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Field Season 2005 – 2006

The Mosfell Archaeological Project is an interdisciplinary research project focusing on the Viking Age in Iceland and employing the tools of history, archaeology, anthropology, forensics, environmental sciences, and saga studies. The work constructs a picture of human habitation and environmental change in the region of Mosfell in southwestern Iceland. The Mosfell Valley (Mosfellsdalur), the surrounding highlands, and the lowland coastal areas are a “valley system,” that is, as an interlocking series of natural and man-made pieces, that beginning in the ninth-century Viking Age at the time of the settlement of Iceland (the landnám or landtaking period), developed into a functioning Viking Age, Icelandic community. Focusing on this valley system, our task is to unearth the prehistory and early history of the Mosfell region. We seek the data to provide an in-depth understanding of how this countryside (sveit) evolved from its earliest origins.

The Mosfell Archaeological Project has implications for the larger study of the Viking Age and later medieval Iceland, as well as perhaps for the north Atlantic world. Mosfellsveit, which was home to the Mosfell chieftains, encapsulates the major ecologies of Iceland: coastal, riverine, and highland. Culturally, the region is equally representative. In some ways it was a self-contained social and economic unit. In other ways, this early medieval community was connected to the rest of Iceland, not least, through a network of roads, including an east-west route to the nearby meeting of the yearly national assembly, the Althing. With its Viking Age coastal port at Leiruvogur (Clay Bay) at the mouth of the Valley, which was also controlled by the Mosfell chieftains, the region was in commercial and cultural contact with the larger Scandinavian and European worlds, possibly as far east as Constantinople.



Jesse Byock and Phillip Walker discussing with the farmers at Hrísbú, Ólafur Ingimundarson and his son Andréas, the excavation of the Viking Age longhouse. To the right is the entrance to the valley leading down to the harbor. Directly across the valley is Holy Mountain (Helgafell).

The 2006 Mosfell excavations provided considerable new information about the early occupational history of several sites in the Mosfell Valley. Radiocarbon dates, archaeological, historical, and artifact analyses suggest that the deposits at Hrísbú on the knoll traditionally called Kirkjuhóll (Church Knoll), date predominantly to the tenth and eleventh centuries, that is, the pagan and early conversion eras of the Viking Age. The archaeological work on Church Knoll in 2005 clarified the architecture of an early timber (stave) church and uncovered the first traces of a wall to the north of the church. This wall gave indications of belonging to the major domestic structure, perhaps a skáli, or Viking Age longhouse. This possibility called for further analysis, and during the 2006 field season we determined that the wall was in fact part of a large Viking Age hall extending for more than 26 meters. This hall or longhouse, which is probably that of the Mosfell chieftains, is in an excellent state of preservation and deserves a full scale excavation next year. During the 2006 field season we also investigated of an arrangement of stones at Borg, further east in the Mosfell Valley, which are man-made and resemble a ship. The excavations at Borg established that the stone setting is of considerable age and also call for future work in the area.



The Mosfell team photographing and documenting the walls of the longhouse in the Mosfell Valley.

Web sites for the Mosfell Archaeology Project:
http://www.gagarin.is/moso/main_content.html
<http://www.anth.ucsb.edu/faculty/walker/Iceland/mosfell.html>;
http://www.ioa.ucla.edu/staff/view.php?subaction=showfull&id=1109876639&archive=&start_from=&ucat=1&