

Midden Investigations at Höftagerði N Iceland 2002

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Summary: During the 2002 season of the *Landscapes of Settlement Project* (directed by Fornleifastofnun Íslands with the NABO cooperative) we carried out coring and test trenching to attempt to localize midden deposits at the site of Höftagerði on the property of Núpar on the lower Laxá River. The site comprises a set of impressive boundary walls, a number of detached structures (A-D) scattered across the S E face of a bluff overlooking the Laxá, and a small farm mound (J) near a modern summer house to the south of the other ruins (w 0388862, utm 7314019, elevation 23 m above sea level, site pH 6.0-6.25). The northern ruins appear to be very early, with occupation beginning shortly after the LNL. They also appear to be briefly occupied, with only 5-10 cm of cultural deposit around them. The farm mound deposits are much thicker, and corings demonstrated up to 80 cm of stratified cultural deposit in the margins of the farm mound area. A 1 x 3 m test trench (L) was dug on top of one of the deeper cores, and encountered multiple layers of peat ash, charcoal, non-diagnostic artifacts, and some animal bone. However, it became apparent that this deposit was mainly ash overlying an earlier phase turf structure. No *in situ* tephra were observed, and the excavated material is undated. Excavation was stopped at this point to avoid damaging the structural remains. There is definitely midden material around the farm mound, and the site appears to have considerable promise for further work.

Coring & Test Pit Program Around Structures A & B:

As part of the overall research effort at Höftagerði, we carried out a series of corings around the evident structures A & B in the N end of the site area. None of the cores or small test pits encountered cultural deposits thicker than 5-6 cm, suggesting a fairly brief occupation phase in this area.

Core 1 downslope of structure B (byre??) 3 m from apparent E wall.

0-50 cm turf and sterile brown silt

50-55 cm brown silt with charcoal and some flecks of ash

55-60 cm sterile brown silt

60-62 cm H3 tephra

Core 2 outside of apparent door in SW end of structure B.

0-20 cm turf and sterile brown silt

20-30 cm mottled brown soil with some charcoal

30-32 cm H3 tephra

Core 3 outside of SE possible door of structure B

0-50 cm turf and sterile brown silt

50-55 cm brown silt with charcoal flecks

55-60 cm H3 tephra.

Core 4 outside E end of Structure A (possible hall)

0-25 cm turf and sterile brown silt

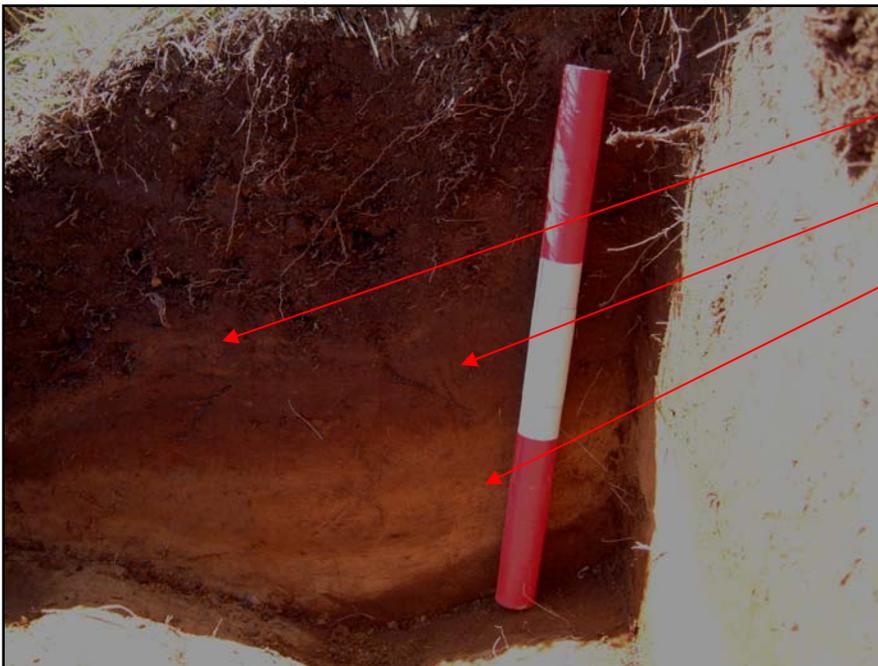
25-30 cm brown silt with charcoal

30-35 cm H3 tephra.

Three small (50 cm x 50 cm) test pits were opened along the access road cutting through the site in an effort to better understand this thin cultural deposit, and to test the hypothesis that a midden had been cut through by the road. Test pit 1 did show a small layer of ash and charcoal running under the road surface, but it was very thin and rested nearly on top of the H3 tephra beneath.



Test pit 1 along the access road was opened to investigate possible cultural deposits below the possible byre structure B.



A thin layer of ash and charcoal spreads above a sterile layer just above the H 3 tephra.

Scale is 30 cm.



Test pit 2 along the road cut just below structure A revealed impressive *thufur* heave effects, but little or no cultural layers.

Test pit 3 on the opposite side of the road also produced no cultural materials.

Coring and Test Trenching around farm mound J:



A small farm mound is apparent down hill (S) of structures A-D, today the site of a small summer cottage built around a trailer (caravan). The farm mound has multiple room depressions on its top, made clearer when the farmer from Núpár cut and harvested the grass crop growing on top of the ruins (view from the S). There had been ashes and charcoal

uncovered when a small strawberry bed was cut into the E side of the mound.

Cores taken (by Elín and Bírna) just below the modern wire fence near the edge of the farm mound and in a green grass patch at the SE corner of the modern wire fence produced indications of deeply stratified deposits (>80 cm) in these areas.

Core 5 in green grass at SE corner of modern fence line

0-15 cm Modern turf

15-25 cm medium brown silt with charcoal flecks

25-30 cm stratified cultural deposit, stripes of charcoal, peat ash, bone flecks.

30-48 cm mottled brown soil with ash and charcoal

48-60 cm very mixed light brown with some displaced H3

60-70 cm dark horizon, possible turf blocks

70-82 cm turf with possible LNL

85-92 cm H3 tephra.

Core 6 just S of the apparent room depression in the middle of farm mound J.

0-10 cm turf

10-20 cm charcoal, bone flecks, ash, greasy texture.

20-32 cm dark brown mixed deposit, charcoal and ash.

32-42 cm red brown with flecks of H3 tephra

42-73 cm, mottled dk brown with charcoal and some ash

73-90 cm stratified dense cultural material with charcoal and small bone frags.

90-120 cm mottled cultural material with charcoal

121- H3 encountered.

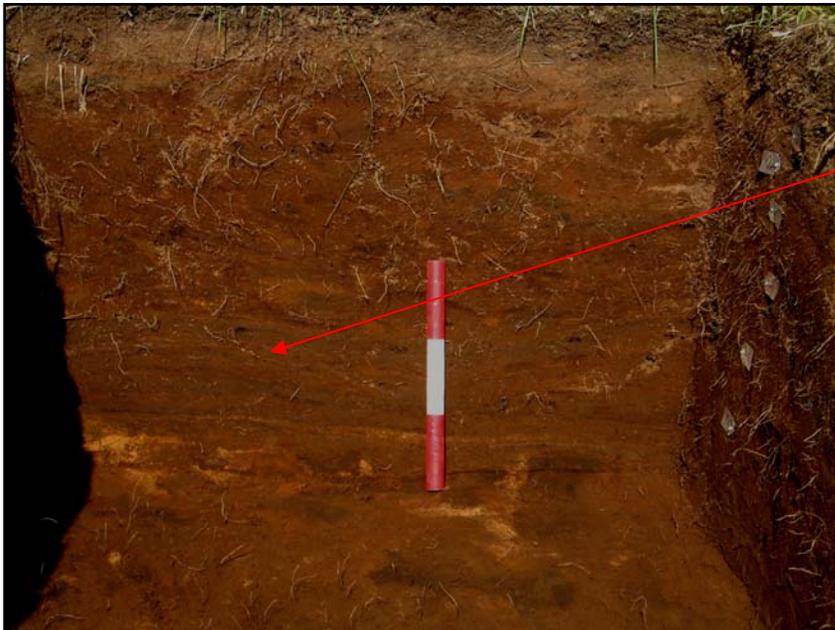


A test pit (L) 1 x 3 m was deturfed over test pit 6 in hope of hitting deeply stratified midden material. View N from the approximate base of the farm mound slope. Ash, charcoal, and bits of burnt bone were immediately encountered after deturfing and a sieve was set up.



Despite the coring results and the early indications of a bone rich deposit, only scattered bits of bone (most burnt, but including a few unburnt fragments in good condition) were recovered. Several ash layers (contexts 03 and 04 in particular) ran the length of the unit and may have been deliberately

scattered over the ground surface in front of the building.



In the NW corner of the unit, turf blocks began to appear, and the layers became extremely compact, suggesting the possibility of a high traffic area or even a floor layer.



The test trench L was ended at this point to avoid damaging possible early phase structures or obscuring relationships between phases. Ash fill seems to have been used in this area to level the slope and perhaps to provide a good walking surface. Deposits rich in bone and other refuse were probably unwelcome in this location and are likely spread down slope.

Discussion and Recommendations : The coring and test pit program at Höftagerði demonstrated that the structures in the N side of the site are probably early, and almost certainly we only occupied for a short time. The farm mound to the S may be a later re-occupation of the site, or may simply represent a movement downhill from the first farm site. The farm mound has deeply stratified deposits all around it (esp on the S and E sides) and would seem to reflect a longer occupational history. While the test trench L failed to find rich midden deposits, it did serve to underline the potentially complex depositional history of the farm mound area. We suggest an expanded program of excavation, and further tests for midden lower on the slope and to the E around core 5.

Attachments:

Profile drawing test trench L (drawing film)

Artifact photos (contact print and CDR)

Site photos (CDR)

Finds database (CDR and printed)