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Where are Eyjafjallasveit's Earliest Settlement Sites? A Review of the Documentary Evidence

Abstract

As is true for medieval Iceland in general, the documentary sources for early settlement in Eyjafjallasveit must be considered potentially unreliable. Although *Landnámabók* tells of eight early Norse settlement sites in this region, only three of them have been identified with any degree of certainty. When surveyed within the framework provided by archaeological, palaeoecological and onomastic evidence, however, it becomes clear that the *Landnámabók* farms may not have been the first or indeed, the only pioneer sites in Eyjafjallasveit. A multi-disciplinary approach has been taken to survey the data provided by place-names, church records and environmental studies in order to reconcile the silent body of archaeological evidence with potential, early settlement sites.

One of the main aims of the Seljaland Project is to chart the development of settlement patterns and land-use in the Eyjafjallasveit region of Rangárvallasýsla in southern Iceland (Ahronson 2002, *this volume*). This article will review what is known about the earliest settlement of Eyjafjallasveit from the documentary record when considered alongside recent developments in the fields of archaeology and palaeoecology.

The main written sources for the study of Iceland's settlement, or *Landnám*, are the 12th century *Libellus Islandorum* or *Íslendingabók* and its near contemporary *Landnámabók*.¹ While these particular accounts purport to tell us when Iceland was settled and where the first immigrants built their farms, they are close enough to the better-known saga literature in terms of both style and content to warrant a similar level of suspicion.

¹ A discussion of the relative ages of these works and their surviving manuscripts can be found in Benediktsson 1996.

Although *Íslendingabók* states that the process of settlement began in AD 870² and *Landnámabók* that the area between Reykjanes and Hornafjörður, in which Eyjafjallasveit is situated, was the last to be settled (ÍF 1968:337-8), we should be wary of taking such claims at face value. It should be remembered that as one of the main functions of *Landnámabók* was to legitimise the rights of major landowners in the later medieval period, the text does not necessarily reflect the exact location or extent of settlement at the beginning of the *Landnám* period (Rafnsson 1974).

At best, *Landnámabók* should be seen as a reworking of older data to suit contemporary concerns. It is therefore only by surveying the material and palaeoecological evidence that a framework can be defined within which this and other documentary sources can be considered. Of the earliest stylistically diagnostic artefacts discovered in Eyjafjallasveit, investigations at Þurfarstaðir Efri have produced an Irish ringed pin of the simple undecorated type common in Norse contexts from the 9th and 10th centuries (Sveinbjarnardóttir 1982:44-5), a heart-shaped bronze stud of the oriental type dated to the 10th century in Scandinavia (Sveinbjarnardóttir 1982:47-8) and parts of a penannular brooch used as weights of the type commonly found in Norse graves from the 8th and 9th centuries (Sveinbjarnardóttir 1982:45-7). Excavations at Kápa in Almanning have produced a small bronze buckle in the form of an animal mask (Eldjárn & Friðriksson 2000:48 & 393-5) very similar to the loose find from Stóraborg which is thought to be representative of the 'Borre' style of decorative art traditionally dated to the latter part of the 9th and earlier part of the 10th centuries (Sveinbjarnardóttir 1982:32).

The style and provenance of these artefacts are consistent with early Norse settlement in Eyjafjallasveit. It should be noted, however, that the discovery of stylistically archaic artefacts is not uncommon in the Norse world and, as at Scar, in Orkney, such artefacts can also survive by virtue of 'heirloom' or even 'waste-not-want-not' practices, sometimes deposited in archaeological contexts long after their diagnostic use-period (Owen & Dalland 1999). As a result, it has not been possible on

² '[Í] þann tíð [...] es [var Ragnarssonr loðbrókar lét drepa Eadmund enn helga Englakonung; en það vas sjau tegum [vetra] ens nfunda hundraðs eptir burð Kristis' (ÍF 1968:4).

stylistic grounds alone to push the settlement of Iceland in general any further back than the first half of the 10th century (Eldjárn & Friðriksson 2000:473). Indeed, critical appraisal of the archaeological record was unable to establish a more precise *terminus post quem* until 1995 when advances in the study of stratified volcanic ash or *tephra* were finally able to offer a more reliable alternative (Grönvald et al. 1995:149-155). Interestingly, the date of AD 871[±]2 which has now been confirmed for the so-called '*Landnám*' tephra, under which no traces of human activity have been found (Vésteinsson 1998:3-4), has proved the documentary material to be remarkably accurate.³ The signs of building activity found directly above the *Landnám* tephra at every investigated medieval site (Vésteinsson 1998:4) suggest that the initial phase of settlement was also as frantic and comprehensive as the written sources claim.

Palaeoecological investigations at Holt in Eyjafjallasveit note a reduction in native birch woodland in the first century after the *Landnám* eruptions. They report a change so drastic that birch completely disappears from the ditch sections before the Katla eruption of c. AD 1000 (Buckland et al. 1991:257). This change has been attributed in part to the creation of arable land by forest clearance, a practice attested by later legal codes like *Grágás* (GG II 1852:448). Other factors such as the harvesting of wood for use in the fuel-intensive business of processing bog-iron, and even the feeding habits of livestock such as pigs are also thought to have played an important part in this process.

The combination of deforestation (see Vésteinsson 1998:11-12) and over-grazing of sheep (Einarsson 1995:69-70) was ultimately too much for the fragile Icelandic ecosystem. Both are known to have led to soil erosion – a phenomenon which is estimated to have halved Iceland's vegetation coverage⁴ and known to have led to wide-scale farm abandonment by the later Middle Ages (Sveinbjarnardóttir 1992). Ari fróði tells us that settlement-period Iceland was '*viði vaxið milli fjalls og fjöru*' (ÍF 1968:5). The traditional interpretation of this passage describes a landscape 'covered with trees between the

³ Although radiocarbon dates from Herjólfsdalur in the Westmen Islands had previously suggested pre-AD 870 settlement (Hermanns-Auðardóttir 1989), these claims have been met with strong criticism (Vilhjálmsson 1992:167-181).

⁴ See the historical vegetation maps produced by Guðmundur Guðjónsson and Einar Gíslason for Nátturufræðistofnun Íslands in 1998.

mountains and the foreshore'. However, given what we now know about the early historic environment of southern Iceland (Simpson et al. 2001), it is tempting to postulate an alternative translation of simply 'vegetated between the mountains and the foreshore'.

While it is clear that Norse farmers must have hastened the process of soil erosion, there is now at least some evidence to suggest that they might not actually have started it. Although limited in nature, the results of the recent excavations at Holt appear to indicate that the process of deforestation was already underway in the south of Eyjafjallasveit before the Landnám tephra was deposited (Buckland et al. 1991:256). This early retreat of birch woodland could be explained in a number of different ways, including climate change, peat growth, river-channel change (Hallsdóttir 1995, Ólafsdóttir 2001) or the early presence of (Norse) hunters or fishermen (Kjartansson 1996).

Returning to the accounts of first settlement, the Icelandic sources concur that the island was primarily settled from Norway⁵. However, the sources also agree with Dicuil's AD 825 *Liber de mensura orbis terra* (Tierney 1967) that the first Norse settlers in Iceland were preceded by an unspecified number of enigmatic, Gaelic-speaking *papar*. While there is currently no convincing material evidence for an early Gaelic settlement,⁶ recent work on *Landnámabók* suggests that a sizeable proportion of the initial Scandinavian immigrants in southern Iceland may have come from Atlantic Scotland (Guðmundsson 1997, Pálsson 1996), the probable 'homeland' of the *papar* (Ahronson 2000). It could be argued that certain types of place-name were introduced by these Scandinavians on the basis of their experience in the Scottish Isles and Ireland. Of the 'Celtic' place-names (leaving aside personal name specifics), Eyjafjallasveit alone boasts *Írá* [*Gael River*], *Írárfoss* [*Gael-River Falls*], *Írárgill* [*Gael-River Gully*], *Stóra Dímon* [*Greater 'Dímon'*], *Litla Dímon* [*Lesser 'Dímon'*] and *Katanes* (*the Norse form of Caithness*) – more 'Celtic' place-names than the rest of Rangárvallasýsla put together (Guðmundsson 1997:86-88 & 190-199 & Pálsson 1996:43-46 & 53-58). Although it is difficult to trace these names any further back than the 12th century, it is

⁵ 'Ísland byggðisk úr Noregi' (ÍF 1968:4).

⁶ A detailed review of the debate surrounding this issue can be found in Guðmundsson 1997:92-100 and Pálsson 1996:30-38.

reasonable to consider that they mark the connection of certain areas to ethnic Gaels in a Norse context.

Landnámabók tells of eight early Norse settlers in Eyjafjallasveit. They are listed from East to West as follows, with the abbreviations S and H denoting its *Sturlubók* and *Hauksbók* manuscripts respectively. Where possible, the sites and landscape features have been located on Figure 1.

Þrasi, who took land between the rivers of Kaldaklofsá and Jökulsá, and settled at the eastern end of Skógar or Þrasastaðir.

(S337: ÍF 1968:338) 'Þrasi [...] nam land milli Kaldaklofsár ok Jökulsár; hann bjó í Skógum enum eystrum'.

(H295: ÍF 1968:339) 'Þrasi [...] bjó á Bjallabrekku; þar heita nú Þrasastaðir skammt austr frá forsinum'.

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|------------------|--------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Bjalli | 8. Holt | 15. Litla Dímon |
| 2. Eyvindarhólar | 9. E. Ásólfsskáli | 16. Stóra Dímon |
| 3. Kaldaklofsá | 10. Miðskáli | 17. Þuridarstaðir Efri |
| 4. Stóraborg | 11. W. Ásólfsskáli | 18. Steinfinnsstaðir |
| 5. Lambafellsá | 12. Írá | 19. Krossá |
| 6. Arnarbæli | 13. Seljalandsá | |
| 7. Steinar | 14. Katanes | |

--- limit of flat, low-lying land

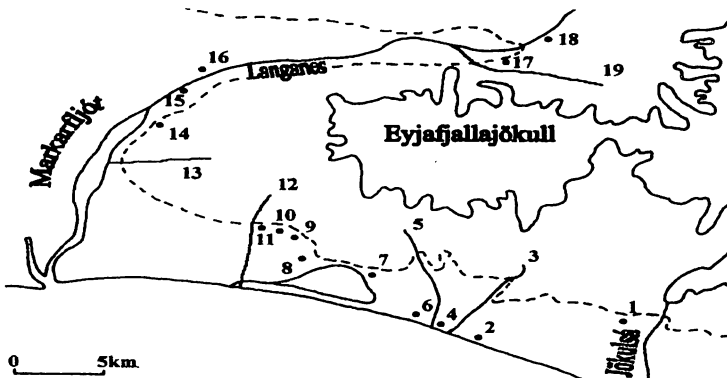


Figure 1. Eyjafjallasveit and some of the places mentioned in the text.

Ásgeirr kneif, who took land between Lambafellsá and Seljalandsá and built his farm at a place called Auðnum [uninhabited tract of land].

Hrafn enn heimski (the stupid), who took all the land between the Kaldaklofsá and Lambafellsá rivers and lived at the eastern Rauðafell.

(S338: ÍF 1968:340) *'Hrafn enn heimski [...] nam land milli Kaldaklofsár ok Lambafellsár; hann bjó at Rauðafelli enu eystra'*.

(S339: ÍF 1968:340) *'Ásgeirr kneif [...] nam land milli Lambafellsár ok Seljalandsár ok bjó þar, er nú heitir at Auðnum'*.

Þorgeir horski, who bought land between the Lambafellsá and Írá rivers from Ásgeirr kneif and lived at Holt.

(S340, H298: ÍF 1968:342) *'Þorgeir enn hörzki [...] keypti land at Ásgeiri kneif milli Lambafellsár ok Írár ok bjó í Holti'*.

Ásgerðr took land between Seljalandsmúli and Markarfljót and Langanes, north towards Jöldusteinn and lived on the north side of Katanes.

(S341, H299: ÍF 1968:343) *'Ásgerðr nám land milli Seljalandsmúla ok Markarfljóts ok Langanes allt upp til Jöldusteins ok bjó norðan í Katanesi'*.

Steinfinnr and Ásbjörn, were brothers who both took land north of Krossá, east of the Markarfljót. Steinfinnr built his farm at Steinfinnsstaðir and Ásbjörn dedicated his farm to the god Thor and called it Þórsmörk.

(S342, H300: ÍF 1968:344, 346) *'Ásbjörn Reyretillsson ok Steinfiðr bróðir hans námu land fyrir ofan Krossá fyrir austan Fljót. Steinfiðr bjó á Steinfinnsstöðum, ok er ekki manna frá honum komit. Ásbjörn helgaði landnám sitt Þór ok kallaði Þórsmörk'*.

Jörundr goði, settled to the west of the Markarfljót at Svertingsstaðir, where he built a great temple.

(S346: ÍF 1968:350) *'Jörundr goði, son Hrafn's ens heimska, byggði fyrir vestan Fljót, þar er nú heitir á Svertingsstöðum; hann reisti þar hof mikit'*.

Of these eight alleged settlement sites, only three have been identified with any degree of certainty: Holt, which has traditionally been associated with Holt by Holtsás; Þrasastaðir, which although no longer extant has been traced to the vicinity of Eystriskógar on account of the local place-name Bjalli (see Tómasson in Guðjónsson et al. 1982:9) and Steinfinnsstaðir, which has been tentatively equated with Kápa in Almening on

account of the general proximity of both to the Miðmörk of Njal's Saga (Sveinbjarnardóttir 1982:21-26). Although *Landnámabók* mentions four other farms in Eyjafjallasveit, these represent later settlement. The four secondary settlements are described as follows:

Eyvindarhólar, was built by second-generation immigrant Eyvindr, son of Baugr who settled at Hliðarendi.

(S348, H307: ÍF 1968:352-3) '*Baugr [...] bjó at Hliðarendi. Hans son var [...] Eyvindr at Eyvindarmúla*'.

East Ásólfskáli, Miðskáli and West Ásólfsskáli (now Yztiskáli), are mentioned in the story of the harangued Christian Ásólfur alskik, whose ancestors originally came to Iceland from Ireland (S24, H21: ÍF 1968:59-64).

One way of tempering the documentary evidence is to re-assess the material on an inter-disciplinary basis. While Fornleifastofnun Íslands' (The Icelandic Institute of Archaeology) preliminary survey of Eyjafjallasveit has revealed 2359 sites, divided into 12 categories and spread over 85 farms (Sveinbjarnardóttir & Gunnarsdóttir 2000), very few of these have been fully investigated. In addition, much of the early material evidence may have been lost as a direct result of the sporadic and destructive changes in the course of the Markarfljót that were common prior to the construction of flood defences in 1910 (see Kjartansson in Guðjónsson et al. 1982:109), or to the effects of coastal erosion and the resultant relocation of farms on the *Sandar* [compacted sand dunes] in the south (Sveinbjarnardóttir 1992:30-40). There are, however, a number of other indicators such as the size of a farm, the status of its name in the local onomastic (place-name) hierarchy and the presence or absence of a church that could be used to pinpoint the most likely sites of *Landnám* settlement (Teitsson 1984). Even so, it should be remembered that over-reliance on written material is dangerous. As church reform in the later medieval period is likely to have obscured earlier data, there are clear limitations to early church lists, such as Bishop Páll Jónsson's *Kirknatal* from shortly after AD 1200 (DI 12 1923-1932:6). Páll names the churches in Eyjafjallasveit as Skógar, Hólar, two at Arnarbæli, one at Borg, Steinar, Holt, Ásólfsskáli, Dalur, Vámúlastaðir, Krossi, Skúmstaðir and Fljót (DI 12 1923-1932:6). However, his list is restricted to those churches that needed to

be supplied with a priest and therefore ignores private churches and chapels (Lárusson 1944:132).

There is another, resource-based approach, which could provide a useful counterbalance to the documentary record. The modern view of a farm as a largely homogenous economic unit consisting of drained pastureland and enclosed fields may have clouded the development of ideas on the mechanics of early settlement. Indeed, it is only now becoming apparent that the earliest 'pioneer' sites are likely to have differed from later settlements in a number of important respects. Without access to a market economy or transport infrastructure, the medieval farmer would have had to be as self-sufficient as possible, irrespective of any overwhelming cultural pressure to either remain independent or risk social subordination.⁷ However, in Iceland, as elsewhere in the Norse world, it is now clear that many settlement sites began as collective groupings of two or more longhouses rather than single independent farmsteads. Sites such as Herjólfssdalur in the Westmen Islands, Hvítárholt in Árnesþing, and L'Anse-aux-Meadows in Newfoundland, Canada, all began as multiple longhouses (Vésteinsson 1998:12-17). It is also likely that early sites would have been chosen for ease of access to the large diversity of resources the settlers would have needed to sustain themselves and not necessarily because they had the most or best arable land.⁸ Although early Norse farms in Iceland appear to have been based on animal husbandry, detailed study of archaeofauna suggests that each household also managed to fully exploit the surrounding environment over large distances (Vésteinsson 2000:171). Most important amongst these would have been access to wetland meadowland for animal fodder, forest for fuel, food and animal fodder, highland pasture for grazing, seabirds for their eggs and fishing grounds for fish and sea mammals (Vésteinsson 1998:6-12). The fact that just such a combination of resources

⁷ Samson *et al* (1991) argue on substantivist economic anthropological grounds that self-sufficiency in the Viking Age was enforced by cultural dictate rather than necessity.

⁸ This does not of course preclude the possibility that initial land claims were enormous. However, studies have shown that as the productivity of labour was so low there was no advantage to be had from cultivating a larger area than the household required for its upkeep (Durrenberger 1991:15-16). A much higher yield could be achieved, albeit in kind rather than cash by gifting out the marginal and border areas to tenants or social subordinates (Vésteinsson 1998:20-25).

can be found in many parts of Eyjafjallasveit argues strongly for its suitability for early settlement. These resources must have attracted the area's many settlers and formed the basis of the mixed economy that allowed them to survive the periods of want and environmental change known from Iceland's historical record.

In conclusion then, it is clear that while the isolated study of written sources such as *Landnámabók* and Páll Jónsson's *Kirknatal* may prove of some use in identifying potential, early settlement sites in Eyjafjallasveit, there are severe limitations to such an approach. It is therefore crucial that these sources are examined critically in a way that highlights their inherent biases and takes proper account of the archaeological, palaeoecological and onomastic evidence. The main aim of this short article has been to highlight the documentary data and contextualise it with a brief survey of the archaeological and environmental records for early settlement in Eyjafjallasveit.

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