

Herding Structures in Northern Iceland

A Preliminary IPY Report of the Field Season 2008

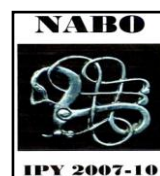
Christian Koch Madsen

Saxo-Instituttet, University of Copenhagen
[ckmadsen@gmail.com]



Fig.1 Steindyrarétt in Svarfadardalur

October 13 2008



Introduction

In the summer of 2008 the author was able to travel to northern Iceland to work with archaeologists and environmental scientists from Iceland, Denmark, Canada, US, and UK involved in three interconnected international projects in the Mývatn area, in Eyjafjörður, and in Vatnsfjörður, all of which combined excavation and environmental science with survey and landscape analysis as part of a long term collaboration of *Archaeological Institute Iceland* (FSI) and the *North Atlantic Biocultural Organization* (NABO). The objective of this collaboration was to combine some of the data generated from three years of archaeological work of the *Vatnahverfi Project* (another IPY-project centred on Southwest Greenland), a master's thesis on Norse enclosures and other herding structures, and the connection of herding structures with other landscape features, zooarchaeology, farm excavation, and isotopic analysis of human and animal diets in Greenland –a study which has already begun to reveal intriguing results in better understanding the land use practices of the vanished Norse settlements in Greenland. However, in order to fully understand this dimension of Norse pastoral activities, a wider North Atlantic perspective is essential and in the summer of 2008, such an opportunity was provided by IPY NABO funding. During three weeks the present author visited three different regions of northern Iceland, trying to get familiar not only with the herding structures, but also with the landscape and the more general dimensions of the archaeological setting of Iceland. Since many of the results of this work as yet only are present as field notes, sketches, uncorrected GPS measurements and an extensive photo archive in hands of the author, this preliminary report will present the diverse fieldwork in the form of a shortened, illustrated and commented diary. A formal report (Aldred and Madsen 2009) will present the full details of the survey results. A publication in *Journal of the North Atlantic* (JONA) comparing patterning in herding structures in Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands is planned as later product of this study.

Three Weeks of Fieldwork in Northern Iceland

22.6.-26.6.2008: Arrival in Reykjavik, Iceland, and transfer to Narfastadir in the Mývatn region, the base for the team of specialists working at Skútustaðir as part of the Mývatn Project. Among these was Oscar Aldred, who already had been working with *réttir*, i.e. historical (and medieval?) communal herding facilities, in Iceland. The setup was that we should join forces and spend this first week surveying as many *réttir* as possible (5 as it turned out) and discussing different ways in which we might each use this type of structure in our studies of the North Atlantic herding practices. As most of the practical results of this week of field work have already been presented in another preliminary IPY-report, by O. Aldred and present author, only certain aspects relating to my own personal studies will be relayed here.



Fig.2 Setting up DGPS base-station at Hlidarétt near Reykjahlid

One of the most interesting aspects of the *réttir* that immediately appeared to us was the many different construction phases of these structures: enlargement or adding of enclosures, extension of walls, blocking off entrances etc (see e.g. fig.3). At Hlidarétt, for instance, it seemed that we from mere close inspection of the walls could trace a series of structural developments, though such observation of course needs historical or archaeological confirmation. The dating of the *réttir* and their phasing was planned as goal for a potential 2009 field season.

One notable feature of seemingly all the stone *réttir* was that the largest, central enclosure seemed to be the first phase of construction, was heavier build, and seemed less liable to major rearrangement. Looking



Fig. 3 Secondary blocking of entrance to compartment in Hlidarétt

at the Greenlandic example from ruin group E90 in the bottom of the Sioralik fjord, the size of the ruins NO. 1&6, enclosing areas of 1519m² and 1381m² respectively, and the dimensions of their walls are not far from the larger of the surveyed réttir of Iceland (fig.5&6). Furthermore, the enclosures of E90 are displaying trends towards the addition of features to the main enclosure, thus hinting at similar developmental patterns as in Iceland.

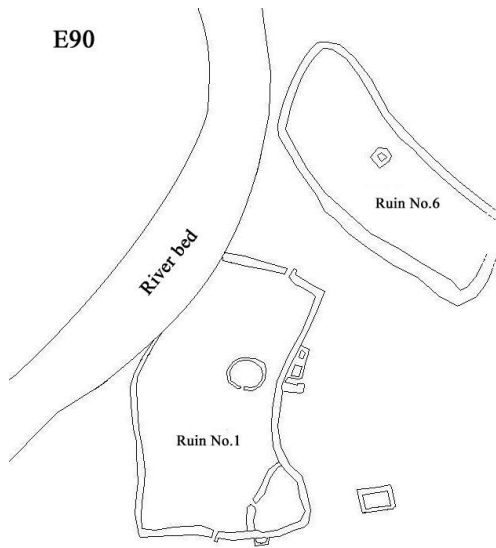


Fig.4 The two large enclosures of ruin group E90 in Southwest Greenland

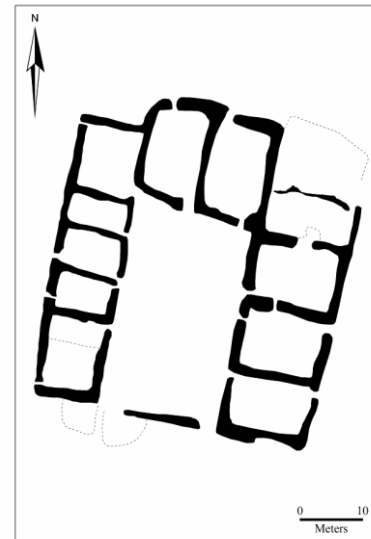


Fig.5 Sellandarétt (plan by O. Aldred)

These similarities reflect actual correlation, it raises two interesting possibilities: on the one hand it seems possible that the enclosures of the fossilized medieval ruin landscape of Greenland might represent an early development of herding practices with communal dimensions, an observation which would have tremendous importance in our understanding of the Norse Greenlandic societal organisation, the structure of which we might hint at from the use of these structures in Iceland. On the other hand, the medieval date of some similar enclosures in Greenland, might indeed suggest that the communal herding practices in Iceland may possibly be traced back in time to at least this period. However, only further investigations of chronology and phasing will reveal such patterns.

Another result of the survey and discussions of réttir in Iceland was a heightened awareness of the topographical locality of herding structures, both functional and social. Although it is yet to be disclosed, one of the ideas of O. Aldred is that the rétt possibly mirrors the community it serves, the location of the individual compartments pointing towards the farm it serves and its size both facilitating and signalling varying degrees of wealth (i.e. flock sizes). The restructuring of compartments in the réttir certainly suggests this. On the functional side, the topographical location of the rétt reveals the natural



Fig. 6 New and old rétt located at the junction of the valley Thorvaldsdalur and the river plain of Oxadalur near Akureyri in Eyjafjörður.

“herding corridors” of the landscape, i.e. riverbanks, valleys coming down from the highlands, junctions etc. (fig.6). Such natural herding corridors may be established in the Greenland setting also, possibly allowing for a better interpretation of the many different types of ruin groups found in the landscape.



Fig.7 Sheep shelter made in a natural volcanic outcrop at Haganesgötur

This first week also gave the opportunity for visiting a number of other herding sites (e.g. fig.7) and some time was also spend with the team at Skútustaðir, either helping out at the excavation or familiarizing myself with Icelandic soil types, new excavation methods etc.

26.6.2008: Move from Narfastadir, Mývatn, to Akureyri, Eyjafjörður, where the team working at Möðruvellir as part of the Gásir Hinterland Project was based.

27.6.-4.7.2008: As the excavation at Möðruvellir was entering into its final week, much time was spend helping to wrap up the field season of the Gásir Hinterland Project, which gave me great opportunity to further familiarize myself with practices and methods in Icelandic archaeology. Very rewarding were the 3 days of excavation at Myrkárdalur, a remote, abandoned farm in the Eyjafjörður hinterland. Besides excavation, however, there was also time for a few excursions in the vicinity.



Fig.8 Excavating at Myrkárdalur. Note the passage house in the foreground.

Joined by P.H.D.-student Astrid H. Björk and her research assistant, the 27.6.2008 saw an excursion to Svarfadardalur southwest of Dalvík, where a number of sites were visited. This was a great opportunity for correlating pedestrian survey notes with the actual ruins in the landscape. The area around Eyjafjörður has seen almost complete pedestrian survey and would thus seem very well suited for drawing in into a comparative study of herding structures and –practices. However, the excursion Svarfadardalur revealed both plusses and minuses in this survey work, as well as gave an insight into the topographical layout of farmsteads in this area of Iceland. One notable and frustrating problem with the survey data from Eyjafjörður is the almost complete lack of chronology and the present day use of old farmland. As most of the farmsteads in Iceland have been inhabited from the Viking Age up to present times, buildings of all time periods (though of course mostly later buildings) are found on the *tún*, greatly confusing our understanding of their chronology (which in the Greenland setting at least is lessened by the abandonment of the settlements around 1450 A.D.). This makes it hard to discern developments in the shapes and functions of different types of enclosures. These problems are also enhanced in areas such as those around Eyjafjörður, where old structural patterns – especially those of less noticeable buildings such enclosures, sheep shelters etc. – have been all but obliterated by modern farming.



Fig. 9 View from the middle of Svarfadardalur towards the north. Note the farmsteads on each side of the river, all of them located on Viking/medieval farm sites.

3.7.2008 the author took 10km hike into Thorvaldsdalur, a narrow valley with its eastern entrance opening down towards the Oxadalur river plain, exactly where Thorvaldsdalsrétt (fig.6) is located. The valley was inspected to document its function as a natural herding corridor, as well as a representative of the natural fauna the valleys of the Eyjafjörður region. Besides locating and registering a previously unknown herding structure (65°46.171N, 018°22.824V), the vegetation at different altitudes (measured with pressure altimeter) was registered and photo documented (fig.10). Notes on this should hopefully ease and clarify the similarities and contrasts with the herding situations in the Greenland setting.



Fig. 10 The landscape and vegetation in Thorvaldsdalur at c.500m elevation. Note the snow in the crevasses still present in early July.

5.7.-7.7.2008: Weekend trip to Reykjavik. On the 7.7.2008 joining up with the team from FSI and the students going to the field school at Vatnsfjörður, driving to the site.

8.7.-14.7.2008: Meeting up again with O. Aldred and his colleague P.B. Heide, both teaching the field school students in and surveying the area around Vatnsfjörður, the last week in Iceland was meant for experiencing the landscape of the North-western part of Iceland, which environmentally is very similar to Southwest Greenland. Furthermore, P.B. Heide is doing a P.H.D. on, among other things, cairns and is using Vatnahverfi in Greenland, as a study area. As present author was going to register cairns for him later in the summer in Greenland, discussions on this type of structure and its functions and locations in the landscape was much needed and welcomed. Thus, I joined O. Aldred, P.B. Heide for a two day survey in the high plains on the southern part of the peninsula, at the same time as surveying also noting and photo documenting the vegetation at different altitudes.



Fig.11 Registering a newly located cairn in the Vatnsfjörður highlands.

As it turned out, Vatnsfjörður proved to be the most promising area in Iceland for comparing with Norse Greenlandic herding practices; this owes not so much to the similarities of environment, but just as much to the fact that it is very well surveyed, can be combined with archaeological data (i.e. the excavation of the church farm at Vatnsfjörður) and has been much less disturbed by recent farming than the other visited areas. Having decided to draw in the Vatnsfjörður area as a comparative study area and joining forces with the staff of the field school, 6 enclosures were surveyed with DGPS, described and photo documented (fig.14).



Fig.12 *The tún and farm of Sveinhús in the foreground and Vatnsfjörður with its “step-ped” hills in the background.*

Another interesting dimension of drawing in the Vatnsfjörður area is its location near to the coast and the natural herding corridors created by this topography. For instance, anticipating that the stepped hills above the coastline near Vatnsfjörður (see fig.12) may have functioned as natural herding corridors, they were surveyed by present author, which led to the discovery of a new stretch of wall marked by a cairn (N65°56.812, W022°30.164) closing of one of the “steps” of the hills.

Finally, the visit to Vatnsfjörður gave the opportunity of registering and documenting three stone built fox traps, another feature common to both Northwest Iceland and Southwest Greenland. Two of these (65°56.805N, 022°30.138V & 65°56.860N, 022°30.160V), were newly discovered.



Fig.13 *Foxtrap at 65°56.805N, 022°30.138V*

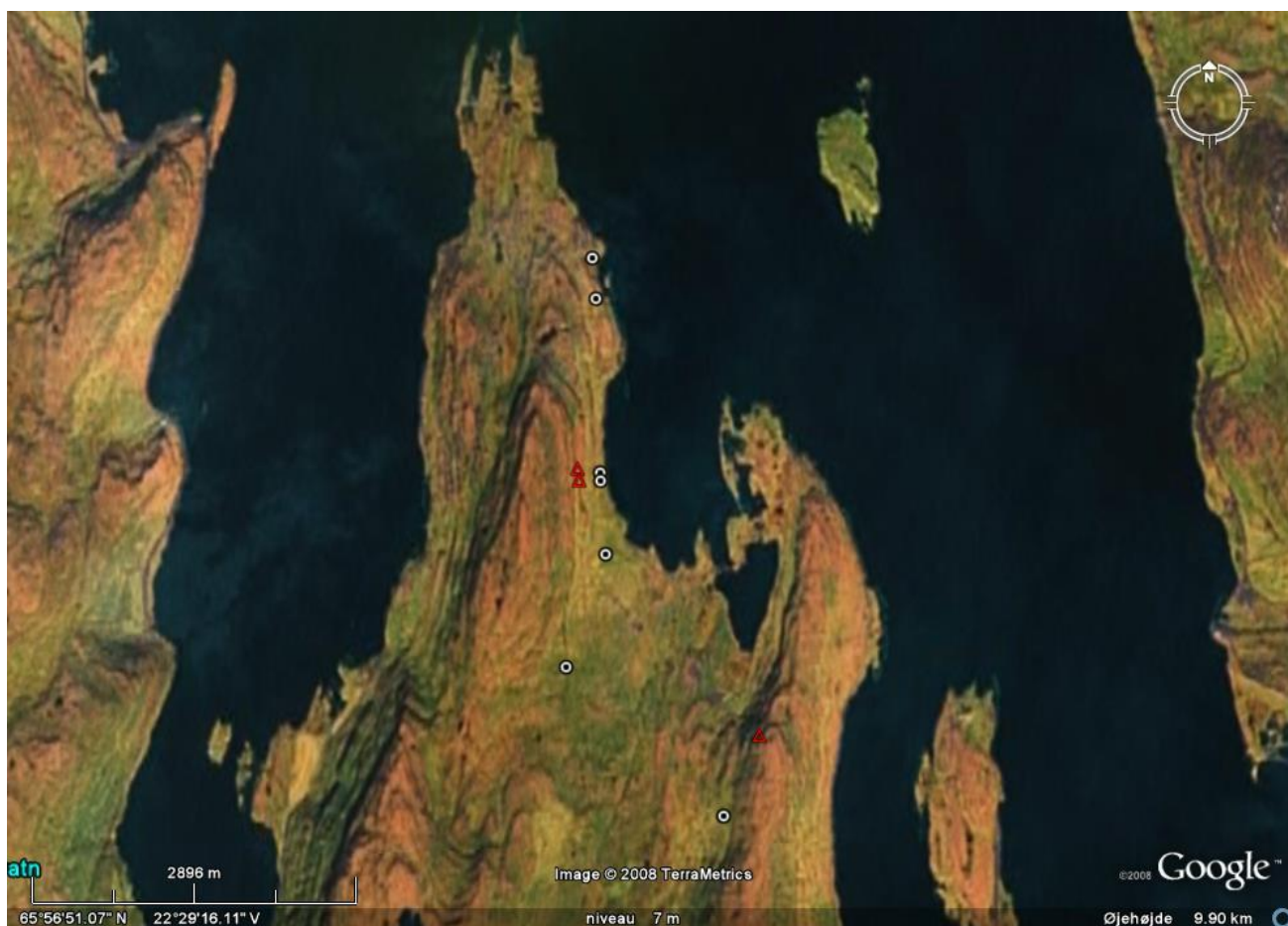


Fig.14 The 7 enclosures (white circles) and three fox traps (red triangles) surveyed in the Vatnsfjörður area.

14.07.2008: Trip to Reykjavik

15.07.2008: Flight from Reykjavik to Narsarsuaq, Greenland

Summary

Besides surveying 5 réttir, 7 enclosures, and 3 fox traps, helping out on 4 different excavations and producing vast sets of notes and a large photo archive, the Iceland field season of the summer 2008 first and foremost opened the eyes of the present author to a range of new possibilities of archaeological research in the North Atlantic material, as well as introducing him to a number of peers, who with their knowledge and helpfulness, made this trip extremely productive. Thus, even though most of the collected data awaits further analysis and comparison, it already forms the basis of new research agendas and collaboration across the North Atlantic to be explored and expanded in the future.

Acknowledgements

This collaborative study was part of the IPY international scholar-exchange program of NABO (North Atlantic Biocultural Organization, www.nabohome.org) funded by the US National Science Foundation Office of Polar Programs Arctic Social Sciences Program International Polar Year *Human Ecodynamics in the North Atlantic Project* (OPP IPY 07322327) and by NSF dissertation improvement grant to Ramona Harrison *Gásir Hinterlands Project* (OPP ARC 0809033) and by support from Fornleifasjóður, Iceland. It is a product both of the NABO research cooperative and the 2007-10 International Polar Year collaboration.