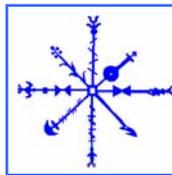


**The Church at Gásir, Eyjafjörður, N**  
**Interim Report of faunal analysis from the 2004 and 2006 Excavations**

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NORSEC

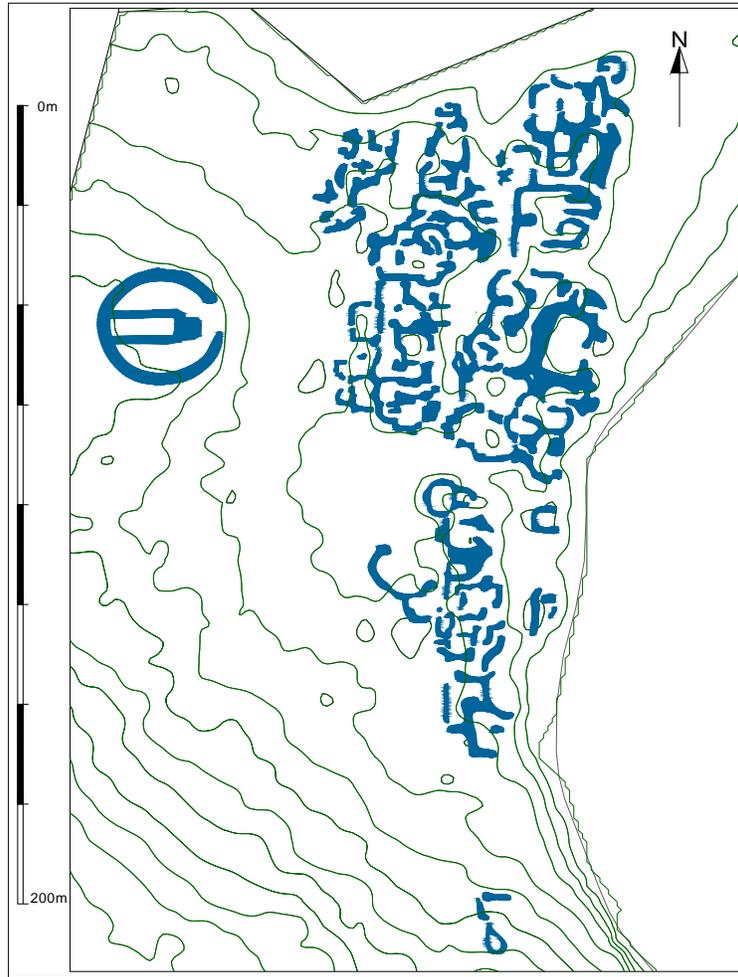
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**Plan 1: Gásir , Church, left and trading station, right side  
(Roberts, 2006)**

### **Summary**

Archaeological excavations at the trading site of Gásir near the modern city of Akureyri were started in 2001 and directed by Howell Roberts of *Fornleifastofnun Íslands* (Archaeological Institute Iceland, FSÍ) for *Minjasafnið á Akureyri* (Akureyri Museum). Plan 1 outlines the Gásir excavation areas in blue, with the Church clearly visible on the left hand of the picture, and the trading site with its booth-like constructions and central Trackway on the right, located on a coastal inlet close to the mouth of Eyjafjörður, about 11 km north of the modern town of Akureyri (Roberts, 2006). In addition to the 2001-

2006 excavation of Area A (as well as some other areas that produced no faunal materials), Area B was excavated in seasons 2004 and 2006. Orri Vésteinsson directed the churchyard dig that produced the faunal materials that have been analyzed at the CUNY Northern Science & Education Center laboratories as part of the North Atlantic Biocultural Organization cooperative effort, with funding provided by the UK Leverhulme Trust. Analysis of the Area B zooarchaeological remains was carried out by Ramona Harrison.

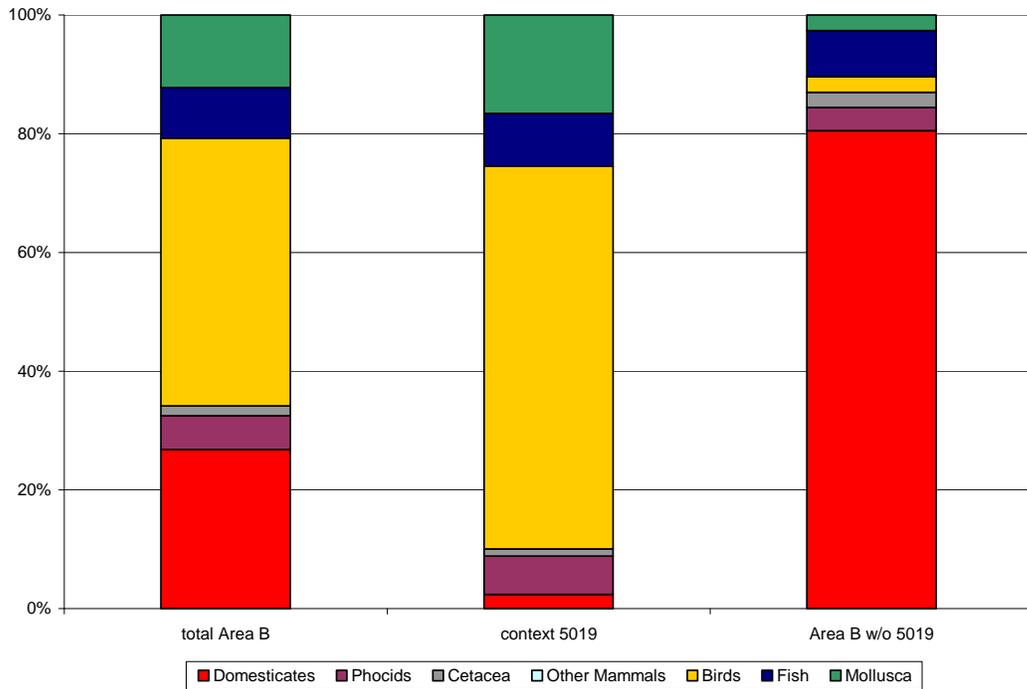
Zooarchaeological data from the years 2004 and 2006 has been used for this report, offering a total NISP (Number of Identified Species) of **246** out of a TNF (Total Number of Fragments) of **334**. The species present include domestic cattle, sheep, and dog, as well as seal and whale elements; furthermore bird and fish remains as well as relatively large amount of Mollusks (roughly 12%). Context **5019**, a midden deposit under the churchyard wall, receives special focus throughout the report. It contains a mixed number of species, most notably a large amount of bird remains speciated to the Guillemot family. The bird remains found in the midden amount to 98% of the total site-assemblage.

The total number of NISP is very low and the only context that has a considerable number of faunal elements (169) that could be identified to species or family is the midden under the churchyard wall (fig. 1). There are a number of ways to interpret this deposit, but the low number of the overall archaeofauna puts a bias on the remains found in this midden. The neonatal seals could come from local seal populations and the Guillemot family remains are not as spectacular, since these alcids are home to the general Eyjafjord region and have nesting grounds (on cliffs) on the island of Grímsey (Bárðarson 1986, Hilmarsson 2000), located not too far north of Eyjafjörður . One Hypothesis could be that the locals provisioned the early travelers with predominantly wild species (McGovern, personal communication, May 2007). At the moment, it may be most prudent to assume that this context presents an *early provisioning deposit*, containing a mix of wild and domestic species.

Table 1 displays the distribution of elements per species:

Table 1: Gásir Area B	
Taxon	no. of Elements
<i>Domestic Mammals</i>	
Cattle ( <i>Bos taurus dom</i> L)	29
Dog ( <i>Canis familiaris</i> . L)	3
Sheep ( <i>Ovis aries dom.</i> L)	2
Caprine	32
total Caprine	34
<b>total Domestic sp.</b>	<b>66</b>
<i>Wild Mammals</i>	
Seal species	14
<b>total Seal species</b>	<b>14</b>
Whale species	4
<b>total Whale species</b>	<b>4</b>
<i>Birds</i>	
Guillemot family ( <i>Uria</i> sp.)	22
Gull species ( <i>Larus</i> sp.)	2
Razorbill ( <i>Alca torda</i> L)	1
Bird species indeterminate	86
<b>total Bird species</b>	<b>111</b>
<i>Fish</i>	
Cod ( <i>Gadus morhua</i> L)	2
Haddock ( <i>Melanogr. aeglef.</i> L)	1
Gadid sp	1
Trout ( <i>Salmo trutta</i> L)	3
total Fish species identified	7
Fish species indeterminate	14
<b>Total Fish species</b>	<b>21</b>
<i>Mollusca</i>	
Periwinkle ( <i>Littorina. lit.</i> L)	1
Mussel ( <i>Mytilus edulis</i> L)	4
Clam ( <i>Mya</i> sp.)	13
Common whelk ( <i>Bucc. Und.</i> L)	2
Moll. Species	10
<b>total Moll. Species</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>total NISP</b>	<b>246</b>
Large Terrestr. Mammal	11
Medium Terrestr. Mammal	37
Small Terrestr. Mammal	0
Unidentified Mammal Frag.	40
<b>total TNF</b>	<b>334</b>

Figure 1: Area B - Major Taxes comparatives (% NISP)



### Domestic Mammals

Figure 1 demonstrates that the Domesticates are prevalent everywhere, but for context 5019. The profile of taxa distribution is strikingly different from the overall site distribution. The context contained a far lower number of domesticates than the other site contexts.

Due to the small amount of overall faunal elements, this comparison is more demonstrative than a statement on site (Area B) subsistence strategy.

**Cattle bone** is present, and the caprine/cattle ratio is about 1.17 caprine bone for every cattle bone. The total number of *Bos taurus* remains is 29, including three cattle horn cores, found in contexts 5078, 5207, 5227 (fig 2), and are potential indicators for horn craft working. Four of the long-bone remains showed chop marks and at least half of all the elements were exhibiting signs of heavy erosion or exfoliation.



**Figure 2: Cattle Horn Core, posterior view (context 5227)**

There were 34 elements speciated to the **Caprine** (Goat/Sheep) category. None of the elements were articulated butchery units. However, 12 caprine bones (35%) did show butchery marks, which were found almost entirely on long-bone fragments, especially metapodials. Two elements were split for marrow consumption: a metapodial from context 5004 and a Phalanx (PH1) from context 5167. One split Caprine skull, presumably butchered for svið, was found in context 5019.

There were no bi-perforated caprine metapodials, but two mono-perforated ones, both in context 5200. The later Icelandic archaeofauna usually yields a certain number of bi-perforated caprine metapodials and the complete absence could potentially indicate either that some of the elements were deposited earlier than 1300, that non-Icelanders handled the marrow-yielding bones, or that the sample size is too small (for a more thorough discussion, see Harrison in Roberts, 2005).

**No** cat (*Felis catus*), horse (*Equus caballus*) or pig (*Sus scrofa*) remains were analyzed from the Gásir churchyard archaeofauna.



**Figure 3. Western side of the Churchyard wall – facing North.  
Context 5019 was located underneath this circular enclosure of the area.  
Photo: Vésteinsson, (FSÍ Report: FS335)**

The two dog (*Canis familiaris*) elements recovered from context 5019 could be from the same individual. One element is a distal dibia and the other either a maxillary or mandibular canine. A third dog element, also a canine fragment, was found in 5167. The presence of one tooth does not necessarily imply death of an animal.

Figure 3 shows the Churchyard wall. Context 5019 was located underneath and since it is assumed (see Vesteinsson in Roberts, 2006) that the boundary was erected prior to 1300, the animal remains should be from that time, if not earlier.

## **Wild Mammals**

### Seals

There were 14 seal remains in total, and 11 of them in the midden context of 5019. None of the elements could be speciated beyond family. The three neonate elements could be a seasonal indicator, since seal pups are mainly born in May-June (McGovern, personal communication May 2007). They were all from context 5019 and might be one individual. Since the elements come from different parts of the body and were not found together, they will still be counted as three seal elements rather than only one seal individual (for MNI and NISP see Reitz & Wing 1999). The one part of innominate found in context 5019 was scorched and had signs of chopping. No other butchery or burning evidence was found on the seal elements.

### Whales

Three of the four whale elements found in Area B were potential bone working debris. It was not possible to speciate the individuals beyond family, since three of the elements were ribs and the fourth was too fragmented to be identified.

## **Birds**

Table 2 breaks down the bird species that could be identified. Guillemot species were most abundant, and all of them found in context 5019. Guillemots are nesting on cliffs and Grímsey, off of Eyjafjörður could be point of origin for the birds traveling the waters of the Fjord. Albeit a potential seasonal indicator, guillemot species in general are present along Iceland's coastline during the winter. If the remains turned out to be of Black Guillemot (*Cephus grylle* L.), the seasonal aspect would be more reliable, since this species has nesting grounds along Eyjafjörður during May with the young ones hatching around July (Hilmarsson 2000).

Table 2 : Gásir, Area B: Identified Bird Species	Absolute #	%
<b>Migratory Waterfowl</b>		
Mallard Duck ( <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i> , L)	0	0
Eider Duck ( <i>Somateria mollissima</i> , L)	0	0
<b>Sea birds</b>		
Murre species ( <i>Uria</i> species)	22	88
Atlantic puffin ( <i>Fratercula arctica</i> , L)	0	0
Razorbill ( <i>Alca torda</i> , L)	1	4
Gull species ( <i>Larus</i> species)	2	8
Total	25	100

Gásir is located along a coastal inlet and the lack in Eider Duck remains is curious. Quite a number of them were recovered from Area A (Harrison in Roberts, 2005).

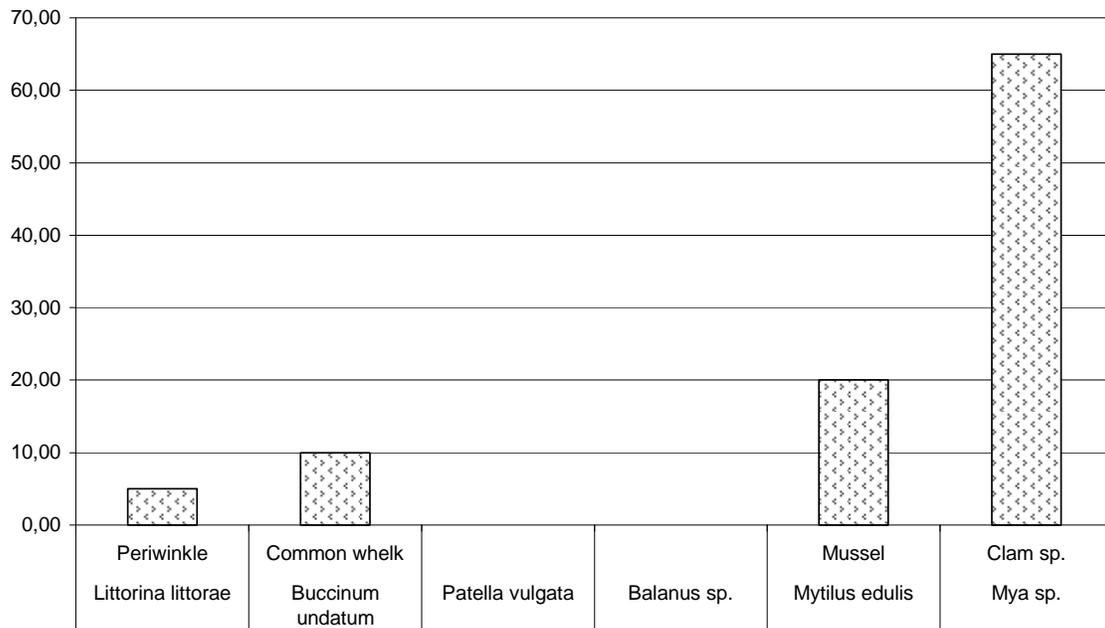
### **Fish**

Few fish remains were recovered from area B; a total of 21 elements, of which 4 could be identified as gadids (Cod and Haddock) and three as trout fragments. The remaining 14 fish fragments were beyond speciation. All of the identifiable fish elements were found in context 5019, and the Haddock cleithrum may have a knife mark on it.

### **Mollusks**

Mollusk remains made up roughly 12% of the total bone assemblage, and 17% of the 5019 assemblage. Clam fragments were the most abundant, and mussels the second highest in number. Context 5019 contained 28 of the 30 elements of mollusks and two of them were speciated to *Buccinum undatum* or common whelk that lives in the waters of the North Atlantic. Figure 4 presents the various identified Mollusk species.

**Figure 4: Gásir Area B  
Mollusca Sp ID %**



## Conclusions

While this is a preliminary report of an archaeofauna that is limited in number, certain trends can be detected by analyzing the data from Gásir, area B:

- The midden deposit (context 5019) contains a faunal assemblage high in wild species and few domesticates.
- The rest of the site contexts reflect a better known pattern of medieval Icelandic subsistence strategy (McGovern 2001, 1999).
- The Guillemot, Seal, and Mollusk remains could be potential seasonal indicators that could further specify the time of year of occupation/consumption activities.
- Due to assemblage size, none of the results are conclusive.

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