

Midden Investigations at Oddastaðir
Mývatnssveit, N Iceland
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A field report to FSÍ
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Summary: During the 2002 field season of the *Landscapes of Settlement Project* (directed by **Fornleifastofnun Íslands** with collaboration by the NABO cooperative) a team (Tom McGovern and Christian Keller) visited Oddastaðir August 9th 2002 with the objective of localizing possible midden deposits around the several groups of ruins contained within the surviving home field wall. McGovern made a series of soil cores using the Oakfield tube type soil corer and dug a 1 x 1 m test pit, while Keller carried out a GPS aided survey map of the general area (returning Aug 12-13th to complete observations). The soil cores rapidly indicated that the most substantial cultural deposits were around the grass covered ruin near the center of the Oddastaðir complex (ruin group F in this report), striking the prehistoric H3 tephra at 126 cm below modern surface with ca 80cm of cultural deposit above. The cores outside ruin complexes H and I to the S turned up ca 10-20 cm of deeply buried cultural materials but no clear indications of midden. The test pit (trench II) reached H3 at 130 cm from modern surface, and held some 80 cm of stratified ash (wood and peat) charcoal, and a few well preserved bone fragments. A profile drawn by Orri picked up a probable 1717 tephra above the heavy 1477, then traces of N 1300, H 1158, and then the LNS above H3 at the base of the profile. While test trench II seems to have missed the bone rich portion of the midden (which is probably a few meters downslope, further from the front wall) it did serve to indicate the long medieval occupation sequence and a shorter early modern presence. The site appears extremely promising for additional excavation work.

The most promising possible farm structures were ruin group F (grass covered mound with clear wall lines and several large stones exposed) and we put in four cores in this area, downslope from the apparent “front door” area.

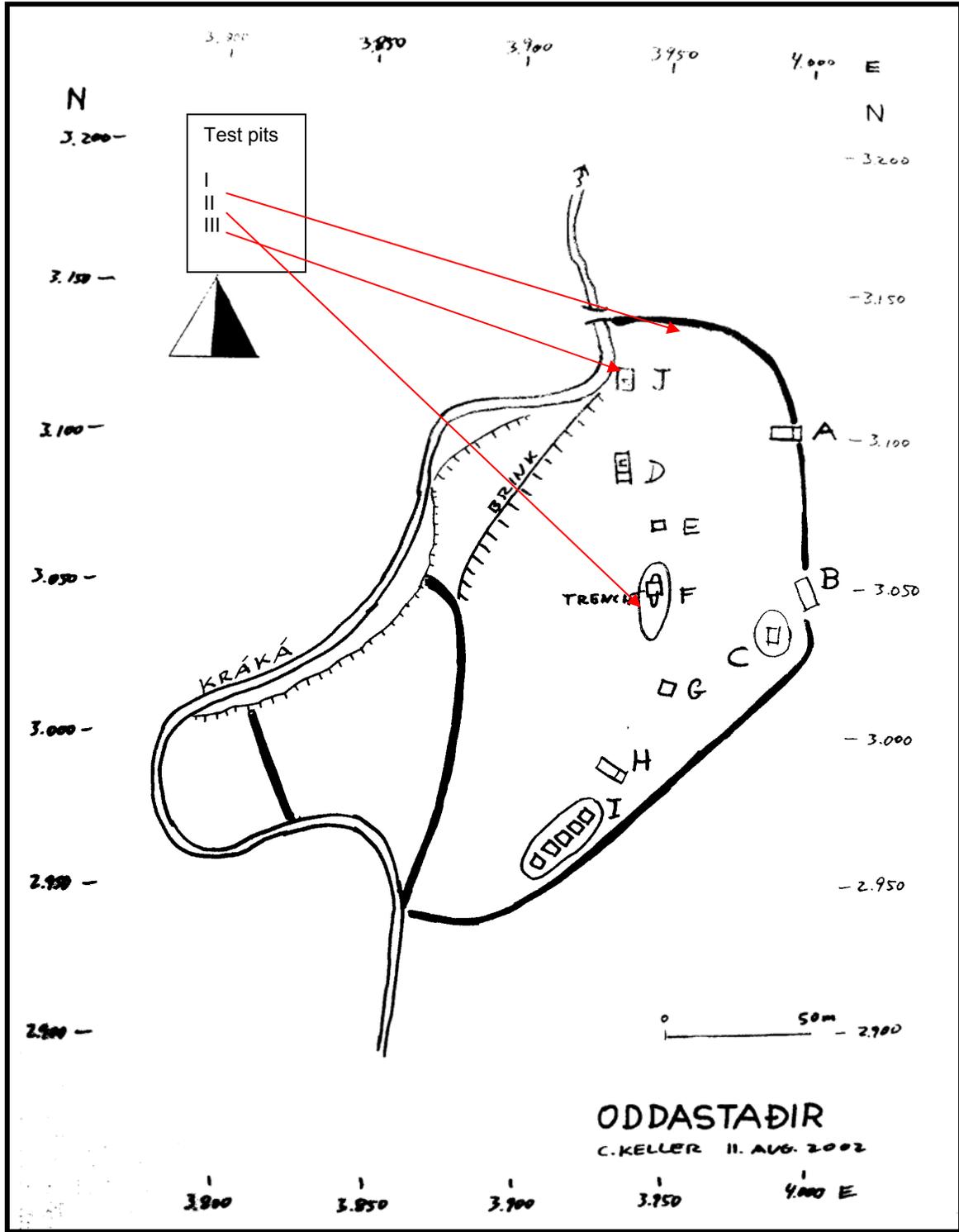


View of area W of structure F producing deeply stratified cultural deposits in cores. Backpack and tool box mark approximate front wall of main structure as visible on surface.



View from N of probable midden area and the slope down towards the Kraká to the W. Backpack and tool box in same position as above.

Sketch map of the Oddastaðir site by Christian Keller. Test pit I, II, III approx. locations, see Trimble GPS map for exact coordinates



Coring Report

Cores in the **Structure F** area produced some 50 cm of largely sterile brown andisol, then a thick band of the grey green 1477 tephra, then 50-80 cm of ash, charcoal, and then the double bands of the local LNS.

Core 1, ca 20 m downhill from large stone near apparent W doorway in upper structure F. ca 5 m down hill from lower front structure wall.

0-44 cm nearly sterile brown andisol

44-48 cm grey green tephra (1477?)

50-130 cm ash and charcoal layers, definitely cultural

148 cm end of core segments- H3 not reached.

Core 2, ca 10 m downhill from core 1 (W) near edge of current grass cover around ruin F.

0-50 cm nearly sterile brown andisol

50-53 cm grey green tephra (1477?)

53-95 cm ash and charcoal layers

95 cm core stopped on rock.

Structure H is a long rectangular building with well defined walls, its main axis cutting across the slope. We placed one core approximately 5 m from the apparent W door, and got some deeply buried cultural layers.

Core 3 ca 5 m W of apparent door in structure H

0-57 cm nearly sterile brown andisol

57-60 cm grey green tephra (1477?)

60-80 cm nearly sterile brown soil

80-95 cm ash and charcoal layers

95-116 cm nearly sterile brown soil

116-120 cm H3 tephra

Structure I is a row of clear room depressions aligned parallel to the farm boundary wall, with their narrow ends facing the Laxá to the W.

Core 4 was just 5 m W (downslope) of the northernmost of the room depressions in Structure I on an apparent slight rise.

0-40 cm nearly sterile brown andisol

40-43 cm grey green tephra (1477??)

43-97 cm nearly sterile brown soil

97-100 cm thin layer of ash and charcoal

100-143 cm nearly sterile brown soil

143-145 cm H3 tephra.

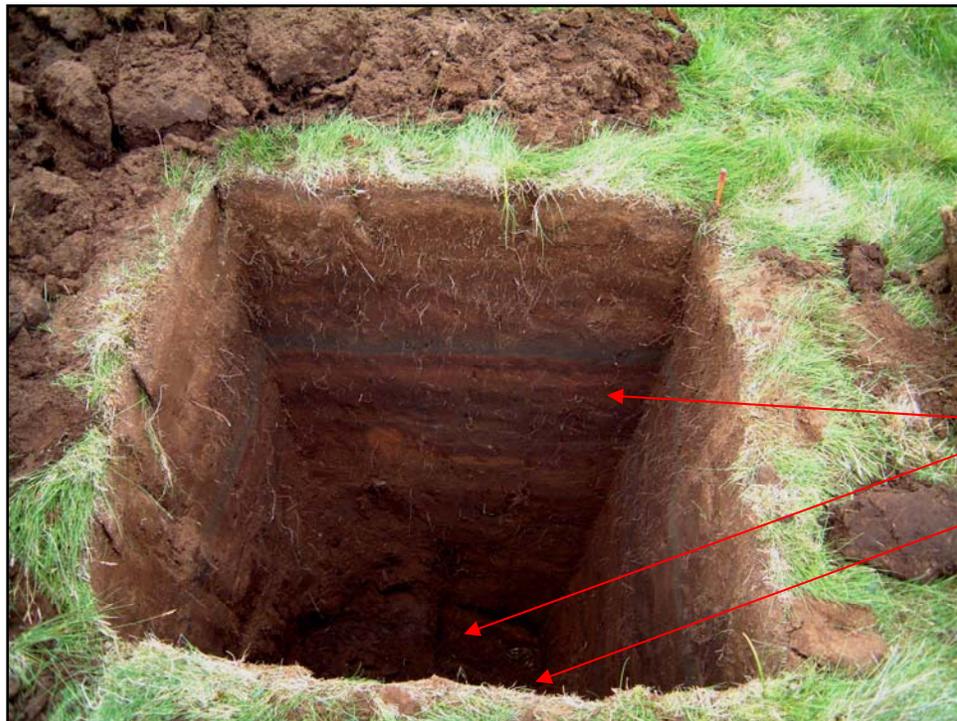
Test Trench II

Test trench II was placed over core 1 just outside the front wall of the ruin F, and was dug to the H3 surface 130 cm below modern turf surface.



View of trench II from the South.

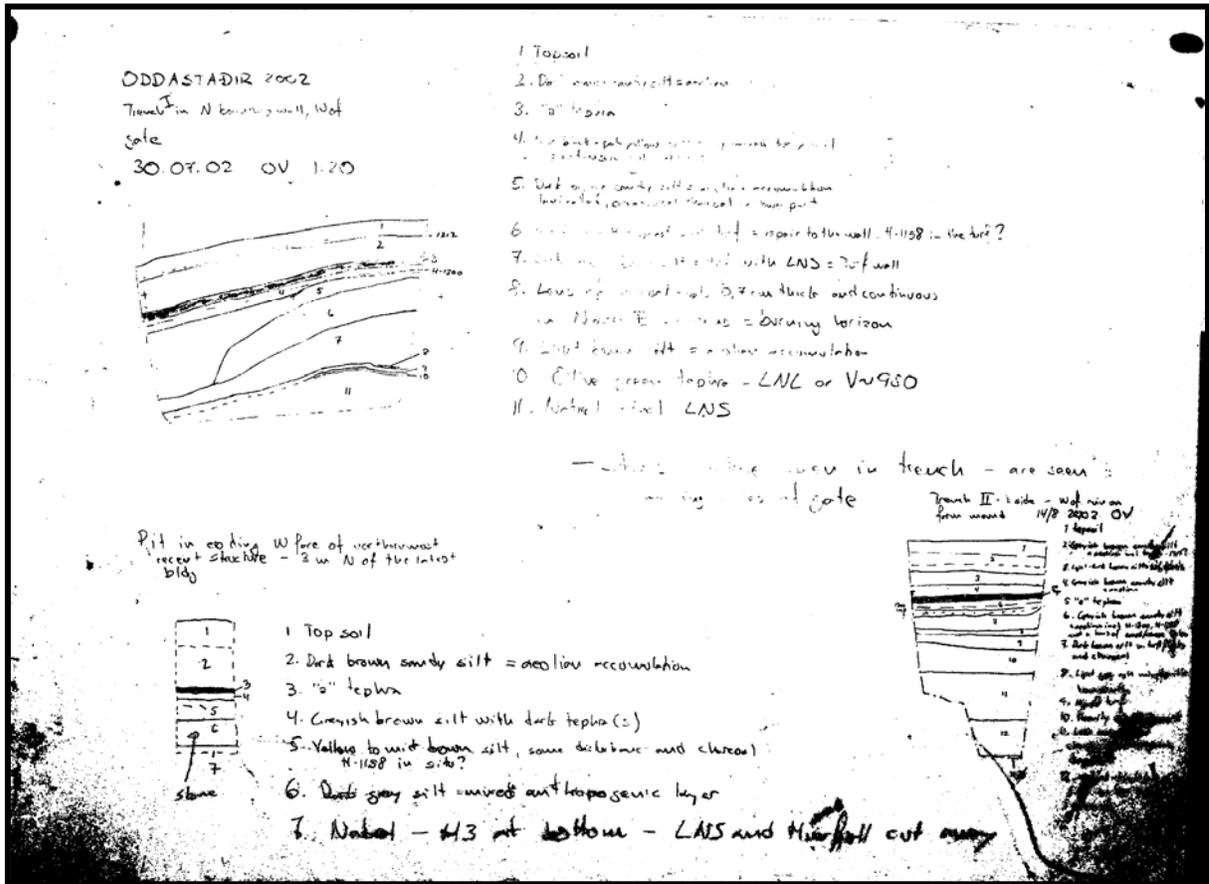
Approximate lower front wall of Structure F



View of completed test pit, illustrating the “telephone booth” drawback of narrow units and deep deposits.

1477 tephra LNS

H3



Profile drawings of test trench original in site archive.

Finds: The excavation produced preserved animal bone, including context 009. Soil pH was 6.25-6.5, and bone should be well preserved under these conditions. No artifacts were recovered.

Trench I
1 topsoil
2 dk brown sandy silt=Aeolian
3 "a" tephra
4 near black & pale yellow silt very mixed turfy soil = intensive cultivation??
5 dk brown sandy silt= aeol.; Accumulation, laminated, occasional charcoal in lower part
6 pale brown silt = upcast and turf repair to the wall, H1158 in turf?
7 Dk grey brn silt=turf w LNS=turf wall
8 lens of charcoal up to 0.7 cm thick and continuous in N & E sections, = burning horizon
9 lt brn silt=Aeolian accumulation
10 olive green tephra= LNL or V-950
11. Natural incl LNS

sson (at 1:10)

rc coal and lower leg

Trench III
1- top soil
2- dk brown sandy silt= Aeolian accumulation
3- "a" tephra
4- Greyish brown silt with dark tephra(s)
5- Yellow to med. Brown silt some disturbance and charcoal, H 1158 in situ?
6- Dk grey silt mixed anthropog. Layer
7- Natural- H3 at bottom, LNS & Hverfall cut away

Trench II
1 top soil
2 greyish brown sandy silt= aeol. Incl./ tephra 1717?
3 lt-med brn silt, w/turf debris
4 greyish brown sandy silt = aeol.
5 "a" tephra
6 greyish brown sandy silt aeol. Incl n 1300, h 1158 and a lens of sand/coarse tephra
7 Dark brown silt with turf flecks and charcoal
8 light grey ash mixed with brown earth
9 Mixed turf & ash
10 heavily mixed deposit
11 less mixed but clearly anthropog deposit
12 natural- black layers in LNS on top LNL absent

Discussion and Recommendations: While the well known limitations cores and especially of narrow deep holes need to be kept in mind, the coring and test trenching seems to produce a reasonably coherent picture of early (and fairly intense) settlement, a long period of abandonment, and some evidence of nearby human activity some time after the 1477 ash fall. There seems to be a very considerable amount of ash accumulation (up to 80 cm) in front of the W wall of structure F, which may simply reflect generations of use of this material as clean and readily available paving in a high traffic area. While the main refuse bearing midden was not found by test pit II, the few bits of bone recovered were in good shape and it is likely that more will be found a bit further down hill. This is clearly an important site- early, far inland, and well preserved. It would certainly warrant further excavation work.

Attached

CK sketch plan (drawing film)

OV profiles (drawing film)

Photo and text archive on CDR