

Sagas and Archaeology in the Mosfell Valley, Iceland

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The relationship between sagas and modern archaeology is just beginning. This paper discusses the nature of the relationship in light of findings of the Mosfell Archaeological Project (MAP). In particular, I will discuss the recent excavations in the Mosfell Valley (Mosfellsdalur) in Iceland, where we are unearthing a chieftain's establishment at Hrísrú – including a longhouse, a church, a graveyard, and a cremation grave—and other sites in the Mosfell Valley including a stone ship setting and ship's landing. The Mosfell Valley was the home of the Mosfell chieftains (the Mosfellingar) a family of warriors, farmers, and legal specialists. Focusing on this glaciated and once wooded valley, 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 the earliest Viking Age habitation.

The Mosfell excavation is an interdisciplinary research project employing the tools of archaeology, history, anthropology, forensics, environmental sciences, and saga studies. The work is constructing a picture of human habitation and environmental change in the region of Mosfell (Mosfellsveit). As part of our excavations we are developing a concept of “valley-system” archaeology. Mosfellsdalur, the surrounding highlands, and the lowland coastal areas form a valley system, that is, an interlocking series of natural and man-made components that, beginning in the ninth-century settlement or *landnám* period, developed into a functioning Icelandic community of the Viking Age.

The archaeological work began with surveys and test excavations in the mid 1990s and major excavations began in 2001. The yearly archaeology, which continues into 2009, has documented a rich Viking Age and *landnám* period occupational history.¹ The 2001 excavation at Hrísrú revealed the presence of significant remains, including an early church, a surrounding cemetery, and an adjacent burial mound containing remains of human cremation. The goals of our subsequent field seasons have been to expand the scope of this work, and in recent years we have excavated a large (28 meters long) and exceptionally well-preserved early tenth-century *eldskáli* (firehall or longhouse).

¹ For an overview of the work of the earlier excavations of Mosfell Archaeological Project, see Jesse Byock, Phillip Walker, Jon Erlandson, Per Holck, Davide Zori, Magnús Guðmundsson, and Mark Tveskov. “A Viking-age Valley in Iceland: The Mosfell Archaeological Project.” *Medieval Archaeology*, 49(2005):195-218 (Translated to Icelandic as: Jesse Byock, Phillip Walker, Jon Erlandson, Per Holck, Davide Zori, Magnús Guðmundsson, and Mark Tveskov. “*Valdamiðstöð í Mosfellsdal: Rannsóknir á fornleifum frá tímum Víkinga að Hrísrú og Mosfelli*”, *Ólafía, Rit fornleifafraeðingafélags* II, Reykjavík (2007), pp. 84-106.) and Per Holck, “Egil Skallagrimssons gård og kirke på Island – fra utgravningene 2001–2005.” *Michael* (Publication Series of The Norwegian Medical Society) 2005;2:340–348.

Our excavations on the Hrísrú farm focus on four archaeological deposits: Kirkjuhóll (Church Knoll), the hillock just behind the modern farm's stable; The *tún* or hayfield just north of Kirkjuhóll; Hulduhóll (Elfin Hill), a hillock located about 60 m west of Kirkjuhóll; and Loddahóll, a small knoll at the far north-eastern corner of the home field (*tún*), the hay meadow immediately north of Kirkjuhóll (see Fig. 1). Elsewhere in the valley we have several major sites under excavation. This concept of multidisciplinary archaeology, combining analysis of the cultural and environmental landscapes of a valley including the surrounding highlands and coast, is particularly well-suited to Viking and North Atlantic archaeology.

From the start we have sought the significant oral memory of the local families. When we began excavating in the Mosfell Valley in 1995, the knolls at Kirkjuhóll and Hulduhóll were used as pasture. Both of these adjacent knolls were covered with grass, and their surfaces were undisturbed except where the trappings of cows exposed small patches of earth. The farmers, Ólafur Ingimundarson and Andrés Ólafsson, whose family has lived on the land for many generations, are extremely knowledgeable about life and the changes in land use in the Valley.

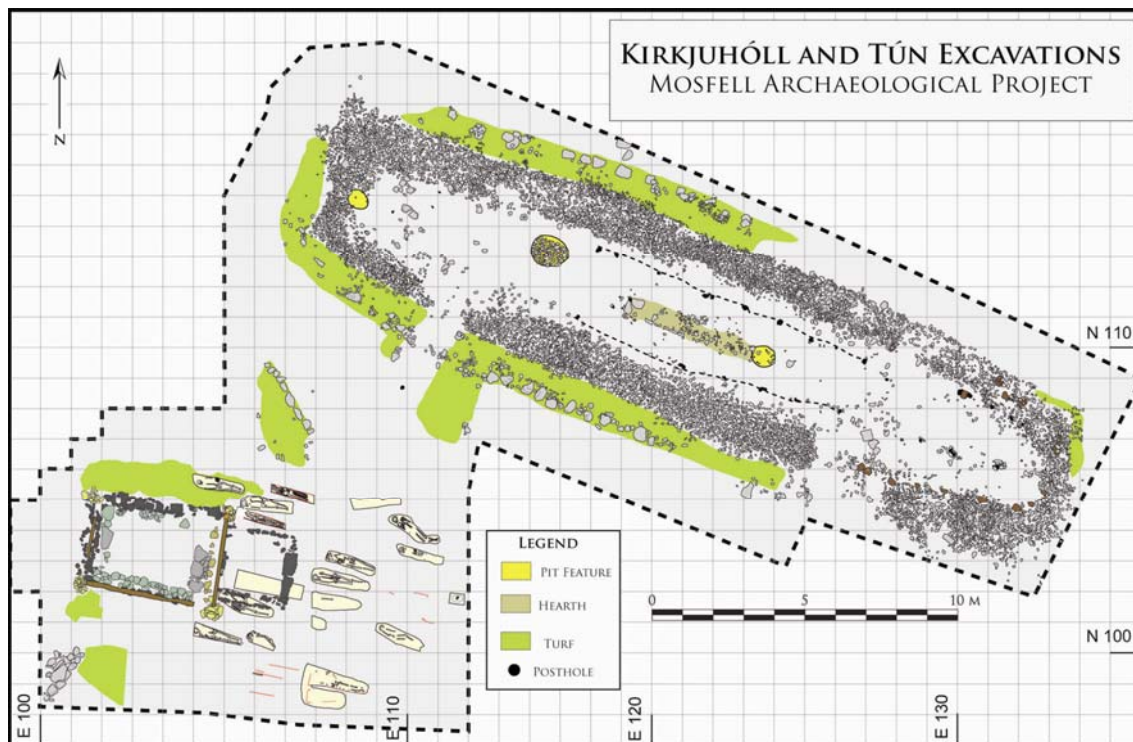


Figure 1. Site plan of the Church Knoll and Tún Excavations at Hrísrú.

No agricultural machinery had ever been used on the knoll because of the reverence attached to Kirkjuhóll in oral memory as the site of an ancient church. To date this remains the case, a situation that is relatively rare on contemporary Icelandic farms which are highly mechanized. The same has held true for Hulduhóll, with oral stories attaching to it the interdiction that it was to be left alone because it was inhabited by 'the hidden people' or elves. As it turned out, both knolls were connected with ancient mortuary rites, Christian and pagan.

Of crucial importance, the archaeology at the Mosfell Valley sites is aided by a wealth of surviving medieval Icelandic writings, including *The Book of Settlements (Landnámabók)*,

Egil's Saga (*Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*), *The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent Tongue* (*Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu*), *Hallfred's Saga* (*Hallfreðar saga*), *The Saga of the People of Kjalarness* (*Kjalnesinga saga*), *The Saga of the People of Floi Bay* (*Flóamanna saga*), and *The Short Saga of Orm Storfsson* (*Orms þáttur Stórolfssonar*) in *Flateyjarbók*. These sources describe sites in the Mosfell Valley and at Leirvogur (Clay Bay), the inlet on the coast below the mouth of the valley into which the rivers of the valley flow.

If we are to believe the written sources, the Mosfell chieftains loomed large in the Viking Age history of Iceland's western region. The geographical position of their lands and their area of power allowed the Mosfellingar to monitor and benefit from the travel and trade that passed through their valley system. *Egil's Saga* tells us about one of these leaders, Grímr Svertingsson, who lived at Hrisbrú. Grímr was the lawspeaker of Iceland from 1002 to 1004, the years immediately following the conversion in the year 1000. Grímr converted and is said to have built a church at Hrisbrú. From the medieval writings, one can piece together considerable information about the Mosfell chieftains. For instance, *Gunnlaug's Saga*, *Hallfred's Saga*, and *Egil's Saga* indicate that the Mosfellingar controlled the Nesses, the region of modern-day Reykjavík, extending perhaps out to present day Seltjarnarnes. From the Nesses these chieftains are said to have called up men to support their authority with force.



Figure 2. The longhouse at the end of MAP's 2007 excavation. The building seen from the eastern end is divided into three rooms. The sunken central hall, which had a longfire down the center (and was still to be excavated at the time of this picture), dates from around the year 900. The benches in the central *eldskáli* or fire hall can be clearly seen. The room at the far western end had a wooden floor.

The Mosfellingar are also said to have entered into marriage alliances with the *goðar* (chieftains) at Borg in Borgarfjörður, the descendents of the *landnámsmaður* Skallagrímr Kveldulfsson. Such an alliance, if it did in fact take place, was logical, and it would have added considerably to the power and authority of both the Mosfellingar and the people at Borg. The two were close enough to support each other but far enough away not to compete for thingmen. The scene in Chapter 81 of *Egil's Saga* when Egill comes to the support of his son Thorsteinn, is one of the great moments in the sagas. When matters of feud and law look

bad for Thorstein, a man, leading a group of warriors, rides into the local assembly in Borgarfjörður. “This was Egill Skallagrímsson, who had come with eighty men all fully armed as if ready for battle, a choice company, for Egill had taken with him all the best farmers’ sons in the Nesses.”²

Having medieval narrative sources, such as those connected with the Mosfell sites, or written sources at all, is exceptional in Viking archaeology. Extensive Viking Age sites are found throughout mainland Scandinavia, the British Isles and northern Europe, but because of the paucity of written sources, archaeologists, historians, and anthropologists often know little about the inhabitants, their personal history or specific socio-economic and political relationships. The Viking Age sites in Mosfellssveit are somewhat different. The fact that we use all the available sources is a distinguishing feature of our archaeology. This much we can say, that despite all the saga evidence and in the face of the location right on the outskirts of present-day Reykjavík, no one had excavated these sites since the twelfth century, when *Egil’s Saga* tells us that the graveyard at Hrísrú was dug when the old conversion-age church was taken down and a new church built further up the valley.³

Just how to find this graveyard was a question. We tried geophysical tests of the *Kirkjuhóll* and *tún* sites but the resulting magnetometer and resistivity maps of these areas did not suggest the presence of subterranean architectural features. Nevertheless, we decided it was worth testing the site because of its place name. Once the excavations began, we soon found concentrations of burned animal bone and other domestic refuse from a settlement period (*landnám*) farm, graves with an east-west orientation indicating the presence of a Christian cemetery, and finally the foundations of buildings.

Thirteen of the twenty-three skeletal remains excavated at Hrísrú were suitable for analysis, offering considerable evidence about the health status and living conditions of Iceland’s early inhabitants.⁴ From the written sources we know that the economic life of these people centered on a settled pastoral life of stock-raising, coastal fishing, and the gathering of wild foods in a challenging marginal environment. The skeletons witness a rough and violent kind of life, with infectious diseases and probable occurrence of tuberculosis. Traumatic injuries appear to have been common. One person buried in the cemetery is an apparent homicide victim with massive head injuries. Another has a healed leg fracture. In addition to traumatic injuries, skeletal lesions associated with heavy labor and infectious diseases are also common in this tenth and eleventh century population.

Several individuals, including an adolescent, show evidence of strenuous physical activity involving the hands and arms and osteoarthritis is prevalent. One young man from this cemetery is of special interest owing to the presence of lesions associated with a chronic ear infection that resulted in a brain abscess. Another adolescent male has lesions on the pleural surfaces of his ribs. Although other diagnoses are possible, the lesions in both of these cases suggest that tuberculosis was present in the Hrísrú population. Stature comparisons with the early conversion period burials at Hrísrú and contemporaneous skeletal remains from Norway provide additional data on the living conditions of these people. These data show that stressful living conditions and heavy labor were common among early Icelanders even at such a prominent site as Hrísrú.

² *Egil’s Saga*, trans. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards. London: Penguin Books, 1976, p. 226.

³ Jesse Byock, “The Skull and Bones in *Egils saga*: A Viking, A Grave, and Paget’s Disease.” *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 1993(24):23-50 translated into Icelandic as “Hauskúpan og beinin í Egils sögu” *Skírnir* 1994(Vor):73-109.

⁴ P.L. Walker, J. Byock, J.T. Engl, J.M Erlandson, P. Holck, K. Prizer, M.A. Tveskov. “Bioarchaeological evidence for the health status of an early Icelandic population,” *Paper presented at the 73rd meeting of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists, Tampa, Florida, 2004.*

Archaeology, history, and saga studies are sciences and studies for exploring the past, and all have their methods and foci. This paper offers insight into archaeological methods and presents some of the types of data from which saga scholars, historians, and anthropologists can draw inferences from the archaeology. At its most obvious, we can now draw the conclusion that the descriptions found in *Egil's Saga* and *Gunnlaug's Saga* about the farmstead of the Mosfellingar⁵ are reflected in the archaeological finds. We now know much more about the material culture of a site described in the sagas than was possible within the scope of the traditional analysis of the written sources.



Figure 3. A man in his mid-forties found just east of the church chancel at Hrisbrú. He died of wounds. Radiocarbon dating places the man in the later half of the tenth century or the early part of the eleventh.

It is hard to imagine it now, especially in light of the rich archaeological finds, but at the start of our excavations, a many archaeologists, historians, and saga scholars thought it was futile to consult the family sagas as sources for aiding in locating sites. We were told that everyone already knew (or was supposed to know) that the *Íslendingasögur* were thirteenth-century fictional literary creations. The question we asked was whether a careful researcher should or should not use every tool and clue at hand in the process of discovery, especially in light of the rather clear hint in *Egil's Saga* (Chapter 86) about when, why, and by whom, a conversion-age church was built at Hrisbrú.⁶

Grímr at Mosfelli⁷ 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

⁵ *Egils saga*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, *Íslensk fornrit 2* (Reykjavík 1933), chapter 86. *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu – Borgfirðinga sögur*. Íslensk fornrit 3. Ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík 1938), p. 105.

⁶ For the full passage in English, see *Egil's Saga*, trans. by Christine Fell. London: Everyman's Library, 1975, pp. 170-171.

⁷ Grímr was the lawspeaker of Iceland from 1002 to 1004. His wife Thórdís was the stepdaughter of Egill Skallagrímsson, who lived with Grímr and Thórdís and was said to be buried in the Mosfell Valley. For the posthumous travels of Egill, see Jesse Byock, "Egil's Bones: A Viking Warrior and Paget's Disease." *Scientific American* 272/1 (January, 1995):82-87. Translated as: "Die Egil-saga und das Paget-Syndrom," *Spectrum der Wissenschaft* (März, 1995); "Les os d'Egil, héros viking," *Pour La Science* 209 (Mars, 1995):52-58; "Le ossa di

það til jarðtegna, at síðan er kirkja var gör at Mosfelli, en ofan tekin at Hrísrú sú kirkja, er Grímr hafði gera látit...⁸

When Christianity was adopted by law in Iceland, Grímr of Mosfell was baptized and built a church there. People say that Thórdís had Egil's bones moved to the church, and this is the evidence. When a church was built at Mosfell, the one Grímr had built at Hrísrú was taken down...



Figure 4. A Viking Age ring pin, Western Norse/Celtic style. Such pins were used by men to hold in place their cloaks. This pin is of iron and the only such iron pin found so far in Iceland. It was found in the soil lying above the head of the man pictured in Figure 3 above, whose skeleton is drawn (feature 2) in the 2003 site map below.



Figure 5. Beads, some with exotic designs. More than twenty beads were found within the longhouse. The largest number of such finds within an Icelandic turf house. They offer some indication of the wealth and high status of the inhabitants of the Hrísrú farmstead.

While we do not by any means believe everything found in the written materials, the sources concerning Mosfell are often basic and detailed. We have in these writings a core of information from a variety of sources about settlers, chieftains, warriors, women, lawgivers, slaves, laborers, travelers, and merchants passing through Mosfellssveit. Much of this information speaks to the material and social culture, describing habitation sites, lands, a

Egill,” *Le Scienze* 319 (Marzo, 1995):74-79; “Kości Egila” *Świat Nauki* (Marzec 1995): 72-77; *Archaeology: Annual Edition* 96/97. Guilford:Brown and Benchmark Publishers, 1996. pp. 80-85.

⁸ *Egils saga*, ed. Sigurður Nordal, *Íslenzk fornrit* 2 (Reykjavík 1933), chapter 86. *Gunnlaugs saga ormstungu – Borgfirðinga sögur. Íslenzk fornrit* 3. Ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík 1938), p. 105.

ship's port, burials, social standing, kinship relations, economic arrangements, as well as determinations of causes and places of conflict. The same can be said for many sagas, and the modern archaeological as well as anthropological, historical, and literary use of Iceland's medieval texts requires a methodology which recognizes both the oral and the written nature of these sources.⁹

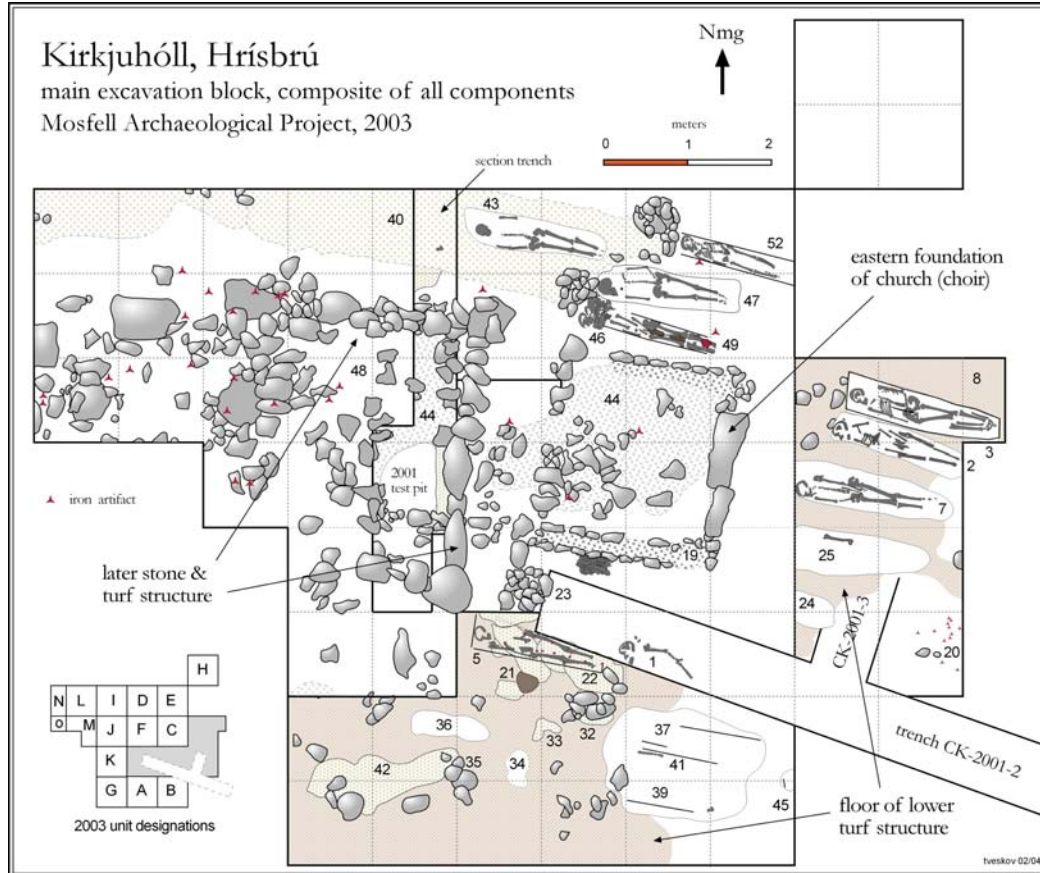


Figure 6. The conversion-age stave church in early stages of excavation. The church chancel at the right is excavated. The foundation stones from the later period building overlaying the church nave were removed in the 2004 excavations. The nave below was undisturbed by the upper agricultural building. Beneath the church is a older turf building.

The passages about the Mosfell region are a case in point. As a grouping of sources about a regional chieftaincy or *goðorð*, the passages from different texts have been largely overlooked by historians and anthropologists. Together the recent archaeological finds by MAP and the ancient written materials offer a new combination of information about a 250-year period in the past of an important region from the early 10th to the mid-12th century, a time which spans the transition from prehistory to history, from paganism to Christianity.

Mosfellsveit encapsulates the major ecologies of Iceland: coastal, riverine, and

⁹ Concerning such a methodology see Jesse Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*. London and New York: Penguin Books, 2001, chapter 1, the section, "The Sagas: An Ethnography of Medieval Iceland", pp. 21-24 and Chapter 8, the section, "The Sagas as Sources: Modern Nationalism and the Medieval Sagas", pp. 149-151. See also Byock, *Feud in the Iceland Saga*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982, which explores the oral saga in light of narrative technique and the cultural and social backgrounds of a feuding culture. Distinguishing social memory is also a central issue, Byock, "Social Memory and the Sagas: The Case of *Egils saga*." *Scandinavian Studies*. 76/3(2004), 299-316.

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, possibly as far east as Constantinople and perhaps further to the west.

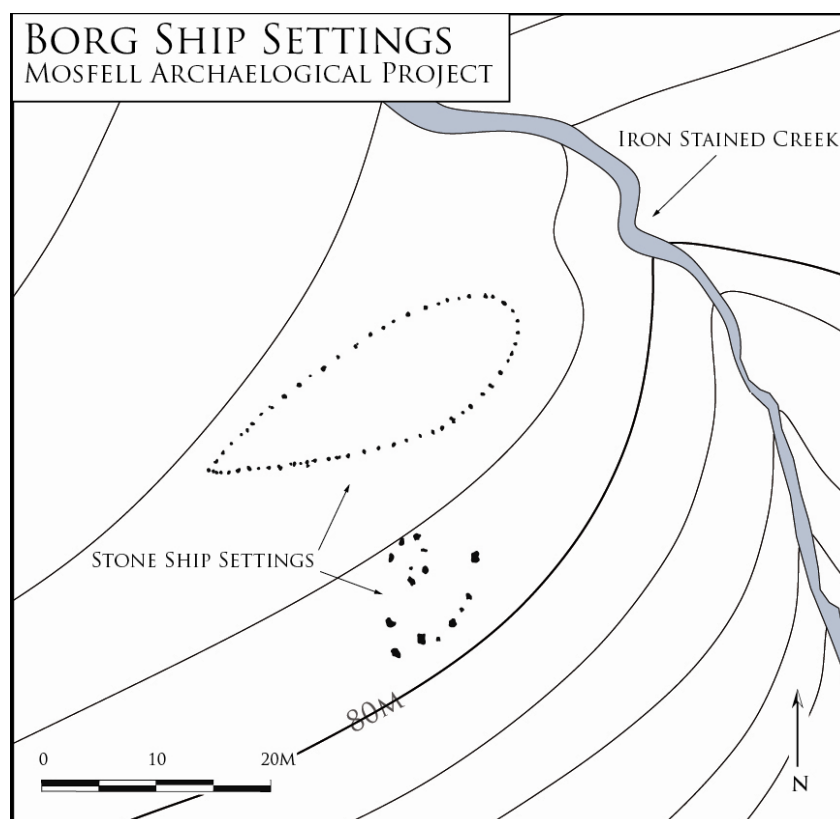


Figure 7. Man-made stone settings shaped like ships. These are the first such monuments found in Iceland.

The research, in reconstructing the early social history of the Mosfell Valley region, integrates information on the changing periods of occupation. We excavate individual sites, both secular and religious, and consider their placement in relationship to one another. We 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 are integrated into this study as we construct a picture of early life.

The different specialists on the MAP team explore among other subjects the development of roads and paths, the importance of the ships' landing at Leiruvogur, the changes over time in subsistence strategies, the state of health and disease in the Viking Age and later population, developments in building techniques, and the usage of smaller activity areas, such as the *sel*, or summer dairy stations. We are asking questions about the production of iron in the early period¹⁰ 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.

¹⁰ The iron artifacts in this late iron age society are numerous, see Zori, Davide, "Nails, Rivets, and Clench Bolts: A Case for Typological Clarity." *Archaeologia Islandica* 6 (2007):32-47.

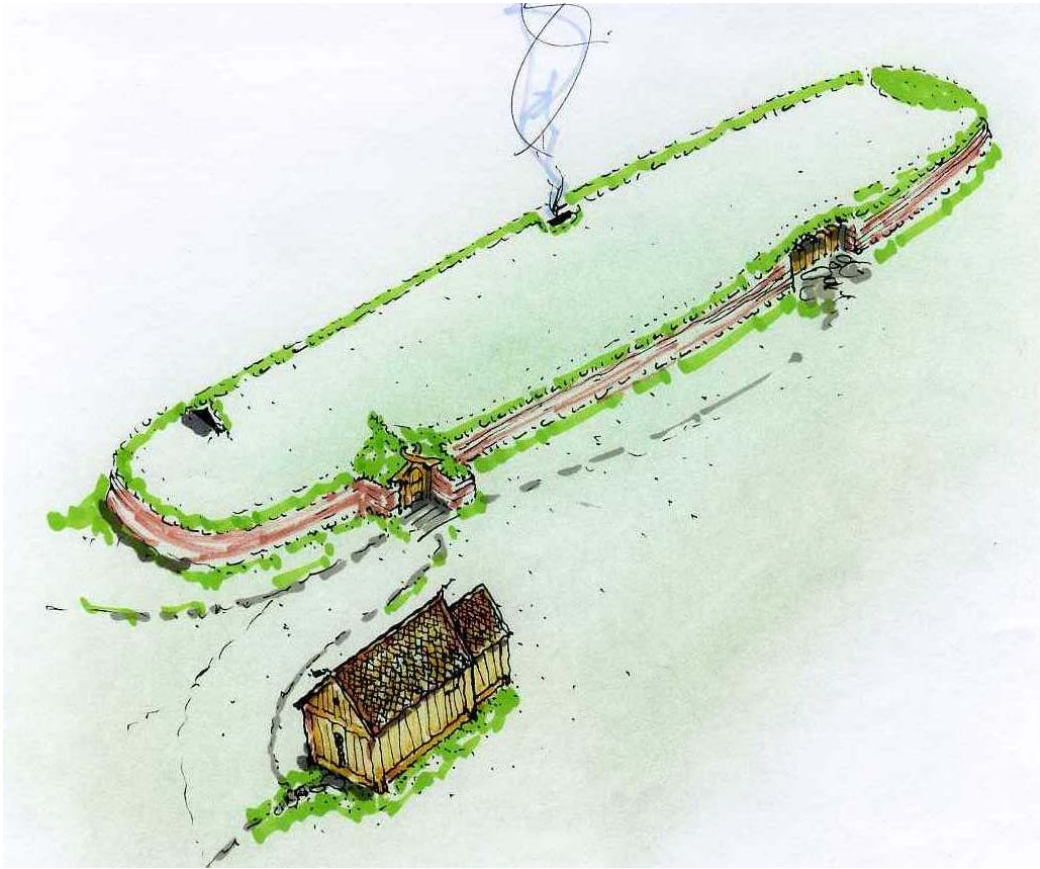


Figure 8. Architectural renderings of the buildings at Hrisbrú in the Mosfell Valley. The church is approximately twelve meters distance from the longhouse (drawn by Grétar Markússon).

The Mosfell Archaeological Project is comprised of an international team and is conducted under the direction of Prof. Jesse Byock of the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). The field director is Davide Zori (UCLA). The international group works in Iceland in cooperation with archaeologists from Þjóðminjasafn (Iceland's National Museum) and with members of the local Mosfellsbær community as well as with professors and students at the University of Iceland and other Icelandic researchers. This article is dedicated to the memory of Phillip Walker, my friend, colleague, and co-director of the Mosfell Archaeological Project.

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