Hrönn Konráðsdóttir

Archaeoentomological Analysis from the 2011 Season of Skriðuklaustur Excavation

Skýrslur Skriðuklaustursrannsókna
2012

Index

Skýrslur Skriðuklaustursrannsókna XXXIII.
Ritstjóri skýrsluraðar: Steinunn Kristjánsdóttir.
Útgefandi: Skriðuklaustursrannsóknir.
Útgáfustaður: Reykjavík.

Forsíðumynd: Brennd *Pediculus humanus* L (mannalús) úr sýni 1248.
Title photo: Charred *Pediculus humanus* L (human louse) from sample 1248.

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1. Project aim

Continuing from the last two reports Konráðsdóttir 2008 and Konráðsdóttir 2009, this project concentrates on samples taken in the 2011 season of the Skriðuklaustur excavation. This was also the last year of excavations and will therefore be the last insect report by the author for now. Seven samples from area a, three from area b and one from area I were processed with the methods of archaeoentomology and the insect remains identified and quantified. The natural habitat and preferences of the insect species were then considered and used to assess aspects of human activity and the local environment.

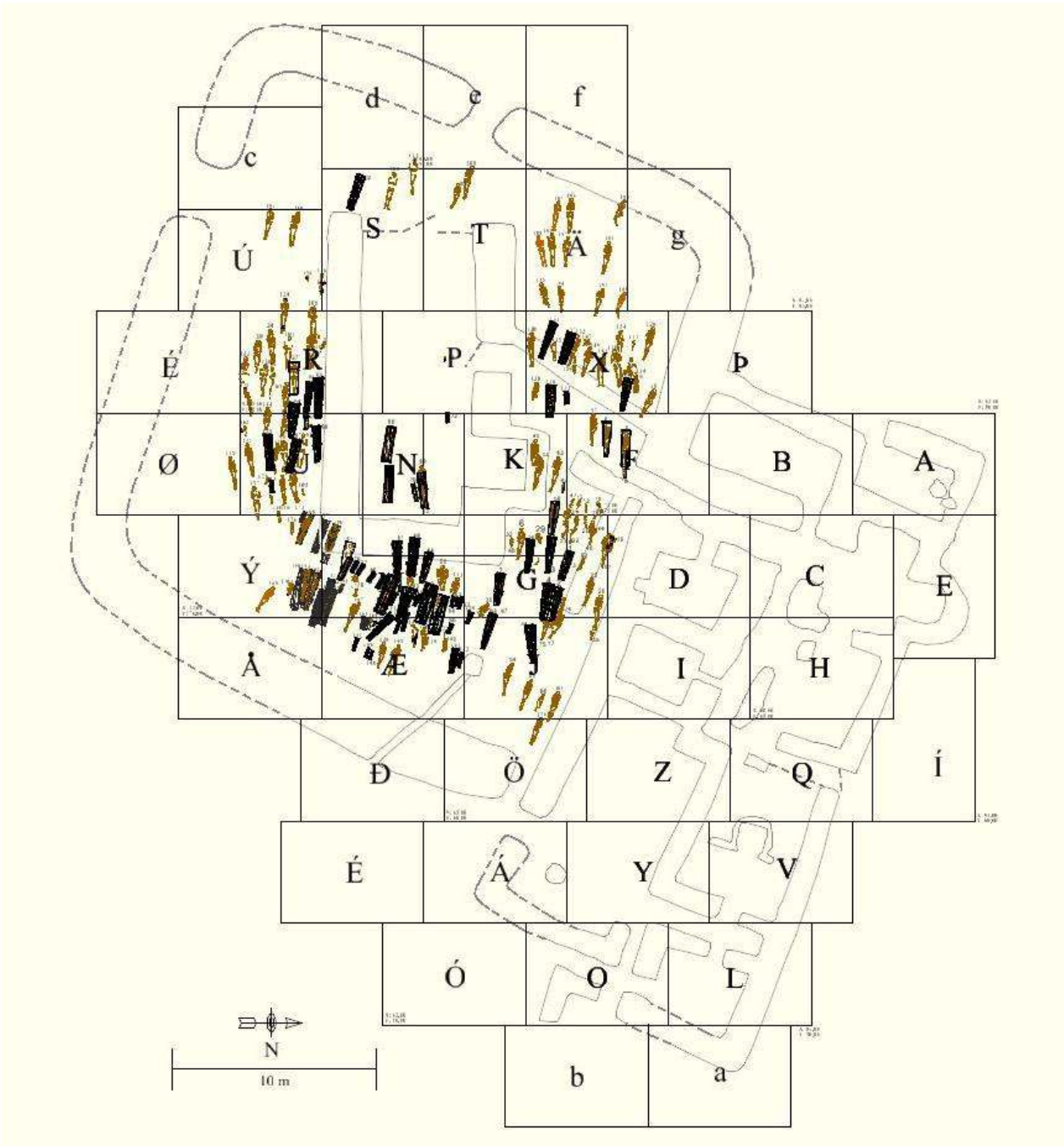
2. Methods

Eleven samples in total were processed and sorted and the insect remains recovered were identified and counted. As mentioned before the samples came from three areas, a, b and I (picture 1), which were all excavated in the summer of 2011, although some of them had been partly excavated during earlier seasons. Most of the samples were from area a, but the ones from area b were richest in insect remains. The samples sizes varied a bit, although most of them were around 3-4 Litres (Table 1). Only two were smaller, or around 1.5 L. The ideal sample size for archaeoentomological work is 5 Litres (*eg.* Buckland *et al.* 2004), but of course it also depends on whether the layers are large enough to allow samples of this size.

Sample	Size (L)
1139	4
1161	4
1210	1,4
1212	1,5
1238	4
1242	3,5
1248	3
1105	4
1286	3
1287	3,5
715	4

Table 1. The amount floated of each sample

The samples were first floated with bucket flotation in the archaeology lab at the University of Iceland. They were then sorted under a stereo microscope where the insect remains were collected and identified with the aid of the authors own insect collection and the collection at the Icelandic Institute of Natural History as well as the relevant literature. The identified insect remains were then counted according to MNI (Minimum Number of Individuals) which gives the smallest number of insects after all the parts that were recovered have been counted.



Picture 1. Plan of the excavation after the 2011 season

3. Results

This collection was similar to previous ones in that the samples ranged from no insect remains at all to being quite rich. This could be due to different levels of preservation. The archaeological structures are not far from the surface and therefore the freeze thaw effect could have destroyed some of the insect remains. One sample, 1287, from area b, contained 111 specimens from 14 species but the rest ranged from 0-31 specimens (table 2). The total number of species was 31 from all 11 samples. Sample 1105 did not contain any identifiable insect remains and was therefore not included in table 2. Samples from area b seem to be richer in insect remains than samples from areas a and I. On the other hand the only sample that did not contain any identifiable insect remains was also from area b and the main difference really only lies in one sample from area b.

Species	*1139*	*1161*	*1210*	*1212*	*1238*	*1242*	*1248*	*1286*	*1287*	*715*
Phthiraptera										
Anoplura										
Pediculus humanus L.	1			1			3			
Coleoptera										
Carabidae										
Bembidion bipunctatum (L.)								1		
Patrobus septentrionis Dej.						2				
Pterostichus nigrita (Payk.)		1								
Amara quenseli (Schön.)								1		
Staphylinidae										
Omalium riparium Thoms.								1		
Omalium rivulare (Payk.)	1									
Omalium excavatum Steph.									2	
Omalium sp.		1			1					
Xylodromus concinnus (Marsham)	1	2	4		3	1	1	3	10	1
Stenus sp.	1									
Atheta sp.	2							2	1	
Oxypoda sp.			1						1	1
Byrrhidae										
Cytilus sericeus (Forst.)								1		
Cryptophagidae										
Cryptophagus pilosus Gyll.						1				
Cryptophagus sp.								2	2	
Atomaria apicalis Er.			1							
Atomaria spp.		4	4		4		1	2	12	
Lathridiidae										
Latridius minutus (L.)								4	14	
Latridius pseudominutus (Strand)									1	
Latridius sp.	1	1	8		3	1		3	15	

Corticaria sp.			2		1			5		
Corticaria spp.		9							40	
Mycetophagidae										
Typhaea stercorea (L.)			1		1				2	
Ptinidae										
Tipnus unicolor (Pill. & Mitt.)										1
Scarabaeidae										
Aphodius lapponum Gyll.	1	1			1	1		1	1	
Curculionidae										
Otiorhynchus arcticus (O. Fabricius)	1							1		
Otiorhynchus nodosus (Müll.)	1					1	1	3	1	1
Otiorhynchus rugifrons (Gyll.)										1
Tropiphorus obtusus (Bonsd.)						1		1		
Diptera										
Hippoboscidae										
Melophagus ovinus (L.)x.þ…		1		2					1	
M. ovinus puparia			1		2	4	1		8	1
Sum:	10	20	22	3	16	12	7	31	111	6

Table 2. MNI of each species in the samples

As in the previous reports the species were categorized into their preferred habitats and into synanthropic and non-synanthropic species (those who are limited to the environments inside human habitats in Iceland and those that are not), as is illustrated in table 3. This was done to give a general idea of the environment from where they came and to assist with the interpretation of the archaeological material. The categorization was supported by the relevant literature and BugsCEP eco-codes (Buckland & Buckland 2006).

Species	*Habitat*	*Synanthropic*
B. bipunctatum	wetlands	No
P. septentrionis	wetlands/meadow	No
P. nigrita	moist grassland	No
A. quenseli	sparse vegetation	No
O. riparium	seaweed	No
O. rivulare	dung/foul	Yes
O. excavatum	dung/foul	Yes
Omalium sp.	moulding refuse	No
X. concinnus	dung/foul	Yes
Stenus sp.	eurytopic	No
Atheta sp.	eurytopic	No
Oxypoda sp.	eurytopic	No
C. sericeus	moss	No
C. pilosus	moulding refuse	Yes
Cryptophagus sp.	moulding refuse	Yes
A. apicalis.	moulding refuse	Yes
Atomaria spp.	moulding refuse	Yes
L. minutus	moulding refuse	Yes
L. pseudominutus	moulding refuse	Yes

Latridius sp.	moulding refuse	Yes
Corticaria sp.	moulding refuse	Yes
Corticaria spp.	moulding refuse	Yes
T. stercorea	moulding refuse	Yes
T. unicolor	dry moulding refuse	Yes
A. lapponum	dung	No
O. arcticus	meadow	No
O. nodosus	meadow	No
O. rugifrons	meadow	No
T. obtusus	wetlands	no
P. humanus	parasite	yes
M. ovinus	parasite	yes
M. ovinus puparia	parasite	yes

Table 3. General habitats of the species identified from the samples.

In eight out of ten samples, synanthropic species were in majority as could be expected when they are mostly from floor layers (figure 1). But it is also important to keep in mind that these results are percentages and should be looked at as such. For example, in sample 1212 there were only 3 insects found, so it could be a coincidence that they are all synanthropic, but in sample 1287, where 111 individuals were recovered the percentage is more likely to be an accurate description of the fauna.

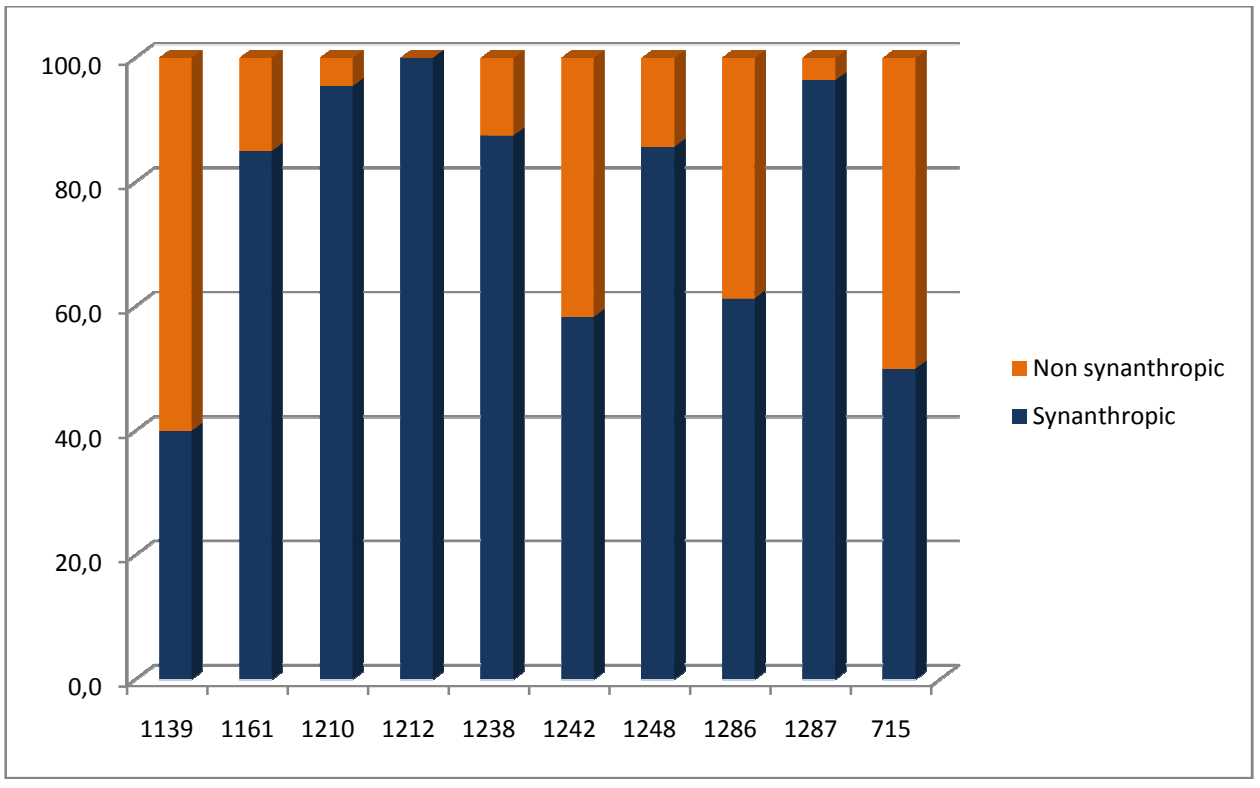


Figure 1: Percentage of synanthropic species in each of the samples

The fauna was then categorized into their preferred habitats, of course in some cases it was quite varied, but this is mainly to get a general idea of the surrounding environments and a general overall look. There was quite a lot of mould feeding beetles as can be seen on the chart (figure 2) and unusually there were parasites in all but one of the samples. But parasites have only been found before this in three samples from the 2005-2007 seasons (Konráðsdóttir 2008) and one from the 2008 season (Konráðsdóttir 2009). Interestingly there was also an insect that usually lives under seaweed in one of the samples. The rest of the species prefer various natural environments from sparse vegetation to wetlands, as can be seen in figure 2.

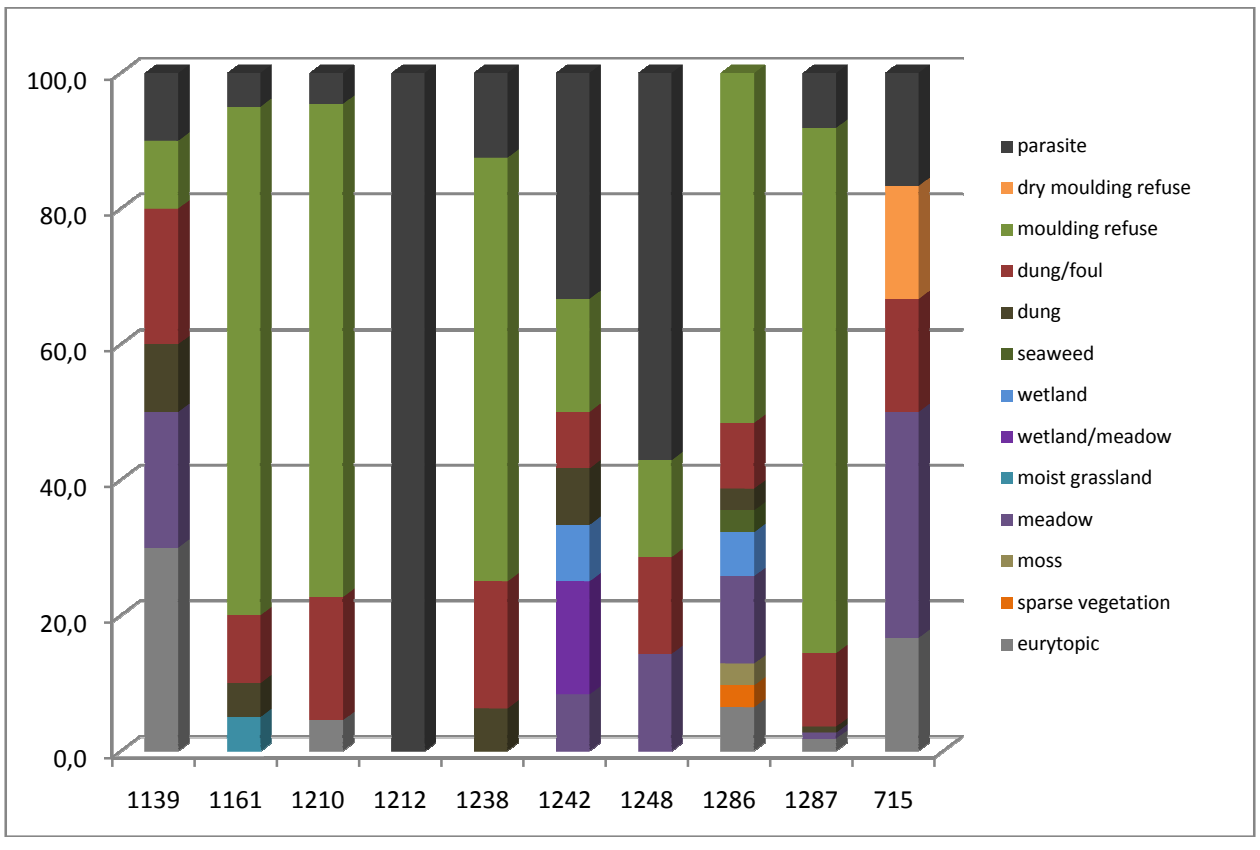


Figure 2: Percentage from each habitat in each of the samples

Area a

The majority of samples this year were from area a and the fauna in them will be discussed below, sample by sample.

Sample 1139

The majority of species in this sample were non-synanthropic. Two of them are very common all around the country and are also commonly found in the archaeological record, these are *O. nodosus* (Hélukeppur) and *arcticus* (Silakeppur). Both are found in meadows but *arcticus* is usually on dryer grounds than *nodosus* (Larsson & Gígja 1959). Although *A. lapponum* (Taðýfill) is not a synanthropic species it lives in the dung of large animals and is therefore almost always found in connection with human habitat, as there are no large animals that live in the wild in Iceland (Larsson & Gígja 1959) except the later introductions of reindeer in the late 18th Century (Þorvaldsson 1960). Three synanthropic species were found in this sample *O. rivulare* , *X. concinnus* and unidentified species of Lathridius. All of these are mainly found in rotting plant remains under moist conditions (Larsson & Gígja 1959). In this sample there was also one human louse. It was charred and the body fused together so it must have been in a fire and probably died there, which opens up a lot of questions.

Sample 1161

Most of the insects in this sample were indoor species, but two were non-synanthropic. *P. nigrita* (Tinnusmiður) which is commonly found in moist meadows and grasslands (Larsson & Gígja 1959; Lindroth 1973) and the dung beetle *A. lapponum* which was also discussed in the previous sample. There was one small part of a *M. ovinus* (Færilús), or the sheep ked, in the sample, which is a parasite on sheep. Some sheep or wool must therefore have been at the site, but as there was only one adult sheep ked in all the samples wool is probably more likely than sheep. The rest of the species consisted of small mould feeding beetles. Only two of them could be identified to species but all of them are found in similar environments.

Sample 1210

Similar to the previous sample there was a lot of minute mould beetles, but quite a lot of them in this case were charred remains. In all 9 out of the 22 insects recovered were charred. These must have ended their lives in a fire as the human louse in sample 1139 which is quite interesting as this seems to be the only room in the complex from where charred insect remains. There was also one *M. ovinus* puparia in this sample, an indication of wool or sheep.

Sample 1212

Only three insects were found in this sample and all of them were parasites, one human louse and two sheep ked. All specimens were charred.

Sample 1238

This sample had a very similar composition of species as sample 1210. It consisted mainly of small mould beetles, some of which were charred. Many of them could not be identified to species but *O. excavatum* (Rotuxi) and *T. stercorea* (Skúmbjalla) were identifiable and are common in old hay and decaying vegetable matter (Larsson & Gígja 1959; Lindroth 1973). There was also a dung beetle and two sheep ked puparia in this sample.

Sample 1242

Again this sample from area a was quite similar to the rest, the majority of insects were synanthropic, but then the most common find was the parasite *M. ovinus* or the sheep ked. Three species of indoor beetles were found, *X. concinnus* has been discussed before, but *C. pilosus* was only found in this sample. It is generally an indoor species, found in old hay (Larsson & Gígja 1959) but has also been found in open areas, under *Archangelica* (Hvönn) in Vík (Lindroth 1973) and in pastures in North Iceland (Guðleifsson 2005). As in many of the former samples there was one dung beetle. There were two weevils in this sample, *O. nodosus* and *T. obustus* (Túnrani). The former was also found in sample 1139 and prefers the environments of meadows and grasslands (Larsson & Gígja 1959). But the latter was only in this sample in area a, and is a root eater (Larsson & Gígja 1959) and has been found in unimproved pastures and hayfields (Guðleifsson 2005). *P. septentrionis* (Fjallasmiður) is common in homefields (Lindroth 1973) but usually in rather moist areas (Larsson & Gígja 1959). There was one charred specimen of Lathridius in this sample but the rest had not been in a fire.

Sample 1248

In many ways the insect fauna was similar to the former samples, but interestingly there were 3 human lice, *P. humanus*, and all of them were charred. Two of them were complete and therefore easy to recognise, and one was missing the head and thorax. There was also one sheep ked puparia. Two indoor species were in this sample, *X. concinnus* and Atomaria and one outdoor speces, *O. nodosus*. Combined they are an indication of mould and grasslands.

Area b

Three samples from area b were floated this year. No insect remains were recovered from sample 1105 and it will therefore not be included here. The fauna from area b was a lot more varied than the samples from area a.

Sample 1286

Although there were more synanthropic insects in this collection, there were quite varied and interesting species of outdoor insects. They ranged from preferring dry to wet biotopes and even one that is usually found at the seashore, which is surprising as Skriðuklaustur is inland and far from the sea. One insect that lives in dry localities was found in this sample, *A. quenseli* (Gullsmiður), usually found in sandy locations with sparse vegetation (Larsson & Gígja 1959). There were three species of weevils recovered, all of which were also in the samples from area a and are common everywhere around the country and in the archaeological record. These were *O. archticus, nodosus* and *T. obustus*. They are common in fields of grass and meadows as well as rather dry areas (Larsson & Gígja 1959). *C. sericeus* (Gullvarta) is a moss feeder and prefers moist environments in homefields, bogs etc. (Larsson & Gígja 1959). Another species from this sample preferring moist localities is *B. bipunktatum* (Leirsmiður), which is common around water, banks of lakes and streams, on seashores and near hot springs (Larsson & Gígja 1959). It was very surprising to find *O. riparium* at Skriðuklaustur because of its location. *O .riparium* is almost exclusively found at the seashore under washed up seaweed and carrion (Lindroth 1973; Larsson & Gígja 1959), it is not very common in archaeological samples, except for sites close to the sea, as Bessastaðir (Amorosi, Buckland et al. 1992), Nesstofa (Amorosi, Buckland et al. 1994), Gásir (Konráðsdóttir 2010a) and Alþingisreitur (Konráðsdóttir 2010b). Skriðuklaustur was around 80 km from the closest harbour at the time (Kristjánsdóttir & Kristjánsson 2010) so this single little insect must have come with products from the sea, fish or possibly seaweed. From animal bone research we know that fish was eaten at Skriðuklaustur and this was mainly whole fish rather than processed ones (Hamilton-Dyer 2010). It is possible that the *O. riparium* came as an accidental introduction with fish that had been at the seashore after being caught. On the other hand it is perhaps more likely that it came with seaweed, which has been used for heating and animal fodder and even human consumption (söl). The collection of seaweed is mentioned in quite a few documents from the 13th Century and onwards (Kristjánsson 1982) The dung beetle, *A. lapponum*, was also present. There were quite a few small beetles that live in mouldy environment, those that could not be identified to species were insects from the groups Atomaria, Latridius, Corticaria and Cryptophagus, all of which live in similar environments. Both *X.*

concinnus and *L. minutus* (Húsvinur) have been commonly found in old hay, feeding on mould and spores (Larsson og Gígja 1959 & Lindroth 1973).

Sample 1287

This sample had the largest collection of insects this year. Most of the insects here were synanthropic, mainly those that live in mouldy environments. All of them have been discussed earlier and are common in old hay, vegetable refuse and other areas where one finds mouldy organic material. The eight *M. ovinus* puparia and one adult most likely represent wool in area a. In addition to this there was also a single dung beetle and one *O. nodousus*, which, as has been stated earlier, is common all around Iceland in grasslands and meadows (Larsson & Gígja 1959)

Area I

Two samples from this area were previously analyzed and will therefore be discussed here in connection with the one analysed this year, for further information see the report from 2008 (Konráðsdottir 2008).

The sample analysed from this area now was number 715, the last one in table 2. Only 6 specimens from as many species were recovered from that sample. Half of these were synanthropic and therefore only live in environments provided by man. Two of them were mould feeding beetles, *X. concinnus* and *T. unicolor* the latter is commonly found in dry mould (Howe 1965). The third one was a parasite, a part of a *M. ovinus* puparia which was present in many of the other samples as well. There was quite a lot of mould feeding beetles in sample 298 from 2005 (Konráðsdóttir 2008) which is from the same room. These two samples indicate that there was some mould and damp in the room.

There were three outdoors species in this sample, an Oxypoda that could not be identified to species and two weevils, *O. nodosus* and *O.rugifrons*. Both of the weevils are common in meadows but the latter in rather dryer environments and often in and around *Thymus praecox* (blóðberg) (Larsson & Gígja 1959). *T. praecox* is a common herb in Iceland and easy to find. It is used in herbal remedies to this day and is supposed to be good for various illnesses (Bjarnason 1994).

4. Conclusions

As could perhaps be expected the samples from the same areas are quite similar, both in MNI count and the species recovered. Looking at the insect remains the areas have distinctly different characteristics. In area a there are quite a lot of burnt remains, which are very uncommon in other areas of the excavation where insect remains have been analysed. The reason could be that ash and burnt remains were dumped there or burnt in situ. Interestingly there were also some burnt human lice in the mix which would indicate that the items in the fire could be of a personal nature, like bedding or clothes. This raises questions if perhaps it had some purpose, especially as Skriðuklaustur was at least in part a hospital, and the practise of burning personal items of people who die from very contagious diseases or even the people themselves is well know in the history of Europe. There were mould feeding beetles and parasites in most of the samples, which indicates that these are from the inside of a room. The outdoors species indicate mainly grasslands, dry and moist.

Samples from area b were in most cases richer in insect remains, especially indoors species. There was probably quite a lot of mouldy vegetable matter in this area, old hay, stored food or leftovers. The outdoors species were very interesting, they ranged from dry to wet environments and there was even one that is usually only found under seaweed at the seashore. Skriðuklaustur is quite far inland so this one must have been brought there with something from the sea, fish or perhaps seaweed. There were also quite a few sheep ked puparia in area b which is probably more an indication of wool than living sheep.

The room in area I had a few mould feeding insects, interestingly a collection that prefers a bit dryer environments than the ones in areas a and b. There was also a weevil in room I which is connected with *Thymus*, a local herb in Iceland which is and has been used for medical purposes, tea and as a spice.

The dung beetle was found in small numbers in most of the samples, indicating that there was animal husbandry at the site, but probably not indoors.

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