

Hofstaðir: Excavations of a Viking Age Feasting Hall in North-Eastern Iceland

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Source: Arctic, Antarctic, and Alpine Research, 42(4) : 499-503

Published By: Institute of Arctic and Alpine Research (INSTAAR),
University of Colorado

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1657/1938-4246-42.4.499>

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HOFSTAÐIR: EXCAVATIONS OF A VIKING AGE FEASTING HALL IN NORTH-EASTERN ICELAND. By Gavin Lucas. Reykjavik: Institute of Archaeology Monograph Series 1, 2009. 440 pp. \$48.00. Order from kristborg@instarch.is.

This extensive and detailed monograph describes results from the archaeological excavations undertaken during the period 1991–2002 at the site of Hofstaðir in Mývatnssveit, a district in the northeast of Iceland. Hofstaðir is of interest not least because it is the largest Viking-age structure known in Iceland. One of the primary conclusions drawn from these recent excavations is that the site encompassed a large hall that was used to host gatherings of people in which feasting and animal sacrifices occurred. The hall was established in the middle of the tenth century A.D., and appears to have been in use for some 90 years before being abandoned, ostensibly with some care.

The excavations were the result of collaboration between the Institute of Archaeology in Iceland (*Fornleifastofnun Íslands*) and colleagues associated with NABO (the North Atlantic Biocultural Organization; see <http://www.nabohome.org/>). The work was sponsored by: the Icelandic Centre for Research (*RANNÍS*); the U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF); the Committee of the Nordic Research Councils for the Humanities (NOS-H); the

DOI: 10.1657/1938-4246-42.4.499

National Geographic Society; and the Icelandic Ministry of Culture (*Menntamálaráðuneyti*). The value of the excavations and the monograph are reflected in the fact that Gavin Lucas and *Fornleifastofnun Íslands* recently received the “Cultural Award” from the Icelandic newspaper *DV*. The comments of the award committee were: “In 1992 a large-scale archaeological excavation was begun at Hofstaðir near Myvatn, in northeast Iceland. The work continued for over a decade. The results have now been presented in a very detailed and elegantly presented monograph. This work offers many new insights into the Viking period in Iceland, the nature of the settlement and the interplay between man and nature in ninth- to eleventh-century Iceland” (quoted on <http://www.nabohome.org/>).

The excavation results as elucidated in the Hofstaðir monograph are presented in a clear and scholarly manner, with sections reflecting the very best in present-day archaeological techniques and paradigms. There are seven major chapters with several subsections in each one. Although Gavin Lucas is credited with primary authorship, the monograph is clearly the product of excellent collaboration among some 45 scholars of varying nationality, including Iceland, the U.K., U.S.A., Norway, and France. The chapters encompass an introduction, with a section on the background to the project, plus a history of previous work at the site, and a discussion of research aims, methods, and collaborators (Adolf Friðriksson and Gavin Lucas); a chapter on the paleoenvironment of Mývatnssveit during the Viking age and early medieval period (Ian Lawson); a chapter on the structural sequence of the site in all its phases (Gavin Lucas); chapters on the archaeofauna (Thomas McGovern); artifactual material (Colleen Batey); and plant remains (Garðar Guðmundsson); the organization and management of the land (Ian Simpson); and a final general chapter on Hofstaðir in the settlement period, both in the local and wider social context (Gavin Lucas). The work is in English with a summary in Icelandic by Orri Vésteinsson. A minor criticism is that the section on climate change (pp. 29–30) is somewhat oversimplified and could have benefitted from more extensive reading on the topic (see e.g. Ogilvie and Jónsson, 2001). Another extremely minor quibble is that the list of contributors (pp. xxii–xxiii) is in the non-Icelandic naming system (in Iceland surnames are virtually nonexistent, the last name being a patronymic). This seems a little odd given that it is an Icelandic publication. These comments aside, the Hofstaðir excavations are clearly an exemplary case of what may be accomplished using innovative modern methods of archaeological analysis, and this is reflected in the monograph. The value of such an approach may be highlighted in the context of a brief discussion regarding the development of archaeology as a discipline, and Viking studies in general.

A well-known historian of the Viking period who shall be nameless is reputed to have written: “archaeology is an expensive way of finding out what we already know” Many decades ago, there might have appeared to be some truth to this statement. Historical sources for the period were considered to be reliable on the whole, greater store was set by them than is now the case, and the many techniques which are now standard archaeological practice were in their infancy. Continued research into historical sources, as well as the development of a whole host of subdisciplines in archaeology, has rendered such a comment shockingly iconoclastic. With regard to the way in which archaeology and related scientific tools may elucidate and clarify the written record in a way that was unthinkable in former times, this reviewer calls to mind the comment of a scholar named Beckman, writing on the historical veracity of the medieval Icelandic annals in 1912: “From our point of view eruptions of Hekla have the advantage that there is no question of non-

Icelandic information,” adding, “but we lack all possibilities of verifying these events. We do not have, and we cannot find, any source with whose help we could verify the annals’ information; it strands alone” (Beckman, 1912, p. 2). Writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, he could not foresee that modern techniques of dating, for example using layers of volcanic dust and ice cores could help to validate statements in the historical record. However, as late as 1970, in spite of the fact that new techniques were being developed in a number of fields, such as geology and chemistry, that could be potentially extremely useful to archaeological studies, they were not immediately accepted with open arms by the archaeological community. On the contrary. In the forward to their book *Geological Methods for Archaeology*, Herz and Garrison quote the views of a colleague: “... the chances of any scientific method, present or future, being able to determine with certainty the source of any given specimen is nil. Meanwhile, we shall have to rely on a method which is far more than 80 years old ... namely that of using the naked eye and common sense” (Herz and Garrison, 1998, Forward).

Although intuition and common sense may indeed have a role to play in archaeology, as in most aspects of human life, archaeology has benefited in great measure in recent decades from the development of many different dating techniques. One of the best known is carbon-14 dating, which can be used on objects which have a biological origin in order to determine their age. In Iceland, the analysis of ash layers resulting from frequent volcanic activity is the basis of a dating technique known as tephrochronology, originally developed by the Icelandic geologist Sigurður Thórarinnsson (Thórarinnsson, 1944). In addition to possibilities for accurate dating, many other tools and methods of analysis have been developed, both for the field and the laboratory. The evolution of subdisciplines in archaeology such as zooarchaeology, the study of animal remains from archaeological sites, and the development of environmental archaeology, which draws on such disciplines as paleoecology and paleoclimatology, has helped to increase knowledge regarding past human subsistence strategies, and also lends insight into past environments.

In the early days of the science of archaeology, the emphasis was on corroborating what was known about “great and famous men.” An example is the work of the pioneering archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann (1822–1890), who felt that archaeology could be used to uncover evidence to support the concept that Homer’s *Odyssey* and *Iliad* reflected actual historical events. Thus, in 1874, he began excavating the site of Mycenae in Greece. He duly interpreted the site according to the Homeric stories, and, upon finding a human skull beneath a magnificent gold death mask (now in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens) he is reputed to have said: “I have gazed upon the face of Agamemnon,” referring to the King of Mycenae, one of the heroes of the *Iliad*. However, modern archaeological research suggests that the mask is perhaps from around 1550–1500 B.C. (which would place it much earlier than the life of Agamemnon, traditionally from the period around 1194–1184 B.C.). As with its sister discipline of history, archaeology is now more likely to approach research projects with an open mind, rather than with preconceived ideas regarding what will be found, and tends to concern itself with the minutiae of the daily life of ordinary people, on the basis that, in the long run, this will yield a more accurate picture of the way of life of societies in the past.

An excellent example of this new kind of approach concerns the work undertaken at Hofstaðir. Although excavations were carried out there in 1908, and later in 1965, the monograph under review concerns the excavations that took place during 1991–2002. In the introduction, the point is made that Icelandic archaeology

owes its origins to interest in the well-known medieval literature of Iceland, in particular the continuing fascination with the *Sagas of Icelanders* which tell the tales of the early settlers to Iceland and their descendants from the late ninth century onwards. Just as Schleimann went in search of Agamemnon and other heroes, early archaeologists in Iceland undoubtedly had the saga heroes and heroines, such as Egill Skallagrímsson and Aud the Deep-Minded, Gunnar and Njáll, Kjartan and Bolli, Hallgerður and Guðrún, to name but a few, as images in their minds. However, as early as 1897, the philologist Finnur Jónsson (1898) criticized Icelandic archaeologists for their belief in the infallibility of saga descriptions, noting that not all saga texts were equally reliable. In 1908, he collaborated with the Danish captain and archaeologist, Daniel Bruun, on an excavation of the remains of a hall-like structure at Hofstaðir. They concluded that the hall was an ancient temple (Bruun and Finnur Jónsson, 1909, 1910, 1911). This idea was discredited by later researchers, however, such as Roussell (1943) and Olsen (1965). Reasons for this included the fact that the great hall had the same form as Iron Age dwelling-houses in Scandinavia, and that the objects found on the site were everyday, indicating an ordinary farm (Lucas, p. 8; Roussell, 1943).

The name *Hofstaðir* itself is also of interest. *Hof* has traditionally been interpreted as meaning some kind of temple, and, in addition to Hofstaðir, some 37 sites containing the name *hof* are known in Iceland (Vésteinsson, 2007). Following this line of thinking, the name Hofstaðir could be translated as “temple farm.” *Staður*, pl. *staðir*, literally means a “place” in Icelandic, and is possibly the most common farm place-name element. However, the consensus today is that there were no particular, purpose-built temples as such in Iceland, but that religious feasts and rituals took place at large farmsteads administered by chieftains who may have functioned as priests as well (Lucas, p. 10; Meulengracht Sørensen, 1988). It is now thought that rather than a temple as such, the word “... *hof* might more generally signify a central place of ritual importance” (Lucas, p. 406). For further discussion regarding the term *hof* see Vésteinsson (2006, 2007).

When considering pre-Christian religion in Iceland, or indeed Scandinavia as a whole, it is important to remember that virtually all of the written sources that describe pagan beliefs and practices were written after the acceptance of Christianity in Iceland in the year A.D. 1000. The most valuable historical source regarding the ancient religion is the work known as the *Prose Edda* or *Snorre Edda*, almost certainly compiled by the Icelandic poet, historian, and politician, Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241). Although it is hard to know now exactly what the acceptance of Christianity entailed in practice (see Vésteinsson, 2000, 2001), Snorri’s work was undoubtedly colored by the changes in religious beliefs that preceded its compilation. It is certainly easy to see how, after the acceptance of Christianity, religious practice became associated with a place, i.e. a church. However, as Lucas notes (p. 10), when considering the pre-Christian era, it is important to distinguish religious *ceremonies* from religious *places*, such as sanctuaries, wells, or groves. The former can be held anywhere, although most probably in halls, while the latter were areas reserved mainly for sacrifices (Bolton, 2006). It certainly appears highly likely that pagan practices were far more subtle and complex than a straightforward belief in Odin, Thor, and the rest of the pantheon of Norse gods and goddesses. In the early days of Christianity it is also likely that people’s beliefs encompassed a mixture of Christian and pagan. This is evidenced, for example, by the account of an early settler named Helgi the Lean who “... believed in Christ, but invoked Thor when it came to voyages and difficult times” (Pálsson and Edwards, 1972, p. 97).

Hofstaðir was established in the first century of the settlement of Iceland (which commenced in c. A.D. 871), and the site under excavation appears to have been in use for around 90 years. The structures associated with the site included an aisled hall, almost 40 m long, surrounded by seven satellite structures. It gives the appearance of having been a relatively self-sufficient farm based on traditional Icelandic animal husbandry encompassing an emphasis on the domestic animals sheep and cattle. There is also archaeofaunal evidence for horses, pigs, and goats. Remains of dogs, cats (a few), and mice were also found. That there was a marine connection is evidenced by the presence of the remains of coastal marine fauna such as seals and molluscs. The larger seashells found were probably used as utensils (spoons and scoops) rather than as human food. That the site was high status is reflected in its grand hall. This, as well as the surrounding buildings, would have been constructed with local stone and turf. The artifactual material found included items which one might expect to find on a farm site from Viking times, especially items constructed of iron, such as knives, parts of various tools, and a large quantity of nails. The working debris of iron is further evidence of smithing and smelting activity taking place. This “is a significant complement to other indications of self-sufficiency in Iceland” (Batey, Chapter 5, p. 253). However, many of the items found would probably have been brought to the site by the original settlers. These included steatite vessels, spindle whorls, combs, pins and needles, and pottery. A total of 28 Viking-age beads were found. This is a higher number of beads than from any other site in the country, but this may reflect more rigorous recovery methods (Batey, Chapter 5, p. 310). Of particular interest are three finds of silver including a silver alloy coin blank or planchet, a piece of silver wire, and a silver pendant with a decoration in the form of a possible cross and a Thor’s hammer.

The site seems to have had several phases. Already in Phase I (c. A.D. 940–980) the activities which are evident from later stages are all to be found. These include textile production, metalworking, and the presence of domestic livestock. In Phase II (c. A.D. 980–1030) the settlement is substantially enlarged and this phase appears to have encompassed its high point. At some point in Phase III (c. A.D. 1030–1070) all the structures, at least their habitations, appear to have been abandoned. Later phases may be characterized thus: Phase IV (c. A.D. 1070–1300) when the ruins seem to have remained largely untouched; Phase V (c. A.D. 1300–1477) when a large building is erected to the north of the hall, probably an outhouse of some sort; Phase VI (c. A.D. 1477–1850) when the ruins are untouched for the most part; Phase VII (c. A.D. 1850 onwards) when some outhouses were built on and adjacent to the ruins. At the present day, a modern farmhouse is located some 100 to 200 m from the site.

The abandonment of the site in the third phase appears to have been characterized by three unusual aspects. One is that a pit was filled with metal-working waste. From a practical point of view this is a pointless act, and it is suggested that this may have been connected with ritual or magic (Lucas, p. 398). In support of this it is noted, for example, that Scandinavian folklore abounds with literary references to the magical skills involved in iron working (Espelund, 2007), and Icelandic literature is full of references to blacksmiths as mythical heroes, most famously Völund the Smith in the *Poetic* or *Snorre Edda* (Lucas, p. 399). (In Anglo-Saxon literature he is known as Wayland the Smith.) A second strange element is that a whole slaughtered sheep seems to have been deliberately thrown into the hall during abandonment (Lucas, p. 399). The third aspect concerns 14 cattle skulls which were also found in the demolition layers (Lucas, p. 399). Like the sheep, some of the cattle appear to have been hornless, probably killed or stunned by a blow between the

eyes, and also decapitated. The skulls display clear signs of weathering, primarily on the front side, indicating that they had been exposed to the outside for a long time. It is suggested (Lucas, p. 399) that they were hung up for display—possibly on the outside walls or roof of the hall, and then collected and discarded at the abandonment of the settlement. Additional cattle skulls were also found, and it is suggested that they are clearly the result of “deliberate collection and possible deposition associated with the abandonment of the settlement” (Lucas, p. 399). In other words, although the site was abandoned, neither the relics such as the cattle skulls, nor the site itself, were destroyed. Indeed, it would appear that the abandonment of the site “was performed with a very clear sense of non-Christian ritual” (Lucas, p. 407).

The evidence suggests that the size of Hofstaðir is related, not so much to its resident population, but to its capacity to hold seasonal gatherings, with feasting as a major component. Although it is impossible to define specifically the purpose of the gatherings at Hofstaðir, they are certainly likely to have served as a way of maintaining social relationships, especially important in landscapes of dispersed settlement such as Iceland (Lucas, p. 404). In addition to preserving social alliances, feasting may have served as a way of acquiring some kind of specific economic benefit such as status or tribute (Hayden, 2001; Lucas, p. 404). It is suggested that feasting activities at Hofstaðir may fit well into this latter context. Also in this regard, a feature of such feasts is the display of remains from former feasts (Lucas, p. 404). This brings the discussion back to the collection of cattle skulls, mentioned above in association with the abandonment of the settlement, and featured on the front cover of the monograph. If the skulls were displayed in the open air, as seems likely, possibly on the walls or roof of the hall, they could be regarded as trophy displays from the feasts (Lucas, p. 405). Potentially even more significant is their association with the element of sacrifice. As reported by McGovern in his chapter on the archaeofauna, the bulls were not killed in the “normal” manner but were perhaps stunned with a blow between the eyes before being decapitated, probably with an axe. This could have produced a fountain of blood as the head came off. “This is not normal butchery, but a highly ritualized and violent practice intended to dramatize death” (Lucas, p. 405; see also Lucas and McGovern, 2008). Sacrificial events at Hofstaðir may be seen in the wider context of pagan Scandinavia; clearly animal sacrifice was a frequent occurrence at mass gatherings such as assemblies, festivals, and funerals. Headless horses, for example, have been found in several Viking-age burial sites in Iceland, as well as in the famous Oseberg ship burial. (The beautiful and elegant Oseberg ship may be seen at the Viking Ship Museum in Oslo in Norway).

The importance of feasting and blood sacrifice in Viking ceremonies is well documented in literary and historical sources. These include, for example, passages in certain of the *Sagas of Icelanders*, such as the *Eyrbyggja saga* and the *Kjalnesingja saga*, and in *Heimskringla*, the history of the Norwegian kings, composed by Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241) where it is stated:

It was an ancient custom, that when a sacrificial feast was to be held, that all householders [*boendr*] should come to the place where there was a hall [*höf*], and bring there the provisions they would need while the feast lasted. At this feast, all men should have ale. Also all kinds of cattle were killed, and also horses, and all the blood that resulted was called the blood of sacrifice [*blaut*], and the vessels that the blood was contained in were called vessels of sacrifice [*blautbollar*].

Sturluson, *Heimskringla* I, pp. 167–168, translated by Ogilvie

The account continues, stating that all the pedestals of the idols (in *Kjalnesingja saga* Thor is mentioned as the most honored god) should be smeared with blood, and also the walls of the hall, both outside and inside, and then the men should be sprinkled with blood; however the meat of the slaughtered animals was not considered sacred as such, and should be cooked for the feast.

A further aspect to the Hofstaðir site is that evidence of a Christian chapel or church is to be found close to the hall. One radiocarbon date suggests a calibrated date of A.D. 970–1040, and a second suggests A.D. 980–1024. In this context, it may be remembered that Christianity was accepted in Iceland in A.D. 1000. Given the imprecision of the radiocarbon dating, however, it is difficult to know whether the first church at the site pre- or post-dates the abandonment of the large hall at Hofstaðir. It is certainly tempting to consider the possibility that the old site was abandoned at some point when the old religion gave way to the new. However, the traps of easy conclusions, belonging to the old style of archaeology where intuition held sway, are avoided by the current investigators of the Hofstaðir site. Indeed, they note that the ambiguities of interpretation involved in the excavations serve in a sense to amplify knowledge of the period, given the complex issues of syncretism and cult continuity surrounding the discussion of the acceptance of Christianity in Iceland. What may be said to be very likely is that, although its status was short-lived, Hofstaðir played a key role in the social landscape of the Mývatn district of Iceland in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. The scholarly and erudite monograph under review would be of value if it only gave the reader an insight into life on a pagan Icelandic farm from long ago. However, it provides far more than this; it gives a veritable window onto the North Atlantic Viking world, and, in effect, forms an exemplary textbook on best practices in archaeology in the twenty-first century.

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