

Myrkárdalur in Hörgárdalur, N. Iceland:  
Brief Summary of the 2008/2009 Archaeofauna.

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## Introduction

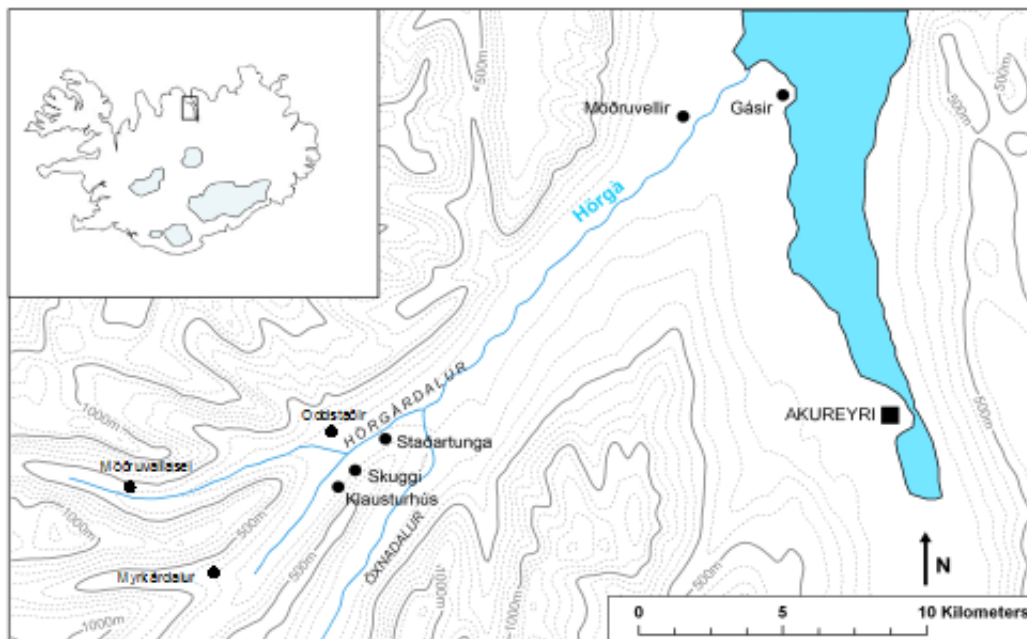
In summer of 2008 and 2009, an excavation team led by the author and Howell M. Roberts (FSI) investigated the potential for midden remains at Myrkárdalur, a farm ruin site situated in a highland area in the most interior part of a minor valley system in Hörgárdalur, Eyjafjörður. The results of these exercises were two small collections of archaeological materials from two middens of the post-medieval and Early Modern Periods. The results of zooarchaeological analysis are presented here, with a very limited discussion on potential site economy. While the ruins visible in the landscape are likely from the medieval period and are reminiscent of medieval corridor houses from Greenland, faunal remains are from a later point in time and indicative of a long term use of this area, at least in terms of structural remains from the early 20<sup>th</sup> c. still standing. Today, this area is frequented by fox hunters and the land used by the nearest farm further down the valley.

### Myrkárdalur project as part of larger regional Research History

- 2001–2006: Gásir; Howell M. Roberts (FSÍ) excavation of the high medieval (13<sup>th</sup> to early 15<sup>th</sup> centuries) trading site and its merchant's church (2004 and 2006, by Orri Vésteinsson, FSÍ) (i.e. Roberts et al 2002, 2006, 2009, Vésteinsson 2009, Vésteinsson in. Roberts et al. 2006, 2009, Vésteinsson et al. in press, Harrison et al 2008, Harrison 2009, Harrison 2006).
- 2004-2006: Skriðuhreppur; Regional surveys by FSÍ staff members, directed by Elín Ó. Hreiðarsdóttir (Hreiðarsdóttir et al. 2008).
- 2006: Möðruvellir; H M. Roberts and Ramona Harrison (CUNY), excavation of an evaluation trench into the Midden Mound (Öskuhóll) adjacent to the Möðruvellir Farm Mound (Harrison and Roberts 2006, Harrison 2007). This project builds on work done by Orri Vésteinsson's expanded archaeological survey and site registration (Vésteinsson, 2001).
- 2007: Möðruvellir; H. M. Roberts and R Harrison; extension of the evaluation trench opened in 2006 (Harrison and Roberts 2007, Harrison. 2008a)
- 2008 – 2009: Gásir Hinterlands Project (GHP), directed by R. Harrison (2009) and H.M. Roberts (2008). Program of midden prospecting, testing and excavation. Sites

producing archaeofaunal remains: Möðruvellir (continuation), Skuggi, Oddstaðir, and Myrkárdalur; all in Hörgárdalur (Harrison 2008b, Harrison et al. 2010).

The **Gásir Hinterlands Project**, mainly funded through a **Dissertation Improvement Grant through the US National Science Foundation** (OPP ARC 0809033, PI: Harrison), is aimed at improving our understanding of the interactions of local farming strategies affected by changing climate and ongoing human impact with medieval overseas trade and long-distance exchange centered on Gásir. GHP also focuses on the long term human eodynamics in this historically important part of Iceland, contributing to the reconstruction of a detailed historical ecology of Eyjafjörður from first settlement down to modern times.



**Figure 1.** Map of Iceland, locating Myrkárdalur, Skuggi, Möðruvellir in Hörgárdalur, and Gásir, located at a coastal inlet in Eyjafjörður (Orig. Map: Streeter, edited by author)..

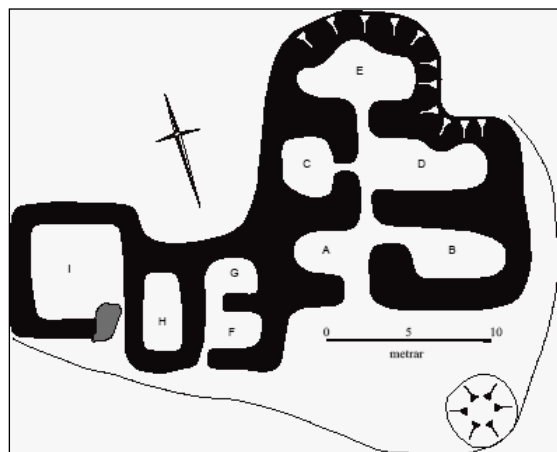
## Materials and Methods

All the Myrkárdalur midden materials were dry-sieved through 4 mm mesh and where applicable materials were targeted for whole-soil sampling for post-excavation analysis, in accordance with NABO recommendations to study plant remains, industrial activities, and other aspects of the site formation process.

The faunal materials were processed at the CUNY Northern Science & Education Center (NORSEC) laboratories in New York City and Brooklyn. Recording and data curation followed the NABONE protocols followed for other archaeofauna from Iceland, Faroes, Greenland, and northern Norway (NABONE, 2009, see [www.nabohome.org](http://www.nabohome.org) for downloadable version 9). Following widespread North Atlantic tradition, bone fragment quantification makes use of the Number of Identified Specimens (NISP) method (Grayson 1984). Mammal measurements follow von den Driesch, (1976) and von den Driesch & Boessneck (1974), fish metrics follow Wheeler and Jones (1989) fish identifications follow FISHBONE 1.1 (2004, also at [www.nabohome.org](http://www.nabohome.org)), bird identifications follow Cohen and Serjeantson (1996, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.), and Serjeantson (2009) and sheep/goat distinctions follow Boessneck, (1969) and Mainland and Halstead (2005), and Zeder and Pilaar (2010). Tooth-wear stage studies follow Grant (1982) and long-bone fusion stage calibrations follow Reitz and Wing (1999), with overall presentation of age reconstruction following Enghoff (2003).

### Location

The Myrkárdalur farm ruin lies on 280 m ASL and is located at the end of a valley named after the river Myrká. The early farm ruin is clearly visible despite the overgrowth of grass: several rooms are connected through a central corridor, reminiscent of medieval houses from Greenland. A landslide in the 14<sup>th</sup> century destroyed part of the farm and the occupants were forced to move



**Figure 2.** Myrkárdalur ruin, survey plan (Hreiðarsdóttir 2008, p 178).

further west, where several more recent ruins are present (sources cited in Hreiðarsdóttir 2008:178). Myrkárdalur was abandoned in 1955 and the grazing land has since been used by the nearest farm to the east and down the valley: Myrkárbakki. A number of ruins present either as standing structures or overgrown ruins on the Myrkárdalur home field provide a partial overview of its settlement history from the middle ages through the 1950s

### *Trench 1/TR1*

In 2008, the more westerly hillock of the two possible midden locations, just south east of the medieval farm ruin (indicated on the survey plan in figure 2) was test trenched and found to consist of predominantly structural debris (see Harrison 2008b for a more detailed report on the Myrkárdalur 2008 coring and test trenching activities). TR1 measured 1 m (west to east) by 1 m (north to south) and less than 0.5 m in overall depth.



**Figure 3.** Coring at the hillock south of TR1 (indicated by red circle). Picture faces ENE.

### *Trench 2/TR2*

In 2009, upon systematic coring of the entire Myrkárdalur perimeter, a very promising looking area to the south of the medieval structure and the two associated hillocks was detected. Figure 3 shows the hillock cored and subsequently trenched in 2009 in relationship to the medieval structural remains and the small midden trenched in 2008. The team decided to put a small test trench into the mound. The Myrkárdalur Trench 2 (TR2) measured 1 m in width (west to east) and 4 m in length (south to north).

### Relative Dating evidence

#### *Trench 1/TR1*

According to Lucas (2010), this trench contains pottery (i.e. blue painted tin-glazed earthenware, glazed red earthenware cooking pot) and glass artifacts (i.e. green vessel glass, possible mirror fragment) of types tentatively grouping these archaeological remains to the 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> c.



**Figure 4 -** MYÖ09 TR 2, context 203, finds no 16, Raeren Stoneware jug handle, dated to late 16/17th century (Lucas 2010).

### *Trench 2/TR2*

One of the artefacts recovered from TR 2 was a Raeren stoneware jug handle (context 203), placing the midden contents into the late 16th or early 17th centuries AD. (Lucas, 2010). Myrkárdalur midden TR2 produced a number of animal bones and artefacts datable to the Icelandic post-medieval period, roughly placing the contents into the late 16<sup>th</sup> to early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

While the two archaeological sets were loosely placed into two slightly different time periods, they can be viewed as materials from the post-medieval – Early Modern times, likely deposited some time during the late 16<sup>th</sup> to early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

## The Myrkárdalur archaeofauna

The faunal collections from TR1 and TR2 are very small and only allow for basic presence and absence discussions.

NISP (number of identified specimens) refers to all fragments that could be identified to a useful level. TNF is a count of all bone fragments (identifiable or not), MTM is “medium terrestrial mammal” (sheep-dog-pig sized), LTM is “large terrestrial mammal” (cattle-horse sized), MM is an “unidentifiable marine mammal” (i.e. whale, dolphin, walrus, seal), UNIM or unidentified mammal are small fragments that cannot be identified beyond this broad category. UNI or unidentifiable bone fragments simply indicate the existing degree of erosion.

TR 1 had a **NISP** of **178** out of a TNF of 485. TR 2 contained a **NISP** of **309** of a TNF of 1,921. As indicated by the Element Counts in table 1, the majority of analyzed domesticate elements were of ovi/caprines, comprising 55 % of the total TR 1 NISP, and 43 of that from TR 2. For both trenches, about 5 % of the total percentage are made up by cattle elements, with one pig element (0.56 %) collected during the TR 1 excavation.

Four goat elements could be analyzed from the TR 2 collection, indicating that these animals were still utilized by the Myrkárdalur farm in the late 16<sup>th</sup> – early 17<sup>th</sup> c. One horse element from TR 1 (0.56 % NISP) and 4 from TR 2 (1,29 % NISP) complete the domesticate assemblage count.

With the exception of one seal element from TR1, no other wild mammals were identified from the site.

TR 2 contained one element each of Ptarmigan, Swan, and Auk bird, and three unidentified bird elements, with no birds analyzed from TR 1.

Both trenches contained some Gadid fishes, namely Cod (< 2% NISP), Haddock (8 – 10 % NISP), and Saithe (< 1% NISP). Unidentified marine fish elements made up the largest proportion of the Fish category (TR 1: 26 % NISP; TR 2: 33 % NISP).

A few clam species and unidentified mollusk fragments complete the Myrkárdalur fauna distribution list.

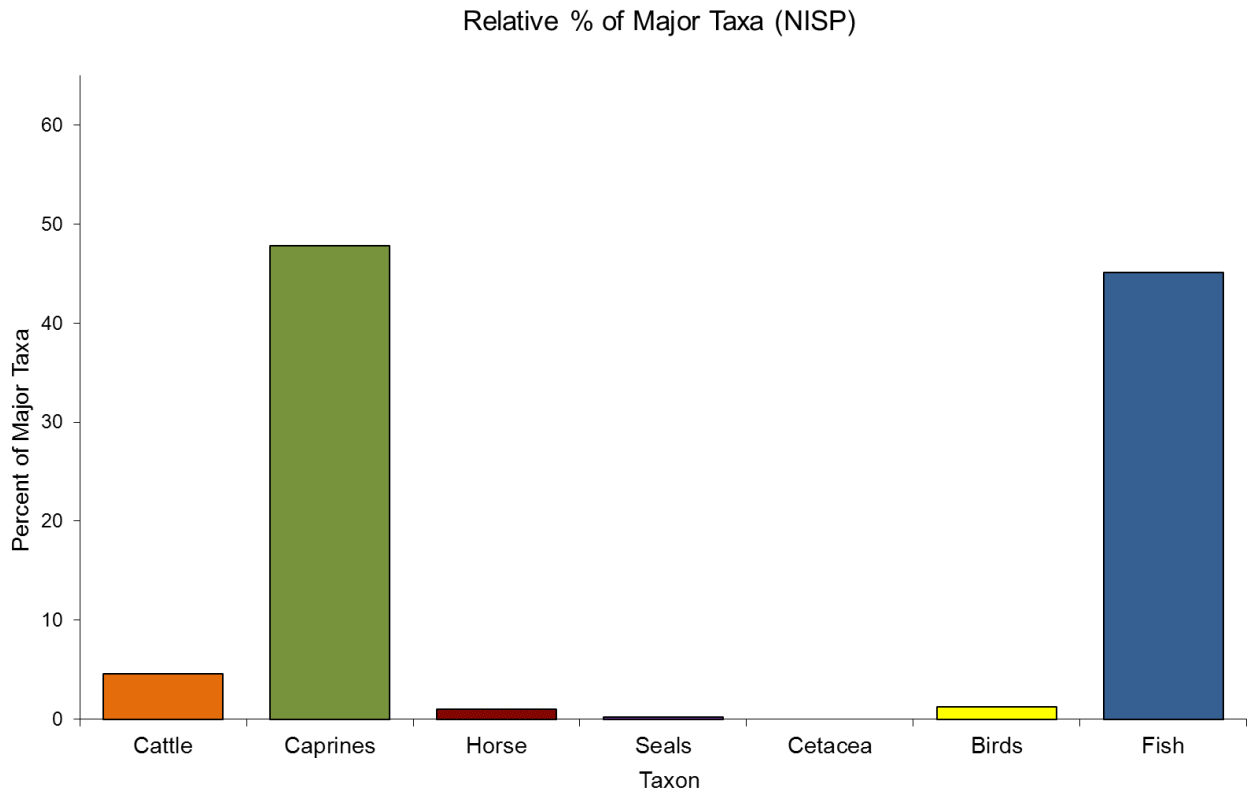
## Overview of Species Present

Myrkárdalur TR 1 / TR2 Element Counts	Area				
	Trench1/TR1 (ca 17/18th c)	Trench1/TR1 NISP %	Trench 2/TR2 (late16th - early 17th c.)	Trench 2/TR2NISP %	Total NISP
<b>Domestic mammals</b>					
Cow ( <i>Bos taurus</i> (L.))	9	5.06	13	4.21	22
Horse ( <i>Equus caballus</i> (L.))	1	0.56	4	1.29	5
Pig ( <i>Sus scrofa</i> (L.))	1	0.56			1
Goat ( <i>Capra hircus</i> (L.))			4	1.29	4
Sheep ( <i>Ovis aries</i> (L.))	4	2.25	6	1.94	10
Unidentified caprine	93	52.25	122	39.48	215
<b>Total caprine</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>54.49</b>	<b>132</b>	<b>42.72</b>	<b>229</b>
<b>Total domestic</b>	<b>108</b>	<b>60.67</b>	<b>149</b>	<b>48.22</b>	<b>257</b>
<b>Wild Mammals</b>					
Unidentified seal species	1	0.56			1
<b>Total seal</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0.56</b>			<b>1</b>
<b>Total wild mammal</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0.56</b>			<b>1</b>
<b>Birds</b>					
Auk species (Alcid sp.)			1	0.32	1
Swan ( <i>Cygnus</i> species)			1	0.32	1
Ptarming ( <i>Lagopus muta</i> )			1	0.32	1
Unidentified bird species			3	0.97	3
<b>Total bird</b>			<b>6</b>	<b>1.94</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Fish</b>					
Cod ( <i>Gadus morhua</i> (L.))	2	1.12	6	1.94	8
Haddock ( <i>Melanogrammus aeglefinus</i> (L.))	14	7.87	32	10.36	46
Saithe ( <i>Pollachius virens</i> (L.))	1	0.56	3	0.97	4
Gadid species	3	1.69	7	2.27	10
Marine fish non-speciated	47	26.40	101	32.69	148
<b>Total fish</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>37.64</b>	<b>149</b>	<b>48.22</b>	<b>216</b>
<b>Mollusca</b>					
Clam sp. ( <i>Mya</i> sp.)	2	1.12	2	0.65	4
Unidentified mollusc species			3	0.97	3
<b>Total mollusca</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1.12</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>1.62</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Total Number of Identified Species (NISP)</b>	<b>178</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>309</b>	<b>100.00</b>	<b>487</b>
Large terrestrial mammal	23		13		36
Medium terrestrial mammal	126		176		302

Uni. terrestrial mammal fragments	158		1,422		1580
Unidentified marine mammal fragments			1		1
<b>Total number of fragments (TNF)</b>	<b>485</b>		<b>1,921</b>		<b>2406</b>

**Table 1.** Myrkárdalur NISP table.

## Major Taxa Summary



**Figure 5.** Total Myrkárdalur Major Taxa distribution

The graph in figure 5 presents relative % of all Myrkárdalur Major Taxa, indicating a dominance in sheep/goat (caprine) elements analyzed. The bar representing the fish taxon includes unidentifiable fish remains and therefore has not as much analytical weight as if it represented fish remains analyzed to family or species level. Since all the Myrkárdalur fish elements were found to be from marine species, these were nevertheless included here. This graph summarizes the findings from table 1; this time the faunal materials from both trenches were lumped together.

## Domestic Mammals

Table 2 presents the percentages of the domestic mammal assemblage by area.

<i>Scientific Names</i>	<i>English Common Names</i>	% NISP			
		Trench/TR1	Trench/TR 1	Trench/TR2	% NISP Trench/TR2
Bos taurus dom.	cattle	9	8	13	9
Equus caballus	horse	1	1	4	3
Sus scrofa	pig	1	1		0
Ovis aries	sheep	4	4	6	4
Capra hircus	goat			4	3
Ovis/ Capra sp. Indet.	caprine	93	86	122	82
<b>Total</b>		<b>108</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>149</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 2.** Percentage of domestic mammal distributions by area.

As indicated by table 2, the overall domesticated species distribution percentages differ only slightly from the earlier faunal collection in TR2, and that of the more recent one in TR1. One difference worth mentioning may be the disappearance in goats in the later period, which could of course be also due to poorer preservation conditions in TR 1, containing the more recent archaeofaunal samples.

### Concluding Remarks

Due to the poor condition of the faunal materials, only a very basic analysis was possible for the late 16<sup>th</sup> – early 18<sup>th</sup> c. Myrkárdalur archaeofauna. During that time, this was clearly a farming operation, utilizing caprines, cattle, and some horses and the occasional pigs. It seems from this faunal assemblage that heavy emphasis was laid on use of domesticated terrestrial resource, but also on gadids, brought to site either from Skagafjörður in the West, or from Eyjafjörður further east.

The position of the Trench 2/TR 2 midden mound on the downhill end of a steep slope may have enabled good drainage of water and leaching of organic materials. The site's fuel economy was visible in a series of excavated midden layers from the post-medieval era: Several contexts consisted almost entirely of either peat ash or wood ash, or a mixture of both. Similar is true for the midden mound where Trench 1/TR 1 was placed in 2008: the area where the medieval ruin is located lies on a down slope and water from the mountains may have leached the bone materials

from both mounds. Also, the peat and wood ash layers may have further degraded the PH levels, leading to increased degradation of the bones. Since Myrkárdalur lies in a highland zone, it is likely that freeze-thawing activities have placed further mechanical stresses on the midden remains.

After two seasons of locating and testing the Myrkárdalur midden remains, the medieval materials remain elusive. A GPR survey may have to be done in this area if these materials were to be recovered, should they remain intact still and have not been spread around the homefield by centuries' worth of farming activities.

### **Acknowledgments**

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