Hofstaðagarðshorn

Preliminary investigations 2016

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Fornleifastofnun Íslands

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Cover: Structure 1 indicated by the measuring tapes, looking northwards down Laxárdalur valley, October 24th 2016, photo by Orri Vésteinsson.

Key findings

- A new Viking Age site has been found 420 m north of the well-known feasting hall at Hofstaðir in Mývatnssveit, NE Iceland
- The site has at least three structures
- One of them is a 26 m long hall, abandoned before AD 1104
- The hall may be constructed before AD 940
- The site is either a precursor or, more likely, a 10th century contemporary of the feasting hall
- Its relationship with the feasting hall is a matter requiring investigation

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Introduction

In June 2016 Árni Einarsson, director of the Mývatn Research Station and veteran discoverer of archaeological sites, noticed a hitherto undocumented cluster of ruins at the northern end of the northernmost field at Hofstaðir. He noted a hall-like building and at least two others, all situated in the corner of the great enclosure which surrounds the Hofstaðir farm, some 400 m north of the site of the feasting hall. The hall-like structure in particular shows up clearly on a GoogleEarth image from May 18th 2012, taken after a spring storm had left a sprinkle of snow, tracing the outlines of indistinct ruins – at this site and many others. Following Árni‘s announcement the site was visited by several archaeologists who all confirmed its identification as definitely something. The site was mapped with drone photography and a GPS differential survey by Gísli Pálsson and Orri Vésteinsson on August 13th 2016. At the height of summer the site was obscured by dense vegetation and it was decided to visit again in the autumn when leaves had fallen to be better able to discern the ruins and make more informed assessments about several possible ruins which had been noted during the summer. The interval was also used to apply for an excavation permit to carry out a limited examination of the hall-like structure.

Orri Vésteinsson, assisted by Jörundur Orrason, carried out the excavation on October 23rd 2016. This preliminary project was funded by the University of Iceland in collaboration with Fornleifastofnun Íslands and the Mývatn Research Station. Its aim was to date the site and throw light on whether the hall-like structure was a dwelling or not.

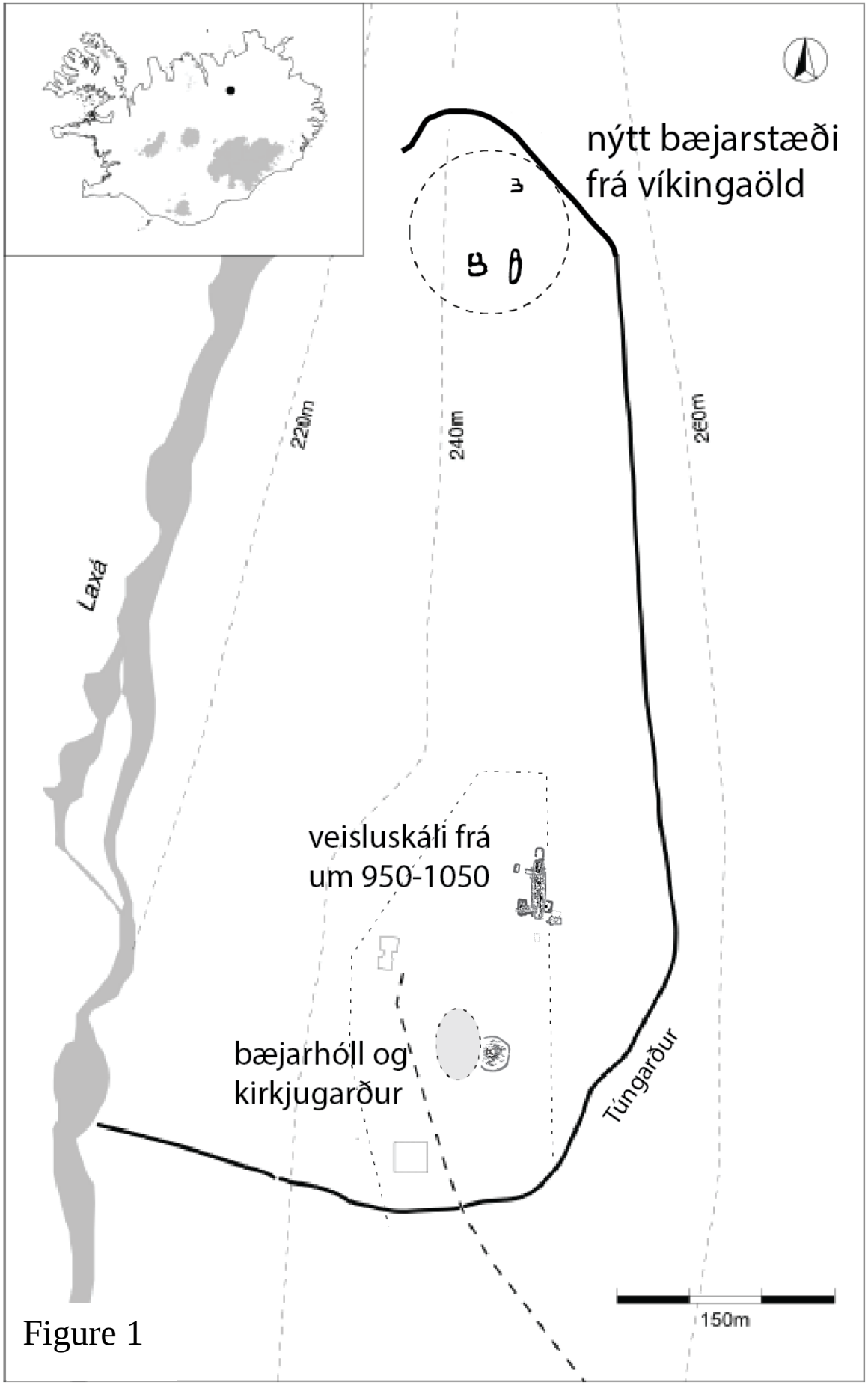

nýtt bæjarstæði
frá víkingaöld
220m
240m
260m
Laxá
veisluskáli frá
um 950-1050
bæjarhóll og
kirkjugarður
Túngarður
150m

Figure 1

Site description

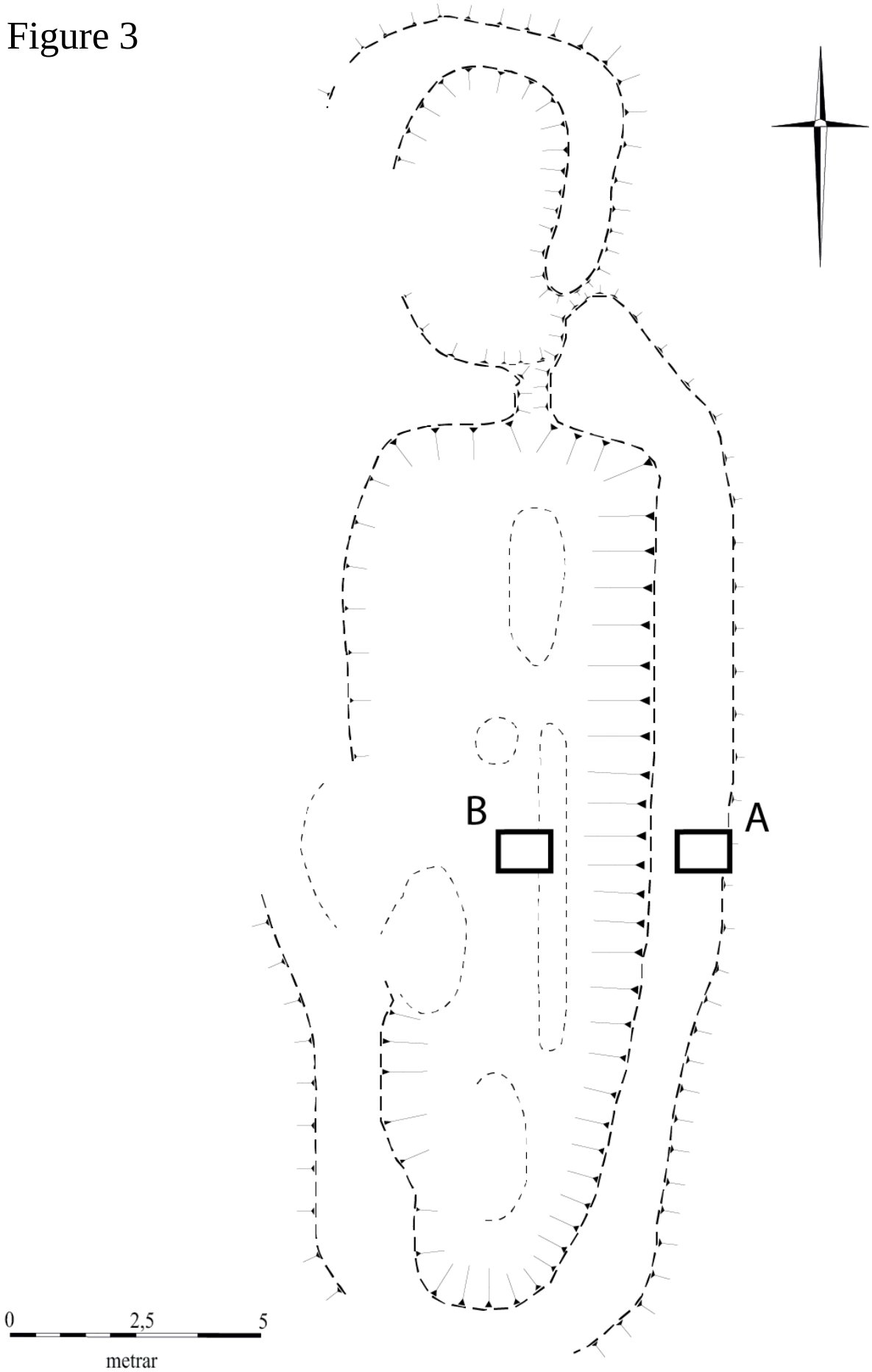
The site is 420 m north of the feasting hall and 550 m north of the Hofstaðir farm mound and cemetery (see Fig. 1). It is a matter of metres north of the northern edge of the flattened hay-field called Gerði, which is the northernmost of the fields around Hofstaðir. A track leads northwards from the field and the structures are all to the west of this. The hall is 120 m east of river Laxá. The structures are in an area measuring 80 m from north to south and 40 m from east to west. They are on two ledges on the slope above the river, one 10 m higher than the other. The elevation of the upper ledge is 30 m higher than the river. The flattened field Gerði rises gently to the north, ending in a high point where the land drops off again towards the north. There is exposed bedrock west of the end of the field, just south of the hall-like structure, marking a break in the landscape. From this point it is possible to see both far northwards down the valley as well as southwards to the farmhouses. A few metres either north or south visibility is blocked by the rise. The earthwork called Túngarður which encloses the Hofstaðir farm and has been dated to before 1477 (Lucas 2009, 155-57), curves around the ruins to the east and north so that they can be seen to be located in the corner of the sub-rectangular enclosure. With reference to this it is suggested the site can be called Garðshorn, a common name for smaller farms found in the corners of earthwork systems.

The site is covered in heath and shrub, with stands of willow reaching up to 2 m in height but also stretches of much lower vegetation dominated by empetrum and dwarf birch. There is no water source above ground but small water channels have been carved by spring run-off. Further downslope there are patches of mire, including the sampling site for a pollen core reported by Tisdall et al. forthcoming.

All who have visited the site and described it in 2016 (Adolf Friðriksson, Árni Einarsson, Gísli Pálsson, Orri Vésteinsson) agree that there are at least three structures at the site in addition to the well-known enclosure which curves around it to the east and north. All have furthermore identified several other possible ruins but there is less agreement on these. One of the aims of the October field visit was to get a clearer sense of the layout of the site, both the dimensions of the three unequivocal ruins and the actuality of the several suggested ones, as the whole site would be much easier to make out once the leaves had fallen from the dense shrub which covers most of the area.

Figure 2. Results of mapping with drone photography and GPS differential in August 2016. The unequivocal structures are marked by their numbers. Others are conjectural. By Gísli Pálsson.

Figure 3



In short it was found that none of the other possible ruins looks particularly convincing when the leaves have fallen. The area is covered in large and irregular þúfur, which are furthermore irregularly distributed with stretches of quite flat heath in between, and many of the þúfur patches may well cover archaeological remains. Their configuration on the surface does not however suggest this in any way strongly. A systematic coring survey is probably the most straightforward way to confirm or eliminate these possible structures.

Of the three unequivocal structures, the hall-like structure (1) and structure (2) directly north of it stand out more clearly at this time year, while structure (3), which has a stand of willow inside it, looks even more diffuse in the cold light of an autumn day.

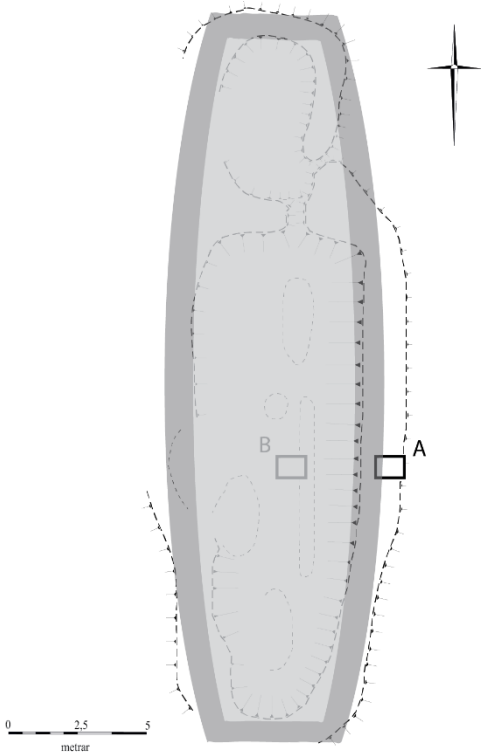


Fig. 4. Hypothetical reconstruction of a symmetrical hall based on the dimensions of the structure observable on the surface.

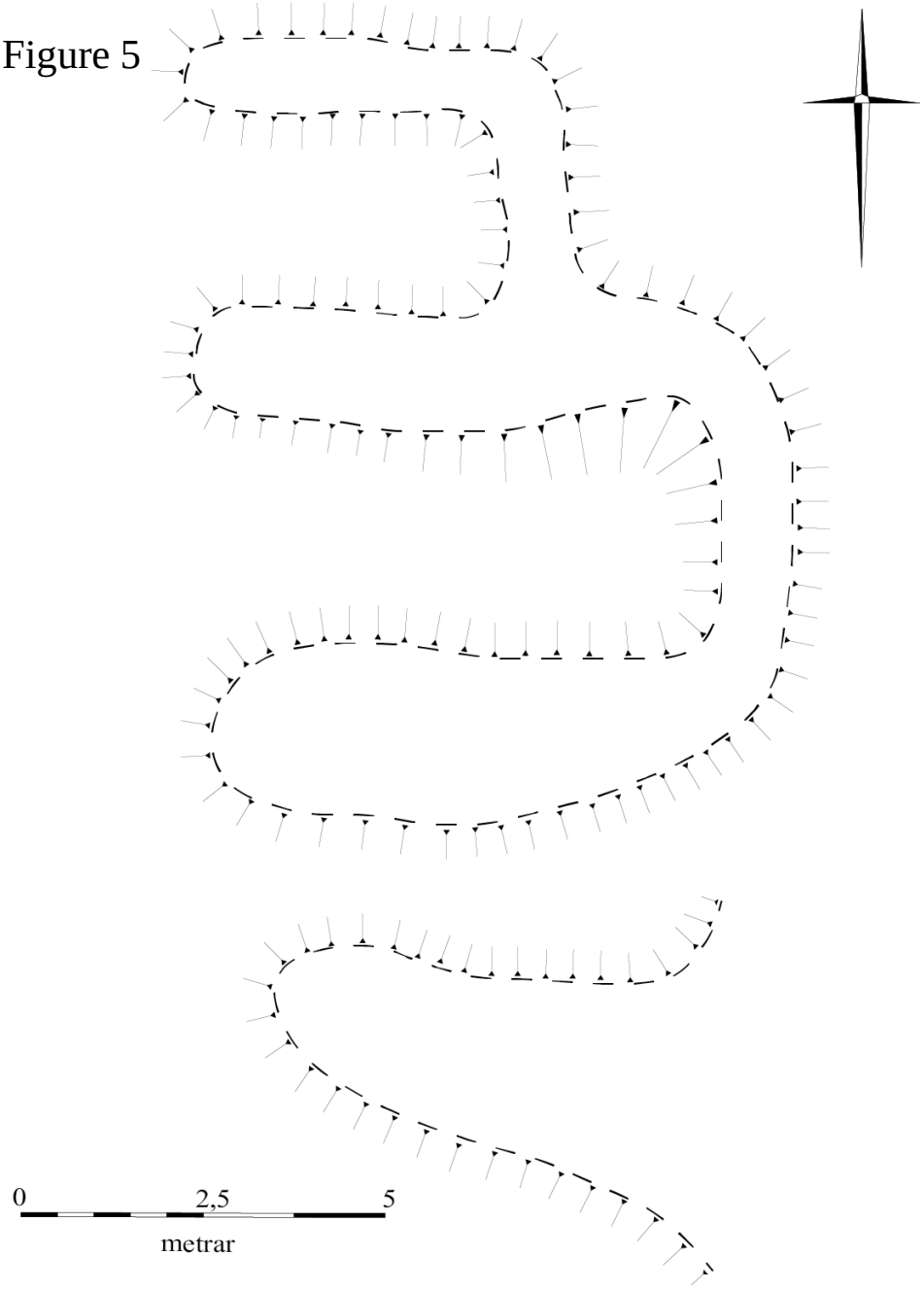
Structure 1. The hall-like structure (1) is 26 m long and 9,5 m wide at its widest. It is built on a ledge in the hillside and probably dug into the slope on the southern and southwestern sides. Only a few metres south of the south end there is exposed bedrock rising more than a metre above the bottom of the structure. It is divided into two rooms. To the south there is an elongated room which tapers decidedly towards its southern end. Internally it is 17 m long and 5,5 m wide in the middle, but only 2,5 m at the southern gable. The western long-wall is quite diffuse and it is possible there was a doorway on it, anywhere northwards from 4 m north of the south gable. In the southern end the bottom inclines towards the north and is furthermore quite uneven, with several þúfur, most of them aligned north-south like the building. The northern room is much smaller, less than 6 m long and 3,5 m wide. Its floor is nearly half a metre lower than the northern end of the southern room. The partition wall between the two rooms has an indistinct opening east of centre, and there may have been a doorway to the east through the east side of the northern room.

The dimensions of this building strongly suggest that it is a hall of a Viking Age type commonly found in Iceland. In the southern end of the south room the gable is only 2 m wide but at the northern end it is 4,5 m. 12 m from the gable the width is at its greatest, nearly 6 m.

Judging from these dimensions and assuming that the building was originally symmetrical this could have been a single 26 m long hall with curved long-walls as shown on figure 4. The northern room would then be the result of some degree of modification but only full excavation can reveal this.

The western long-wall is more diffuse and indistinct than the eastern wall, partly because it is built on the edge of slope and has slumped outwards and partly because it has become obscured by sheep tracks that follow the edge and can be traced several kilometres northwards.

Figure 5

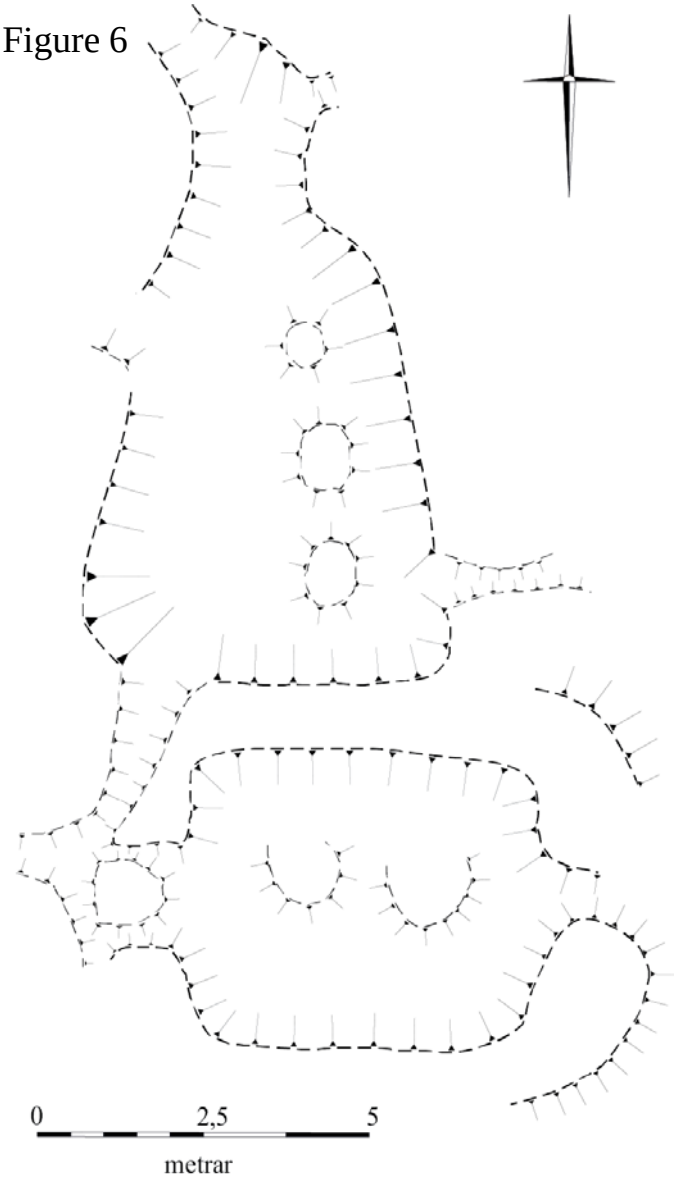


Structure 2. Structure 2 is on the same ledge as structure 1, 40 m north of its north end. The same sheep-tracks which obscure the western long-wall of structure 1 lie in front of and possibly over a west wall of this structure. If it did have a west-wall it is now completely obscured and the structure now looks like a row of up to three rooms with open west-gables

facing the river. Of the rooms only the largest and most central one is completely unambiguous. It measures 7x3 m internally and 8x6,5 m externally (Fig. 5). Its southern long-wall is particularly thick, more than 2 m, while the eastern gable is less than a metre. Built on to its northern side is another cell, which measures 4x2,5 m internally, with more evenly dimensioned walls. A third possible cell is on the southern side of the central one. This is much less clear than the other two and is really only suggested by a regular ridge which runs parallel to the southern long-wall of the central cell, with a space of less than 2 m between. There is no clear eastern gable to this cell and it is therefore doubtful that it is a part of the structure at all. If it is it would measure c. 5x2 m internally, perhaps more like 3 m wide of the southern long-wall of the central cell has slumped into this one.

This structure has no close parallels in terms of size and shape but can be compared to building E in Steinbogi which was interpreted as a sheep house. It is most likely an animal stable of some description.

Figure 6



Structure 3. Some 25 m west of structure 1, and close to 10 m downslope on the next ledge below there is a dense stand of willow in two regular depressions. The more convincing of the two is on the southern side, a building which measures 5x4 m on the inside, 8x6m on the outside and has doorways on both its eastern end western gable ends (Fig. 6). The eastern wall has an outer edge but otherwise this building seems to be sunken and only the inside is distinct. It is close to 1 m deep. It is possible that one or both doorways are in fact water channels and the one on the western gable has definitely been modified and become

wider as a result of water action. On the north side a less well defined cell is aligned on a north-south axis. It is at least 6,5 m long and 5 m wide at its southern end but narrows towards its northern end and is 2,5 m where it seems to end. The northern end is indistinct however and looks open. There are also openings on the western and eastern walls and in the southwest corner but all of these are in part at least the result of water running through the structure from east to west. The opening in the southwest corner is almost certainly entirely natural. Apart from the south wall which it shares with the other cell this one has no outside edges and is entirely sunken.

Both cells are unusually wide compared to their length which may indicate that they are pens or folds of some sort rather than roofed buildings. Another possibility is that the northern cell is the remains of the northern half of a hall with bow shaped walls and that the southern cell is a later modification across its southern half. Only excavation can reveal what is the nature of this structure.

Excavation

Two 1x0,7 m trenches were dug into the east side of structure 1 (Fig. 3). Trench A was placed to catch the outside edge of the eastern long wall and Trench B was put in the centre of the southern room to ascertain what kind of surface it had. Both are on a line 10 m from the southern end of the building, just south off centre of the room but well south of the centre of the whole structure.

Trench A. In Trench A the V-1477 tephra is 22-34 cm below the surface. Below this is a laminated layer [2] primarily made up of mid to dark-brown aeolian accumulation and includes both the H-1300 and the H-1104/58 tephras in situ, although neither is continuous across the trench. There are uneven colourations in this layer which may indicate that it includes some crumbling from the adjacent turf wall. [3] is a thin but quite distinct layer of light-brown aeolian accumulation on top of [4] which is collapsed turf wall. In the trench this layer has an even thickness, 14-18 cm, almost as if the wall has been knocked down rather than collapsed over time. In the western profile (the southern was drawn and is shown on Fig. 7) a turve with the Landnám sequence upside-down represents the edge of the wall proper. It sat right on top the Landnám sequence in situ but below the turf collapse this had been dug away and only the prehistoric Hverfjall and H3 tephras could be seen in the natural [5]. The

Figure 7. Trench A, south side.

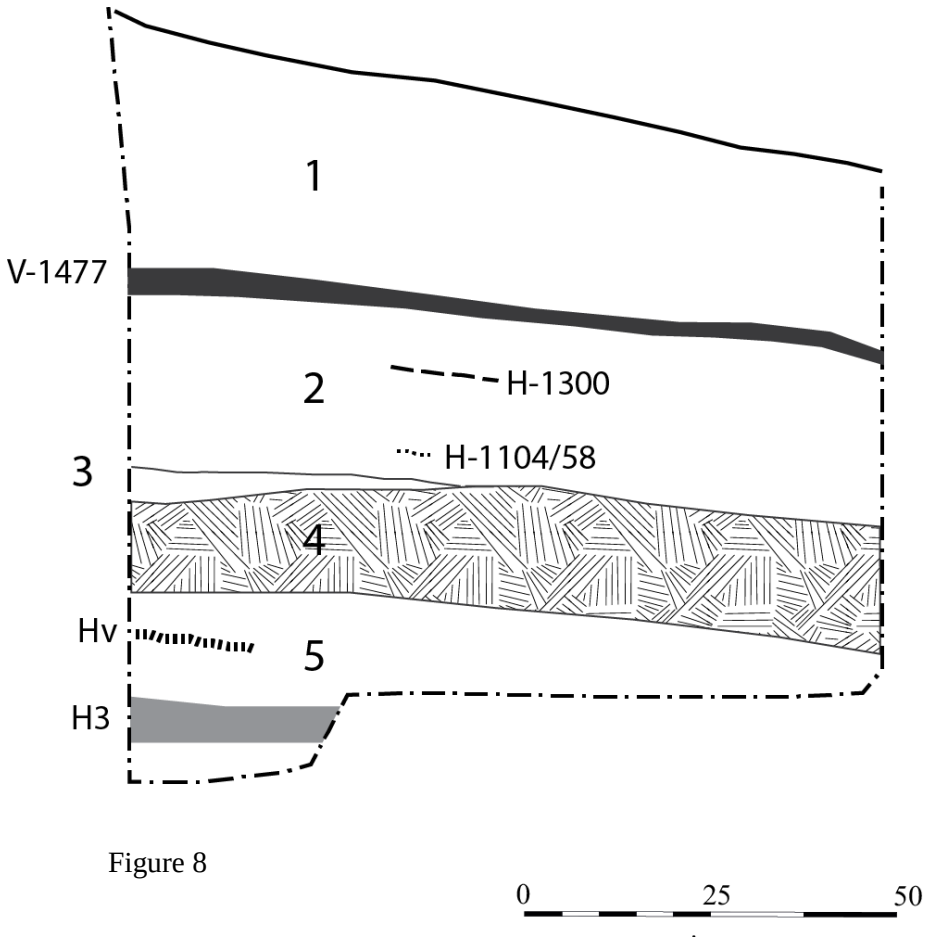


Figure 8

Landnám sequence, both in situ and in the turf construction contained the black tephras and what most likely is the V-871±2 tephra but the V-940 tephra was not observed. If it is confirmed that the V-940 is not below the wall along with the rest of the

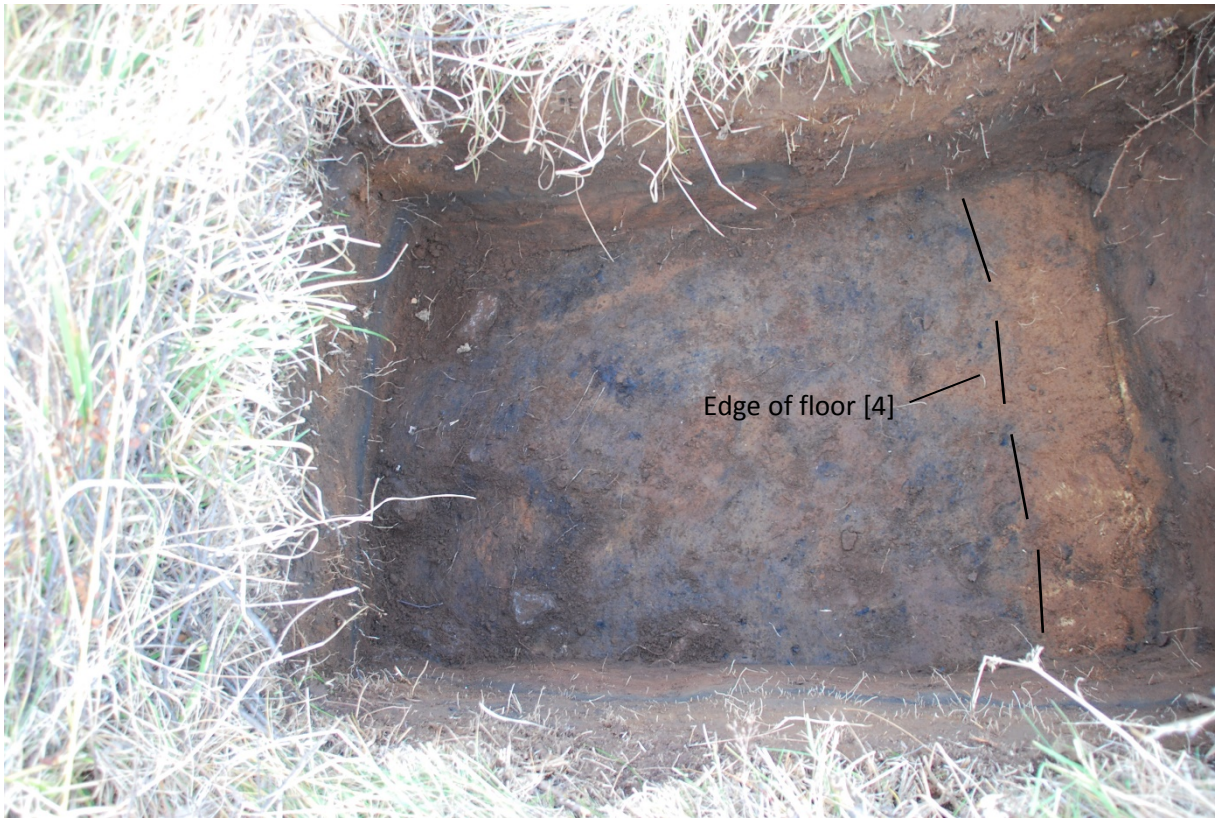


Figure 9. Trench B. North is up on the picture.

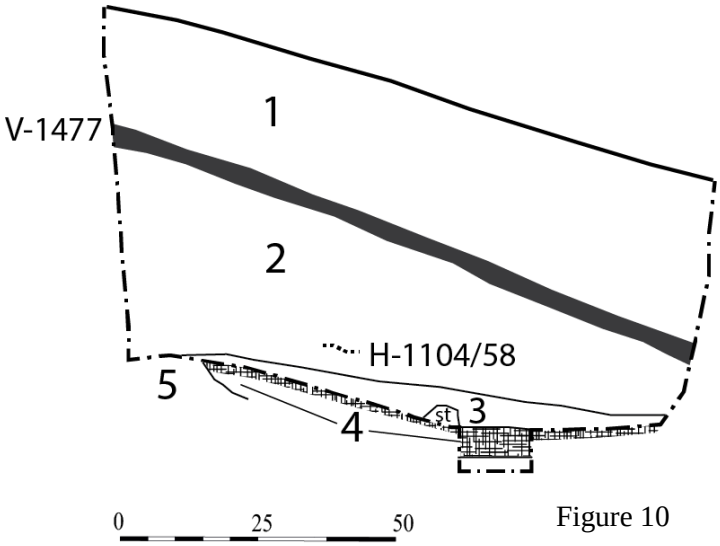


Figure 10

sequence this might indicate that the structure is earlier than 940. To confirm this the tephra would need to be found abutting the walls or overlying contemporary deposits.

Trench B. In Trench B which is just east of the central axis of structure 1 (Fig. 3), the V-1477 is 20-24 cm below the surface, sloping westwards towards the centre. Below the tephra the mid-brown aeolian accumulation [2] is even-coloured and looks entirely natural. It includes the H-1104/58 tephra in situ 5 cm above the uppermost cultural layer [3]. This layer has an indistinct border with [2] and is characterized by pieces of charcoal, up to 2 cm in diameter, some ash and burnt bone sitting in a matrix of mixed dark-brown soil. It likely represents a midden accumulation from an abandonment phase of the building. Below this is a floor [4], soft and fatty with more ash and burnt bone

than [3] and large smudges of charcoal. Several small stones, most around 5-7 cm in dimeter, are sitting in this layer in the western part of the trench. A small hole was made to ascertain the thickness of the floor layer which turned out to be 4-6 cm. The floor layer does not extend all the way to the eastern edge of the trench but stops at a more or less straight line 10 cm from the trench-side (see Fig. 9). Here, and below the floor, is a layer [5] of disturbed natural, orange brown silt with flecks of H3. The edge of floor [4] likely indicates the division between a central corridor and a platform along the western wall of a three aisled building.

No artefacts were found in either trench. Both were backfilled with aluminium tags left in to mark the limit of excavation.

Discussion

The excavation revealed that structure 1 is a hall of a common Viking Age type, which had been abandoned long before the deposition of the H-1104/58 tephra. The two 12th century tephras cannot be visually distinguished but chemical analysis of the tephra observed over the feasting hall 420 m to the south suggests that this is the H-1104. The floor layer is neither thick nor particularly hard, indicating a short period of accumulation, but like many floors observed at Viking Age sites in Mývatnssveit this may reflect the frequency of the mucking out of the floor rather than giving an indication of the length of time the building was in use.

The V-940 has been observed widely around the site of the feasting hall and at 2-3 mm thick in this area it is easily recognizable where it has been preserved. The fact that it was not observed in Trench A may indicate that this building was built before the eruption but further excavation is needed to confirm this.

The location of the site suggests that it must be secondary to the feasting hall and farm mound complex. The latter is situated on a broad and flat plain with good hay-making potential. This site is located on a steep slope with narrow ledges conducive to waterlogging. The location is in many ways reminiscent of the 10th-13th century site Steinbogi further south on the opposite side of river Laxá. At present it is not known whether the enclosure, Túngarður, is contemporary with this site. It may have been built long after the site was abandoned but at the very least its lay-out will have been decided with reference to the site, possibly remains of

cultivation associated with the settlement after it had ceased to be an operating farm. Unlike Steinbogi however there are no obvious signs of cultivation associated with the three structures at Garðshorn so this relationship will require clarification.

What Garðshorn lacked in farming potential it possibly made up for in strategic location. It is situated by a break in the hillside, at a point from which there is extended visibility both to the north and the south. Unlike the feasting hall and farm mound complex the buildings at Garðshorn would have been visible from at least two kilometres down-valley. Visitors coming to Hofstaðir from that direction would have Garðshorn in their sights for a long time before they saw the feasting hall and other possible buildings in the home-field proper. The hall at Garðshorn is built in the northern lee of an outcrop (possibly a small hill if it was covered in soil) so that it would not have been visible, or only just the top of the roof, from the feasting hall and farm mound complex. Garðshorn, therefore, will have had limited or no visual impact from the feasting hall, tucked away behind a rise in the land even if it was not that far away, but at the same time it would have been like an outpost signalling the Hofstaðir centre to visitors approaching the site from the north.

The hall at Garðshorn is not a small building. If it was originally built as a 26 m long hall it is among the largest halls in Iceland even if it was substantially smaller than the great hall at Hofstaðir – a building in a league of its own. Only the halls at Skallakot and Hrísbrú are larger than this possible larger version of the Garðshorn hall. If the Garðshorn hall was more like 20 m long it would be on a par with halls like Aðalstræti, Vatnsfjörður and Ísleifsstaðir. Even that smaller version is much larger than halls at unequivocal low-status sites like Sveigakot, Eiríksstaðir or Grelutóttir. If Garðshorn was subsidiary to the main operation around the feasting hall it nevertheless had a substantial dwelling which does not suggest low status. A possible parallel may be found in Lækjargata where a substantial hall was discovered in 2015. Lækjargata is c. 200 m from the core of the Reykjavík farm at Aðalstræti/Tjarnargata and seems to represent a coterminous and full-fledged farm in the same home-field as the larger site. The very substantial hall inside a very small homefield at Skallakot can also be mentioned in this context. That site is c. 400 m from the historic farm of Ásólfsstaðir which is in a much more favourable location in terms of farming potential.

These cases suggest that the traditional model of single households dominating the resources of a farm, either because there was only one household per farm or because any other households were subsidiary and controlled only a circumscribed portion of the resources does not hold for the Viking Age. The size of the halls at Garðshorn and Skallakot suggests that

even if they were located in relatively unfavourable spots within the farm land they must have controlled or had access to resources greater and more varied than suggested by their immediate environment. That in turn suggests a different kind of dynamic, a model whereby each unit within a farm has a more collective stake in the operation.

The discovery of a farm site at Garðshorn raises new questions about the operation of the feasting hall in Hofstaðir. If Garðshorn is coterminous with the feasting hall – and a possible central farm on the farm mound – it suggests more complex arrangements and relationships than hitherto imagined. To understand this relationship it is important to accurately date the occupation of Garðshorn and to define what sort of unit it represents: was it a separate farm which originally shared in the resources of the Hofstaðir property until it was overshadowed and outcompeted by its feasting hall neighbour? Or was it a component in a complex organization aimed at supporting feasts in the large hall?

Future research at Garðshorn will aim to answer these and other questions which promise to throw new light on Viking Age society in Iceland.