

The Mosfell Archaeological Project

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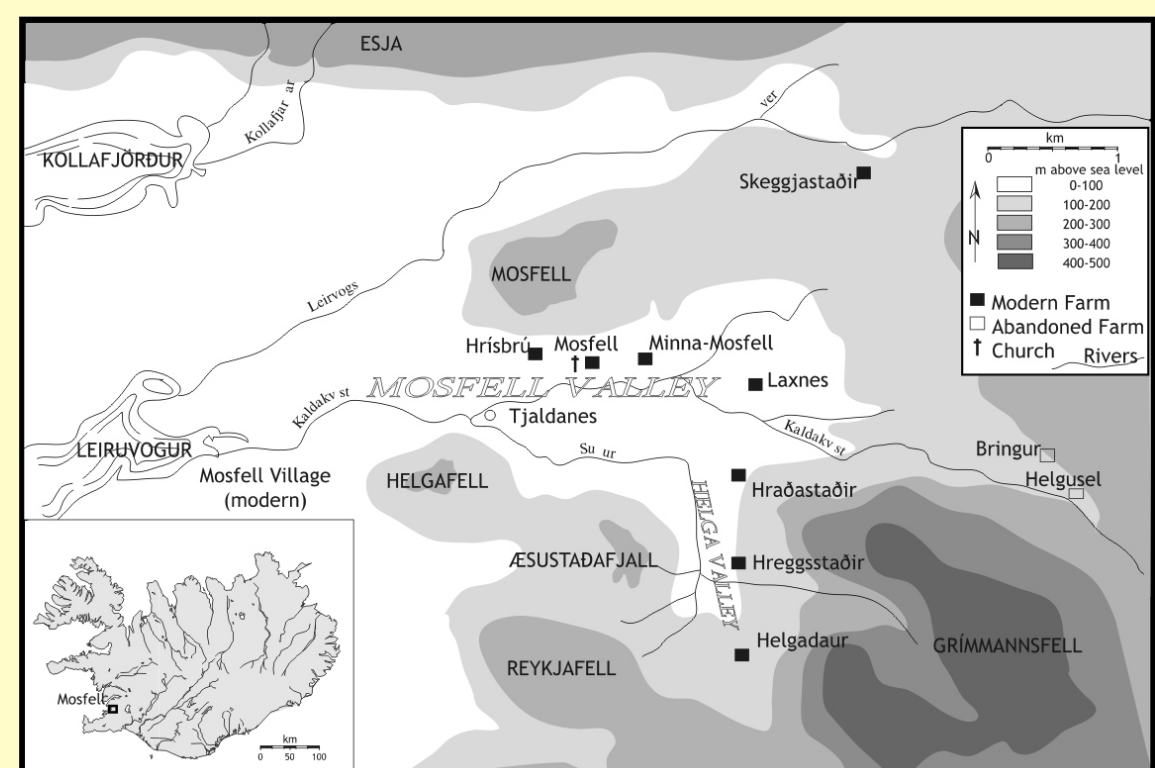
Abstract

The Mosfell Archaeological Project (MAP) is an interdisciplinary research project employing the tools of history, archaeology, anthropology, forensics, and environmental sciences. The work will construct a picture of human habitation and environmental change in the region of Mosfell in southwestern Iceland. The Mossfell Valley (Mossfellsdalur), 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 settlement or Landnám 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 or sveit evolved from its earliest origins.

The Mosfell Archaeological Project has implications for the larger study of Viking Age and later medieval Iceland. Mosfellssveit 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 it 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 Althing. With its coastal port at Leiruvogur the region was in commercial and cultural contact with the larger Scandinavian and European worlds, perhaps as far east as Constantinople.

In reconstructing the early social history of the Mosfell Valley region, the research will integrate information on the changing periods of occupation. We will excavate individual sites, both secular and religious, and consider their placement in relationship to one another. We will examine the apportionment of open spaces and the utilization of common lands in the highlands and on the coast. Written, archaeological, and other scientific information will be integrated into this study as we construct a picture of early life. The different specialists on our team will explore among other subjects the development of roads and paths, the importance of the ships' landing at Leiruvogur, the changes overtime in subsistence strategies, developments in building technics, and the usage of smaller activity areas, such as the sel, or summer dairy stations. Crucial questions will be the production of iron in the early period, and finding the locations of burials, and early farm sites. In some instances our task is to find the remains of turf buildings, roads, burials, agricultural enclosures, and port facilities before they are destroyed by modern construction or lost to human memory.

The Mosfell Archaeological Project is conducted in a collaborative, international way under the direction of Prof. Jesse L. Byock of the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) and Prof. Philip Walker of the University of California at Santa Barbara (UCSB). As in the past, the American and international group will work closely with members of the local Mosfellsbær community as well as with archaeologists from the Þjóðminjasafn (National Museum) and professors at the University of Iceland and other Icelandic researchers.



The Mossfell Valley (Mossfellsdalur)

Historical Records

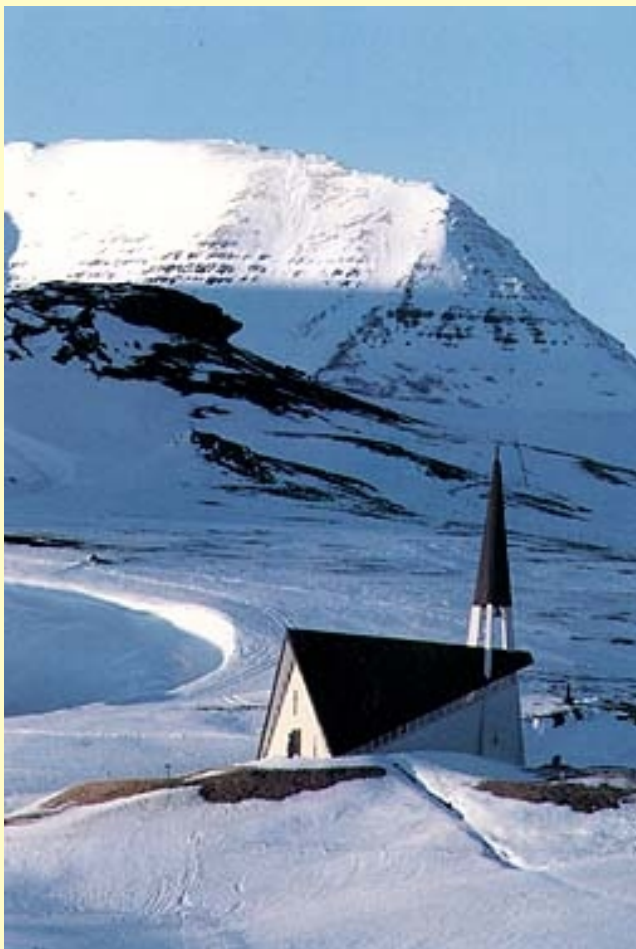
“When Christianity was adopted by law in Iceland, Grimy of Mosfell was baptized and built a church there. People say that Thórdís had Egill's bones moved to the church, and this is the evidence. When a church was built at Mosfell, the one that Grimy had built at Hrisbrú was demolished and a new graveyard was laid out. Under the altar some human bones were found, much bigger than ordinary human bones, and people are confident that these were Egill's because of stories told by old men.”

Egils saga, chapter 86

Because of the wealth of medieval and later documentation, Mosfell is an unusually important Viking Age site. Historical sources provide a rich source of information about the History of the Mosfell valley. One goal of our research is to obtain archaeological that can be used to evaluate the historical accuracy of literary sources such as Egil's Saga. For example, scholars have been in some disagreement as to precisely what this saga passage tells us about the placement of the early church at Mosfell.



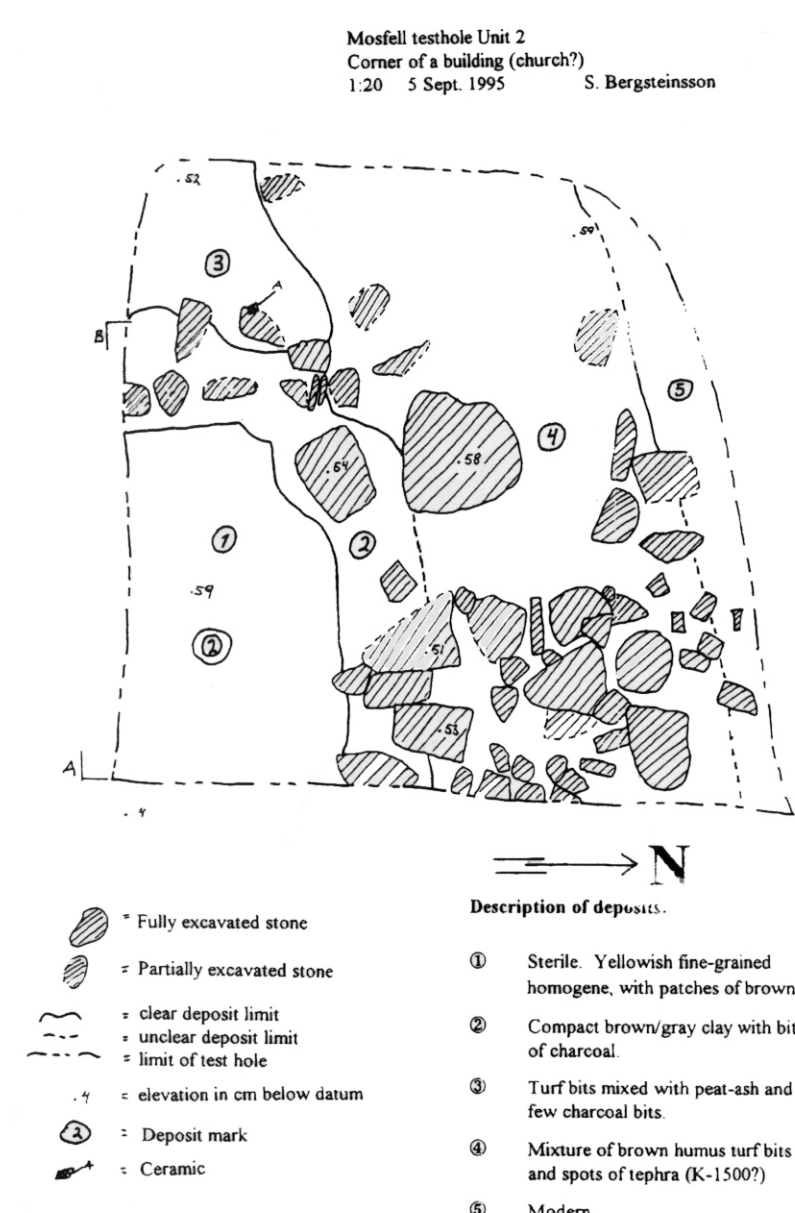
Egil Skallagrimsson



The modern church at Mosfell and our test excavation in the church mound

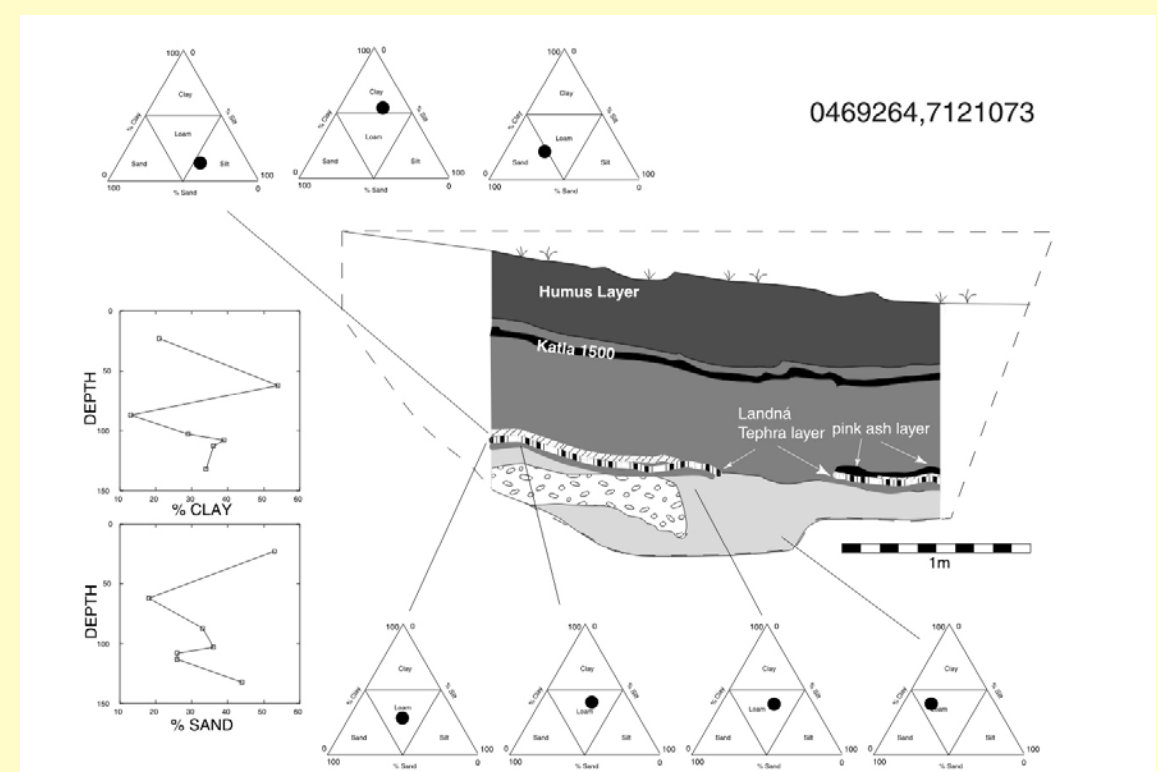
Results of 1995 Test Excavations

Our initial goal in carrying out the archaeological reconnaissance at the site of Mosfell 1995 was to determine whether we could locate the important sites mentioned in the medieval texts. From these excavations, we discovered that at least one major historic aspect of the Mosfell site was bulldozed (leaving nevertheless, clear foundations of a probable Medieval period church). However, we were encouraged that significant historic remains at Mosfell and the surrounding site appear undisturbed. Further, it is now apparent to us that there may be other important, undisturbed sites not mentioned in the medieval texts.



The 1998 Fieldwork

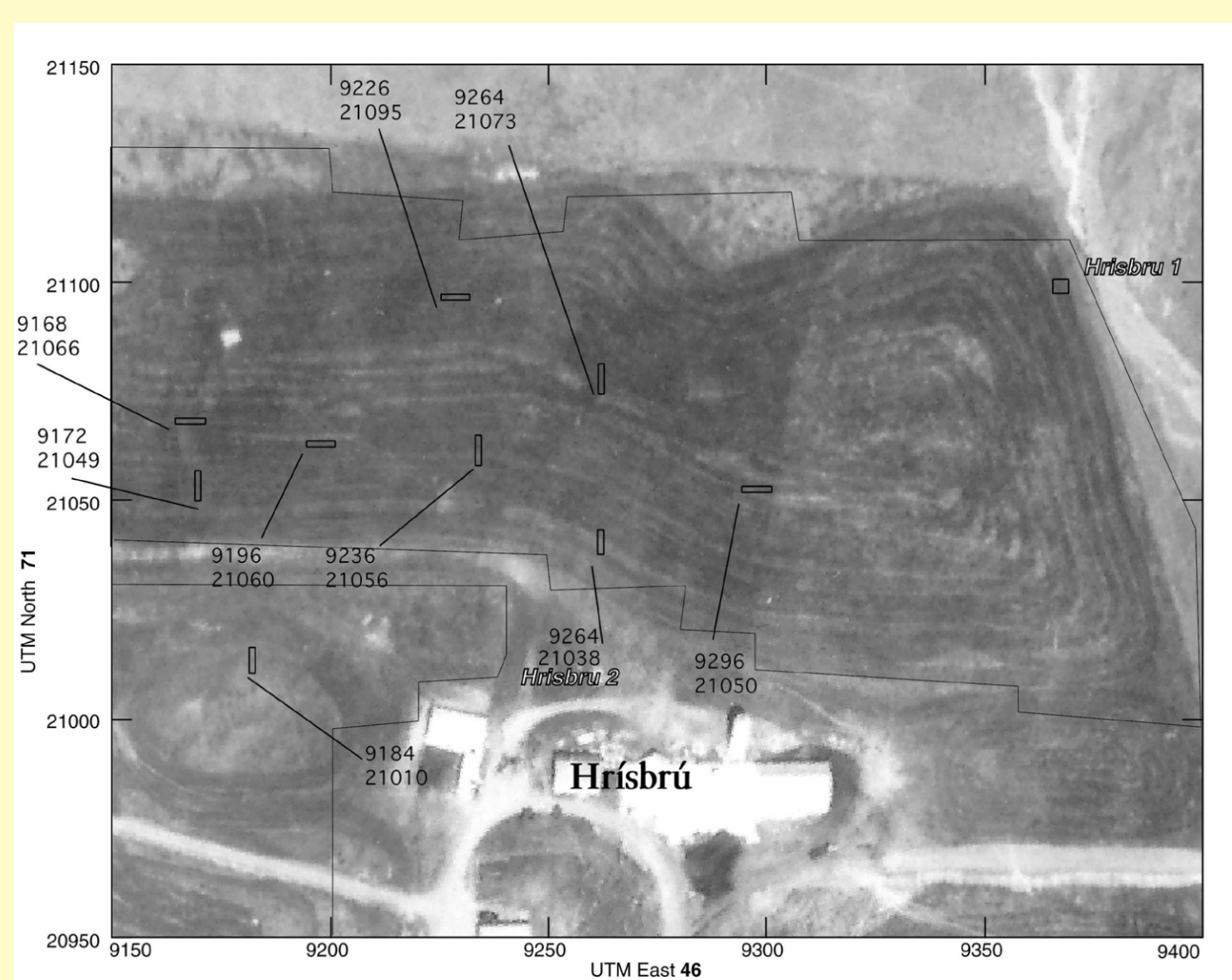
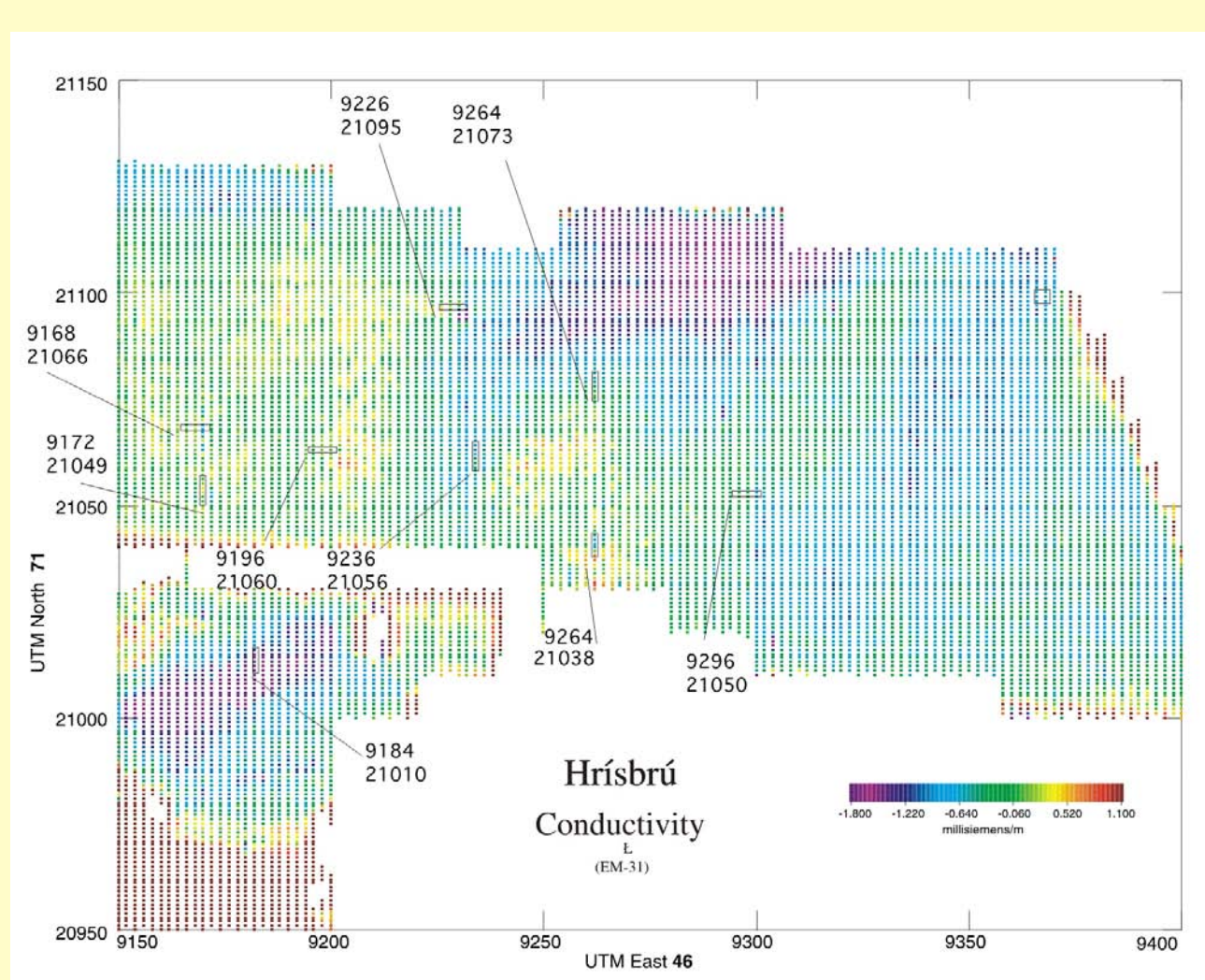
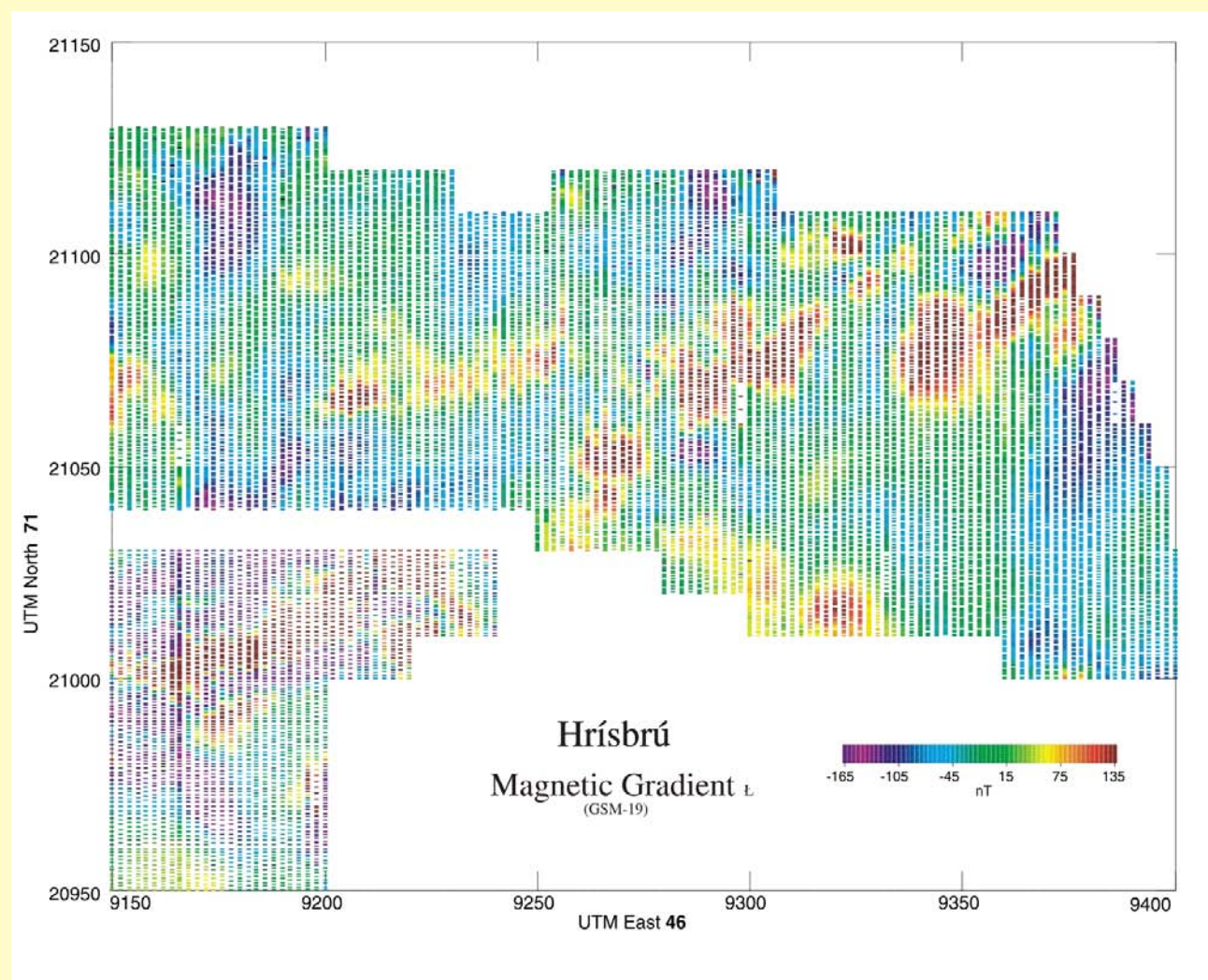
For the 1998 field season, Jesse Byock and several students did a preliminary survey of the Helgafoss area in the near highlands, where clear remains of buildings can be seen. We tested phosphate techniques throughout the area and undertook an exploratory excavation on the northeast corner of the hay meadow (tún) at Hrísbú. At the Hrísbú site, the team unearthed small sections of well-defined walls from a medieval building within which were collapsed roof materials. These turf walls showed signs of the medieval tephra layer (early thirteenth century). Radio-carbon dating of a small wood chip found in the turf walls produced a date of 650 \pm 50 years and was inconclusive.



Trenching and remote sensing work at Hrísbú

The 1999 Field Season

During the 1999 field season, magnetic, conductivity, phosphate testing was done in an attempt to determine the location of earlier structures, graves, and other archaeological materials. This work focused our efforts at the site of Hrísbú, where a series of test trenches were dug. Of the remote sensing techniques employed, conductivity surveys seem the most promising. On the other hand, phosphate testing for signs of excrement associated with animal husbandry showed little promise in this context. Our test excavations greatly increased our understanding of the geology of the site. We learned that 1-2 meters of recent colluvial and aeolian deposits covered most areas of the Hrísbú site. This along with radiocarbon dates and stratigraphic evidence from below this deposits suggests that remains of a Viking period farm may be preserved at the site.



Results of magnetic and conductivity testing at Hrísbú

Future Research

From our initial excavations, we now have a far better picture of the medieval settlement pattern of the region, and have begun to relate this to the local socio-economic and ecological systems. A basic fact is that Mosfell and the surrounding farms were not isolated habitations or farms that had to be abandoned a few centuries after the initial settlement. To the contrary, they are part of a frequently prosperous and long-lived valley system of human habitation. Given the interdisciplinary and complimentary archaeological skills of our team in social history, anthropology, and forensic analysis, Mosfell and its valley, as it evolved over the centuries, is an extremely fruitful site for continued archaeological examination. This we look forward to undertaking this work.