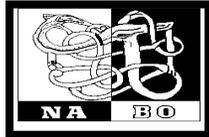


Midden Investigations at Hofstaðir
Mývatnssveit, N Iceland
2002

Thomas H. McGovern
CUNY Northern Science & Education Center
&
North Atlantic Biocultural Organization



A field report to FSÍ (begun Aug 8th 2002)

Summary: During the 2002 field season of the *Landscapes of Settlement Project* (directed by **Fornleifastofnun Íslands** with collaboration by the NABO cooperative) the CUNY team was tasked to locate midden deposits surviving around the medieval to early modern farm mound on the southern side of the home field and assess their prospects for further excavation. Two areas were investigated with small test pits: 1) the area of a midden mound drawn by Bruun in 1908 and subsequently leveled by bulldozer, and 2) a midden concentration to the NE of the area Z excavation unit that had produced bone and artifacts in a test trench profile dug in 2000. The area of the bulldozed midden was approximately located and two 1 x 0.50 m (pits A & B) and one 2 x 0.50 m (pit C) test pits were dug. These showed clear evidence of surviving well stratified cultural deposits directly below the modern turf surface, and all produced small amounts of well preserved bone as well as ash and charcoal. The three pits were otherwise very different in stratigraphy, with pit A showing a deeper deposit marked by multiple in situ tephra (including the LNL sequence and probable medieval tephra above the H4 prehistoric tephra approximately 60 cm below modern surface). This pit did clearly show cultural materials (including some displaced H3 tephra) directly above the probable LNL tephra sequence, but it is not completely clear if turf cutting or other disturbance is the cause of this superposition. The second pit B showed a much shorter total profile, reaching H4 at 40 cm above modern surface and producing ca 20 cm of cultural deposit. LNL and medieval tephra were less evident in this pit. Pit C provided a 2 m continuous profile and yet another set of tephra, including the 1477 (absent in pits A & B) both 1158 and 1104, and a clearly sterile layer separating the cultural material from the LNL sequence. The area Z midden investigation confirmed the presence of an extremely rich early modern (18th-19th c) midden overlying a stratified sequence of peat ash and medium brown cultural deposit. It appears that a significant bone and artifact collection could be made in this area documenting the final centuries of occupation, and that earlier midden materials (probably less bone and artifact rich) are preserved below.

Hofstaðir Midden Investigations 2002

On August 8th and 13th I had the opportunity to prospect for midden deposits possibly surviving in the area around the medieval- early modern house mound across the homefield from Hofstaðir's Viking Age complex. This prospecting had two immediate objectives:

- 1) Attempt to locate the site of the now bulldozed midden mound indicated in Bruun's 1908 sketch. Determine if any stratified deposits survived below those truncated by the bulldozing and assess their potential for further excavation.
- 2) Inspect the profile cut in 2000 N of the main area Z excavation unit (profiles 31 and 31b) to determine the state of bone preservation and the potential for further excavation of midden deposits in this area.

Bulldozed midden investigations: With the help of both Bruun's sketch and a plan based on the sketch prepared by Adolf and Orri, Ragnar Edvardsson and I managed to get a good compass bearing on the location of the former midden mound. The area is still marked by a subtle rise, and may well represent the location of the lost midden mound. I sampled the deposit with two 100 x 50 cm test pits (A & B) located 3 m apart on a rough N-S axis (see figure 1 for location).



Test pit A (100 cm x 50 cm) reached the distinctive creamy prehistoric H3 tephra at 60 cm below modern ground surface. As figure 2 indicates, the test pit revealed numerous layers of well stratified cultural material beginning directly below the modern turf, as well as several apparent historic period tephra layers *in situ* among the cultural layers. The cultural layers produced small amounts of well preserved animal bone and wood charcoal but no artifacts. Scale is 30 cm.



Figure 3 presents a close up of the lower portion of the N profile of test pit A, showing peat and wood ash, charcoal, and bits of displaced H3 tephra in layers that appear to directly overly the “Landnám” tephra sequence. Note another greenish grey tephra *in situ* above these cultural layers. No cultural material was identified below the probable LNL sequence.



Test pit B (80 cm x 50 cm) is located 3 m S of test pit A, and also showed clear evidence of well stratified cultural deposits below the truncation at the modern turf line.



Figure 4

of well stratified cultural deposits below the truncation at the modern turf line. However, this test pit revealed only about 20 cm of cultural deposit above the H3 tephra (reached at 35 cm below modern surface) and appears to lack the in situ tephra observed in test pit A only 3 m to the north. The natural ground surface must slope sharply between these two test pits, and (unlike test pit A) something has removed material above the H3 tephra prior to the deposition of what is now the lowest cultural material. A small amount of well preserved animal bone was recovered from test pit B.

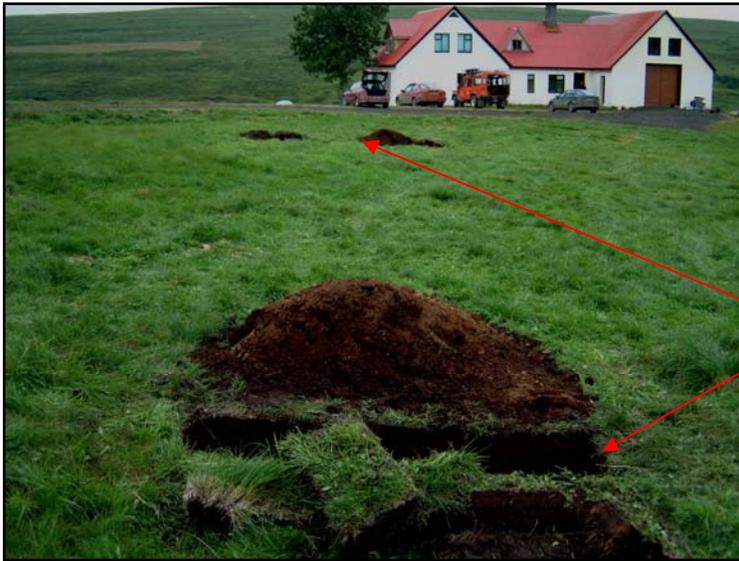
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Cultural deposit

In situ H3 Tephra

A third test pit C 50 cm x 200 cm was opened approximately 25 m E of test pits to investigate a second rise in the modern ground surface and to attempt to resolve some of the stratigraphic problems of test pits A & B. Instead, this rest pti presents yet another picture of stratigraphic development in this part of the homefield.



Test pit C was dug to the East of test pits A and B.

Here the 1477 tephra is well developed, with cultural materials above and below, and there are two white tephra horizons which are probably the 1104 and 1158 tephtras respectively. In this profile there is not much evidence for significant human occupation below the 1104 tephra, and nothing cultural in contact with the LNL sequence. Stratified natural materials extend down to the white H3 horizon (at 110



cm), where excavation was ended. The profile was logged for tephra by Anthony Newton, who also kindly supplied the tephra identifications.

Discussion & Recommendations: The results of these three test pits in the probable area of the flattened midden are:

- 1) Stratified cultural deposits do exist more or less intact below the “bull dozer truncation” event.
- 2) Rich concentrations of animal bone and artifacts (high density midden) may survive in this area, but the test pits did not locate them. I suspect that some sorts of cultural deposits (including bone fragments and charcoal) are widely spread over this whole part of the homefield, and that more concentrated high density midden is probably closer to the structures themselves. I would rank this area as low priority for further midden investigations.
- 3) Multiple tephra in association with cultural deposits do exist in this area, including layers that are thin or hard to locate in the main excavation area. I do not think that any of the test pits are large enough at present to add much (besides confusion) to the phasing of human occupation on the site, but it is possible that several long trenches in the area could recover tephra and cultural layers to add significantly to our understanding of the sequence of land use at Hofstaðir. I would suggest that at some point a long trench be dug in this area for these sorts of investigations with a profile 6-10 m long to deal with potential turf cutting and reversed stratigraphy .

AREA Z Midden Testing: In 2000 the area Z excavation team extended a test trench northwards from the main churchyard area in an effort to determine the extent of the burials and to locate the N side of the churchyard dyke. As well documented in their 2000 annual report, the team found extensive midden deposits with abundant 19th c artifacts in this area. The area Z team drew excellent long profiles (Area Z profiles 31 and 31b) which clearly illustrate the stratigraphy in this area, but did not further investigate the midden. The objective of the 2002 test was thus not to locate the midden but to carry out a quick assessment of its potential for further investigation in future seasons. With help from Oscar, I located the point in the profile that had been extended to its deepest point (approximately 110 cm without striking subsoil). I partially cleaned a 50 cm wide portion of the profile, and cut back the upper 1 m of the deposit 10 cm to test bone and artifact density and preservation. The results confirmed observations by the 2000 Z team:

- 1) There is an extremely rich deposit of well preserved bone, bird egg shell, charcoal, and artifacts (glazed ceramics, metal, glass) in the upper layers of the midden in this area (context 1565). Inspection of the ceramics by Gavin suggested a post 1830 date for the portion sampled, and the 1565

context in this area probably relates most directly to the final phases of occupation of the farm mound.

- 2) Below the 1565 context are layers of charcoal-rich brown soil and thick bands of bright orange peat ash that extend to the base of the profile. These are much less rich in finds of all sorts, and may represent a different sort of deposit (as well as an earlier one).



Location of 2002 test excavation within the 2000 area Z extension trench. View from the N towards the chapel area.



Rich 19th c midden deposit (context 1565) with high density of egg shell, animal bone, glass, glazed pottery, and metal.

Middle horizon of brown soil and charcoal, low density of bones and finds

Banded peat ash and wood ash layers extending to base of profile (not carried to sterile subsoil).

Discussion & Recommendations: The area Z extension certainly contains large amounts of well stratified midden material that appears to extend from the later Middle Ages through the abandonment of the farm mound area in the 20th century. The uppermost horizons are exceptionally rich in finds (7 ceramic shards, 2 glass shards, 4 Fe objects from a 10 cm x 50 cm x 50 cm test cut) and in well preserved bone and egg shell. It is less clear from the 2002 test that the earlier deposits below are equally rich, but it is probable that there are good medieval-early modern deposits below the 19th-20th c layers in the general area of the Z extension trench. This area thus has excellent proven potential for documenting life at Hofstaðir in the later historic period, and considerable potential for extending this record back to the early modern and late medieval periods as well. An excavation of midden contexts to the E and W of the current area Z extension trench would be relatively simple and easy to supervise once the long profiles are cleared, as crews could cut back from a well defined working face with good stratigraphic control. Continued work on the area Z churchyard would provide a good logistics connection and would further ease student supervision. The area Z extension area middens thus have good potential for:

- 1) Extending the archaeological record of Hofstaðir up to the near present.
- 2) Generating large 18th-early 20th c artifact collections (including glass and glazed ceramics suitable for dating) that are of importance in their own right and valuable as both teaching tools for students and as tools for community outreach (providing immediately recognizable connections to artifacts still in use).
- 3) Easily supervised training in midden excavation, artifact curation, and profile drawing.

I would thus recommend the area Z extension area for additional work as part of the ongoing project centered on the churchyard investigations.

Attached:

Finds photograph proof sheet

CDR archive with all photos and finds database.

See 2000 HST report for original profile drawings.

See Anthony Newton report for tephra log of test pit C