

Report of First Stage Midden Investigations at Selhagi, Mývatn 2001



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SUMMARY: Initial excavations at a midden deposit at the abandoned site of Selhagi near Haganes at Mývatn have produced substantial cultural layers between the 1477 and probable Landnám sequence tephra. The deposits are clearly stratified and have produced substantial amounts of animal bone (fish, bird, domestic mammal) and show great promise for more extensive investigation.

Site Area

The site of Selhagi is a small, multi-roomed ruin (see Plan 1 by Orri Vésteinsson) located on a lava platform at the edge of the outfall Lake Mývatn near the juncture of the Kraká with the Laxá. The modern site area is lushly vegetated, with a thick moss, grass and sedge groundcover and stands of angelica along the water. Large numbers of ducks (several species) are present in the watercourses immediately around the site (which is on a small island), and the small embayment directly NW of the site is a famous trout fishing spot.



View from
farm ruin
towards the
NW.



At the suggestion of the farmer of Haganes, on August 13th we place a small shovel test near the crest of a mound just N of the main structure's room depressions. Immediately bone and charcoal is encountered below what appears to be the 1477 tephra. Cultural deposits extend well over 50 cm below the turf layer.



A 2 x 2 m unit (Unit J) is laid out and unturfed. Note shovel test hole in SW corner and the unbroken surface of the 1477 tephra emerging directly after cleaning following unturfing.



Coring (Oakfield tube type corer) reveals nearly 1 m of cultural deposit rich in bone and charcoal. The core ends on what appears to be the local manifestation of the Landnám sequence, with bone and charcoal resting close to the tephra layers.



Unit J is carried down to the first midden layer (context 004). Note that the bedding angle of this midden layer follows the contours of the modern slope. The midden layers appear to thicken down slope (N).



A frost hummock (Thufur) is visible in the 1477 stratigraphy on the N side of unit J at the 004 midden layer. Note the slope of the midden layer roughly paralleling the modern surface.



A set of four partially articulated large salmonid vertebral segments in situ in the 004 context. The coin scale is an Icelandic 10 Kr. Piece.



Location of midden unit J, from the N, near the level of the lakeside. Note the steep sided mound and the ca 1.5-2 m accumulation of deposits above what is probably a lava platform.



View across the house-mound from the SE showing the relation of unit J to the cluster of room depressions.



The base of the lava platform visible along the shoreline. Note depth of soil and deposit above the gravel and lava base.



Top of the 005 midden context, from the S. Note continued drop in bedding angle, and articulated caprine vertebra in the profile base.



The J unit carried to sterile subsoil, in this case the top of the presumed Landnám ash sequence. Contexts have been marked with aluminium tags for later recognition.



Close up of the base of the unit at the SW corner, cut slightly into the tephra sequence below the lowest midden layer (008).

SW corner of the J unit carried to tephra .



- Contexts:
- 001 med brn topsoil
 - 002 tephra (1477)
 - 003 mainly sterile med brn layer
 - 004 Gray brown midden
 - 005 Midden w/charcoal
 - 006 Mottled tan midden
 - 007 Gray brown midden
 - 008 Gray midden
 - 009 tephra (?Landnám)



August 16, 2001, Unit J is prepared for backfilling.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

The Selhagi midden is well stratified, datable, and has excellent bone preservation. It definitely represents a major archaeological resource, and deserves far more extensive investigation by a multi-disciplinary team including tephra and soils specialists. While all finds in 2001 were non-diagnostic iron objects of unclear date, it seems likely that a more extensive excavation will turn up datable artifacts to supplement tephra and radiocarbon dating. The midden appears to directly overlie the Landnám tephra, and seems to terminate some time before the 1477 ash fall. Orri observes what may well be some of the 14th c. tephra below the 1477 and above the first midden layer. This suggests that we may have deposits spanning the period from ca. 871 to early 14th c, overlapping in time with the Sveigakot, Hofstadir, and (probably) the Hrísheimar middens but also extending the record into the 12th-13th c. It will be extremely valuable to get both more early material and a longer chronological record that can come closer to linking to contemporary documentary resources. The Selhagi midden appears to be of a fairly standard bone density, which is to say far lower in bones/cu m than the fill deposits at HRH and SVK T. This will require a larger excavation area to get a usable archaeofauna from each major layer (esp given the longer apparent occupational period), and we would anticipate a prolonged excavation effort. It may eventually be productive to combine a major midden excavation with some systematic excavation of the structures. We recommend a major multi-season effort.