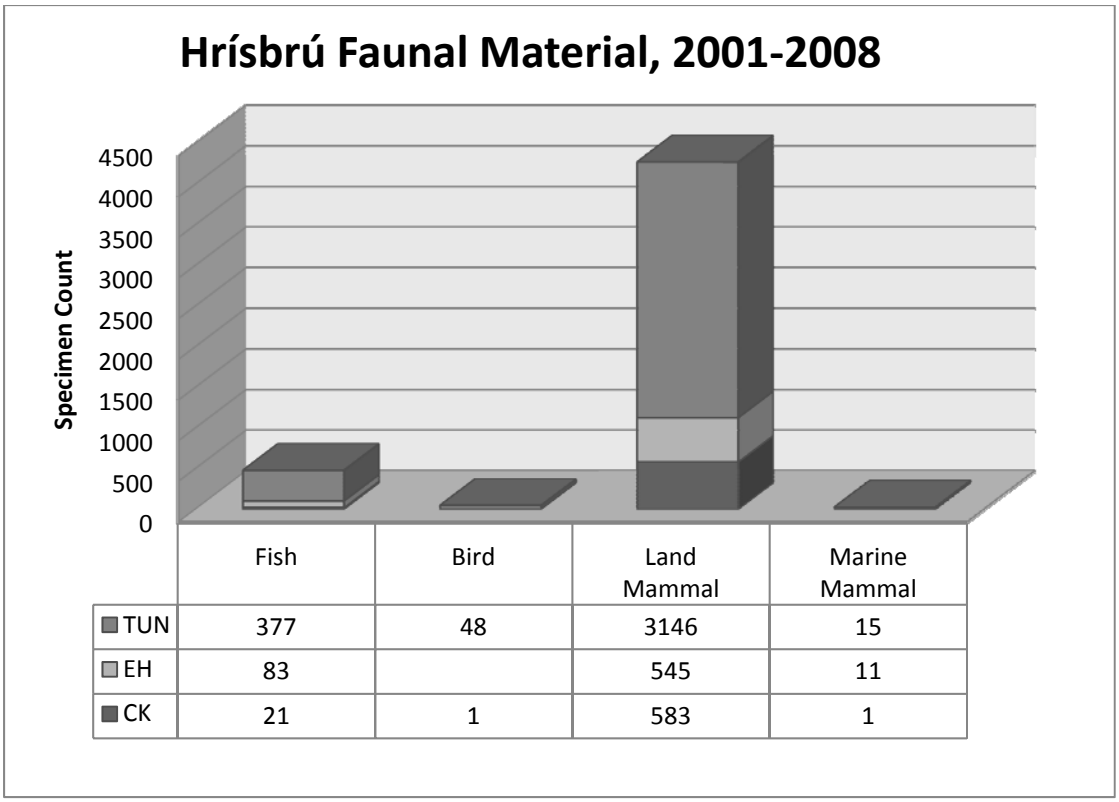


Figure 7.1 Pollen grains from a section in the marsh below the Hrísbrú farm shows the presence of barley beginning immediately at the time of settlement (ca. AD 871) and continuing until the early 13th century. Birch pollen declines over the same period, but the continued prevalence of birch pollen until the 13th century suggests forest management in the valley. Below the depth measurements on the x-axis, the three in situ tephra layers observed in the soil profile are marked, providing absolute dates for the section. The graph is based on data from Erlendsson and Edwards 2010.



	Fish	Bird	Land Mammal	Marine Mammal
TUN	377	48	3146	15
EH	83		545	11
CK	21	1	583	1

Figure 7.2 NISP of archaeofauna from the three excavation areas at Hrísbrú (TUN, EH, CK) divided into 4 broad taxonomic categories.

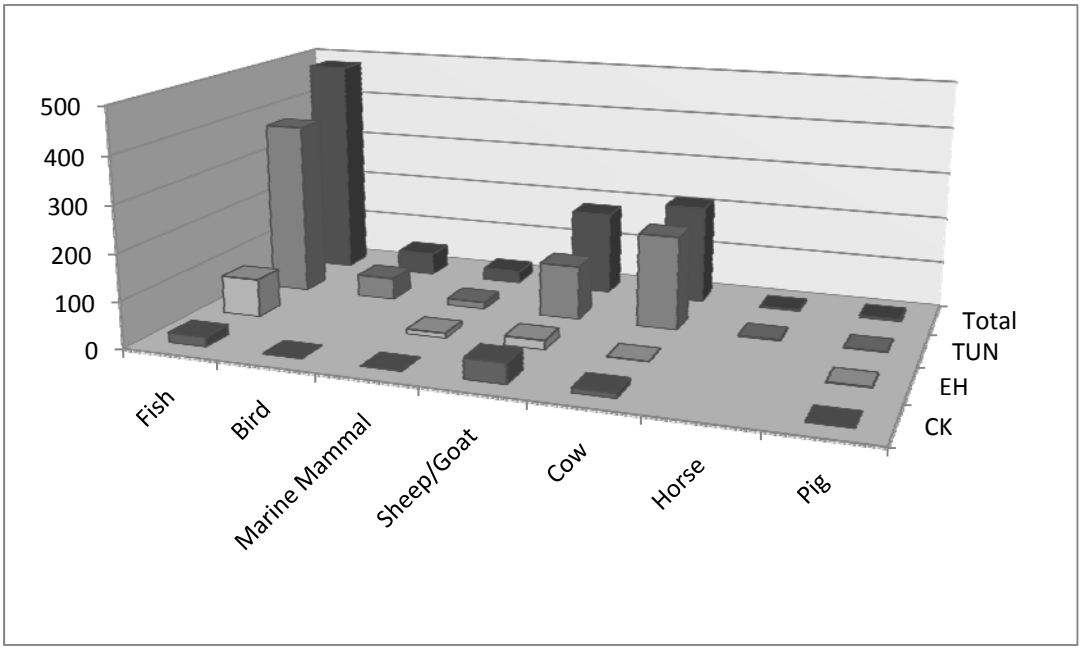


Figure 7.3 Number of identified specimens from the Church Knoll (CK), Elfin Hill (EH), and Tun (TUN) excavation areas.

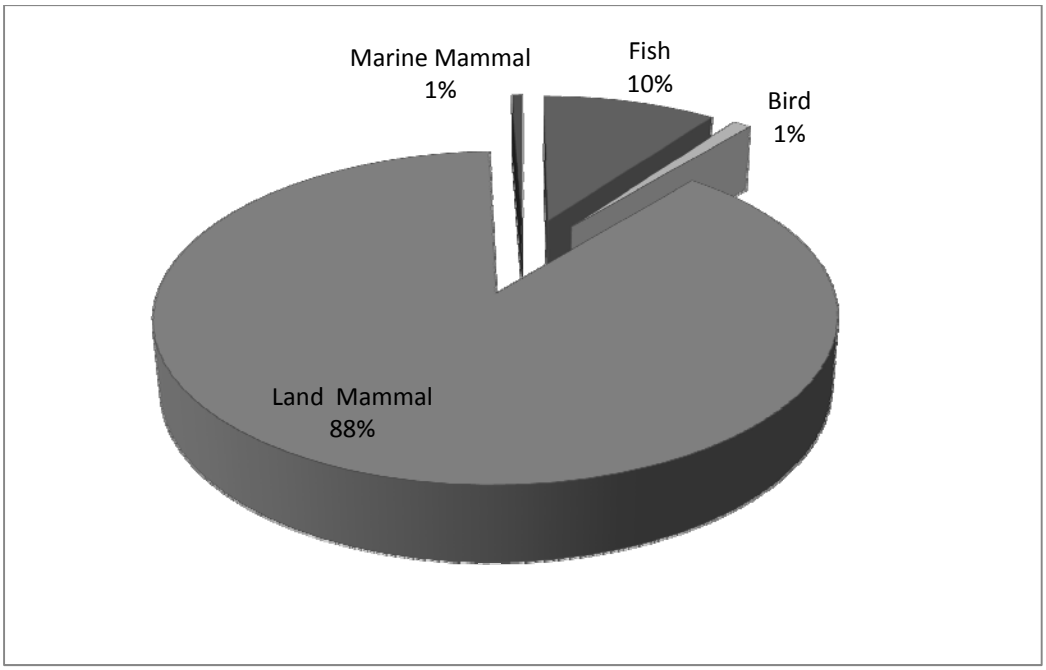


Figure 7.4 The percentage of all specimen counts from the Hrísbrú excavations divided into four major categories and showing the Hrísbrú inhabitants primary reliance on domesticated land mammals.

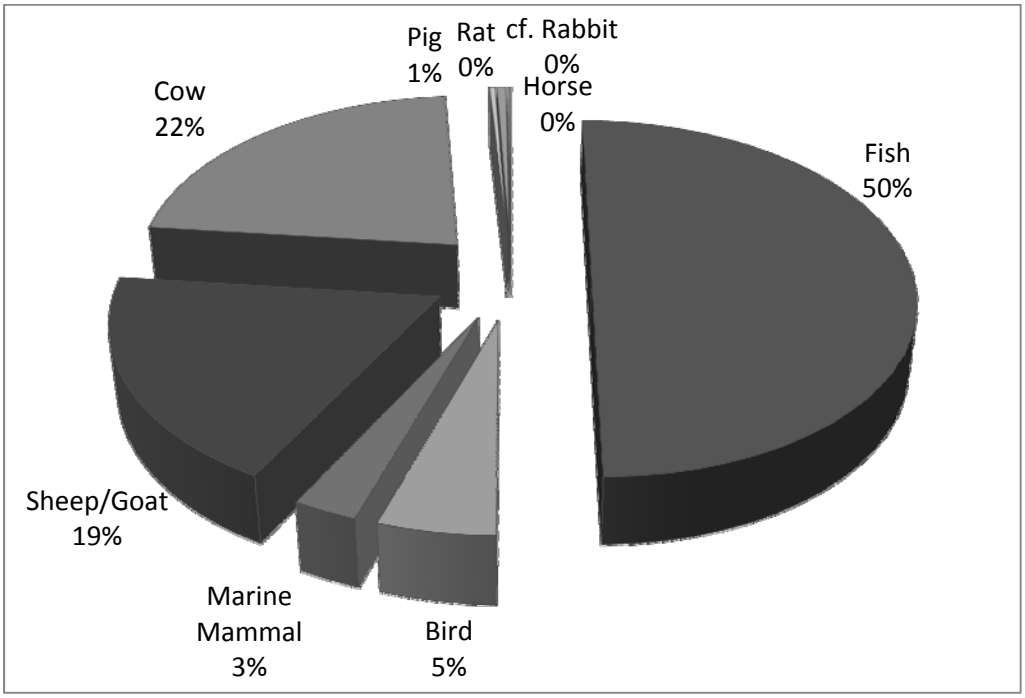


Figure 7.5 Percentages of the faunal collection represented by major specimen types, excluding finds that were identified as general "land mammal." Compare this chart with the chart in Figure 7.4, which includes bones recognizable only as "land mammal."

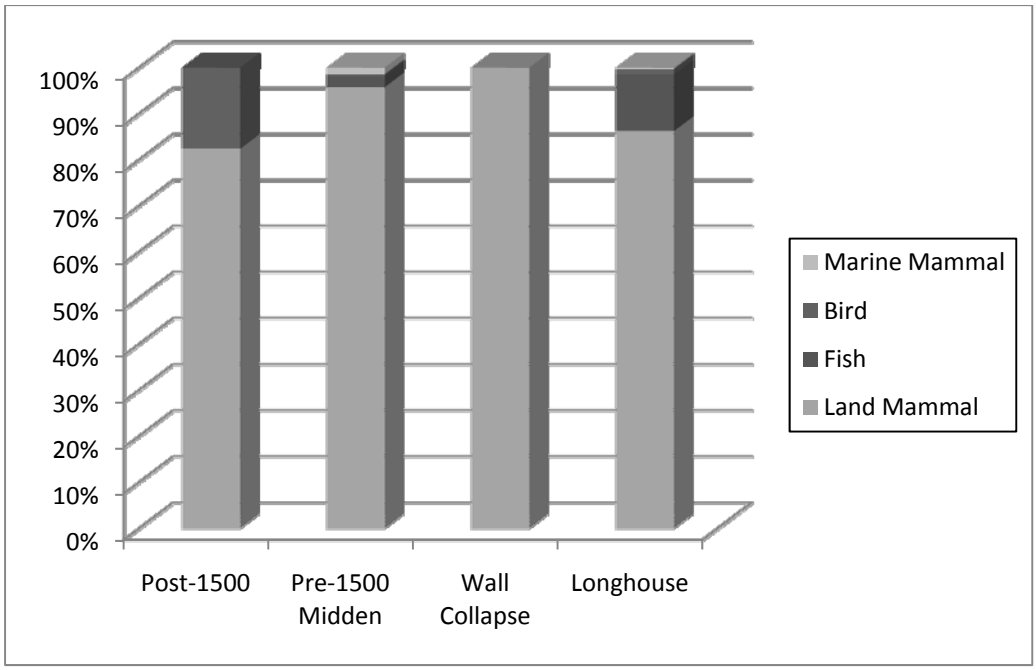
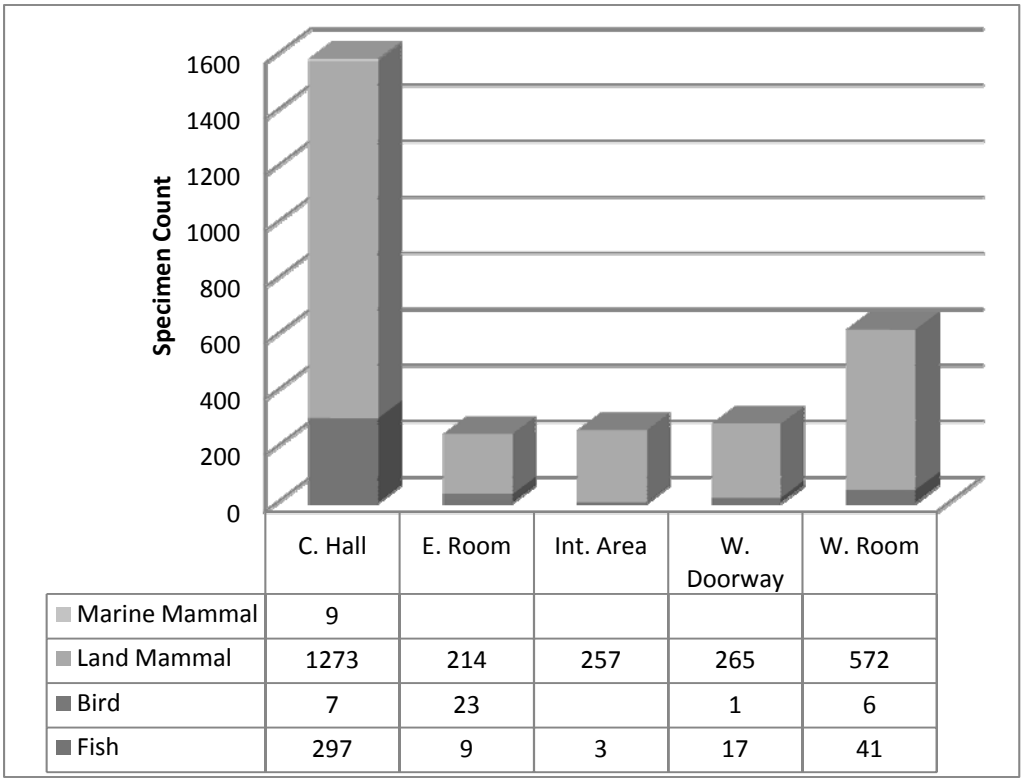


Figure 7.6 Comparison of the percentage of the assemblage from four broad periods of the TUN excavation area made up of marine mammal, bird, fish, and land mammal.



	C. Hall	E. Room	Int. Area	W. Doorway	W. Room
Marine Mammal	9				
Land Mammal	1273	214	257	265	572
Bird	7	23		1	6
Fish	297	9	3	17	41

Figure 7.7 NISP of marine mammal, land mammal, bird, and fish in separate spatial units of the Hrísbrú longhouse.

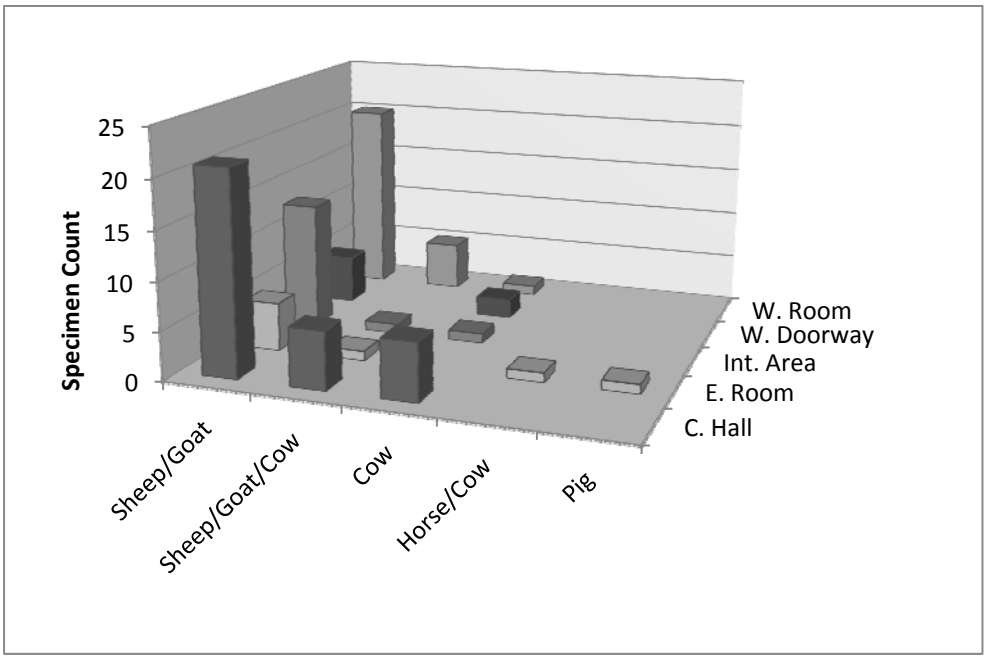


Figure 7.8 Comparison of the NISP of domesticated animal bones recovered from the separate spatial units of the Hrísbrú longhouse.

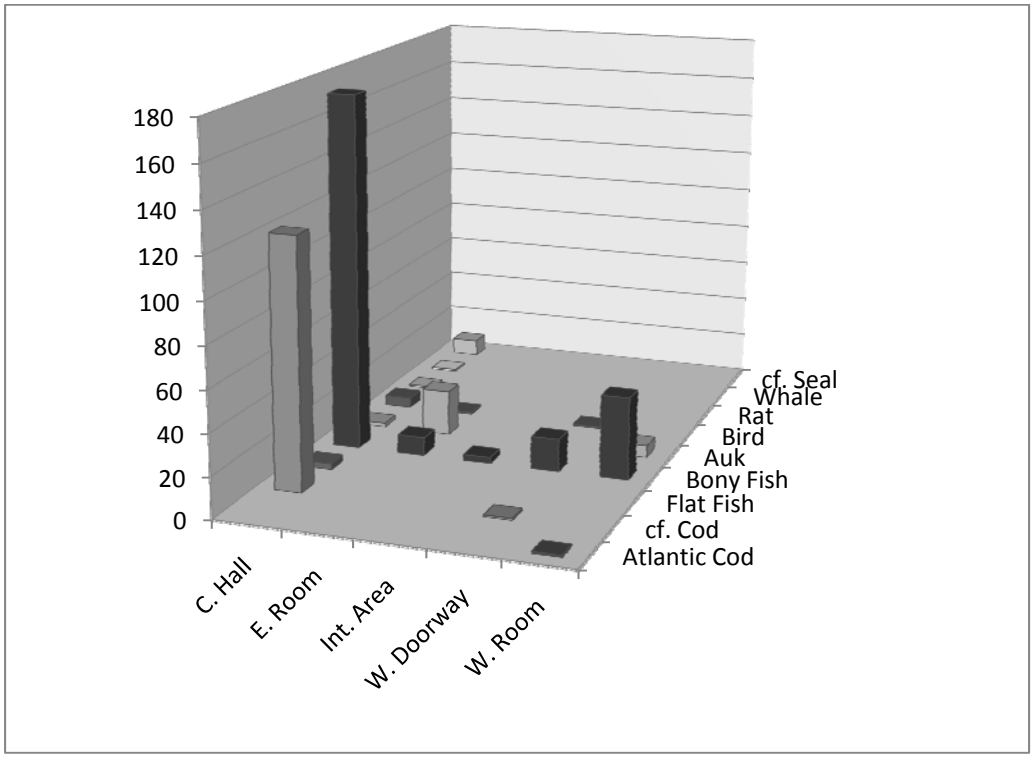


Figure 7.9 Comparative graph showing the NISP of wild animal bones recovered from the separate spatial units of the Hrísbrú longhouse.

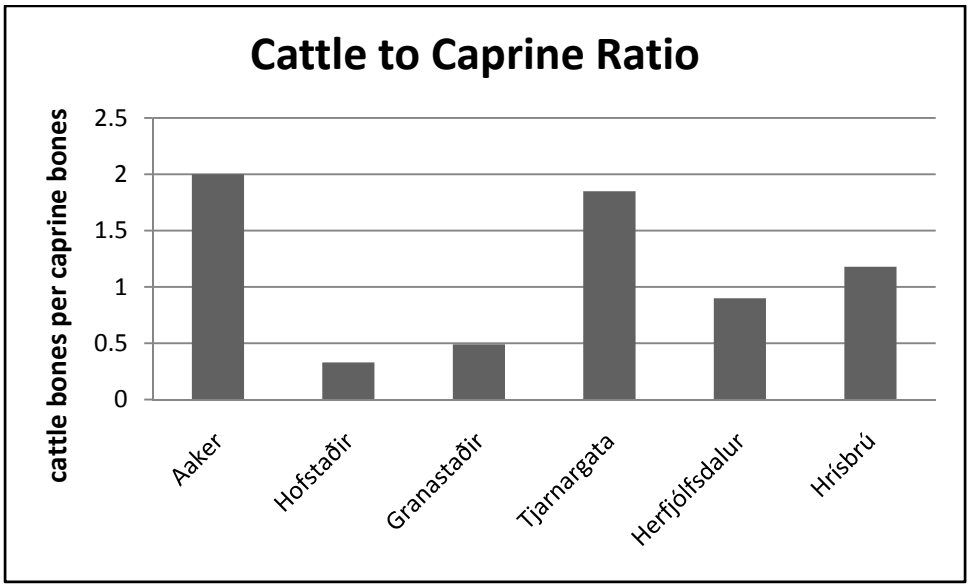


Figure 7.10 Comparison of the cattle to caprine ratio of the Hrísbrú faunal assemblage with the 8th-9th century Norwegian chiefly farm of Aaker and early Icelandic 9th and 10th century farmsteads. Hofstaðir and Granastaðir are in northern Iceland, while Tjarnagata and Herfjólfsdalur are in southern Iceland (graph incorporates data from McGovern 2010; McGovern 2000; Vésteinsson et al. 2002; Amorosi and McGovern 1995).

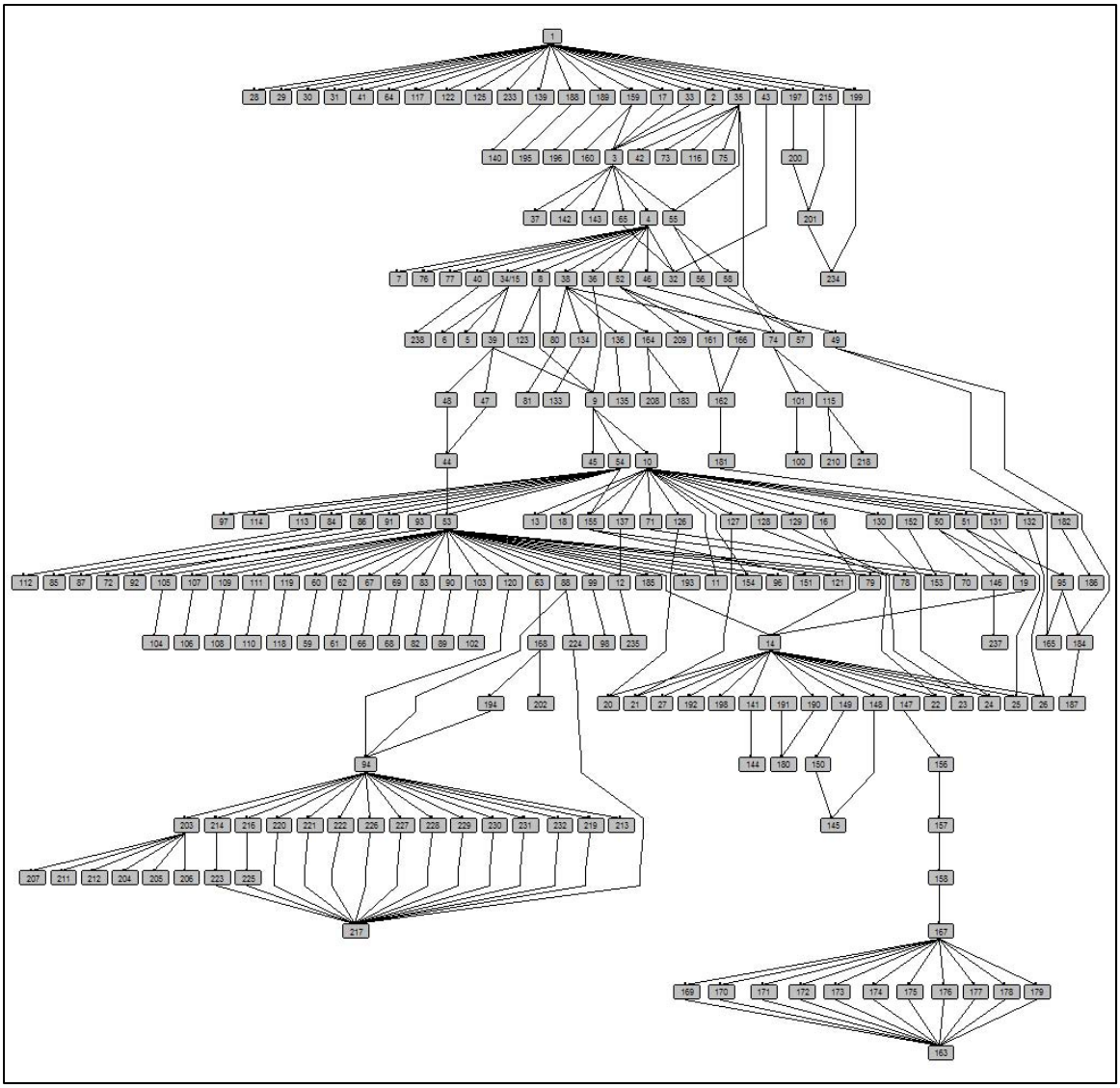


Figure 7.11 Harris Matrix showing the stratigraphic relationships of excavated contexts from the longhouse and midden layers at Hrísbrú (created with ArchED Program software).

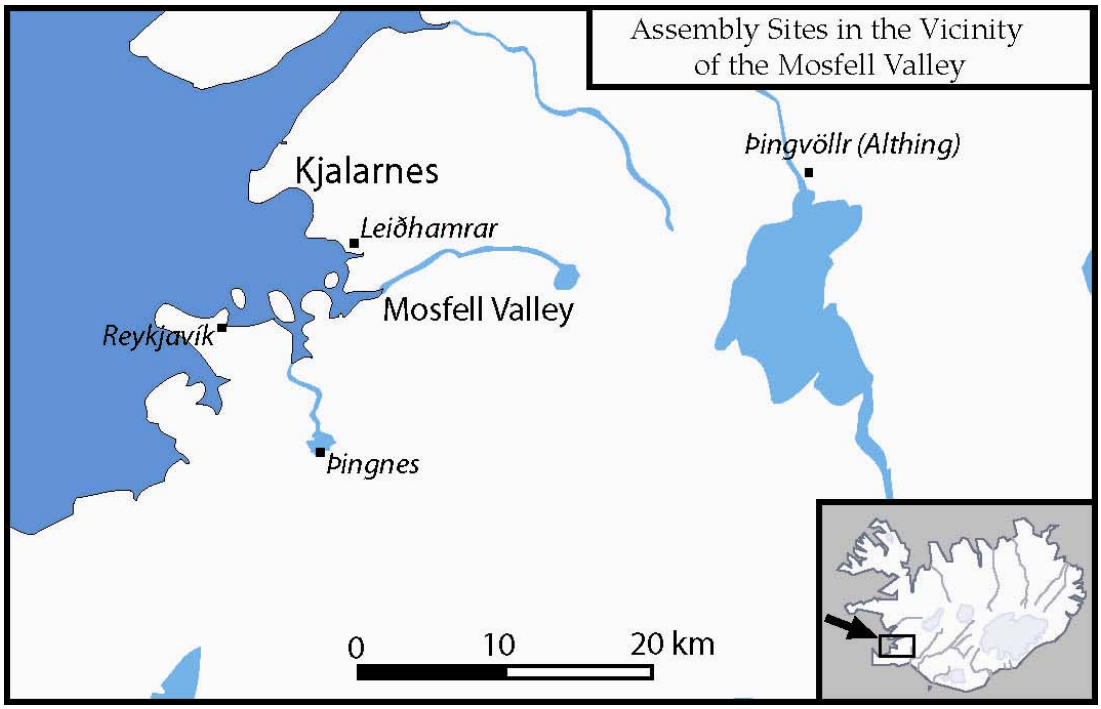


Figure 8.1 Map showing the locations of identified assembly sites in the wider Mosfell region. Regional assemblies were probably held at Þingnes and Leiðhamrar, while the Althing for all of Iceland was held at Þingvöllr (modern spelling, Þingvellir).

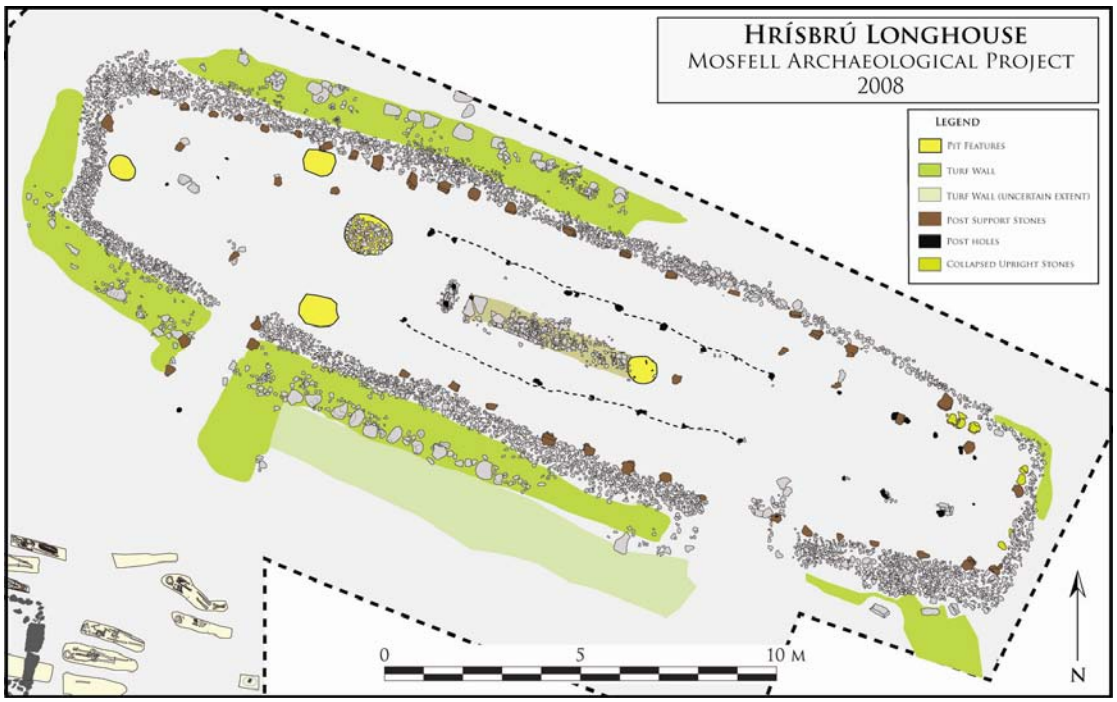


Figure 8.2 The Hrísbrú longhouse (map by Davide Zori, Jesse Byock, Jennie Dillon, Max Farrar, Megan Dubois, and Francesca Conselvan).

Figure 8.3 The Hrísbrú longhouse at the end of the 2008 season looking west.

Figure 8.4 Looking west at the central hall of the Hrísbrú longhouse. The picture shows the blackish gray bench surface layers in both side aisles.

Figure 8.5 Overview of the eastern gable room at the end of the MAP 2008 season. A single mixed floor and natural soil layer is visible in the central aisle (photo by Brooks Walker).

Figure 8.6 Overview of the western gable room at the end of the 2008 season, when all surface layers and pit fill features had been removed (photo by Brooks Walker).

Figure 8.7 Looking into the western entryway to the longhouse. The surface was covered by planks and flanked by short turf walls to the east and west. The entryway also appears to have been covered by a roof. Note the posthole in the foreground.

Figure 8.8 Quernstone found lying on top of the northern bench in the central hall.

Figure 8.9 Looking west over the Hrísbrú longhouse. This picture illustrates the immense number of fist-sized cobbles employed in the construction of the component of the walls between the turf walls and the inner wooden planking. The photograph shows the house before the collapsed stones that fell into the longhouse were excavated.

Figure 8.10 Imported beads found in the Hrísbrú longhouse.

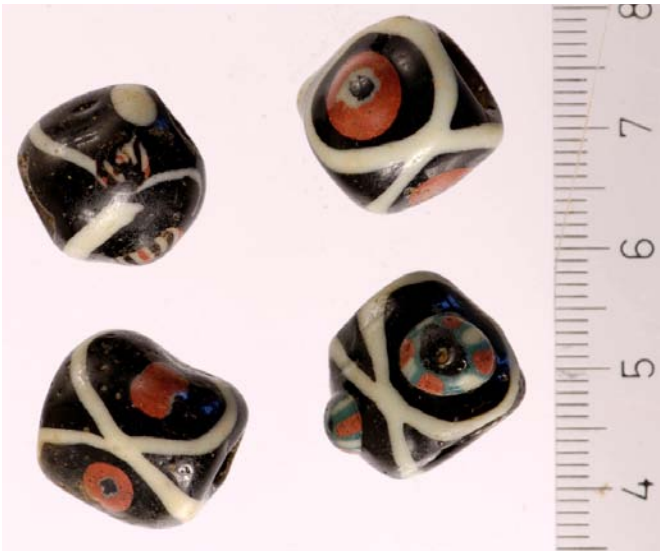


Figure 8.11 "Eye Beads" produced in Western Turkestan and recovered in the western gable room of the Hrísbrú longhouse. The two beads with radial lines spreading from the central eye or sun (top left and bottom right) belong to Callmer's (1977) bead type B090. The two beads without the radial lines are examples of bead type B088.

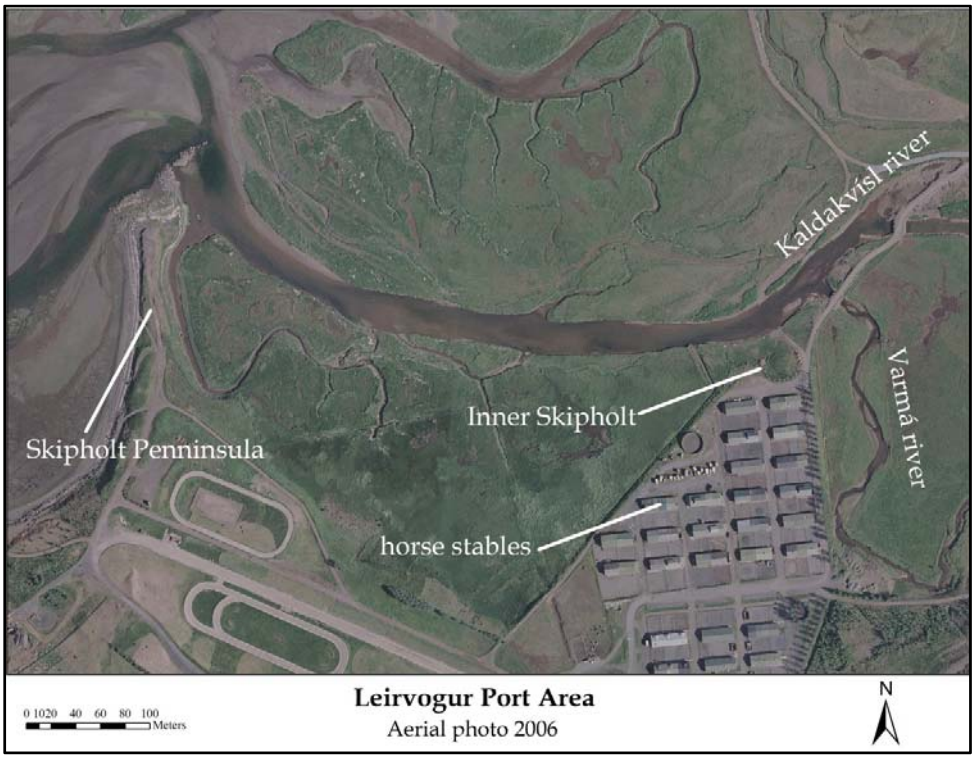


Figure 8.12 Aerial photograph of the inner reaches of the Leirvogur bay showing the two locations known by the place name Skiphóll (Ship-hill).

Figure 8.13 Looking north on the inside of Outer Skiphóll peninsula in the Leirvogur bay at low tide. On the left is the large stone that previously sat on top of the peninsula, possibly functioning as a beacon for the port.

Figure 8.14 Outer Skiphóll as high tide rolls in, showing that the depth of the canal even today after centuries of silt accumulation would be deep and wide enough to pull in a boat with a shallow draft.

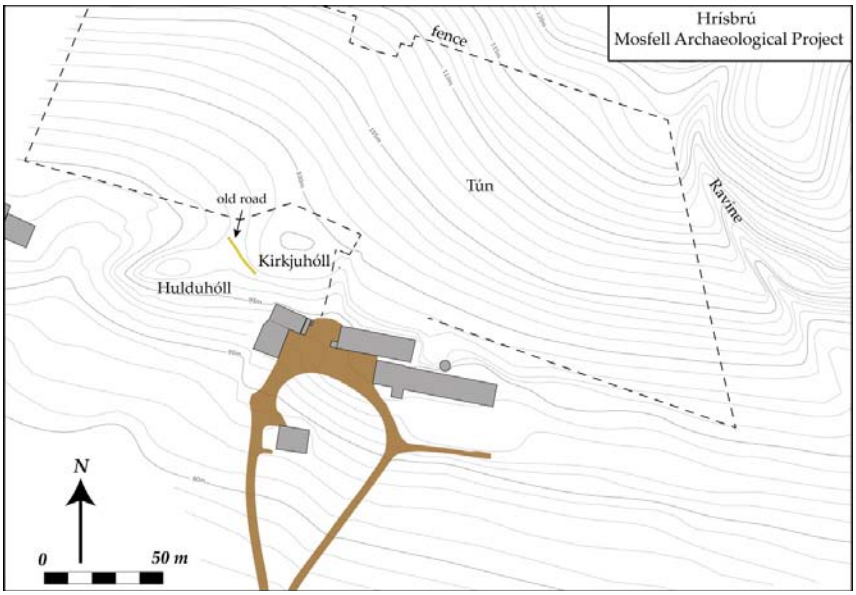


Figure 9.1 Topographical map of the Hrísbrú farmstead, showing the location of Hulduhóll (Elven Knoll) and Kirkjuhóll (Church Knoll) northwest of the modern farm buildings. Hulduhóll, which was modified at the tip to approximate the shape of a ship pointing towards the sea, was the site of a pagan cremation. Excavations at Kirkjuhóll yielded a conversion-era church and an early Christian graveyard that exhibited evidence of the syncretization of the pagan and Christian ritual systems (map by Davide Zori, Jesse Byock, and Max Farrar).

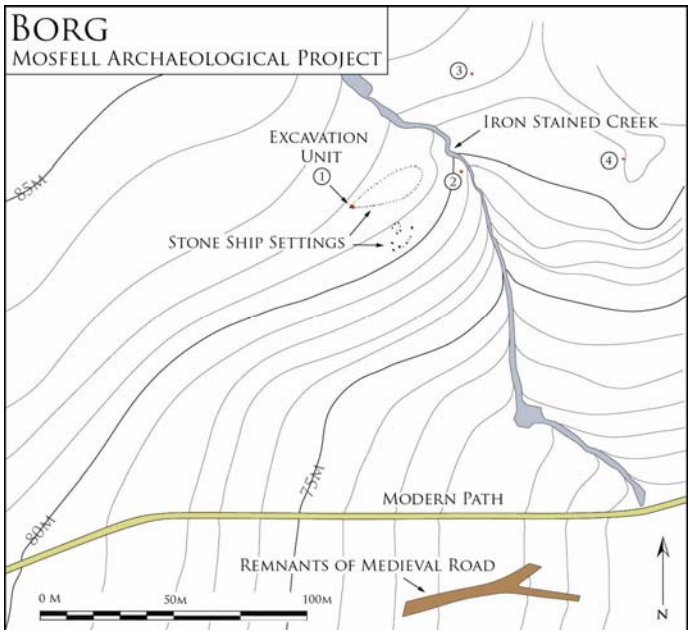


Figure 9.2 Map of the Borg site in the low highlands showing the location of the stone alignments, the remnants of a probable medieval road, and the location of four excavated test units (map by Davide Zori, Jesse Byock, and Max Farrar).

Figure 9.3 Ship setting at Borg seen from the southwest.

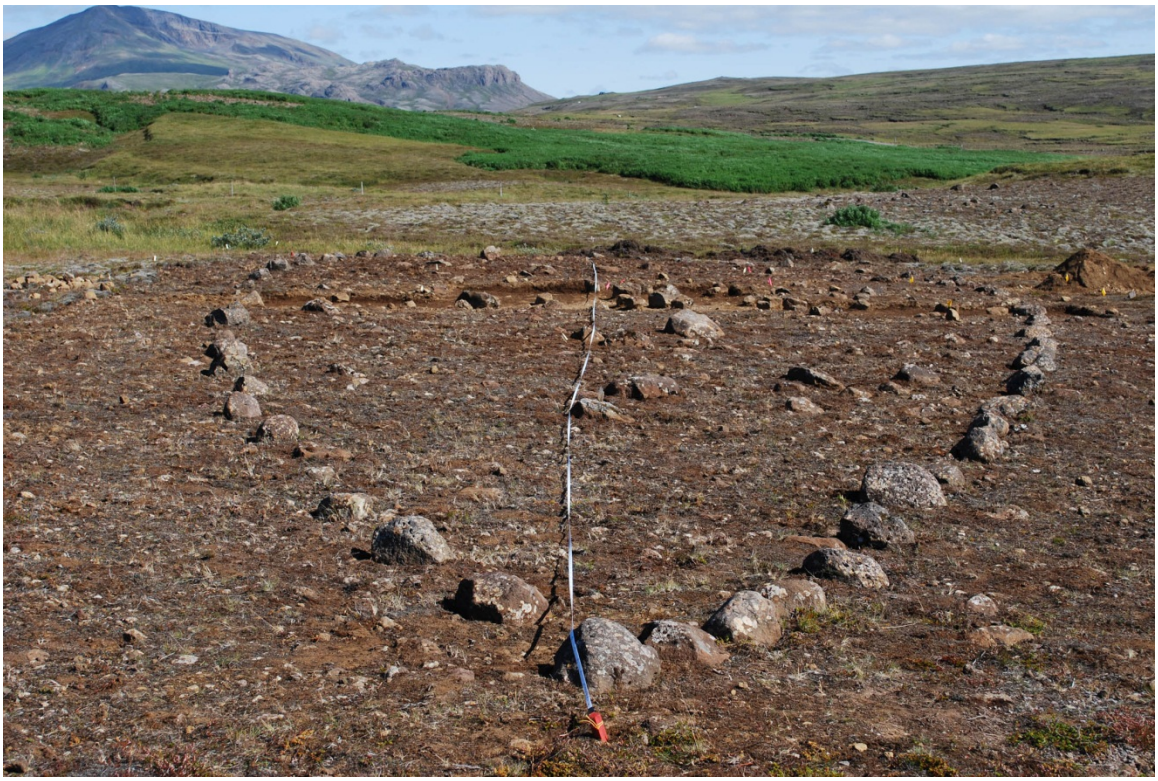


Figure 9.4 Ship setting looking east from the tip of the “prow.”

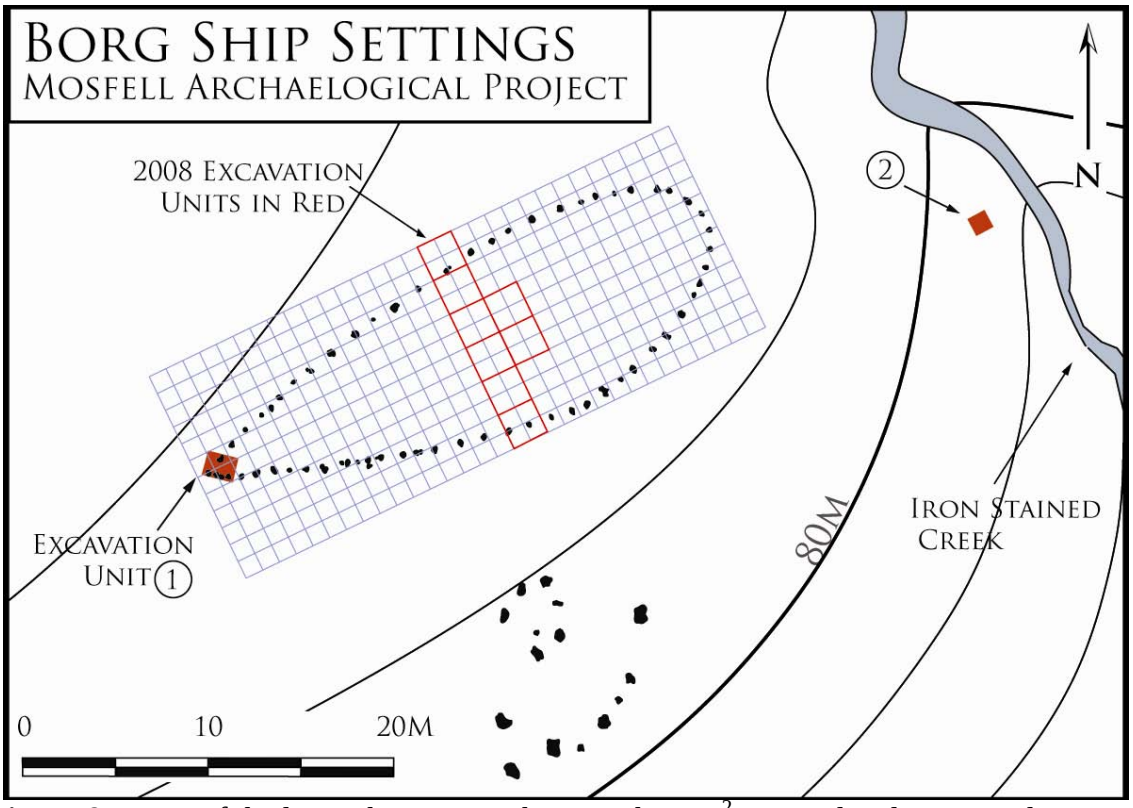


Figure 9.5 Map of the large ship setting showing the 1 m^2 site grid and excavated units (map by Davide Zori, Jesse Byock, and Max Farrar).

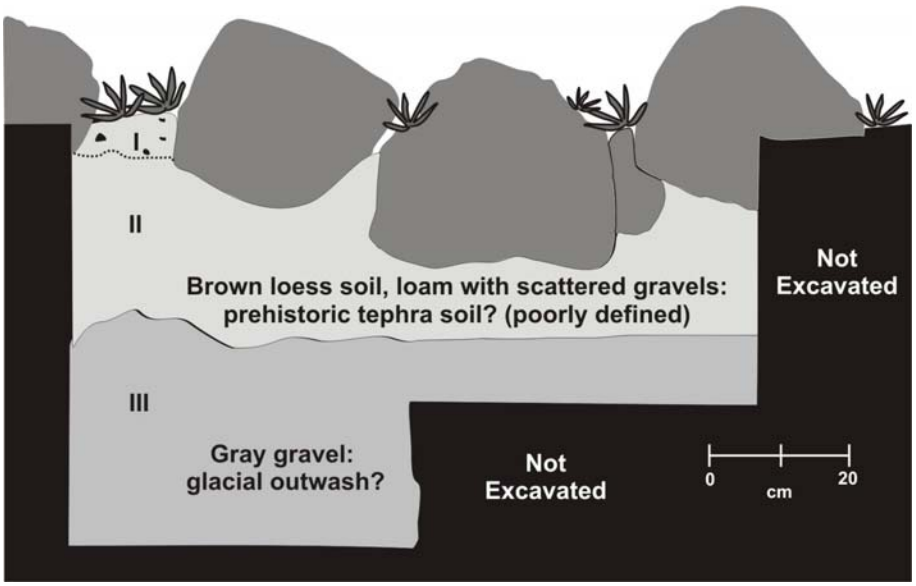


Figure 9.6 Section profile of the test unit dug inside the "prow" of the ship setting. Layer "I" in drawing is the erosional gravel pavement, which the stone alignment clearly predates (profile drawing by Jon Erlandson and Phillip Walker).

Figure 9.7 Clearing moss away from the stone alignment to clarify the number and size of the stones and allow accurate mapping.

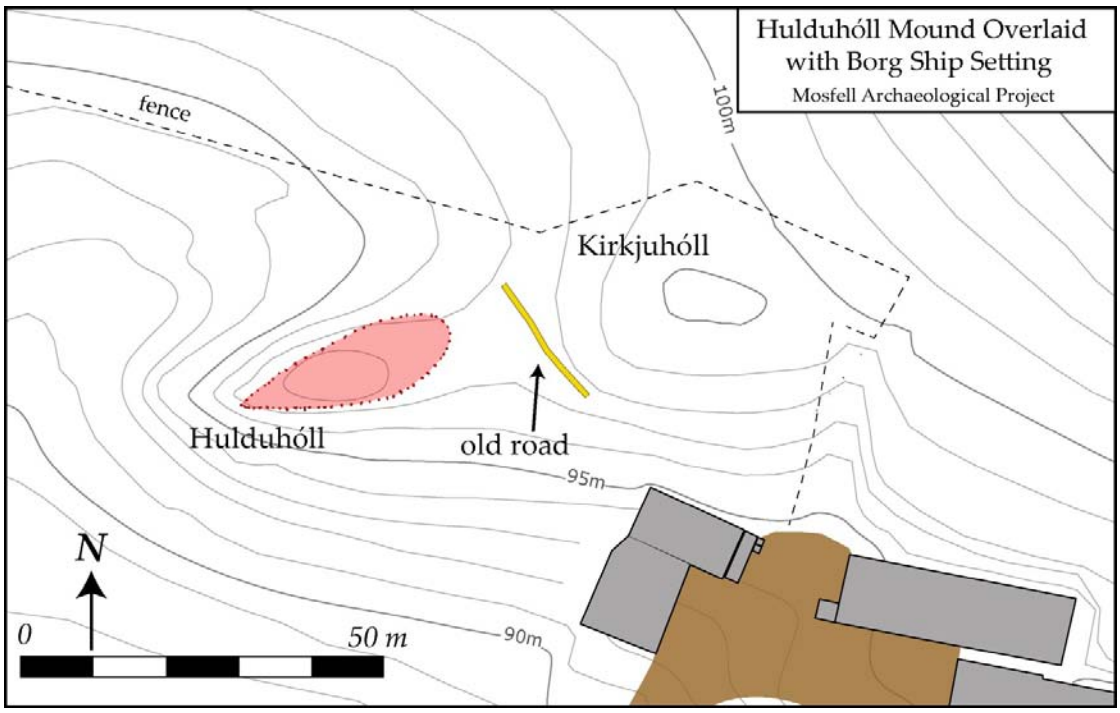


Figure 9.8 The modified knoll at Hrísbrú superimposed with a map of the ship setting at Borg (shaded ship shape). Both features share a similar shape and curvature, as well as a nearly identical size and orientation with the prow pointing towards the sea (map by Davide Zori and Max Farrar).

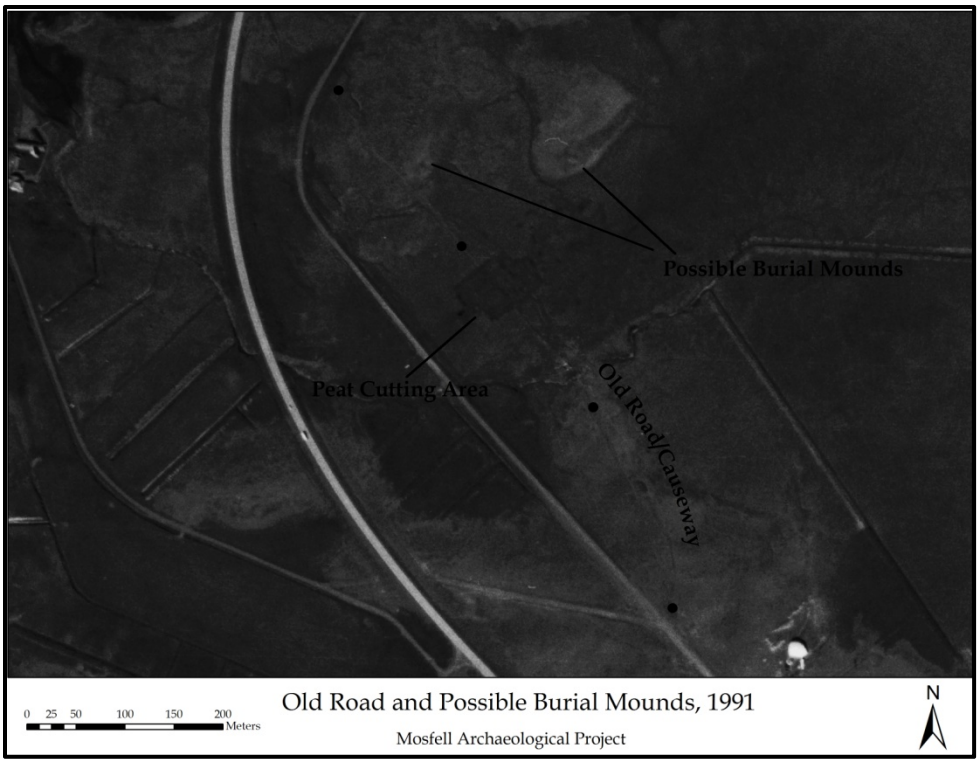


Figure 9.9 The Kollafjörður Mounds on an aerial photograph from 1991 with the old road marked with red dots. The peat cutting area truncates and post-dates the road, while the road post-dates the southern burial mound.

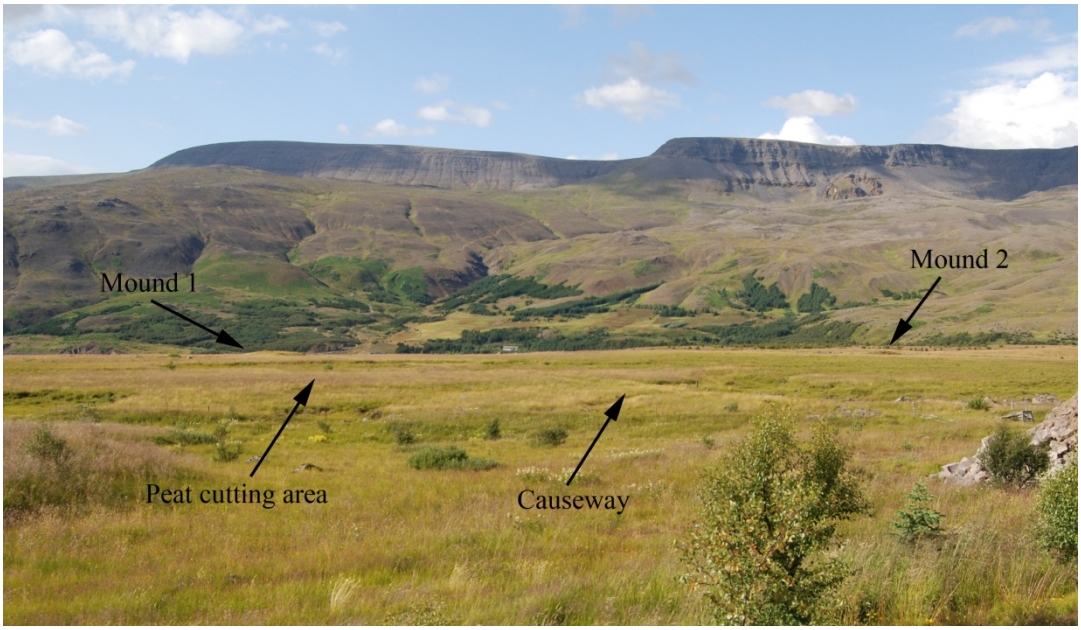


Figure 9.10 Looking north over the marshy landscape crossed by the old road with the peat cutting area and the two possible burial mounds in the background.

Figure 9.11 Jesse Byock standing on Kollafjörður Mound 2. The landscape around the mound has been heavily eroded. In the background is the recent and on-going construction of a warehouse complex.

Figure 9.12 Jennica Svensson standing on a built-up bridge of selected flat stone slabs where the old road leading to Kollafjörður crosses a stream.

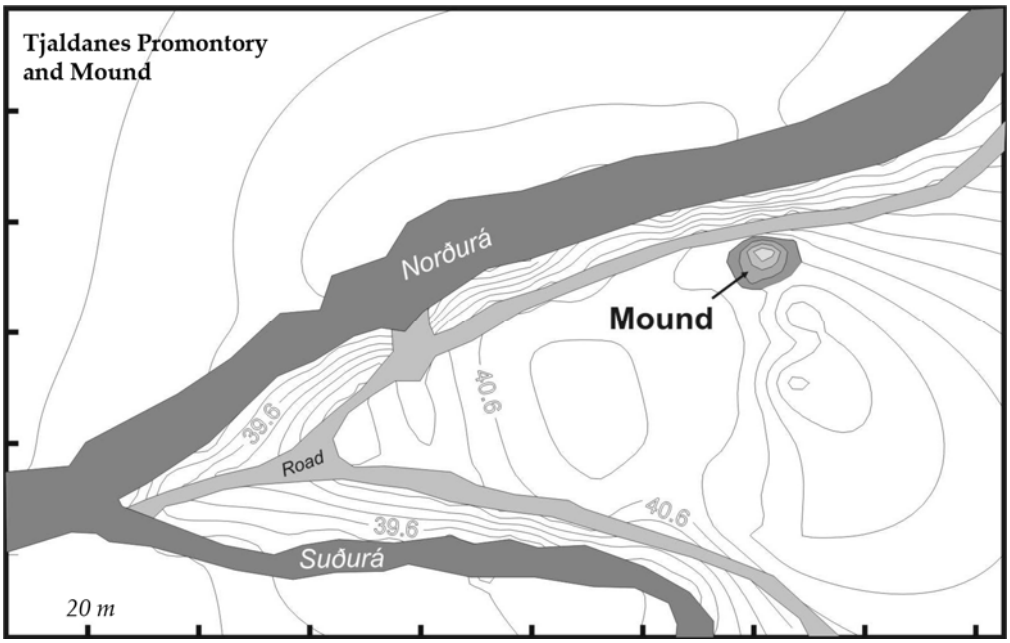


Figure 9.13 Map of the Tjaldanes promontory and the Tjaldanes mound remembered in oral tradition as the burial mound of the saga hero Egill Skallagrímsson (map by Phillip Walker, Davide Zori, and Max Farrar).


Figure 9.14 Photograph of the Tjaldanes mound seen from the southwest before excavation.

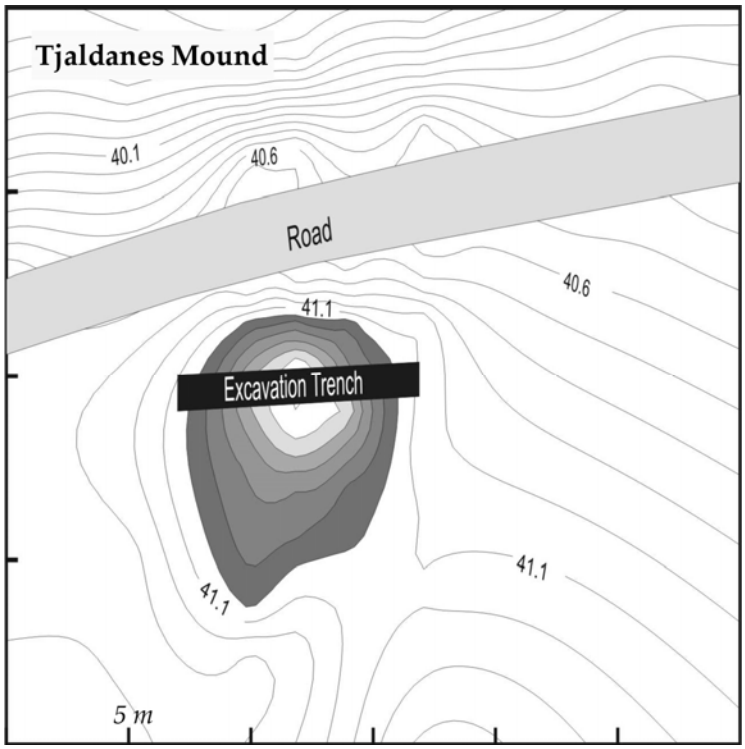


Figure 9.15 Map of the Tjaldanes mound, showing the location and orientation of the test trench excavated in 2005 (map by Phillip Walker, Davide Zori, and Max Farrar).

Figure 9.16 The reburied remains from a pagan grave, reinterred besides the southern wall of the chancel of the conversion-era Hrísbrú church. The retroactive Christianization of pagan burials at Hrísbrú was part of a strategy that established continuity of control over ideological power during the conversion period.

Figure 9.17 Examples of clench bolts found in burial feature CK-2007-5. These bolts and the wood preserved around the bolts are the remnants of pieces of boats deposited in early Christian graves at the Hrísbrú farm's churchyard.

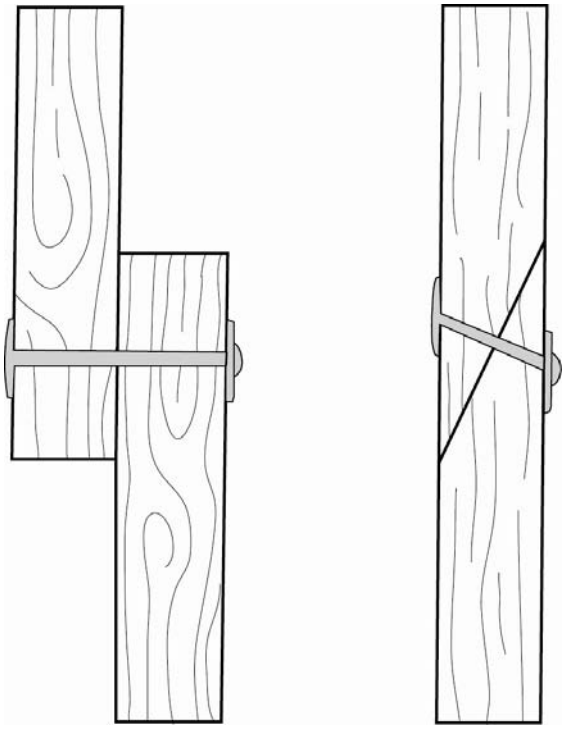


Figure 9.18 Clench bolts employed in two methods for joining planks (redrawn by Jennie Dillon from Ottaway 1992: 617).

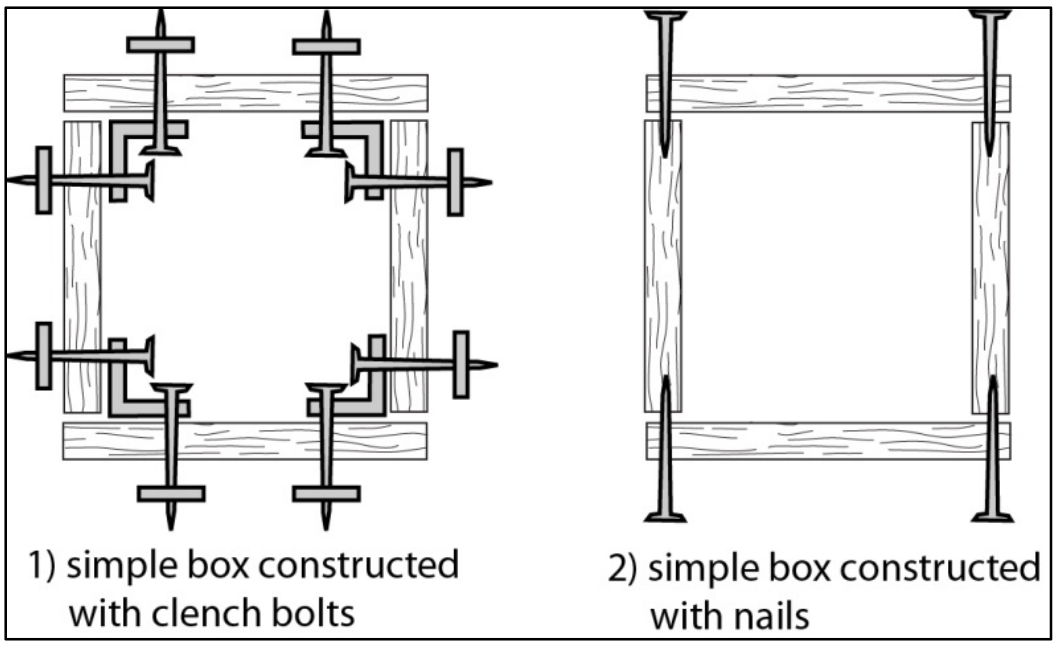


Figure 9.19 Schematic drawings of box construction using clench bolts and nails.

Figure 9.20 An emptied grave shaft at the Hrísbrú church shown running underneath the eastern wall of the chancel. This relationship indicates that the grave predates the construction of the chancel.

Figure 9.21 Jon Erlandson excavating the grave shaft under the Hrísbrú church chancel.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Radiocarbon Dates from the Hrísbrú Site in the Mosfell Valley

Lab Ref #	Sample Name	Site	Context	Context Type	Material	14C Age (BP)	±	Calibrated AD
OS-35415	Huldu c14 1	Hulduhóll	T 2: base	Cremation layer	charred twig	1060	30	895-1015
OS-37964	Huldu c14 2	Hulduhóll	Unit 2: EH-B	Cremation layer	charred twig	955	35	1019-1160
OS-37965	Huldu c14 3	Hulduhóll	Unit 2: EH-X	Cremation layer	charred twig	1060	35	895-1025
Beta-165332	Kirkju c14 1	Kirkjuhóll	Feature 10	Midden	charred twig	1100	40	900-990
Beta-175675	Kirkju c14 2	Kirkjuhóll	Feature 8	pre-church activity	hay	1070	40	960-1010
Beta-175676	Kirkju c14 3	Kirkjuhóll	Feature 19	Church structure	wood	1150	40	870-960
Beta-165331	Kirkju c14 4	Kirkjuhóll	Feature 2	Burial	bone collagen	1240	40	890-990
Beta-203867	Kirkju c14 5	Kirkjuhóll	Feature 4	Burial	bone collagen	990	40	890-1020
Beta-244587	Kirkju c14 6	Kirkjuhóll	Feature 4	Burial	bone collagen	1040	40	780-980
Beta-244588	Kirkju c14 7	Kirkjuhóll	Feature 18	Burial	bone collagen	480	40	1320-1350
Beta-244589	Kirkju c14 8	Kirkjuhóll	Feature 43	Burial	bone collagen	1030	40	810-1010
Beta-244590	Kirkju c14 9	Kirkjuhóll	Feature 46	Burial	bone collagen	1180	40	660-870
UCIAMS 64168	S-2007-5	TUN	39	Midden	barley seed	1040	20	973-1025
UCIAMS 64169	S-2007-3	TUN	34	Midden	barley seed	1055	20	901-1023
UCIAMS 64170	S-2007-2	TUN	36	Midden	barley seed	1085	20	895-1014
UCIAMS 64174	S-2007-6	TUN	44	Midden	barley seed	1080	25	895-1018
UCIAMS 64175	S-2007-28	TUN	8	Midden	barley seed	1115	15	891-978
UCIAMS 64171	S-2007-37	TUN	95	Longhouse Floor	barley seed	1125	20	885-980
UCIAMS 64172	S-2007-175	TUN	11	Longhouse Floor	barley seed	1140	15	870-974
UCIAMS 64173	S-2007-9	TUN	19	Longhouse Floor	barley seed	1145	20	782-974

Note: All dates determined by AMS. Kirkjuhóll dates deterimined at Beta Analytic; Hulduhóll dates determiend at National Oceanic Sciences, Woods Hole; TUN dates determined at the University of Irvine, Keck Carbon Cycle AMS Facility. The dates from Kirkjuhóll were callibrated by Jon Erlandsson using Calib 4.3 (Stuvier and Reimer 1993). The dates from TUN and Hulduhóll were calibrated by Davide Zori using OxCal 4.1 to 95.4% probability (Bronk Ramsey 2010; Reimer et al. 2009).

Appendix 2: Context List from the MAP Hrísbrú Longhouse Excavations

Context	Description
C-2006-1	topsoil at longhouse site (TUN site name)
C-2006-2	mottled light brown soil under topsoil
C-2006-3	black Katla tephra (AD 1500), in situ
C-2006-4	mottled light brown soil under Katla tephra
C-2006-5	cobble wall on N. side of house
C-2006-6	turf wall between small stone fill and large stones in N. wall
C-2006-7	large foundation stones in N. wall
C-2006-8	charcoal midden lens over gray soil
C-2006-9	gray compact layer over turf collapse and under charcoal layer and C-4
C-2006-10	turf and stone collapse from walls/roof covering floor
C-2006-11	charcoal layer on top of N. bench under collapse
C-2006-12	charcoal layer on top of S. bench under collapse
C-2006-13	charcoal layer under collapse in E. end of T-2006-2 (same as C-11)
C-2006-14	floor layer, black and compact
C-2006-15	peat ash midden
C-2006-16	charcoal layer (midden/trash) over bench
C-2006-17	gravel lens on top of peat ash midden in E end of wall-search-trench
C-2006-18	hearth
C-2006-19	top floor layer under turf collapse, uneven, contained pockets of light brown soil
C-2006-20	post hole
C-2006-21	post hole
C-2006-22	post hole
C-2006-23	post hole
C-2006-24	post hole
C-2006-25	post hole

Context	Description
C-2006-26	post hole
C-2006-27	hearth trench
C-2006-28	outer turf wall in northern longhouse wall
C-2006-29	outer turf wall in southern longhouse wall
C-2006-30	large stones in southern wall
C-2006-31	internal turf fill in southern wall
C-2006-32	cobble wall of southern wall of longhouse
C-2007-33	small pile of cobbles
C-2007-34	lens of ashy midden beneath C-4 in the east section of TUN site
C-2007-35	mixed deposit in area between southern wall and churchyard
C-2007-36	peat ash deposit east side of center section of excavation
C-2007-37	brown soil under Katla tephra AD 1500 north of N. wall
C-2007-38	turf and stone collapse with some ash in West end of longhouse
C-2007-39	orange mixed midden with mottled charcoal
C-2007-40	midden dump, charcoal rich, west end of longhouse excavation area
C-2007-41	brown soil NE corner, east of later stone concentration
C-2007-42	gray/red compact layer between church and longhouse
C-2007-43	brown soil on top of south wall in East Area
C-2007-44	black surface/gray midden, rectangular, East Area
C-2007-45	stone collapse beneath C-9 in middle section
C-2007-46	sub-rounded pit cut filled with C-4, in western end of Central Area
C-2007-47	stone semi-circle/fire pit?, intrusive in C-44, East Area
C-2007-48	large rock cluster outside cobbles along N. wall, east end over house
C-2007-49	cut for C-46
C-2007-50	stone and turf collapse of S. wall, western side of Central Area
C-2007-51	stone and turf collapse of N. wall, west side of Central Area
C-2007-52	stone and turf collapse N. wall, western part of longhouse, loom weights in this layer

Context	Description
C-2007-53	orange sandy collapse with turf
C-2007-54	gray layer collapse, greasy with turf and charcoal
C-2007-55	gray/red turf in wall in West Area
C-2007-56	yellow/green turf in wall, W. Area between longhouse and church
C-2007-57	a row of stones in wall, W. area, south of longhouse
C-2007-58	a row of stones in wall between longhouse and church
C-2007-59	post hole cut, eastern gable room, just south of N. wall cobbles (rectangular rock in between)
C-2007-60	post hole fill of C-59
C-2007-61	Post hole cut, eastern gable room, on eastern side of rectangular rock
C-2007-62	post hole fill of C-61
C-2007-63	clear turf lens, East End, on eastern side of rectangular rock
C-2007-64	turf outside east wall- easternmost extension
C-2007-65	orange sandy loam (soft), beneath C-3 on S. wall
C-2007-66	post hole cut, east gable room, exposed in C-53, N. side
C-2007-67	post hole fill, east gable room, N. side
C-2007-68	post hole cut, east gable room, S. side (opposite C-66)
C-2007-69	post hole fill, fill of C-68
C-2007-70	post hole cut, central hall, S. side, 1st from west
C-2007-71	fill of post hole cut C-70
C-2007-72	cut for large 'double' posthole, south side, central hall
C-2007-73	turf wall, e. of entrance, entryway wall
C-2007-74	turf collapse in walkway outside S. wall in west end, between turf walls
C-2007-75	turf wall w. of western doorway, entryway wall
C-2007-76	cobble wall south side, west gable room
C-2007-77	cobble wall west side
C-2007-78	cobble wall east side
C-2007-79	cobble wall south side, east gable room

Context	Description
C-2007-80	fill in the west gable room, fill of a cut into sterile
C-2007-81	boundary of the cut in the west gable room
C-2007-82	possible post hole cut in east gable room, filled with loose soil
C-2007-83	fill of C-82
C-2007-84	post hole cut in center on south side
C-2007-85	fill for C-84
C-2007-86	posthole cut in center on north side
C-2007-87	fill for C-86
C-2007-88	greasy gray floor/midden layer in east gable room next to north wall
C-2007-89	hole in floor (C-88) in east gable room, N. side in line with C81 and C83
C-2007-90	fill of post hole cut C-89
C-2007-91	posthole cut in central hall, south side
C-2007-92	fill of C-91
C-2007-93	fill of C-72 large 'double' posthole, south side, central hall
C-2007-94	floor layer in elevated part of east gable room
C-2007-95	black charcoal floor layer on plateau in Intermediary Area
C-2007-96	white ash, thin lens on eastern gable room, N. side
C-2007-97	eastern part of hearth characterized by smaller stones
C-2007-98	posthole cut, east gable room, N. wall
C-2007-99	posthole fill of C-98
C-2007-100	post hole cut in walkway outside western gable room
C-2007-101	posthole fill of C-100
C-2007-102	posthole cut, eastern end, N. wall
C-2007-103	posthole fill of C-102
C-2007-104	posthole cut, eastern gable room, S. wall
C-2007-105	posthole fill of C-104
C-2007-106	posthole cut, eastern gable room, S. wall, 2nd to right of door

Context	Description
C-2007-107	posthole fill of C-106
C-2007-108	posthole cut, eastern gable room, S. wall, closest to eastern wall
C-2007-109	posthole fill of C-108
C-2007-110	posthole cut in floor (C94) of East end near N. wall
C-2007-111	posthole fill of C-110
C-2007-112	posthole cut, eastern end, south wall
C-2007-113	posthole fill of C-112
C-2007-114	pit at the east end of central hearth
C-2007-115	layer in walkway on south side
C-2007-116	south turf wall, outside West end
C-2007-117	West end turf wall
C-2007-118	posthole cut, easternmost, N. wall
C-2007-119	posthole fill of C118
C-2007-120	hay floor, East end, N. side
C-2007-121	in tact cobble wall, east end
C-2007-122	turf wall outside the middle of longhouse
C-2007-123	in tact cobble wall, south side, center
C-2007-124	inside cobble wall, end of season, not in tact
C-2007-125	gravel lens to the West
C-2007-126	post hole fill of C-20
C-2007-127	post hole fill of C-21
C-2007-128	post hole fill of C-22
C-2007-129	post hole fill of C-23
C-2007-130	post hole fill of C-24
C-2007-131	post hole fill of C-25
C-2007-132	post hole fill of C-26
C-2007-133	"stake hole" cut 1 in western gable room; western most hole

Context	Description
C-2007-134	"stake hole" fill for C-133 in western gable room
C-2007-135	"stake hole" cut 1 in western gable room; eastern hole
C-2007-136	"stake hole" fill for C-135 in western gable room
C-2008-137	charcoal layer on surface of southern bench
C-2008-138	VOID
C-2008-139	trench fill of 2003 Trench (cut 140)
C-2008-140	trench cut of 2003 Trench containing fill C-139
C-2008-141	sub-C-14 pit 1 (fill)
C-2008-142	aeolian soil deposit under C-3 Katla tephra west of 2003 Trench (C-140)
C-2008-143	aeolian soil deposit under C-3 Katla Tephra east of 2003 Trench (C-140)
C-2008-144	sub-C-14 pit 1 cut containing fill C-141
C-2008-145	floor layer in central hall under C-14, south of hearth; mottled appearance
C-2008-146	pit near the west end entrance containing stones and ash fill
C-2008-147	floor layer in central hall under C-14, north of hearth; mottled black, orange, gray
C-2008-148	hearth spill SW corner of hearth in central hall; gravel and charcoal mix
C-2008-149	square pit within C-145 N5 E14 (sample grid), next to hearth fill
C-2008-150	cut containing fill C-149
C-2008-151	post hole cut in side of bench
C-2008-152	post hole fill in side of bench
C-2008-153	post hole cut in side of bench
C-2008-154	floor material on side of bench (north)
C-2008-155	floor material on side of bench (south)
C-2008-156	black charcoal lens- very thin- beneath C-147. In N6E15 (sample grid)
C-2008-157	orange clay spread stretching from hearth to N. bench, beneath C-147
C-2008-158	black/mottled floor under C-157, N of hearth in central hall
C-2008-159	fill of cut in south expansion, over Katla 1500, containing heavy worm cast concentration
C-2008-160	cut filled with Katla 1500 and C-159

Context	Description
C-2008-161	pit filled with collapse next to NW bench
C-2008-162	cultural layer with ash and bone in bottom and sides of C-161
C-2008-163	thin black lens overlying sterile orange clay- under C-158
C-2008-164	dark charcoal layer starting in the entrance and onto the south bench in western gable room
C-2008-165	surface layer under C-95 in intermediate area, NE corner
C-2008-166	group of stones inside N wall in west end, over part of pit 186
C-2008-167	orange clay spread; small layer above C-163
C-2008-168	dark gray-brown organic silt; charcoal flecks in S. side aisles of E. end
C-2008-169	stick hole at foot of bench- N of hearth (contexts from C-169 to C-174 from west to east, N7E14)
C-2008-170	stick hole at foot of bench- N of hearth
C-2008-171	stick hole at foot of bench- N of hearth
C-2008-172	stick hole at foot of bench- N of hearth
C-2008-173	stick hole at foot of bench- N of hearth
C-2008-174	stick hole at foot of bench- N of hearth (eastern most stake hole in sequence)
C-2008-175	stick hole east of post in N7E14, FS 238
C-2008-176	hole at foot of N. bench, N7E13- easternmost (contexts C-176 to C-179 from east to west), FS 239
C-2008-177	hole at foot of N. bench, N7E13, FS 240
C-2008-178	hole at foot of N. bench, , N7E13, FS 241
C-2008-179	hole at foot of N. bench, N7E13- westernmost, FS 241
C-2008-180	post hole cut NW of hearth
C-2008-181	bottom of the pit C-161- light brown
C-2008-182	organic phytolith layer in bottom of pit C-161
C-2008-183	layer of burnt wood and unburnt wood inside western doorway
C-2008-184	in situ burning in pit in intermediary area, under C-95
C-2008-185	group of flat stones, collapsed uprights in NE corner of eastern gable room
C-2008-186	cut of the pit filled with C-161, C-181, C-182
C-2008-187	pit cut filled with C-184, in intermediary area

Context	Description
C-2008-188	ditch with worm casts
C-2008-189	ditch with worm casts
C-2008-190	ash and charcoal deposit between double post holes west of the central hearth
C-2008-191	post hole fill in post hole cut C-180
C-2008-192	floor layer at western edge of central hall
C-2008-193	floor in NE corner of east end; gray with charcoal
C-2008-194	floor in east end of central aisle in eastern gable room; gray with charcoal
C-2008-195	cut containing fill C-188
C-2008-196	cut containing fill C-189
C-2008-197	narrow ditch-like feature with high concentration of worm excrement
C-2008-198	wooden sill stain across western end of the central hall in transition to intermediary space
C-2008-199	stone collapse outside south wall of east end
C-2008-200	cut containing fill C-197
C-2008-201	aeolian deposit between E door and C-189 extending out of current excavation area
C-2008-202	small wood ash spread in S. side of the eastern end
C-2008-203	layer under C-94 in eastern end, adjacent to N bench of central hall
C-2008-204	pin hole 1 in N7E22 (sample grid)
C-2008-205	pin hole 2 in N7E22 (sample grid)
C-2008-206	pin hole 3 in N7E22 (sample grid)
C-2008-207	pin hole 4 in N7E22 (sample grid)
C-2008-208	surface layer in southern aisle in west gable room
C-2008-209	surface layer in northern aisle in west gable room
C-2008-210	wood in doorway
C-2008-211	pin hole 1 in N7E21 (sample grid)
C-2008-212	pin hole 2 in N7E21 (sample grid)
C-2008-213	white organic lens in N. side aisle of east end
C-2008-214	wood ash spread between post holes North of central aisle in E. end

Context	Description
C-2008-215	ditch cut at SE end of skáli
C-2008-216	small dump of peat ash around NE posthole in E. end
C-2008-217	layer of mixed/multi-lensed, undulating charcoal/trampled floor and aeolian soil
C-2008-218	square cut in west doorway
C-2008-219	depression in row on S. side of central aisle in the E. end
C-2008-220	depression in row on S. side of central aisle in the E. end
C-2008-221	depression in row on S. side of central aisle in the E. end
C-2008-222	depression in row on S. side of central aisle in the E. end
C-2008-223	depression in N. row of post holes in E. end of skáli
C-2008-224	depression in N. side aisle in E. end of longhouse
C-2008-225	depression in N. row of post holes in E. end of longhouse
C-2008-226	stake/pin hole 1 in E. end of central aisle in eastern gable room
C-2008-227	stake/pin hole 2 in E. end of central aisle in eastern gable room
C-2008-228	stake/pin hole 3 in E. end of central aisle in eastern gable room
C-2008-229	stake/pin hole 4 in E. end of central aisle in eastern gable room
C-2008-230	stake/pin hole 5 in E. end of central aisle in eastern gable room
C-2008-231	stake/pin hole 6 in E. end of central aisle in eastern gable room
C-2008-232	linear slot cut into C-217 in central aisle of eastern end of longhouse
C-2008-233	turf S. wall center, outside
C-2008-234	turf wall south of east end
C-2008-235	wood ash, charcoal and calcined bone in small cooking pit in southern bench
C-2008-236	cut for pit fill C-235
C-2008-237	cut for pit fill C-146
C-2008-238	cut for pit fill C-40

List of Abbreviations

Dipl. Is. = Diplomatarium Islandicum (*Íslensk Fornbréf*)

ÍF = Íslenzk Fornrit edition of the Icelandic Sagas

ÍF 1 = *Íslendingabók, Landnámabók* edited by Benediktsson, Jakob (1968)
ÍF 2 = *Egils Saga Skalla-Grímsonar* edited by Nordal, Sigurður (1933)
ÍF 3 = *Borgfirðinga Sögur* edited by Nordal, Sigurður and Guðni Jónsson (1938)
ÍF 4 = *Eyrbyggja Saga* edited by Sveinsson, Einar Ól. and Matthías Þórðarson (1935)
ÍF 5 = *Laxdæla Saga* edited by Sveinsson, Einar Ól. (1934)
ÍF 7 = *Grettis Saga Ásmundarssonar* edited by Jónsson, Guðni (1936)
ÍF 8 = *Vatnsdæla Saga, Hallfreðar Saga, Kormáks Saga*. Sveinsson, Einar Ól. (1939)
ÍF 11 = *Austfirðinga Sögur* edited by Jóhannesson, Jón (1950)
ÍF 12 = *Brennu-Njáls Saga* edited by Sveinsson, Einar Ól. (1954)
ÍF 13 = *Harðar Saga* edited by Vilmundarson, Þórhallur and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson (1991)
ÍF 14 = *Kjalnesinga Saga* edited by Hallórdsson, Johannes (1956)

Strl. = *Sturlunga Sagas* edited by Jóhannesson et al. (1946)

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