

***Réttir* in the landscape**

***Archaeological investigations of sheep-folds in
Skútustaðarhreppur and other neighbouring districts***



IPY Report on fieldwork - Summer 2009

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Front cover: Trench excavated against wall of Hlíðarétt, south of Reykjahlíð, June 2009.

Summary

This report outlines the research that was conducted over the course of two weeks in June 2009. The basis for this research was derived from a survey in 2008 of five *réttir* (sheep folds) using a Differential Global Positioning System (DGPS). Four sites were trenched to ascertain their age, and in addition a further ten sites: five were surveyed using both a standard field record and five using a DGPS. A discussion relating to the location of *réttir*, their internal architectural and spatial organisation and the temporality of the *réttir* in relation to their use and abandonment.

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Introduction

This report is the second in a series relating to the archaeological investigations taking place around Mývatn in relation to sheep folds (Isl rétt) specifically, but not exclusively, those associated with the seasonal gathering and sorting of sheep from the grazing areas. The projects general aims are to elaborate further the practices involved, and in partocular for this report, monument biographies i.e. chronologies, adaptations and uses.

Réttir are seasonally used monuments to sort sheep after collection from the grazing areas in late summer and autumn (mid-September). They were and continue to be used today as gathering places not only for animals (sheep or horses) but also for whole communities; consequently the monuments are the venue for a major social event in the seasonal calendar that combines many facets of rural living. During the winter months, however, these monuments are exposed to low levels of entanglements by the community who are abided to maintain the monuments in preparation for the next sorting.

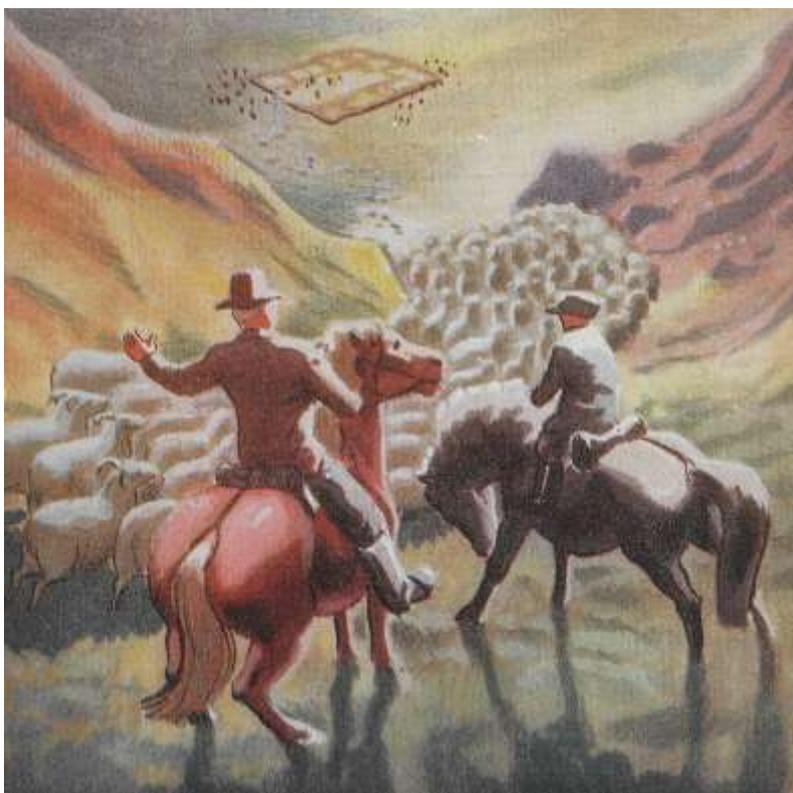


Figure 1. Pictorial representation of sheep being driven down from the highlands – the area of grazing - to the lowland – the place of the réttir (Göngur og réttir (vol II) 1949: frontspiece).

The main focus for the report is on the monument itself, but as it has been suggested this aspect of *réttir* is but one part of a wider study on the landscape setting of these monuments in association with the routes of movement to and from the grazing areas and farm zone (the central place of dwelling). In particular, this study is situated within a general concern linked to understanding further the temporality of the landscape with respect to its grazing strategies. Essentially, what is being conducted is a landscape archaeology of *réttir* and the movement of animals to and from the grazing areas, noting the way in which the landscape is perceived and understood through the practice of sorting and gathering (*fjallskil*) and if the strategies of use change over time, and contextually, what affect this has on the environment and the perception of the landscape. There is a focus both on the traditional accounts of the practice and monuments from historical sources relating to *fjallskil*, as well as on innovative approaches to its study from an archaeological perspective. This involves a landscape archaeology orientation, framed by archaeological field survey (*fornleifaskráning*) and excavation.

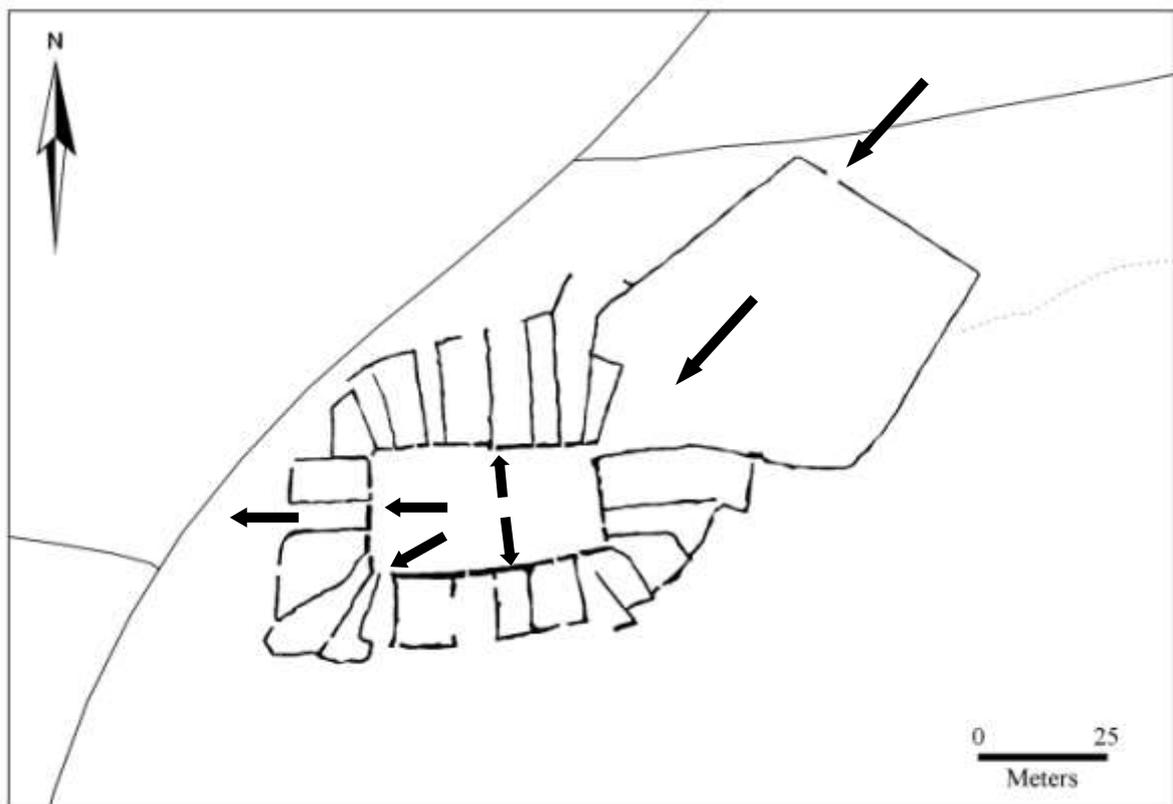


Figure 2. Hlíðarétt, Reykjahlíð, Skutustaðarhreppur. Arrows represent the movement of sheep into and out of the monument.

The focus on the *réttir* are an important part of the general study on grazing practices in Iceland for several reasons. The *réttir* are a material form that stands for the relationship that farm communities have with landscape as a grazing resource; that is to say that the monument is a mirror of the attentiveness that communities have towards the organisation of landscape use. This is seen through the way in which this resource is managed and shared, and how it is implemented in practice. This material relationship is expressed in several ways through the *rétt*: through the location of the monument with respect to the grazing areas and the farm zone; the spatial organisation within the monument itself; and the temporality (the expansion and contraction of the monument) seen through the lens of architecture (i.e its construction form). This short study and report are a start to understanding in a more concrete ways the material relationships with respect to the temporality of the monument.

The *réttir* monuments are composed of three elements: the individual farm chambers (*dilkur*), as well as a central enclosure (*almeningur*) and, on occasions, an outer enclosure. The *dilkur* are attached to the central enclosure by a gate which provides access to and from the central area. The spatial form of the *réttir*, particular those surveyed for this study, suggests a number of architectural variations, from circular and curvilinear forms, to rectangular and square forms, to more organic and amorphous forms; the study areas has examples of each of these forms. The *réttir* also come in a variety of sizes, but what may be important in analysing the relationship between farming communities, the animals and the landscape is the size of the central area within the *rétt* and the outer enclosure (if there is one) in relation to documented or archaeological derivations of sheep numbers for a particular period of time.

Archaeology and réttir?

There are several aspects of *réttir* which are interesting for archaeologists. Firstly, the spatial layout of the *dilkur* may reflect two inter-related aspects. That there is possible connection between the directionality and the through-flow of the movement by sheep from the central enclosure to the *dilkur* and out towards the home farm: a practical positioning for herding sheep. And that the spatial arrangement reflects in the monument a symbolic reflection of the surrounding farm landscape. Although episodes of reorganization may have occurred, it is likely that the *dilkur* were not randomly allocated but mirror a social organization of some kind. Secondly, the size of the *dilkur* and their position, as well as the size of the central and outer enclosures, may indicate the wealth or potential wealth of the districts or farms based on the number of animals that it owns. The sizes therefore should indicate the sheep-capacity of the *réttir* for the local community.

These two factors are interesting as proxies for the archaeological faunal record indicating sheep numbers on farms (on a seasonal basis derived from midden layering) and historical documentary sources that indicate the number of sheep on farm, as well as its values. Part of the study in 2008 was to correlate the potential sheep community from the internal size of the *rétt* and to match this, if possible, to the historical or archaeological (NISP) record. However, the specific archaeological problem remained from the results in 2008: how to gauge the relationship between the monument and its size of internal enclosure as it stands today – as a visible form as well as through potential phasing of the enclosure through a close examination of its architecture – with the historical records concerning the number of sheep used by a community who used and monument at the time of construction. This involved ascertaining the temporal relationship between the monument by establishing its *terminus post quem* and correlating this historical sources of the same date.

The date of construction and the subsequent alterations to a monument (some of which are visible in the alterations to the spatial form and in the architecture of the construction, especially wall thickness and indications of abutting walls and changes in alignment) are then used to align the archaeological/architectural biography of a *rétt* with its documented histories that list sheep numbers. In particular, the *fjallskilbók* contains lists in order of farms (*heimili*), with farmers name (*nöfn*), the sheep numbers that have gone to graze to the grazing areas

(*ffjártala*) and the numbers of gathers required for each farm (*gangamenn*)¹. This research will essentially test the idea that the size of the internal enclosure correlates to sheep numbers. Actual numbers of individual sheep from an assemblage that pre-date documentary evidence and correlating these to monuments that date to a similar period is part of the research question whether there was a communal land-use management that included a *réttir* system, or whether this was primarily a 19th century (as has been suggested) phenomena.

Determining the temporal character of the *réttir* monuments is important not only to ascertain the date of individual monuments, but also to the wider system, and ascertaining to what extent this is the adaption of an earlier system of organising the land. Some indication of land management is already suggested by the boundary systems which are particularly well preserved in the north-east². There is some suggestion that there was a gradual movement of the *réttir* in the study area away from the grazing lands; suggesting the proposition that the earliest *réttir* are located in the grazing areas, whereas later, perhaps in the mid-19th century, the *réttir* are located closer towards the farm zone.

Previous work

There has been limited archaeological investigations on important farm and community monuments in Iceland. *Réttir* are monuments in the sense of being places of habitual and routine activities on a yearly basis that are imbued with social reproduction at both farm and community levels. Relatively little is known concerning the earlier usages of *réttir*, although several accounts indicate that sheep herding and transhumance practices were taking place as early as the 13th century. However, to what extent a system the 19th century system that still underwrites the present-day system was the same as the one used much earlier is as yet unanswerable. More data concerning the dating and distribution of these sites needs to be researched.

To date there has been only a few archaeological research associated with *réttir*. The structure excavated at Hegranes, was possibly another type of feature, or even smaller type of animal

¹ Bragi Sigurjónsson 1950 (*Göngur og réttir III Þingeyjar- og Múlaþing*. Akureyri: Bókaútgáfan Norðri): 199-201. A reproduction of the *ffjallskilbók* which list from 1882 relating to Helgastaðarhreppu and Hraunsrétt.

² Árni Einarsson, Oddgeir Hansson and Orri Vésteinsson 2002 An Extensive System of Medieval Earthworks in Northeast Iceland, *Archaeologia Islandica* 2: 61-73.

fold/enclosure³. Besides the excavations that took place in association with this study, there was an excavation of a stone built *rétt* in the Búðarháls area in advance of development⁴. The excavations revealed a 17th century enclosure divided into two by a low lying partition wall. The location of the enclosure suggests that there was no relation between it and the farm zone with there being no settlement within 30 km radius. It is conceivable that the enclosure was a holding pen for sheep being transported across the river at the near-by ford, though it is historically considered to be a *rétt*.

In terms of archaeological survey there have been two types of archaeological investigations to date. The first which is part of the routine *fornleifaskraning* that occurs district by district. In areas where there have been survey work all types of fold (*réttir*) – essentially a holding enclosure for animals - have been recorded, both in the field and through documentary sources. The second is connected to the specific research interest by the applicant in landscape archaeology; on the research of community level practices in Iceland connected to my PhD (at University of Iceland) on *An archaeology of movement*. I am interested in the community sheep folds to which sheep were brought from the grazing areas to the farm zone and separated into farms according to their ear markings. This is in relation to the transhumance and herding practices from the Viking to modern day in north east Iceland⁵.

The basis for the current project is primarily connected the second investigation of *réttir* in the district of Skútustaðahreppur and linked to research in 2008⁶ in which five *réttir* were measured and surveyed in the field using a Differential Global Positioning System (DGPS). This was related to both the applicant's research (as already stated) but also in association with an International Polar Year (IPY) funded project (*Long Term Human Ecodynamics in the Norse North Atlantic: cases of sustainability, survival, and collapse*).

³ Rescue excavations at Hegranes found a possible *rétt*: Guðmundur Olafsson & Mjöll Snæs dóttir 1976 Rust í Hegranes, *Árbók hins íslenska fornleifafélags 1975*: 69-78.

⁴ Aldred, O 2009 *Rétt við Búðarhálsvirkjun. Archaeological Investigations*. Fornleifastofnun Íslands FS428-09031. Reykjavík.

⁵ Cf Aldred, O 2006 *Réttir in the landscape. A study on the context of focal points*, in J Arneborg and B Gronnow (eds.) *Dynamics of Northern Societies. Proceedings of the SILA/NABO Conference on Arctic and North Atlantic Archaeology, Copenhagen, May 10th–14th, 2004*. Publications from the National Museum. Studies in Archaeology and History, Vol. 10. Copenhagen. Pp. 353–63. Aldred, O & Madson, C 2008 *Réttir in the landscape. A study on the interactions between humans and animals through sheep-fold monuments*. Unpublished IPY report.

⁶ Aldred & Madson 2008.

Research and methodology

The main research goal of the project being reported here are the investigations that continued the 2008 research but also to archaeologically date several of the *réttir* surveyed in 2008. Trenches excavated against the wall of *réttir* revealed an additional level of information about the date of construction, supporting documentary and oral histories surrounding these monuments. As a consequence further knowledge has been added concerning the origins and construction of *réttir* at the excavated sites. Added to the already extensive archaeological work in the region, the *réttir* project is linked to the material on the wider settlement occupation, environmental change, and the animal husbandry and land management since the Viking period from research already conducted in the Mývatn environs by the North Atlantic Biocultural Organisation (NABO) and Fornleifastofnun Íslands over the last 15 years. Furthermore, the research has added considerable knowledge concerning a little understood important community practice of sheep gathering and sorting.

In general, the aim of the project was to measure additional *réttir* with a DGPS in order to get an accurate measurement of form (enclosures, *dilkur*, and other features) with which to compare the animal numbers and farm values. And secondly, to determine the archaeological age of several of the monuments. As a result it is hoped to reflect on the *réttir* as proxies for community sheep-capacities with respect to their temporal ordering. The project also has the aim to assess the relationship between the spatial layout of the *dilkur* in relation to the farm landscape, to determine the relationship between the material landscape and the symbolic-mimetic arrangement of the *réttir*.

In addition, Professor Ian Simpson, as well as Dr Amanda Thomsen and Jennifer Brown (University of Stirling), have been carrying out research on the land degradation and rangeland grazing strategies in the area. This research helps to address questions concerning the differences in localised farm grazing practices contra to communal based practices, and timing of *réttir* as a community centred practice, and how sheilings and community grazing practices operated side by side. Although a complicated issue, and intimately connected to the dynamic balance between environmental change against estimates in sheep numbers and the impact of herds on land, this will nonetheless provide an interesting angle of inquiry (though not reported as such here).

Also of particular interest in this study, though not reported here, are the movement strategies associated with collecting sheep from the rangeland pasture areas. In particular the movement from one *réttir* to another in communal systems of herding, and transferring of animals from the *réttir* to the farm; this forms a part of my PhD research. Furthermore, *réttir* acted as a social gathering for communities, and were an opportunity for small trade, exchanges, settling community matters and much more. In many ways the activities associated (gathering, sorting, community places, maintenance) with *réttir* bonded communities together – provided a year round community focus - and therefore are an important avenue of research in understanding the social worlds of past societies and their interactions with environments⁷.

<i>Réttir</i>	<i>Start date</i>	<i>End date</i>
*Kambsrétt or Grænavatnsrétt or *Svartárbkot	?	?
Réttartangi (Garðsmýrarrétt +)	?	?
Strengjarétt (?Grænavatnsrétt 1878)	?	1905
Selladarétt	?	1910
Gautlandarétt	1909-11/1912	1933
Baldursheimarétt	1933/1934	in use
* Réttagrund	?	?
* Gæsadalur	?	?
Dalsrétt +	?	1880
Hliðarétt	1880	in use
Lítla Dalsrétt +	?	?
Hlíðarendi -	?	in use
Lundabrekka -	?	in use
Víðiker -	?	in use
Mýri -	?	in use
Hallbjarnarétt I	?	1930s
Hallbjarnarétt II +	1930s	?in use
Kasthvammsrétt -	?	?
Gamalarétt (Hörgsdalur) +	?	?
Lítla-Strönd -	?	?

Table 1. *Réttir* in the study area and suggested origin and abandonment dates based on documentary and oral sources. Grouped by community – grazing area. Excavation and survey 2008; DGPS survey 2008-2009+; Sketch survey -; * to be surveyed in 2010. [Svartárbkot is mentioned as 'rétt í Framaffrét' (to be cleaned 1880)].

As a result, two strands of research will take place in connection with the assessment of grazing strategies and *réttir* monuments at different periods in this report, only these are preliminary thoughts. In 2008 the landscape was examined in relation to the location and spatial organisation of *réttir* with other features such as topographic features as well as the

⁷ Aldred 2006: 356.

farm locations from different periods. Also some of the *réttir* monument histories, the internal spatial organisation and their relationship with the sheep-capacities inherent in architecture of the *réttir* were commented on. There are however several difficulties to be overcome. One is to match contemporaneous faunal and historical records for sheep numbers with the monuments themselves. Also an aim is to correlate a farm's *dilkur* within the *rétt* to the wider farm landscape. Without particular documented examples however, this is unlikely to work and to what extent it is likely to have been a fixed and determined allocation of space. In cases where this arrangement is known these assumptions will be tested, both through oral histories and a close inspection of available documentary sources. These problems are being worked on, but are not presented in this report.

The current project reported here, combines both additional survey as well as specific excavation at four sites⁸. The four *réttir* that excavations took place at were surveyed using a DGPS in 2008. The four *réttir* are generally rectilinear in shape; two constructed from turf (Sellandarétt and Hallbjarnanarétt) and two made of stone (Hlíðarétt and Strengjarétt). The work in 2009 used three separate methods, though their application was dependent on to what extent they had been investigated (table 1). The first method was a general sketch or written survey, and each *réttir* was surveyed, photographed and a measured sketch plan drawn. This was carried out at seven sites at places being visited for the first time. The second method was a DGPS survey, using similar techniques as in 2008. Five sites were surveyed in 2009, adding to the five already surveyed in 2008. These were generally sites that appeared to have more than recent histories or could be associated directly with an earlier *rétt* (e.g. Hallbjarnanarétt I and II). The third method was excavation, by placing a single trench partially into or against the walls of the *réttir*. The sections were drawn and recorded, and samples of the visible tephra in the turf or the ground surface on which the *rétt* was built were taken for analysis. The date of the tephra from below the wall gives a *terminus post quem* date for the construction of the monument at this specific location.

The area around Lake Mývatn, in Suður Þingeyarsýsla is the case study area for this project. The modern landscape is relatively diverse, containing an abundance of farms, and improved locally based grazing areas. Due to volcanic activity, the landscape is limited to only a few

⁸ It was intended to excavate at five sites, but the field evidence combined with the recently collected oral testimony at Gautlönd suggests a quite specific history of the *réttir* both in terms of its construction, abandonment and reason for movement to Baldursheimar in 1933/1934. Based on a written transcript of an interview with Þórunn Einarsdóttir and Jón Þórasson from Baldursheimar (2009).

grazing areas: one to the south of Skútustaðir called Mývatnsheiði - Suðurfrétt, another to the south and east of Reykjahlíð called Austurfjall, and another north of Reykjahlíð in Grímsstaðaheiði and Reykjahlíðar called Norðurfjall. All of these areas are a mixture of desert and bare rock, dispersed with patches of vegetation (see figure 3). However, in all of these areas, the environment and vegetation is likely to have been more than it is today. This is commented on in the *fjallskilabók* relating to Skútustaðarhreppur from the late-19th century, where it states in antiquity the Suðurafrétt area was used considerably more than it was in the late-19th century. The three areas that have been identified that were/are used by the local community, and are therefore implicated within this study on *réttir*. The following section reports the main fieldwork findings.

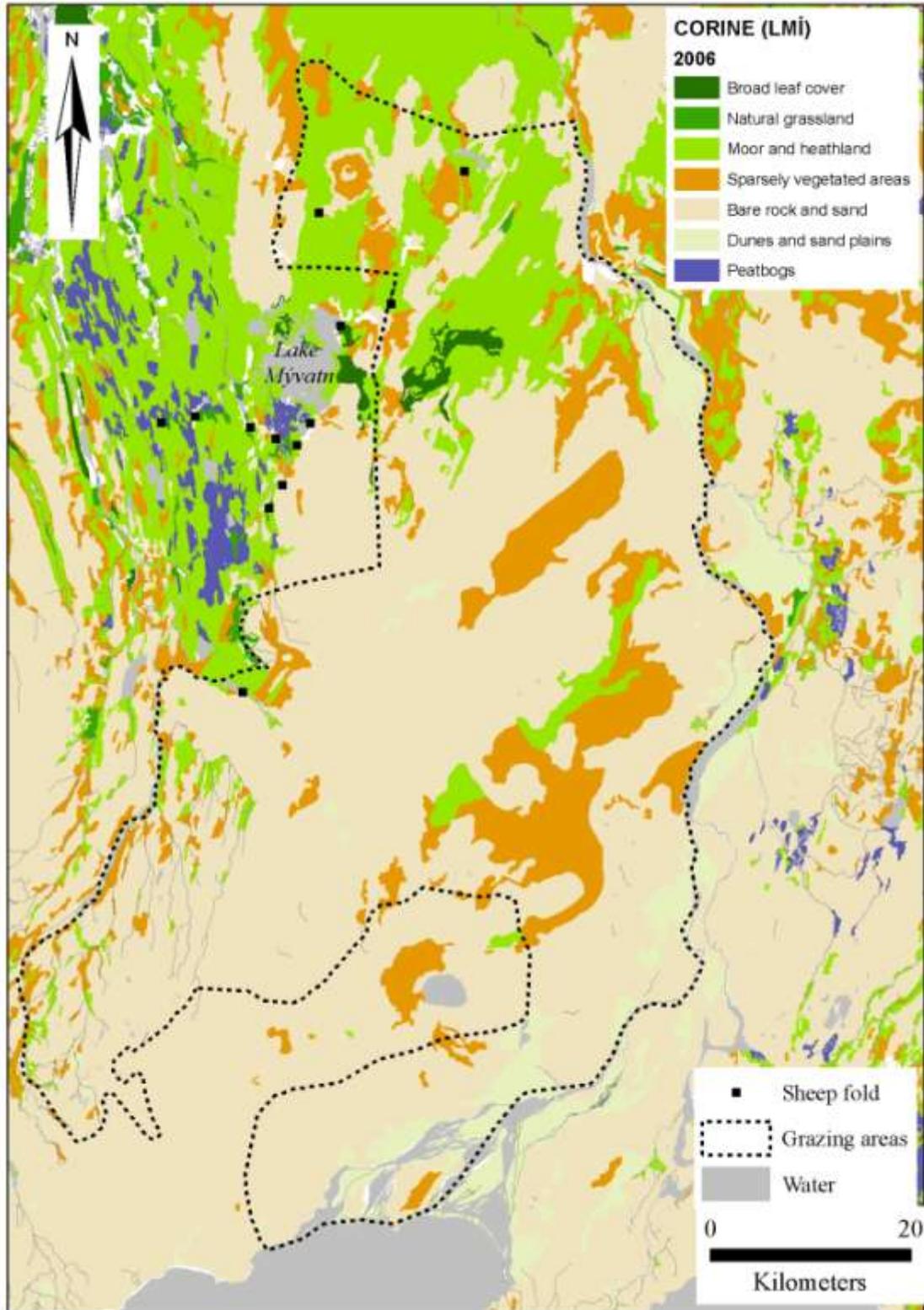


Figure 3. Skútustaðarhreppur's grazing areas (based on source material) and land cover in 2006 (derived from LMÍ CORINE data). Shows the extent of vegetation cover suitable for sheep grazing and the distribution of réttir in Skútustaðarhreppur.

Fieldwork results

Survey

(Small) Dalsrétt (601523, 574020)



Figure 4. Small Dalsrétt (DGPS survey).

The site has not been surveyed either from documentary or fieldsurvey. The small enclosure in Hliðardalur was located eight hundred meters east of the edge of Dalfjall and Namaskarð, and Dalsrétt. The walls of the enclosure measured c. 20m by 8m, and were constructed from natural lava stone, gathered from the surrounding lava outcrops. The *rétt* was built up against a natural edge, formed by lava, which provided a natural wall, although in places (on the western side) this was reinforced by a single stone wall. The constructed part of the enclosure was one stone wide, approximately 0.4m, and built to a height of up to 0.5m. An entrance was seen centrally located in the eastern wall.

Hallbjarnanarétt II (576878, 575820)

On the 10th June 2009, A DGPS survey of the new (c. 1930) *rétt* was undertaken. It was constructed of corrugated iron and wood, with iron brackets and nails. It consisted of 14 *dilkur*, which opened into a central area, and a enclosure to its east. It was nestled in between a slope and the river.

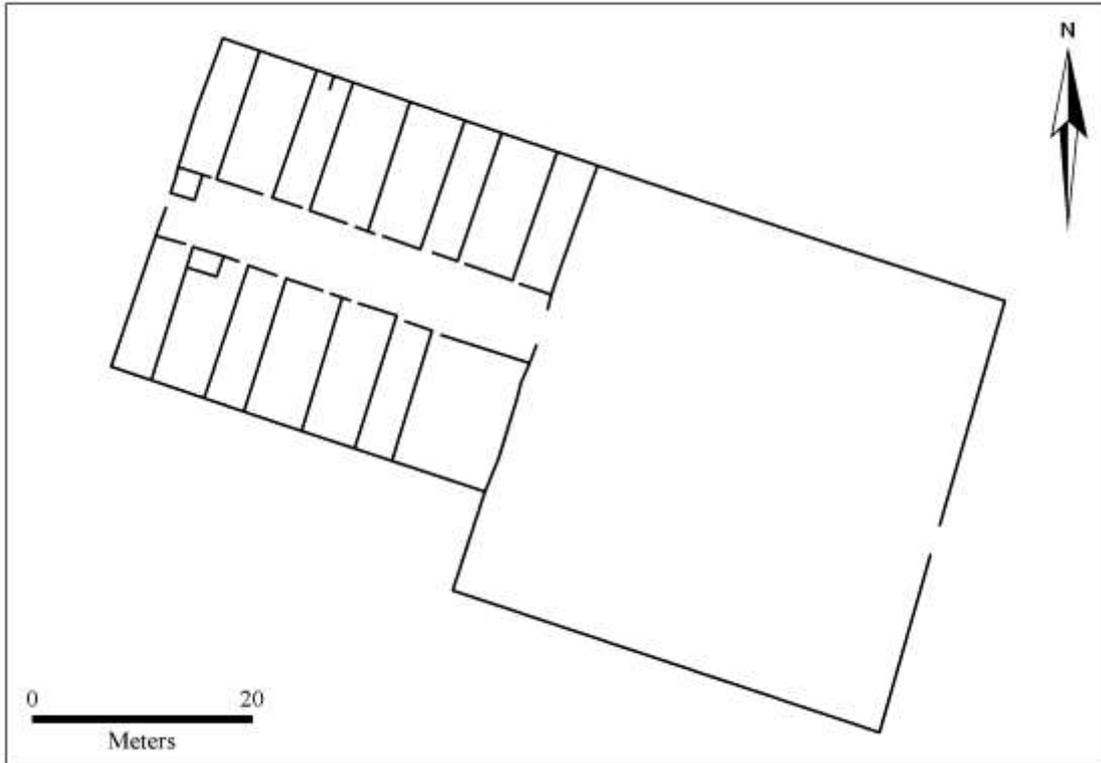


Figure 5. (New) Hallbjarnararétt (DGPS survey).

Like the older Hallbjarnararétt, it was located on the eastern side of the Reykjadalssá. Also like the older Hallbjarnararétt, it had no entrances out of the rétt from the *dilkur*, instead the sheep was moved out from the *dilkur* through the central area. Although the *rétt* was situated slightly above the flood plain of the river, drainage, like the older Hallbjarnararétt, may have been a problem. There was a drainage ditch on the northern edge of the *rétt* that was perhaps constructed in response to this.

Réttir in Barðaldalur

Several *réttir* were sketch surveyed in Bárðardalur. These included a *rétt* at Hliðendi (568600, 568204) built from corrugated iron and wire fences, with eight *dilkur* and a central sorting area and enclosure (all attached). Approximately 25m by 30m, and rectangular in shape, with entrances at its northern end out of the central area, and two further smaller entrances into the enclosure in south end on the east and west sides. Skjálfandafljót (river) was located fifty meters to the east.



Figure 6. Rétt at Lundabrekka, looking north-west.

A *rétt* at Lundabrekka (574222, 551681) was also surveyed (wooden built with wire fencing) which was close to the river (on the west) and had six *dilkur* and a partitioned enclosure/sorting area. It was 40m by 30m, and a divided square shape – one half for the enclosure (west side), the other for the *dilkur* (east); *dilkur* were located only on the eastern side. The enclosure was further partitioned into two half and joined by a gate. Entrances into the enclosure were from both the north and south ends; and exists out of the *dilkur* on the eastern side, though the two furthestmost *dilkur* had exists north and south respectively.

The *rétt* at Viðiker (579673, 547937) was rather large measuring approximately 60m by 50m; and like the others was square in shape, with a large enclosure situated on the eastern *and* southern side of the *rétt*. It had ten *dilkur* that enclosed a central area. It was built from a combination of corrugated iron, wire fences and wooden posts and is probably relatively recent in construction and is still, to some extent, being used.

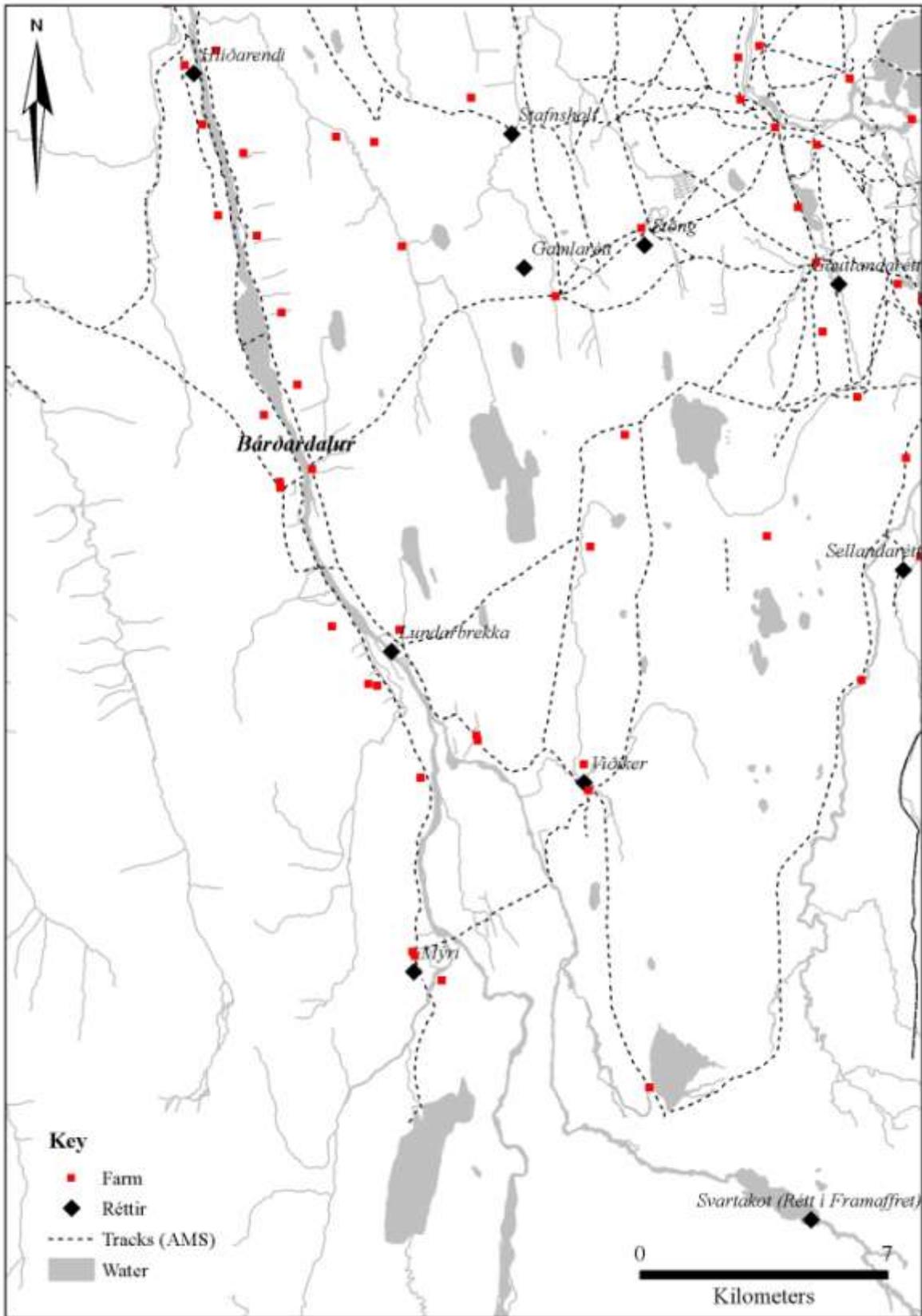


Figure 7. Farms and réttir in Bárðardalur (and a part of Skútustaðarhreppur on the right), with tracks mapped from the American Military Service maps (c. 1950s).

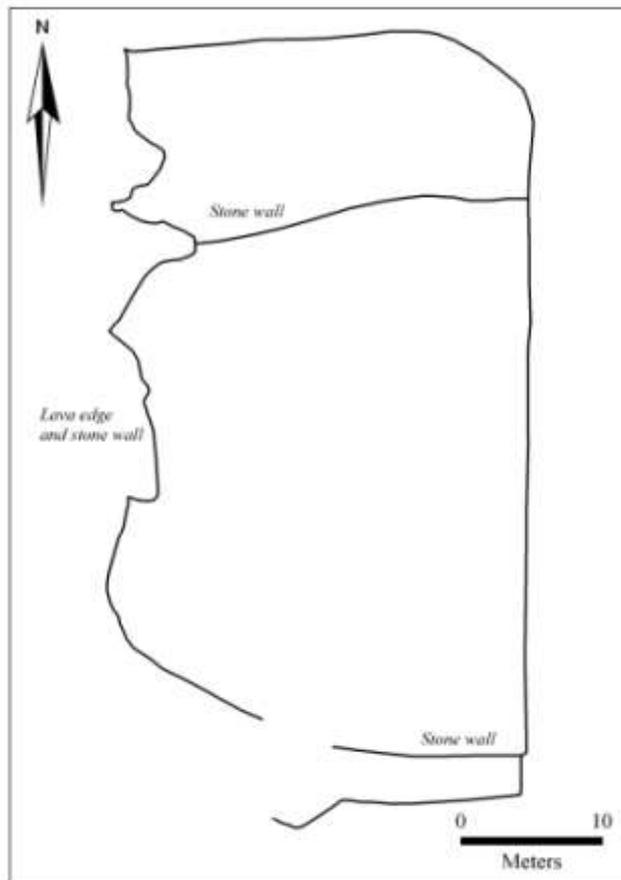


Figure 8. Péturskirkja (DGPS survey).

The following description of Péturskirkja is based on based on an oral testament by Snæbjörn Pétursson (born 1928) (Ö-Reykjahlíð, 1317), and from a documentary survey in 1996 and a field survey in 1999 (Ísleif accessed 10/02/2010). Although it says very little about the enclosure, and more about the structures and ruins which seem to be fairly late in date (c. 1920s) and are associated with a shelter (*Isl Sælahús*).

“Péturskirkja (1934) er leitamannaskýli í austanverðu Austara-hrauntaglinu, fyrst byggð 1925, seinast 1953; er kennd við Pétur Jónsson, er hóf byggingu hennar og reisti hana”, segir í örnefnaskrá. Péturskirkja er sunnan þjóðvegjar og liggur þangað slóði nákvæmlega 9 km

austur af Dettifossafleggjara. Nýrra hús úr steini, sem stendur vestan gömlu Péturskirkju, sést ágætlega frá þjóðveginum.

Þónokkur mannvirki eru á sama bletti: Illa farið steinhús (1953) er uppi á hraunkambinum en gamla Péturskirkja um 10 m suðaustur af. Hlaðnir veggir hennar standa að öllu leyti uppi á lágum hraunstalli. Dyr á SA horni. 10-11 umför af grjóti, torf efst á veggjum. Utanmál er 8 x 5 m og veggir allt að 1 metri á þykkt. Hlaðinn stallur upp að dyrum. Engar hleðslur sjáanlegar innan veggja, botninn er grasi gróinn. Engin merki um þak. Skammt austur af er rétt, að hluta grjóthlaðinn garður í boga með hraunjaðrinum en að öðru leyti trégirðing með vír. Garðurinn er rúmlega 60 m langur og allt að 1,5 m á hæð. Rúma 30 m suðvestur af hlaðna kofanum er hesthús. Lítur ekki út fyrir að vera gamalt en byggt með gamla laginu. Grjóthlaðnir veggir og tyrft yfir, timburgaflar og bárujárnsþak. Mál um 15 x 6 m. Dyr á austurgafli, veggjaþykkt rúmum metri og 8 umför grjóts. Inni er moldargólf og jötur úr viði.

Sunnan og vestan við hesthúsið eru þrjú lítil og grjóthlaðin aðhöld, milli hraunjaðars og hesthúsveggja. Þau gætu verið nokkuð gömul en virðast einkum þjóna sem kamrar núorðið. Snæbjörn Pétursson segir að byrjað hafi verið á gamla húsinu 1924. Í bókum Ólafs Jónssonar um Ódáðahraun eru margar frásagnir af eftirleitum Benedikts Sigurjónssonar, Fjalla-Bensa, sem enduðu yfirleitt með margra daga hrakningum og lífsháska. Í sumum þeirra er sagt frá dvöl hans í sæluhúsinu gamla.

Both a DGPS and sketch survey were undertaken in Austurfjall. The survey was used to explore the eastern grazing area, including the potentially natural enclosure at Hrossaborg, and the shelter, chapel and enclosure at Péturskirkja.

The enclosure at Péturskirkja suggested two distinct phases in its construction. The first was built from stone, and the second utilising elements of this had added more recently wire fencing and wooden posts. There appeared to be remnants of earlier stone walls under the ground surface that were partially visible as slight earthworks. The first phase stone construction appeared to be smaller than the currently used one.



Figure 9. Péturskirkja enclosure looking north-east.

A particularly interesting feature of the enclosure was the way in which the western side of the enclosure utilised the lava edge, and in some places it was clear that there had been some modification enhancing its wall-like character. Occasionally on the western side a stone wall had been built, though in places this showed signs of being unmaintained and in disrepair. The second phase enclosure was approximately 45m by 20m, where as the earlier stone built enclosure was shorter on its north south axis c. 35m, but a little fuller along its east west axis at c. 25m. There were also indications of a stone wall underneath the eastern side which was currently a wire fence.

Dalsrétt and Dalshús (600958, 574613) SP-208:096 & SP-208:097

The following description of Dalsrétt (SP-208:096) is based on based on an oral testament by Ármann Pétursson (born 1924) (Ö-Grænavatn: 4, Ö-Garður: 15-16), and from a documentary survey in 1996 and a field survey in 1999 (Ísleif accessed 10/02/2010).

“Rúst af grjóthlaðinni rétt í Hlíðardal, nærri Dalhúsum, sögð hafa verið lögð niður um 1880”, segir í söguminjaskrá. Þegar komið er yfir Námaskarð er Dalfjalli fylgt til norðurs á að giska 1 km. Þar eru rústir á hól, alveg í fjallsrótunum.

Réttin enn greinileg. Myndar næstum u kringum Dalhús (097) og er aflöng og mjó. Skiptist í 5 - 6 hól og eru tvö þeirra sýnu stærst. Tvö nyrstu hólfín eru ofan í dálítlu gili; þar er greinilegt op og hefur líklega verið rekið inn þar, enda gilið ágætt aðhald og opið austan megin. Hvergi sér í grjót í réttinni og hleðslur eru víðast hvar mjög signar og lágar.

In addition to the *rétt* and enclosure is Dalshús (SP-208:097):

“Rústir í Hlíðardal, skammt fyrir norðan Námaskarð, sagðar hafa verið beitarhús” segir í söguminjaskrá. “Austan við [Námaskarð] er dálítill grastorfa. Þar voru eitt sinn beitarhús frá Reykjahlíð. Þeirra sjást nú engin teljandi merki” (Ódáðahraun I, 58). Þegar komið er yfir Námaskarð er Dalfjalli fylgt til norðurs á að giska 1 km. Þar eru rústir á hól, alveg í fjallsrótunum.

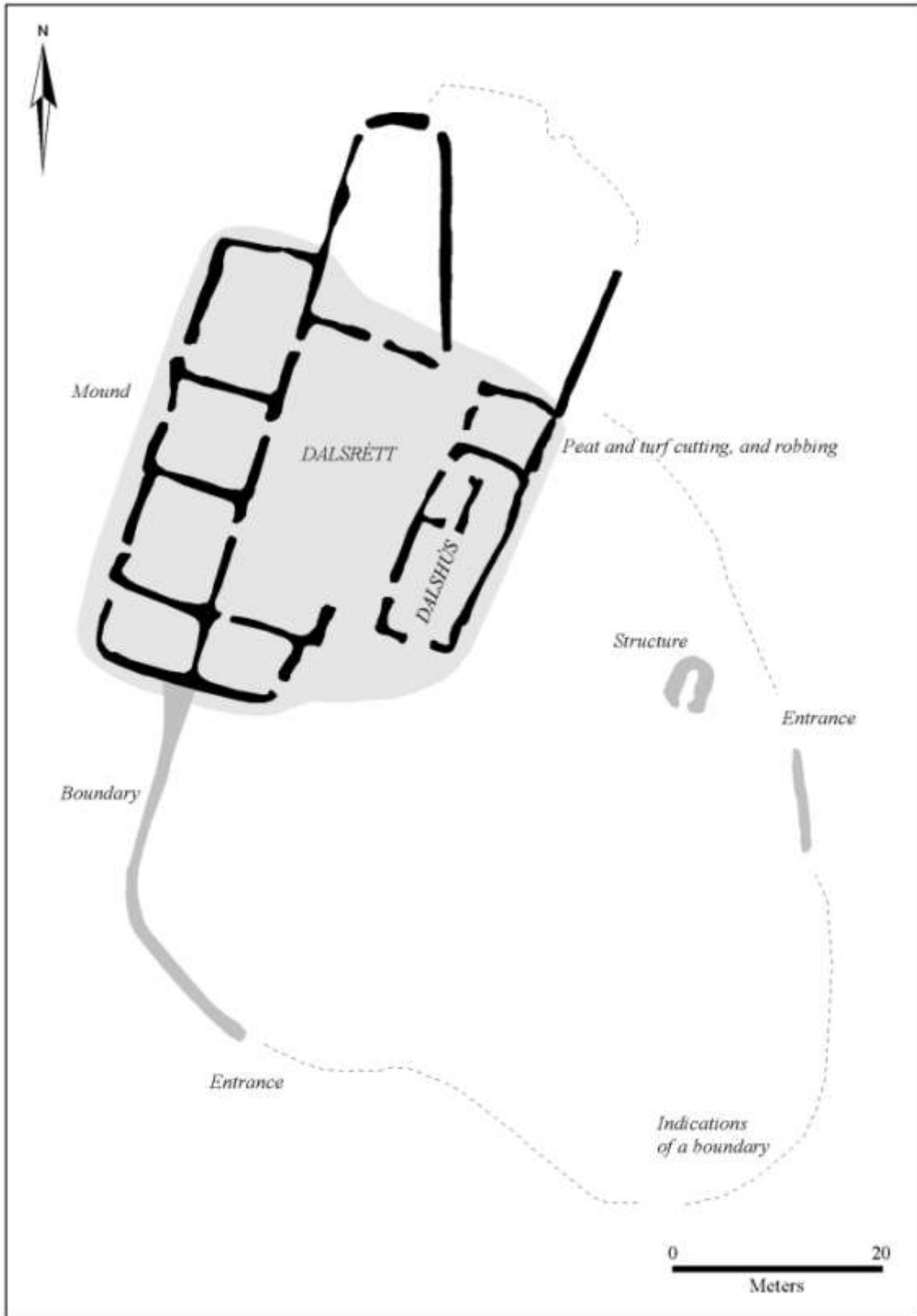


Figure 10. Dalsrétt and Dalshús, and surrounding enclosure (DGPS survey).

Mjög gróin tóft syðst á hólnum. Aflöng, snýr frá suðri til norðurs. Engar hleðslur sjáanlegar að innan og ekki ljóst hvar dyr hafa verið. Eins konar framlenging að norðan, gæti verið hlaða. Þetta er eina rústin sem fannst á þessum slóðum, hugsanlegt er að það séu ekki Dalhús.

The Dalsrétt was abandoned c. 1880 and was replaced by Hliðarétt, which is south of and closer to Reykjahlið. There are several distinct phases of use visible on the surface: a *rétt*, a sheep house and an outer enclosure. Although the relationship between them is uncertain, it is suggested that the sheep house is later than the *rétt*, though there appears to be an earlier phase below the house (on the east) perhaps relating to the *rétt* or to the mounded area on which the *rétt* is situated. The walls are constructed primarily from stone, as well as turf, though vegetation now covers it entirely. There are at least nine to ten *dilkur*; the discrepancy is in part due to the later disturbance by Dalshús as well as ambiguity that the naturally forming hollow in the northern part of the *rétt* create which appear not to have a northern boundary. The *dilkur* arrangement encloses a central chamber, with an entrance on the south side. The *rétt* is approximately 60m by 30m, with its walls standing approximately 0.5m tall.



Figure 11. Dalsrétt, looking east.

A boundary and its projected edge encloses an area approximately 65m by 65m; 4,225 m². On the western edge the boundary is quite clear, though it is less visible along the southern and eastern sides, and rather is suggested by the vegetation growth and the sharp boundary between the it and the sand. Within the enclosure there is a small turf built structure, c. 4.5m by 4m. Several tracks converge on the enclosure and Dalsrétt, from the both the north, east and south.

Dalshús is estimated to be 22m by 10m, and encompasses possibly the space of two *dilkur*, though there is some uncertainty associated with extent of the structure which is interpreted as a sheep house. The walls are made from turf and stand to a height of about one meter.

Réttartangi, Grænavatn (592866, 562587) (SP-203:043)

The following description is based on based on an oral testament by Þorgrímur Starri Björgvinsson (born 1919) (Ö-Grænavatn: 4, Ö-Garður: 15-16), and from a documentary survey in 1996 and a field survey in 1998 (Ísleif accessed 10/02/2010).

“Réttartangi. Austasti tanginn, sem gengur suður í Grænavatnið. Skilrétt Mývetninga áður fyrr. Samkvæmt munnmælum ... mun hún hafa verið í notkun í byrjun 19 aldar og ef til vill fyrr. Hún hefur verið hlaðin úr torfi og staðið á vatnsbakkanum. Sést enn greinilega fyrir réttarveggjum, en sýnilega hefur vatnið brotið stóran hlut hennar.” segir í örnefnalýsingu fyrir Garð en í örnefnalýsingu Grænavatns stendur. “Nokkru austar með vatninu gengur annar tangi fram í vatnið, nefnist Réttartangi. Á honum eru réttartættur. Þar mun hafa verið skilarétt til forna.” og enn fremur stendur. “Torfrista var mjög léleg. Helzt var rist á Réttartanga og Ytrigrund.” Réttartangi er austasti tanginn sem gengur suður í Grænavatn. Um 1 km sunnan við þjóðveginn á vatnsbakka Grænavatns.

Rétt þessi er í örnefnaskrá bæði talin upp í landi Garðs og Grænavatns enda er hún nálægt því að vera á merkjum. Grænavatn hefur breyst nokkuð í aldanna rás og á undanförunum árum hefur vatnið brotið sífellt meira land undir sig. Merkin fylgja ekki vatninu heldur línu sem lá þvert milli austurs og vesturs. Réttin telst líklega í landi Grænavatns. Þarna sjást einnig leifar réttarinnar þú hún sé að nokkrum hluta horfin í vatnið. Nyrsta hólf réttarinnar er alveg heilt og auk þess sjást merki tveggna annarra hólfanna sem eru þó að mestum hluta horfin í vatnið. Má gera ráð fyrir að ef fram fer sem horfin verði réttin alveg horfin í vatnið eftir nokkra áratugi.

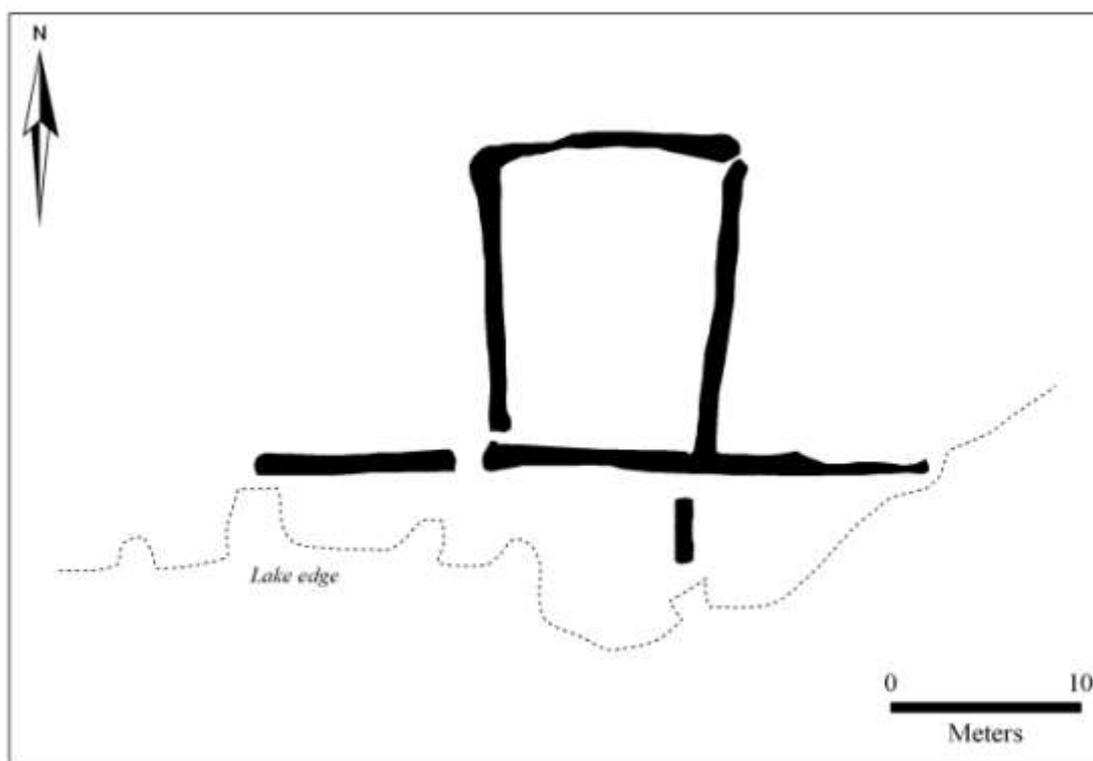


Figure 12. Réttartangi, Grænavatn (DGPS survey).

The *rétt* at Grænavatn, is referred to in use in the early 19th century. In that respect it predates most of the other sites that have been investigated. However, it is badly preserved and is falling into Grænavatn (lake). Its current dimensions are approximately 35m by 22m, with a wall height of 0.5m. The *rétt* is constructed out of turf, and in the eastern side, where the wall meets the lake edge, the construction was exposed. The wall consisted of four to five turf pieces stacked on top of one another sitting on a boggy soil matrix; the turf layers in the wall, contained a dark black tephra (1-2cm thick) and a light grey tephra (2cm thick). It is possible that the tephras are the 1717 and 1477 tephras which would give a construction date *after* 1717 (unless the black tephra is the 1477 and the grey the 1300, in which case a post 1477 date). A similar profile was also examined in an exposed part of the north-eastern corner of the *dilkur*. It is likely that this is the *rétt* referred to as being the structure before Strengjarétt called Gardsmýrarétt (*Göngur og réttir* 1950: 135).



Figure 13. Réttartangi, Grænavatn, looking north-east.

Gamlarétt, Hörgsdalur (577982, 562653) SP-192:014

The following description is based on based on an oral testament (Ö-Hörgsdalur: 6.), and from a documentary survey in 1996 and a field survey in 1996 (Ísleif accessed 10/02/2010).

“Vestari-Ásendi er norðurendinn á Vestari-Bæjarás. Yfir hann allra norðastan liggur Ytri-Ásendalág norður í Mýri, og þvert yfir hann töluvert sunnar er Ásendalág. Ytri lágin er stutt. Nyrst á Vestari -Ásenda eru grónar réttartóftir, sem heita Gamlarétt” segir í örnefnalýsingu. Réttin er um 1 km NNV af bænum, á norðurenda ássins, sem er vestn við bæinn. Norðan við þennan stað gengur mýrin alllangt til vesturs.

The remnants of the *rétt* are measured at 25m by 9.5m, with walls standing to a height of 0.5m. The *rétt* although mentioned as old (Isl *Gamla* -) is probably a *rétt* used by the local farm Hörgsdalur, rather than being one of the community *réttir* that is the main basis for this study.

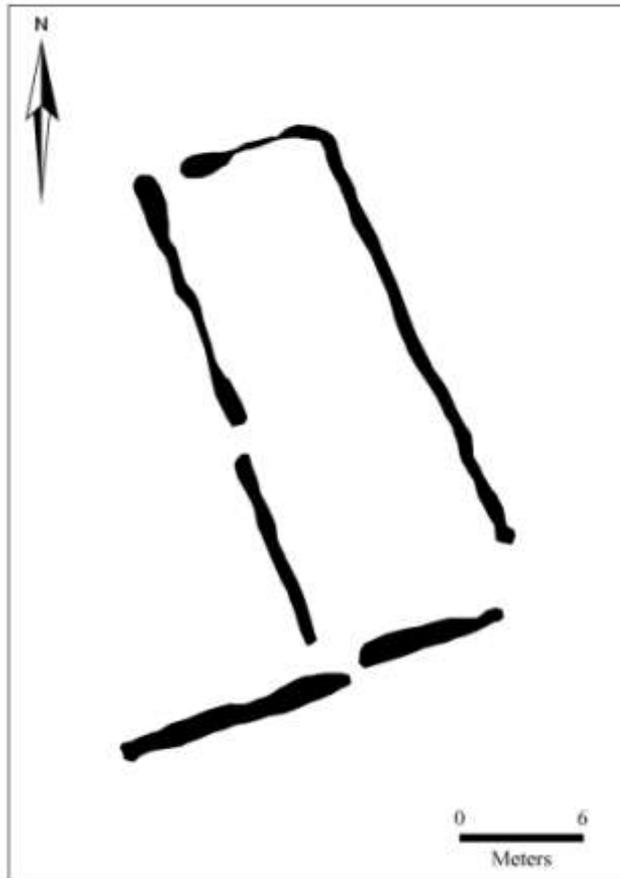


Figure 14. Gamlarétt, Hörgsdalur (DGPS survey).

Its relative antiquity might be revealed from the history associated with the farm. For example, the farm was a new foundation in 1825, but is mentioned in 1712 (Jarðabók) as belonging to the land of Helgstaðir. It was abandoned in 1958 (Ísleif accessed 10/02/2010). There is some suggestions that it was a sheiling site before becoming a farm in the 19th century, and possibly prior to that. There is also a suggestion that it was farmed in the 14th century (Orri Vésteinsson pers. comm. 27/12/2005).

It may be that the *rétt* is related to the 19th century use of the farm, given the height of the walls, but the referral to the ‘old sheep-fold’ suggests that in the 19th century it was already old. Therefore, it is possible that the *rétt* relates to the 14th century usage of the farm, of which, immediately south there is a badly degraded ruin, and further south towards the 19th century farm, there are remnants of a linear boundary (associated perhaps with SP-192:004) running against the slope as well as towards the farm, and, in addition, one structure (not surveyed) that is older than the 19th century.



Figure 15. Stöng, looking north-west.

Stöng (581394, 563298)

The *rétt* at Stöng was sketched surveyed only. Constructed with corrugated iron and wood, it is a recent construction dating to the mid-20th century. The arrangement of the *dilkur* in relation to the central area was interesting, enclosed only on two sides: on the north and west sides. The central area was approximately 15m by 16m, and the entire *rétt* c. 20m by 30m. There were four *dilkur*, as well as large enclosure attached to the central area; though one could argue that there is only one *dilkur*, subdivided into five compartments as all the space was connectable through entrances and openings of one sort or another.

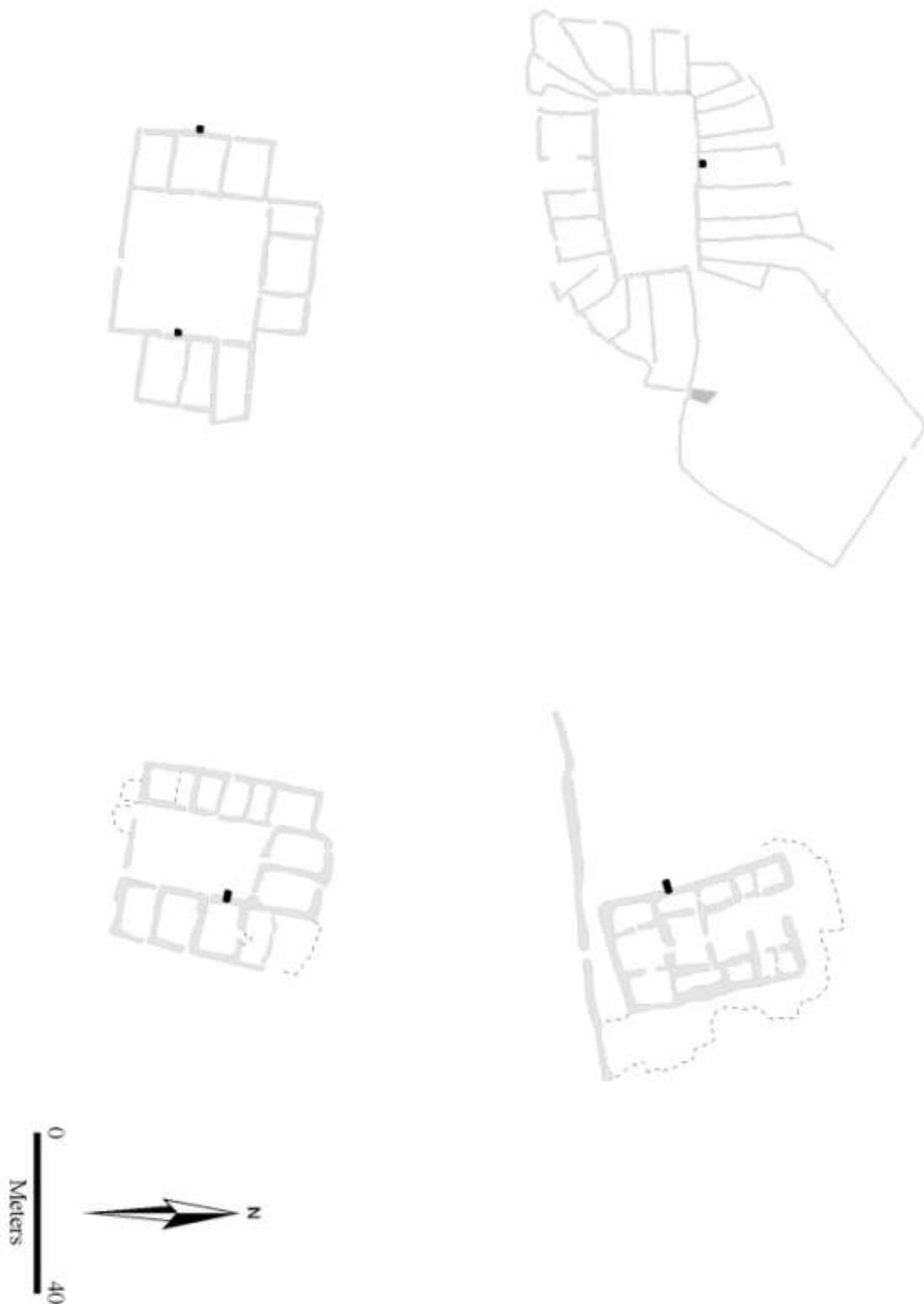


Figure 16. Excavated réttir. Clockwise from top left to bottom left: Strengjarétt (site 3), Hliðarétt (site 4), Hallbjarnararétt (site 1), Sellandarétt (site 2). Black are trench locations.

Excavation

The trench locations were chosen in the field according to monument preservation, though on reflection the best trenching locations associated with *rétt* are inside the *dilkur*. These areas are likely to have had less damage from animal trample and natural erosion of the underlying tephra. All trenches were 1m wide, and if a wall was turf, excavation was partially made into them, and up against the wall if it was stone. The premise being that the underlying tephra would indicate *terminus post quem* with respect to tephra deposition date on which the walls were built, or the tephra included in the turf used to construct the walls.

In each trench a section was drawn at 1:10 and a plan made at 1:20. Each trench and drawn section was photographed and context descriptions given. Several tephra samples were taken from each site (see table 2), though only two tin columns were taken, the rest being spot samples. The following is a description of the main findings at each of the four sites.

<i>Sample No</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Context</i>	<i>Notes</i>
1_1 <1>	Column		
1_2 <2>	Spot	2	?1717
2_1 <1>	Column		
2_2 <2>	Spot	4	
2_3 <3>	Spot	4	
2_4 <4>	Spot	4	Birch?
3_1 <1>	Spot	3	trench 1
3_2 <2>	Spot	5	trench 2
4_1 <1>	Spot	3	
4_2 <2>	Spot	5	
4_3 <3>	Spot	7	
4_4 <4>	Spot	9	

Table 2. Tephra samples taken from each site. The first number in the Sample No refers to the site, and the second number refers to the sample number from that site; <1> is referred to in the text for each site respectively.

Hallbjarnanarétt (site 1)

The excavated trench measured 1m by 2.15m and was placed in the western wall of the second from south *dilkur*. The wall stood at a height of approximately 0.8m, and a width of 1.8 – 2m wide (before excavation). The excavated partition of the wall was 0.6m high and 1 – 1.2m wide. The field suggestion was that the wall was rebuilt after 1717, on top of an earlier

wall, built after 1477. The two phases of walls were divided by the different tephras in the turf used to construct the walls. The lower phase (post-1477) was constructed with three to four strengur turfs. The upper phase consisted of a much looser reconstruction, but was at least two to three turfs tall; the lower phase being 0.25m high, and the upper phase 0.35m high. The wall was built upon a dark grey tephra, possibly 1477.



Figure 17. Hallbjarnanarétt, looking west.

Samples were taken from the in situ tephra and the lower part of the wall <1>, as well as one <2> of the tephra from the turf in the rebuild phase. The tephra analysis suggested that the samples comprised mostly wind blown soil rather than *in situ* tephra (preliminary observations by Magnús Á Sigurgeirsson report dated to 9/2/2010). It is likely though that the observations made in the field suggest a rebuild, but that this was not a successive build to a post 1477 date, but rather a post 1717 date, in which the rebuild included turf that was heavily disturbed containing redeposited tephras. Therefore, an inconclusive date of the *rétt* is suggested, though probably post-1717 in date.



Figure 18. Hallbjarnanarétt (site 1) trench 1, looking east (left); Sellandarétt (site 2) trench 1, looking east (right).

Sellandarétt (site 2)

The excavated trench measured 1m by 2.3m, was placed partially in the central area and the 2nd from north dilkur on the east side of the rétt. The wall stood to a height of approximately 0.7m, and a width of 1.7m - 2m wide (before excavation). The excavated wall was built of one phase, possible a rebuild (though this was not very clear), and stood to a height of 0.35m – 0.4m high, and 1.4m wide (though the wall was half-sectioned).

There was a large amount of soil deposition against the eastern slope of the wall which was the result of Aeolian deposition, as well as soil run-off from the wall. This deposit was extensive, and appears to have been an issue that may have affected the whole of the site. The wall was built above a dark grey tephra; though in the field observations suggested that this might be possibly 1262 or 1477, from the tephra analysis it appeared to be Aeolian deposits (Magnús Á Sigurgeirsson report dated to 9/2/2010). A sample was taken of the *in situ* tephra, and part of the lower parts of the wall (including some tephra in the turf) <1>. Samples were

also taken from the dark course tephra <2> and from the light grey fine tephra <3> which turned out to be Aeolian. Also, between the tephras were organic rich deposits, presumably old ground surfaces buried by the wall and Aeolian and potential tephras, from which birch fragments were sampled <4>.

Although there was not enough tephra sampled to make a suggestion of the date possible without in the field observation by a tephra specialist. However, it is suggested that this *rét* was built after 1905, perhaps because Strengjarétt became unusable due to sand infilling the *dilkur*. It is also likely that this *rét* was abandoned shortly after it was built for similar reasons (c. 1910), judging by the excavated trench when a new *rét* was built at Gautlönd: Gautlandarétt.

Strengjarétt (site 3)

Two trenches were excavated at Strengjarétt. The first trench measured 1m by 1m and was placed up against the inside edge of the east wall of the central enclosure, opposite the southernmost *dilkur*. The wall was c. 1.2m tall and 1.5m wide and built of large weathered stones, presumably coming from the surrounding environment and slope face. Unfortunately, not much remained of any *in situ* soil profiles, and excavation, recording and backfilling proceeded quickly. It is possible that the 1477 tephra was located at the base of the trench on which the wall was placed sampled for analysis <1>, although this had been subjected to severe erosion and disturbance and was not commented upon by Magnús Á Sigurgeirsson (report dated to 9/2/2010). However, close to the trench a brass button was found with a flower mould on the front with a cast shank on the reverse. According to its form and style it dates to the mid-19th century (Gavin Lucas pers. comm. 11/02/2010).

The second trench was excavated on the outer edge of the middle *dilkur* on the western side of the *rét*. Like the first trench, this one was also 1m by 1m, laid against the stone built wall, which had similar dimensions of c. 1m by 1.5m. Preservation of *in situ* deposits was slightly better than in trench 1, though the tephra sample was identified as Aeolian tephra (Magnús Á Sigurgeirsson report dated to 9/2/2010). The significance of this deposit [5], however, is that it was located below and underneath the stone wall, and although not identified in the analysis, the *rét* can *not* be earlier than 1477, or perhaps 1717. In *Göngur og réttir*

Strengjarétt is identified as the third *rétt* built for grazing area of Suðurafrétt, after Garðsmýrarrétt.



Figure 19. Strengjarétt, trench 2, looking east.

Hliðarétt (site 4)

A trench measuring 1m by 1m with a small sondage in its south-west corner was excavated and placed against the inner wall of the middle *dilkur* on the northern side of the *rétt*. The walls measured c. 1.4m and a stone thick, c. 0.4m. The deposits that were seen in trench were relatively well preserved and clear. In the field observations identified several possible *in situ* tephtras that were sampled <1, 2, 3, 4>, <1> 1717 and <3> 1477. These deposits were interleaved by Aeolian deposits. Magnús Á Sigurgeirsson (report dated to 9/2/2010) suggested that <3> was windblown but suggested that <1, 2, 4> were tephtras.



Figure 20. Hliðarétt, trench 1, looking south.

According to documentary sources, the *rétt* at Dalsrétt was abandoned and replaced by Hliðarétt c. 1880 and the tephras are situated within this chronology. The layout and organisation of the Hliðarétt was commented on in 2008 but is worth reiterating here. Even though the *rétt* was built c. 1880, and that no earlier evidence of any previous structure was found within the trench, it is still possible that there existed some structure prior to this one. The architecture shows considerable variation in the arrangement of *dilkur*, with some suggestions of reorganisation. This is also suggested, as commented on in 2008 in the variable thickness of the walls, particularly in the central enclosure and the *dilkur* walls that front onto the central area. What this perhaps illustrates are the considerable readjustments and reorganisation that probably occurred at these monuments, responding to the alterations in both farm numbers and the numbers of sheep, but which are material present in the upstanding structures.

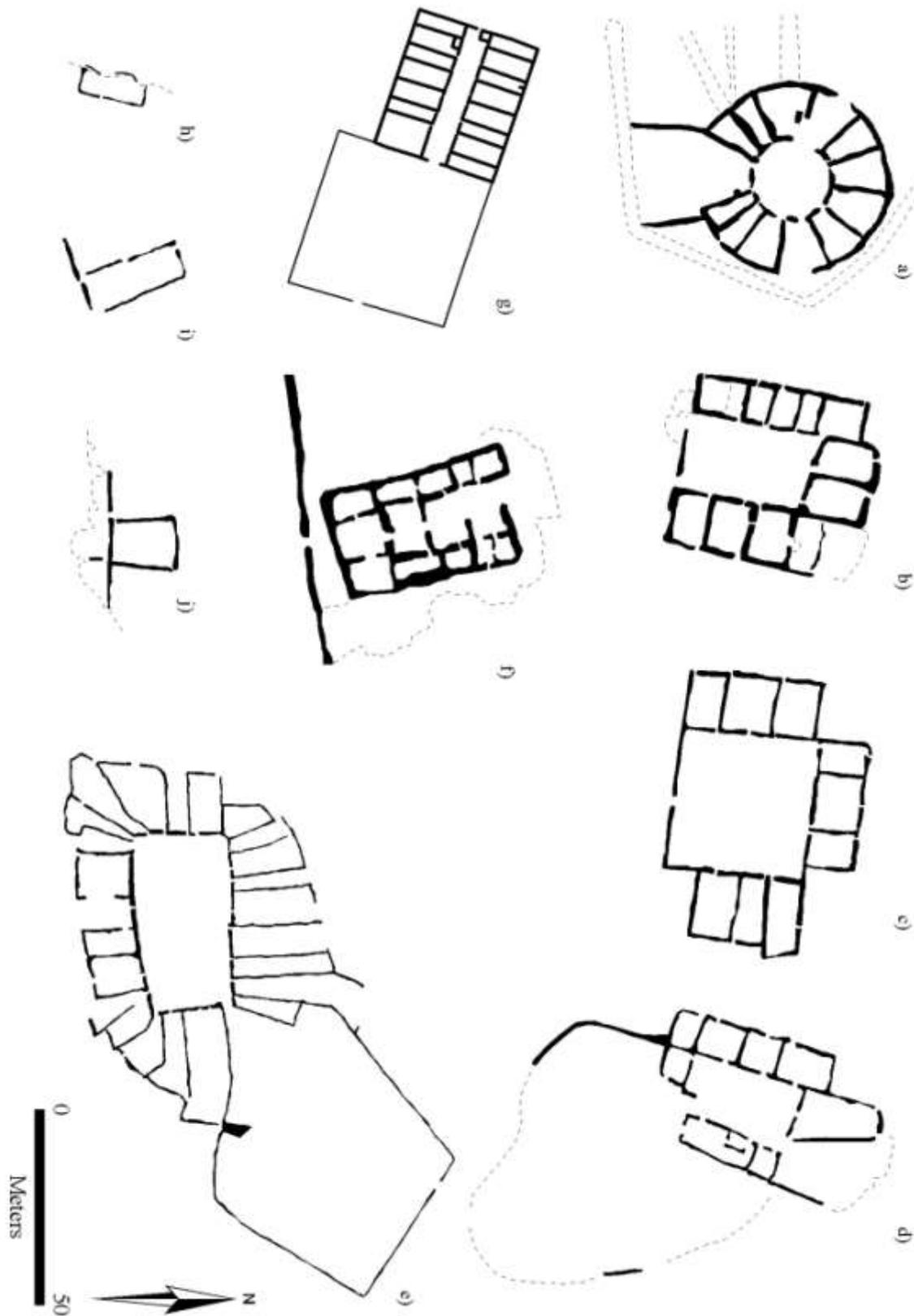


Figure 21. All réttir that have been DGPS surveyed. Key: a) Gautlandaréttir; b) Sellandarétt; Strengjarétt; d) Dalsrétt; e) Hliðarétt; f) Hallbjarnanarétt I; g) Hallbjarnanarétt II; h) Dalsrétt; i) Gamlarétt, Hörgsdalur; j) Réttartangi, Grænavatn.

Discussion

The following discussion relates both the findings of the current project, but also the main threads that frame the project as a whole connected with seasonal movements of humans and animals, the perception of the environment, and the temporality of practices associated with grazing of animals. The focus for these themes in this report and discussion are associated with the monuments themselves. These preliminary thoughts address several points connected with the material relationships between the grazing areas and the communities that used them for grazing their sheep and the expression of this relationship in the building of the *réttir* from three aspects: in terms of their location, spatial organisation and temporality.

Réttir location

In this discussion the *réttir* location is related to both the grazing areas as well as to the farming area, which is defined by the main area of everyday habitation. The spatial organisation of a farm is such that often sheep houses are located close to the homefield, with smaller *rétt* structures for folding of sheep relating to the local farm (often attached to the homefield boundary). Sheilings sites used for summer pasturing of sheep are also related to this organisation which was conducted in a controlled manner are (by law) and located within the boundaries of a farm but are often marginally placed with respect to the farm itself. The *réttir* are related to more extensive use of the landscape than local farm *rétt* and sheilings and therefore have a different form of relationality with the communities that constructed and used them; the important difference being that they were communally built, used and maintained by the whole collective.

At present, what is understood about the communal grazing areas relating to Skútustaðarhreppur is that they were divided into two to three areas depending on sources of different dates. These main are Norðurfjall, Austurfjall (which in some references includes Norðurfjall) and Suðurafrétt. It is also known that Austurfjall and Suðurafrétt had their own legal *réttir*: the latest being Hliðarétt and Baldursheimarétt respectively. What is not known at present is in which farms used which areas, or if the grazing regions were differentiated by particular types of sheep grazing there. In c. 1880 there were nine different areas (see figure 22 (right) below) and each had a particular history associated with it (see table 4). These areas

divided the landscape in terms of where their sheep were grazed, although it is known that Suðrafrétt was grazed less frequently after 1880 because of deteriorating vegetation cover⁹.

<i>Grazing area name</i>	<i>Grazing area</i>	<i>Historical rights</i>
Gæsafjallastykki	Norðurfjall	Reykjahlið & Grimstaðir
Norðurfjall	Norðurfjall	Reykjahlið
Neðri Miðfjall	Norðurfjall	- “ -
Austari Miðfjall	Norðurfjall	- “ -
Veggjastykki	Austurfjall	- “ -
Grafarlandstykki	Austurfjall	- “ -
Miklimor	Suðrafrétt	Skútustaðir & Grænavatn
Austurdalur and Grafarlönd	Suðrafrétt	Skútustaðir
Framdalur	Suðrafrétt	Einarstaðir & Reykjahlið

Table 3. Grazing areas within Skútustaðarhreppur, collective grazing area, and historical connections

<i>Réttir</i>	<i>Distance (m)</i>	<i>Farm</i>	<i>Location type</i>
*Svartárkot	15,492	Árbakki	Border/grazing area
Réttartangi	382	Þuríðarnes	Farm ‘zone’
Strengjarétt	3,126	Baldursheimar	Border
Sellandarétt	5,532	Baldursheimar	Border
Gautlandarétt	878	Gautlönd	Farm ‘zone’
Baldurheimsrétt	751	Litlaströnd	Farm ‘zone’
Réttargrund	18,920	Reykjahlið	Grazing area
Rétt í Gæsadal	10,538	Reykjahlið	Grazing area
Dalsrétt	5,162	Reykjahlið	Border
Hlíðarétt	1,177	Reykjahlið	Farm ‘zone’

Table 4. Distance (m) between réttir and farms grouped (shade – non-shade) by geographic grazing areas.

* NB In some instance the rétt is close a farm in a neighbouring hreppur e.g. Svartárkót, but I have retained Skútustaðarhreppur’s integrity concerning the grazing areas with their rétt. Also where possible a farm that was contemporary to a rétt’s use is used in the analysis. Please note that Svartárkót has not yet been surveyed so its status as a rétt must remain undetermined.

The setting of the réttir are characterised by a variety of location types with respect to the community: within the farm ‘zone’; on the border between the farm ‘zone’ and the grazing areas; in the grazing areas. Table 4 expresses this relationship spatially in the study area,

⁹ Referred to in 1880 (Bragi Sigurjónsson 1950 *Göngur og réttir III Þingeyjar- og Múlaþing*. Akureyri: Bókaútgáfan Norðri).

determining the distances between a *rétir* and the nearest contemporary farm (the spatial distance is used as a proxy). The analysis suggests that there is a spatial variation in terms of the *rétir* location which changes and that this pattern is significant because it also follows a temporal trajectory (see figure 22 (left) below). The meaning of which is unclear, but there is nonetheless a material expression being made in the *rétir* location derived from the relationship between grazing areas and the communities involved. Possible changes to the system may be reflecting changes in the relationship between grazing area and community because of changes in the environment, alterations in the social fabric of the communities, or perhaps even changing perceptions in a commoditization of sheep. It is likely, though, that all of these are factors involved. Although the reasons behind these patterns need further research to be interpreted more fully, there is general sense in which the movement of the *rétir* towards the farm land indicates a closer spatial connection between the grazing areas and the community.

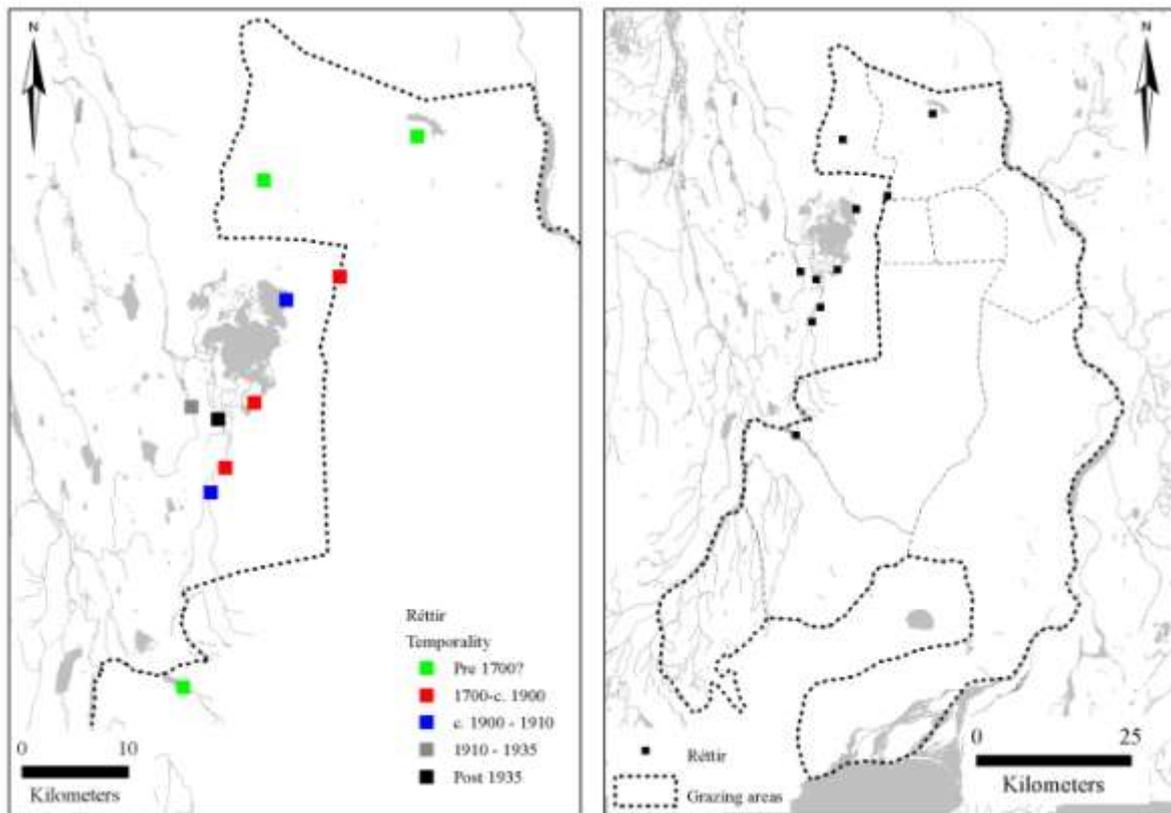


Figure 22. Interpreted chronology of the *rétir* (left); and the grazing areas associated with Skútustaðarhreppur (right).

Internal organisation of the réttir

In 2008 it was suggested that there was a possible correlation between the sheep numbers and the layout of the *dilkur* and their size, and the size of the central enclosure. The organisation of the grazing system is used to unravel some of the complexity, but it is by far more complex than is being suggested here. As a result the discussion is focused on comparing the spatial arrangements and the changes thereon incurred in temporally sequenced *réttir* divided between Austurfjall and Suðurafrétt.

<i>Réttir</i>	<i>Dilkur</i>	<i>Dilkur area</i>	<i>Dilkur mean</i>	<i>Central area</i>	<i>Spatial efficiency</i>
(Small) Dalsrétt	/	/	/	89	/
Hörgsdalur	/	/	/	224	/
Réttartangi	1	51	51	/	/
<i>Strengjarétt</i>	9	925	102	1,193	0.775
<i>Sellandarétt</i>	12	620	51.6	1,048	0.592
<i>Gautlandarétt</i>	12	902	75.2	800	1.128
Dalsrétt	10	1110	111	420	2.64
Hliðarétt	24	2,650	110.4	999	2.65
Hallbjarnanarétt II	15	868	57.9	231	3.75
<i>Hallbjarnanarétt I</i>	11	489	44.5	318	1.54

Table 5. Spatial analysis of the internal space of the rétt; grouped according to grazing area association. Italics refer to those surveyed in 2008 (Aldred & Madson 2008).

The réttir of Austurfjall

The sequence of *réttir* for Austurfjall is suggested to be: Réttargrund and Rétt í Gæsadal which are divided by Gæsafjöll, Leirhnujúkshraun and Hágöng (these sites have not yet been surveyed but have as part of *fornleifaskráning* conducted in 1999), and then Dalsrétt and then Hliðarétt. For this discussion Dalsrétt and Hliðarétt are compared. The immediate difference is the size of Dalsrétt (130m by 70m) compared to Hliðarétt (185m by 122m). This is also reflected in the number and size of the *dilkur*, ten – 1,110m² and twenty-four – 2,650m² respectively; and the total area of the central area, 420m² and 999m² respectively. What is interesting is that the mean size of the *dilkur* is more or less the same, 111m² for Dalsrétt and for Hliðarétt at 110m². And consequently, the spatial efficiency (a ratio that expresses the *dilkur* area divided by the central enclosure area) of the *réttir* is more or less the same at 2.6.

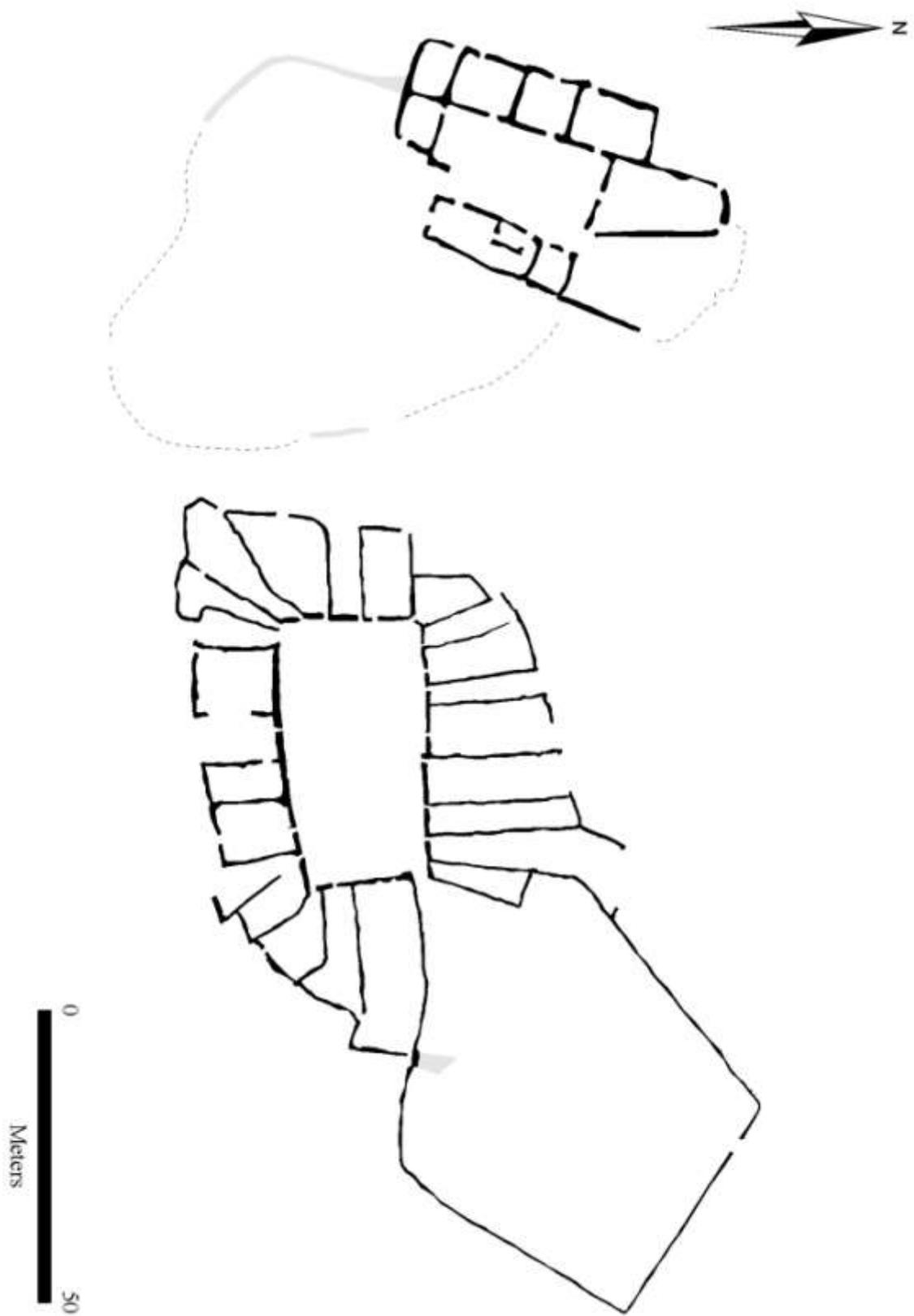


Figure 23. Dalrétt (top - left) and Hliðarétt (bottom – right).

What this suggests is that when Dalsrétt was abandoned in 1880, it is possible that the old spatial arrangement was replicated in the architecture of the new monument Hliðarétt not in mimicking the layout but retaining the *dilkur* – central enclosure ratio. And although Hliðarétt is considerable larger than Dalsrétt, the flow of animals in and out of the *rétt* perhaps did not need to be readjusted but rather replicated in the new monument, which is arguably reflected in this ratio. In 2008 it was commented upon that Hliðarétt showed an organic development in the layout of its *dilkur*. While the temporality of layout appears to have taken place over a relatively short duration there seems to be some control in the spatial arrangement of the *dilkur*, demonstrated by the regular and comparable mean size. Perhaps reasons for abandonment of Dalsrétt were simply that the monument became too small rather than any other mitigating factors such as environment damage to the monument as seems to have been occurring in the *réttir* in Suðurafrétt.

The réttir of Suðurafrétt

Göngur og réttir mentions six different *réttir* or *réttir*-places relating to Suðurafrétt¹⁰. The sequence of *rétt* use as it is described in this report is derived from a number of different sources, including *Göngur og réttir*, oral testaments, as well as Ísleif (accessed 10/02/2010). The sequence appears to be: Kambsrétt or Grænavatnsrétt, Garðmýrarrétt (in this report called Réttartangi), Strengjarétt, Sellandarétt, Gautlandarétt and Baldursheimsrétt. At present, all of the *réttir* have been surveyed to some extent, except for Kambsrétt or Grænavatnsrétt, and though it is unknown where precisely this is, it is suggested that this is the *rétt* in Framafrétt, east of Skjálfafljót, close to Svartárkót¹¹. The earlier AtlasKort maps show based on surveys done in 1934 (LMÍ archives) indicate a *rétt* location, though when the *fornleifaskráning* was conducted in this area in 1996 no *rétt* site was registered in the area. Due to bad road conditions the site was not checked in 2009, though it is planned to do so in 2010.

¹⁰ Bragi Sigurjónsson 1950: 135.

¹¹: *Ibid.*: 128.

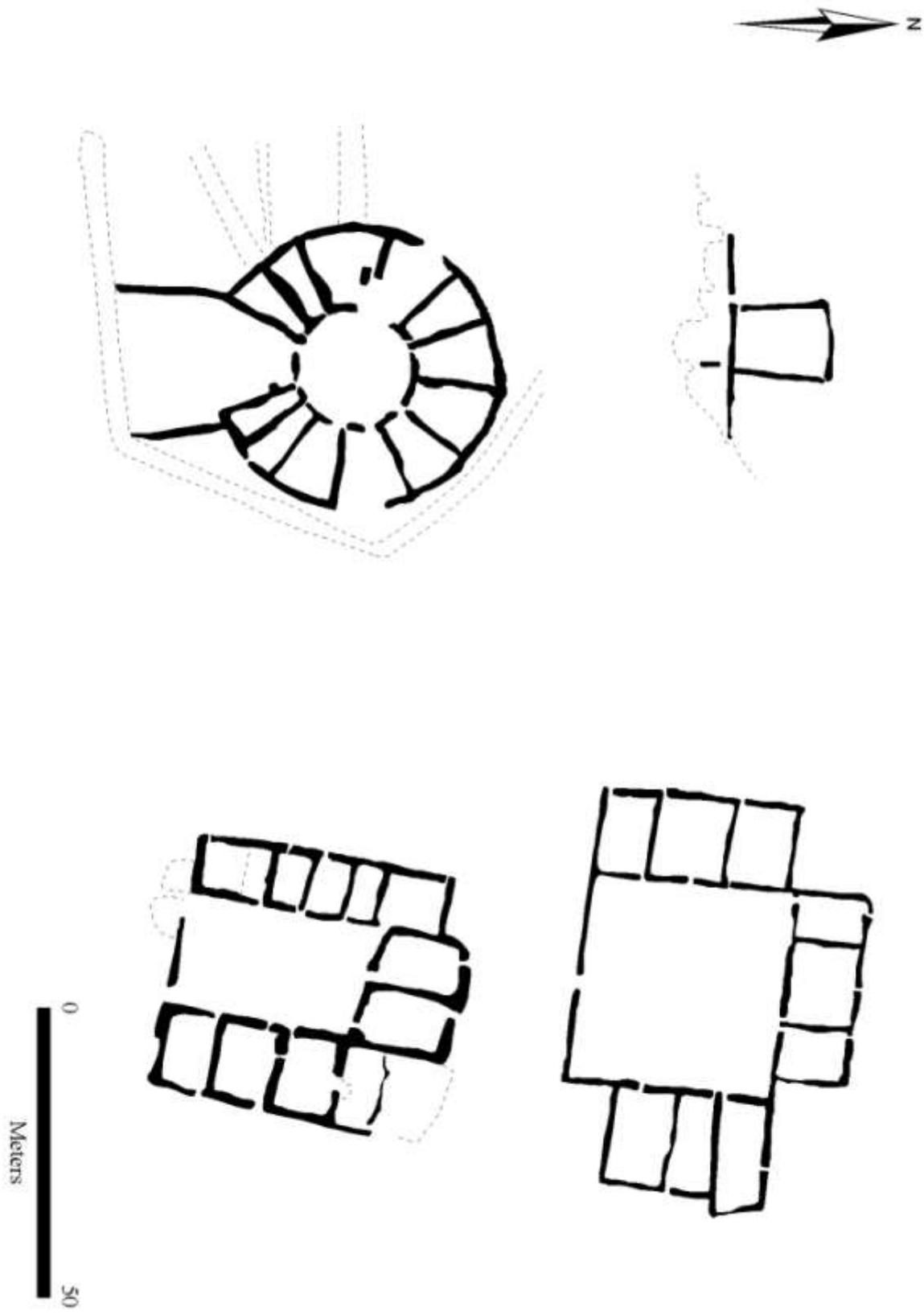


Figure 24. Clockwise from top left corner (small rétt): Réttartangi, Strengjarétt, Sellandarétt, Gautlandarétt.

The comparisons of the *réttir* in Suðurafrétt in this discussion follow a direct correspondence in terms of the transition of architecture and construction between one to another over a one hundred to two hundred period. Although this report does not comment so much on the sheep numbers relating to this period, it is possible that corresponding sheep numbers for the community can be used to understand further the spatial efficiency of *réttir* and the consequent adaptations and changes that occurred in the design and style of construction. For this discussion Réttartangi, Strengjarétt, Sellandarétt and Gautlandarétt are compared in terms of the spatial arrangements of their internal features.

From a simple visual inspection, there are some major differences. There is of course a preservation issue to contend with respect to Réttartangi, though the size of its *dilkur* is interesting at 51 m² compared to Strengjarétt's 102m², but then almost corresponds with Sellandarétt's 51.6m². The size of Strengjarétt's central enclosure is also quite not so different from the others: 1,193m², with Sellandarétt at 1,048m² and Gautlandarétt at 800m². The number of *dilkur*, like in Austurfjall also appear to increase slightly, from nine in Strengjarétt to twelve at both Sellandarétt and Gautlandarétt. What appears to be happening is that Réttartangi was smaller in its overall carrying capacity than Strengjarétt, perhaps similar to Sellandarétt but perhaps out grew its use, either as a result of increasing wetness of the ground or an increase in sheep numbers. There is a general increase in numbers during this period: in 1712 including lambs, there were 2,122 and in 1902 including additions (which probably means lambs) there were 6,775.

The possible increase in size of the *réttir* at Strengjarétt was because of sheep numbers and possible expected numbers. The reduction in *dilkur* size in Sellandarétt is perhaps a reflection of the changes occurring in the condition of the grazing areas of Suðurafrétt rather than a change in actual sheep numbers for the community. The grazing areas in Suðurafrétt were in a much better condition one hundred years earlier than 1878¹²: the biggest and best grazing areas, such as Mótunga, Skafamýrar and parts of Míklamó, have been destroyed; these areas once had two to three meters of soil but were as it was at the time of survey (1878) as it is now stone and sand (see figure 3). Although it is possible to follow the correlation in sheep numbers against the monuments, there needs to be a consideration of changes that refer to where sheep were being grazed. It may be that the better state of the grazing areas in

¹² Bragi Sigurjónsson 1950: 125

Austurfjall c. 1880 lead to expansion in the *réttir* monument at Hliðarétt because of the increase of sheep grazing in that area that had moved from the grazing areas in Suðurafrétt which were under considerable stress. Critical to understanding the organisation of the grazing system in the latter part of the 19th century is to understand the relationship between Austurfjall and Suðurafrétt and how this was influencing the localised changes in the *réttir* organisation and use. Further research is needed to unravel this problem.

The temporality of réttir monuments

The archaeological investigations in 2009, and specifically the excavations which formed a core part of these investigations, have lead to a deepening knowledge of the gathering and sorting of sheep through the communal system of *réttir*. Although the earliest recorded usage of the *afrétt* relates to the Saga, very little is known about the organisation and the practices involved. Most references are cursory at best in documentary sources, which mention gathering or *réttir* in passing: mentioning of both gathering and *réttir* in the 14th century¹³. There is a possible mention of the *réttir* at in 1410, with respect to the movement of the river Svartá, though this is extremely ambiguous¹⁴. Things become clearer the closer we get in time to the present-day, though much of this slightly contested because it is assumed that the practice of gathering and sorting is a 19th century product; but there is considerable historical information that refers to the use of grazing areas in the upland areas, though how this was organised may have been primarily localised and farm specific rather than more generally communal. It is safe to say that the *réttir* system as it is today was quite different in the medieval period though the modern practice derives from its historical context and is contingent on the accumulation of traditions. Though as we see in the archaeological evidence, it was a practice that was both creative and evolutionary in its character. With respect to this discussion, the last one to two hundred years form the basis of interpretation, with some tenuous links beyond that.

Strengjarétt is one of the oldest of the *réttir* excavated in this project; although the tephra inspection was not useful in this respect, documentary sources and oral testimony suggest that

¹³ Diplomatarium Islandicum (DI) 1857 - 1876 Íslenzkt Fornbréfasafn. Copenhagen. Volumes I – X. DI II: 666; DI IV: 44.

¹⁴ DI II: 493.

the *rétt* was abandoned in 1905 due to sand infilling¹⁵. There is mention of a *rétt* in the land of Grænavatn in 1880 when it is decided to hold the sorting a day earlier than usual¹⁶. According to *Göngur og réttir* there is mention of six *réttir* relating to the history of Suðurafrétt: Kambsrétt or Grænavatnsrétt, Garðsmýrarrétt (survey site called Réttartangi in Grænavatn), Strengjarétt (site 3), Sellandarétt (site 2), Gautlandarétt¹⁷ and Baldursheimsrétt (built in 1936 and still used)¹⁸.

Perhaps the most interesting facet of the temporality is the relatively quick and successive mobility of the *réttir*. Hypothetically, this suggests major upheaval in the community dynamics, and is in small way reflected in the levels of investment in the construction and the location of the monuments. Forces for change are coming from both within the community as well as externally from different types of environmental responses. These are both a reaction to environmental changes but also perhaps a precautionary response to change. While the first known *réttir* for Suðurafrétt is located at the south western border close to Svartárkót, the subsequent *réttir* are moving closer to the farm zone, at Réttartangi and Strengjarétt.

Strengjarétt suggests some precautions in its architectural design. I have already mentioned the larger *dilkur* size that is comparable to Dalsrétt, and to Hliðarétt, suggesting perhaps a contemporaneity in construction and use, which is different from both previous and subsequent constructions. Strengjarétt is also substantial in the character of its construction, with large stone walls and solidly built. One could suggest that the materiality of the monument advances a suggestion of it being a much more substantial and longer lived investment, that in many ways was not evident in the lesser and more ephemeral constructions at Réttartangi, Sellandarétt and Gautlandarétt (indicated by their turf walls). In fact, this investment in construction at Strengjarétt suggests that the site was intended to be used for a much longer period than the other monuments. One could perhaps go so far as to suggest that the possible reasons for abandonment of the *réttir* at Réttartangi, Sellandarétt and Gautlandarétt were not so much because of environmental changes, but that change in due partly to the need to investment into a more substantial construction.

¹⁵ Derived from testaments by Böðvar Jónsson, born in 1925 (Gautlönd), and from Þórunn Einarsdóttir and Jón Þórasson: “Strengjarétt was used until 1905 and then they built Gautlandrétt in 1909-1911 to bring it closer to the farms and everyone used that one from then on. Sellandarétt was used before Stengajarrétt.”

¹⁶ Bragi Sigurjónsson 1950: 128.

¹⁷ See Aldred 2008.

¹⁸ Bragi Sigurjónsson 1950: 135.

The one to two hundred period between the 1700 to 1900 also has a corollary in the increasing numbers of settlement in the region, adding to the size of the domestic community, but also the numbers of sheep. In the period there are approximately an additional twenty new cottages or small farms established¹⁹. While the new settlements alone cannot account for an increase in sheep over the same period, it is likely that these increased the numbers of sheep but also the community needs. The result is therefore a dual process that is being played out in Suðurafrétt: an increase in settlement with an increase in sheep numbers, but also an increasing deterioration in vegetation. This is indicated from both documentary sources as well as archaeological evidence. Documentary sources from the organising committee for the sheep gathering and sorting in the *fjallskilabók* indicate that there was a need to reorganise and manage better the places where sheep were grazing, particularly in Suðurafrétt (in 1880). Archaeological evidence suggests that the 18th century environmental record is characterised by increased soil accumulation rates with the repeated presence of sand layers in the profiles within Mývatnheiði, immediately north of the grazing areas of Suðurafrétt. This is up to twenty times more than the rates compared to the 1447 to 1717 profile²⁰. Currently, there are no environmental records for the Austurfjall area, but we might make some assertion to suggest that this area seems to have been less susceptible to the effects of environmental change, lessening the pressures on seasonal vegetation growth.

Austurfjall also appears to be experiencing changes in the way in which the *réttir* were organised in the same period as Strengjarétt's use. While it is not known how old the two *réttir* which are located in the grazing areas, Réttargrund and Rétt í Gæsadal, or Dalsrétt, it is clear enough that Hliðarétt was built c. 1880 (from both documentary and archaeological evidence). However, while it can be suggested that the environmental change taking place in Suðurafrétt was affecting the grazing areas in Austurfjall also, this area appears to be more resilient; or at least gives that is the impression given in *Göngur og réttir*. This suggestion is seen both in terms of the grazing area being mentioned in comparison to Suðurafrétt which is stated were better for grazing c. 1780, and also in the source material detailing the grazing

¹⁹ Based on research conducted by Orri Vésteinsson (pers. comm. 27/12/2005). This is different from estimating the changes in settlement from Jarðabók (1712) to Johnson (1847) which focus 'on legal' farms rather than settlement per se.

²⁰ McGovern, T H, Orri Vésteinsson, Adolf Fridriksson, Church, M, Lawson, I, Simpson, I A, Árni Einarsson, Dugmore, A, Cook, G, Perdikaris, S, Edwards, K, Thomson, A M, Adderley, W P, Newton, A, Lucas, G, Aldred, O 2007 Landscapes of Settlement in northern Iceland: historical ecology of human impact and climate fluctuation on the millennial scale, *American Anthropologist* 109.1: 39 (27-51).

area for Austurfjall, in particular a map and a detailed description of the grazing. While there is a selection process in what is being presented in *Göngur og réttir*, there is nonetheless a clear change occurring in which Austurfjall was becoming a more predominant area of grazing of sheep for Skútustaðarhreppur in general when Hliðarétt was constructed in 1880, if not before. Arguably this asymmetrical use of the grazing areas in Suðurafrétt and Austurfjall may have influenced the levels of investment being made into the construction of *rétt* to Suðurafrétt. Based on the argument of investment in the monument construction, it is possible to suggest that when Strengjarétt was built the usage of Suðurafrétt was perhaps greater than when it was abandoned in c. 1905. Conceivably the date of its construction could be put to c. 1780 or earlier.

The archaeology of *réttir* in the district of Skútustaðarhreppur has indicated a myriad of complexities that underlie the construction of *réttir* as well as the way in which communal sheep grazing was organised. Far from a simple procedure of taking the sheep to the grazing land and leaving them, what this study is suggesting is that this was quite a complex process that in the same way as settlement was responding to environmental pressures and social dynamics, equally so too were the monuments relating to animal husbandry practices. Within this system there were various competing agencies involved, from the environmental basis to which farms grazed where with particular types of sheep, and from the levels of communal investment in monument construction as well as placement. One of the interesting aspects of the *réttir* in Skútustaðarhreppur is perhaps the considerable variation in the location, use and abandonment of the *réttir* over a relatively short duration. It is almost as if there is a disposable attitude surfacing in the construction of ephemeral monuments in which change was an expected condition of construction and use, that use was inevitably to be short-lived. Both the materiality and architecture of these monuments gives a glimpse into the kinds of relations that communities had with the grazing areas and the transmission of traditions in practice between different monuments, as well as how numbers of farm chambers varied in size and spatial arrangements were similar or different through time, and that the location with respect to the grazing areas and the farm zone tells something of the nature of these relationships. The monuments are in many ways vestiges of the human – environment relationship but in tangible and concrete material form. It is very likely that other such examples like the community of Skútustaðarhreppur have had to adapt as much to the changes in the social structure of communities and the environment.