

**Land at Sómastaðagerði and Hraun, Reyðarfjörður:
An Archaeological Evaluation.**



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FS212-99122
Reykjavík, September 2003

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fornleifastofnun Íslands carried out an archaeological evaluation (trial trenching) on land at Sómastaðagerði and Hraun, in Reyðarfjörður, Suður Múlasysla, between June 4th and June 12th 2003. This work was carried out on behalf of Alcoa Primary Metals, in advance of construction plans, and represents the first stage of a process of investigation required to meet the conditions of a development constraint imposed by Fornleifavernd Ríkisins.

- Targeted trenching of the farm-mound sites revealed limited archaeological remains at both locations. The remains encountered at Hraun appear to represent only a single phase of late 19th/early 20th century activity. At Sómastaðagerði, evidence came to light of activity in the late 19th/early 20th century, and also traces of structural activity thought to date to the Viking age or high middle ages.
- A systematic 2% trenching exercise within the homefield of Sómastaðagerði revealed no further archaeological structures, but did reveal deposits of possible archaeological interest at a single location.
- Targeted trenching of possible anomalies in the shoreline area revealed no additional structures of archaeological interest.
- Further systematic fieldwalking of the environs of Sómastaðagerði revealed several additional structures of archaeological interest.

Additional archaeological excavations are therefore seen to be necessary to fully document the remains at the farm-mounds of Sómastaðagerði and Hraun. However, neither farm-mound location is seen to retain archaeological remains of great depth, extent or complexity.

Additional excavation will also be necessary to fully document the numerous outlying structures that have not yet been subject to archaeological investigation.

INTRODUCTION

In advance of the proposed development of an aluminium smelter, in 1999 Fornleifastofnun Íslands conducted a documentary survey and fieldwalking exercise at land on the farms of Sómastaðir, Sómastaðirgerði and Hraun in Reyðarfjörður. This process identified a number of sites of archaeological interest that are threatened by development. In light of this, Fornleifavernd Ríkisins has imposed a development constraint requiring both the protection of a number of sites not directly under threat, and a multi-stage investigation of those remains that will be destroyed by construction work. This report details the results of an evaluation (trial trenching) exercise that represents the first stage of that investigation.

The purpose of this evaluation was;

- 1) - to determine the nature and extent of presumed archaeological remains at the farm-mounds of Sómastaðagerði (SM-137:001) and Hraun (SM-134:005).
- 2) - to investigate the possible survival of previously unknown archaeological remains within the homefield of Sómastaðagerði.
- 3) - to investigate the possible survival of previously unknown archaeological remains along the shoreline.
- 4) - to further investigate the possible survival of previously unknown archaeological remains within the general environs of Sómastaðagerði.
- 5) - to make a record of the surface topography around the 2 farm-mounds.
- 6) – to evaluate and make a graphic record of Feature SM-137:004, located at the shoreline to the south of Sómastagerði.

METHOD

A trial trenching methodology was adopted as the primary approach to these research questions. This was supplemented by measured survey, and a measured graphic record.

A grid system was established using known points provided by Hönnun in Reyðarfjörður. This corresponds directly to the ISN93 grid system – all coordinates given herein adhere to that system. Areas targeted for study were staked out using a total station theodolite. A small (3 ton) mechanical excavator was used to remove turf, topsoil, any modern overburden, and geologically deposited layers. All archaeological deposits were subsequently excavated by hand. Written and drawn records of all archaeological deposits were completed using pro-forma recording systems developed by Fornleifastofnun Íslands, and supplemented by photography as appropriate. All finds were recovered and located by single context.

The mapping of outlying structures and the modelling of the farm mound locations was carried out using a Trimble DGPS total station, and the results of this survey were subsequently post-processed using “Surfer 8” software.

In total, 16 trial trenches were excavated, supplemented by a number of smaller test pits and interventions.

- 1) Five trial trenches were excavated within the area of the Sómastaðagerði farm-mound (Trenches 1, 2a, 2b, 3 and 4). At Hraun, a small area was hand-excavated around already exposed building remains – and a test pit was excavated to test an apparently blank area a short distance to the west.
- 2) Eleven trial trenches were excavated within the homefield of Sómastaðagerði. In total this represents circa 2% of the area of the homefield.
- 3) Two test pits were excavated in the shoreline area, supplemented by the excavation of a small area around an exposed stone feature, and the recording and test excavation of a cluster of stone located shortly above the shore line.
- 4) All areas in the environs of the homefield of Sómastaðagerði were intensively field walked, and all apparent and possible structures were located and recorded.
- 5) The topography of the farm-mound sites of Sómastaðagerði and Hraun were mapped using a Trimble DGPS station, thus generating a high resolution digital elevation model of both locales.
- 6) Feature SM-137:004 was cleaned, and drawn at a scale of 1:20. A small test pit was also examined alongside this feature.

RESULTS

Sómastaðagerði

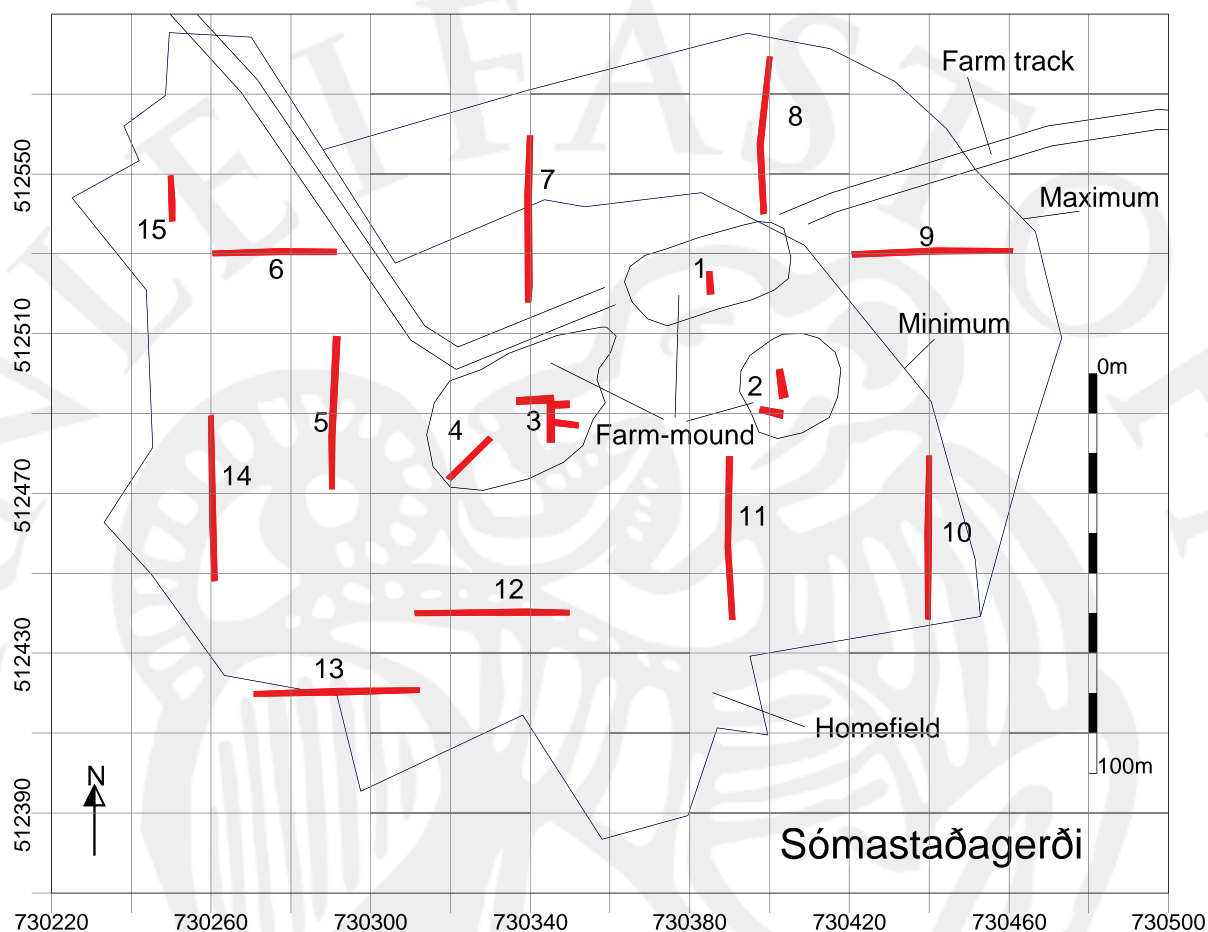


Figure 1 – Trench Locations

Of the 15 trenches excavated at the farm-mound and within the homefield of Sómastaðagerði, only Trench 3 revealed complex archaeological stratigraphy.

Trenches 1, 2 (a&b), and 4 contained the demolished remains of modern buildings or building platforms, as clearly demonstrated by extensive quantities of concrete, structural metalwork, gravel, plastics and polystyrene insulating foam. These deposits overlay either bedrock or other natural deposits. The latter trenches are held to be of no archaeological interest.

Trenches 5-15, excavated within the homefield, revealed no additional structural evidence. Only Trench 13 revealed any deposits of possible archaeological interest. Within Trench 13, a thin deposit (1041) enriched with soot/very small charcoal fragments was observed at a depth of 0.50m from the modern surface, located in the northern section some 15m from the eastern end of the trench. This layer was seen to lie beneath a layer (1040) containing tephra (volcanic ejecta) layers believed to be the “Landnám sequence”.

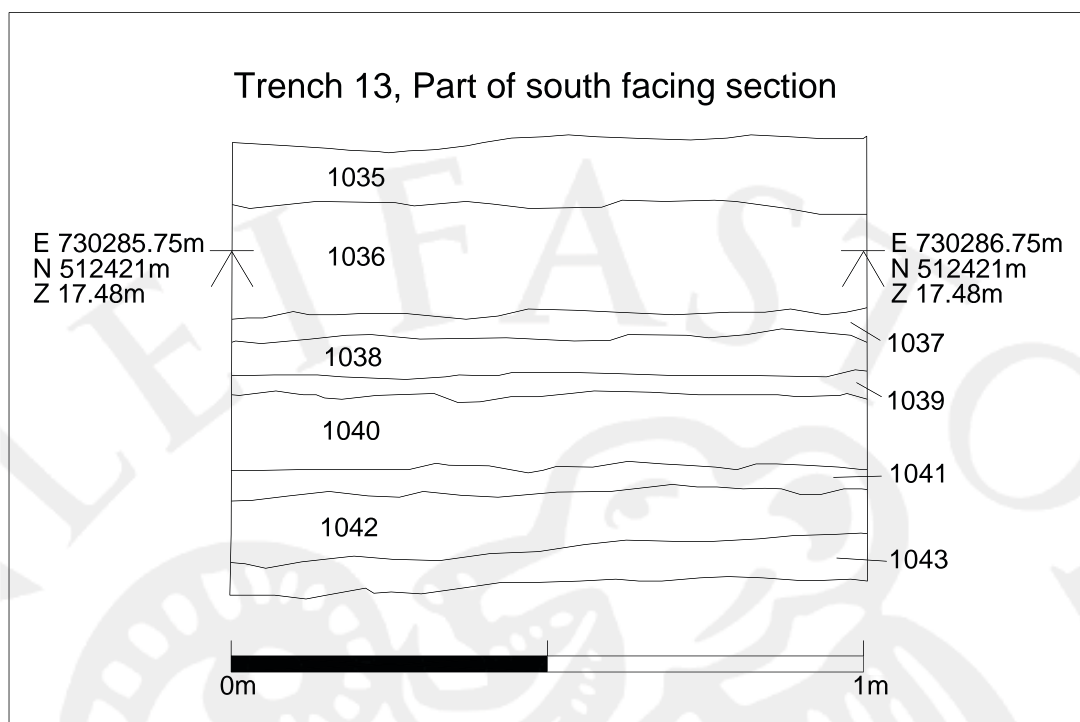


Figure 2 – Trench 13

Context	Description
1035	Turf and topsoil
1036	Fine grey brown silt
1037	Dark grey tephra horizon
1038	Pale grey clay silt
1039	Grey tephra horizon (thought to be “a”-1477)
1040	Pale grey clay silt including elements of the “Landnám” tephra sequence
1041	Dark grey/black silt including frequent soot/charcoal fragments
1042	Mid red brown clay silt
1043	Pale grey clay silt with ferric precipitation.

Table 1 – Contexts seen in Figure 2

This layer, and others were examined by tephrochronologist Magnús Sigurgeirsson. His identification of this tephra sequence is that they are indeed the “Landnám” sequence dating from 871±2 AD to circa 950AD (See Appendix 1). If this identification is accepted, then the soot/charcoal layer (1041) beneath it is thus dated prior to the accepted date of the first settlement of Iceland. However, in the absence of any other evidence of anthropogenic impact at this level, this observation must be treated with some caution. Although it is thought unlikely, natural sources of ignition could be responsible for the formation of this layer.

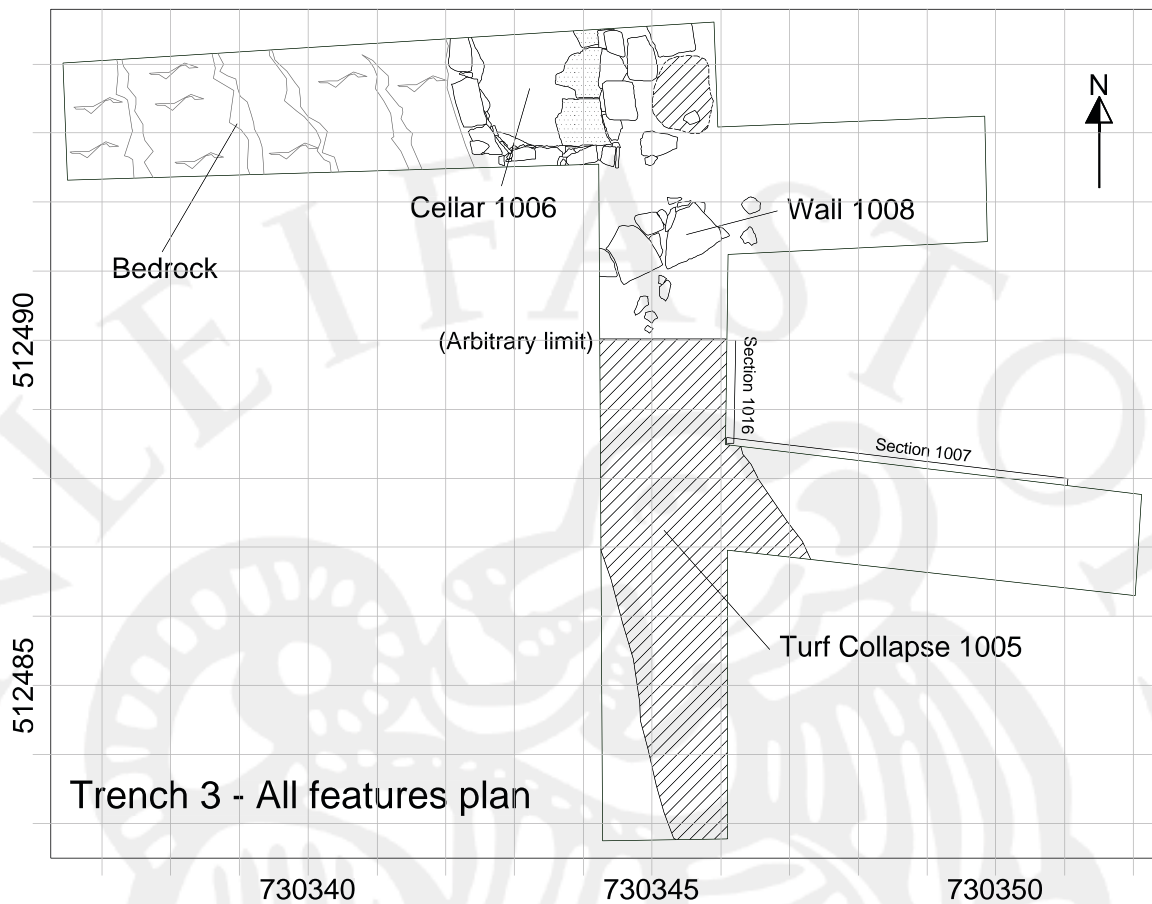


Figure 3 – Trench 3 – All features plan.

Trench 3

Excavation in Trench 3 exposed the remains of two distinct phases of archaeological activity. The earlier of these is represented solely by a spread of turf debris (Context 1005), located throughout the southern part of the trench and seen in patches beneath later deposits in the northern part of the trench.

This layer is composed of irregular red/orange/black turf fragments, in a matrix of mid orange brown aeolian silt. It is thought to represent the tumbled remains of a wall or other structure. The upper horizon of this deposit was in places truncated by more recent activity, but in a number of places this upper surface was clearly overlain by two separate and distinct tephra horizons. The lower of these is up to 1cm thick, fine grained in texture and very pale yellow/white in colour. Some 5-10cms higher, this layer was in turn sealed by a somewhat thicker dark grey tephra horizon. Field observations by Magnús Sigurgeirsson confirmed these layers to be Ö-1362 and 1477 (the “a” layer). In situ beneath the layer of turf collapse, several elements of the “Landnám Sequence” were noted. As such, the turf collapse layer can be dated to between 950 AD and 1362 AD, most likely to the late 10th or early 11th century.

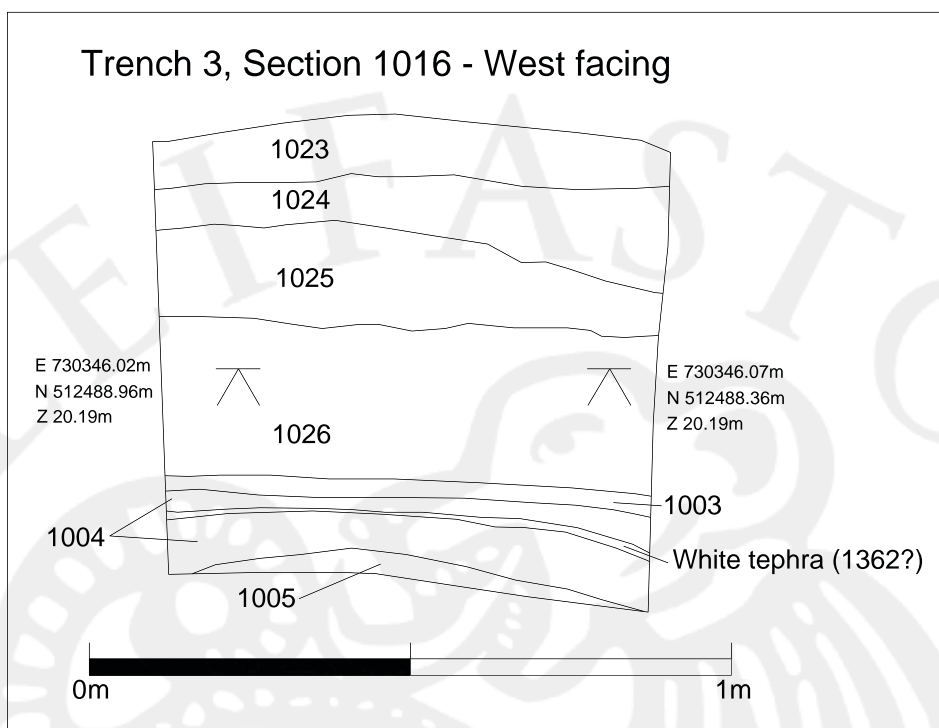


Figure 4 – Section 1016

Context	Description
1003	Dark grey tephra (1477)
1004	Mid orange brown aeolian silt including white tephra (1362)
1005	Turf collapse
1023	Turf and topsoil
1024	Loose gravel including charcoal and modern debris
1025	Pink peat ash and charcoal
1026	Orange brown silt, darker at surface, becoming paler towards base.
1027	Cut of shallow linear feature
1028	Fill of Cut [1027]
1029	Dark red brown silt including occasional turf fragments
1030	Grey/black charcoal horizon
1031	Mid orange brown silt including occasional turf fragments
1032	Mid orange brown aeolian silt – equivalent to (1026)?
1033	Mid orange brown aeolian silt
1034	Sterile yellow brown silt with LNS tephra at surface. Natural.

Table 2 – Contexts in Sections 1016 (Figure 4) and 1007 (Figure 5)

Between 30-50cms above the latter turf horizon, and above the 1477 tephra, a sequence of anthropogenic layers was noted. These included wood ash and peat ash (1025), and contained occasional charcoal, burnt stone, and gravel (1024). These layers were seen to be associated with a number of stone built features.

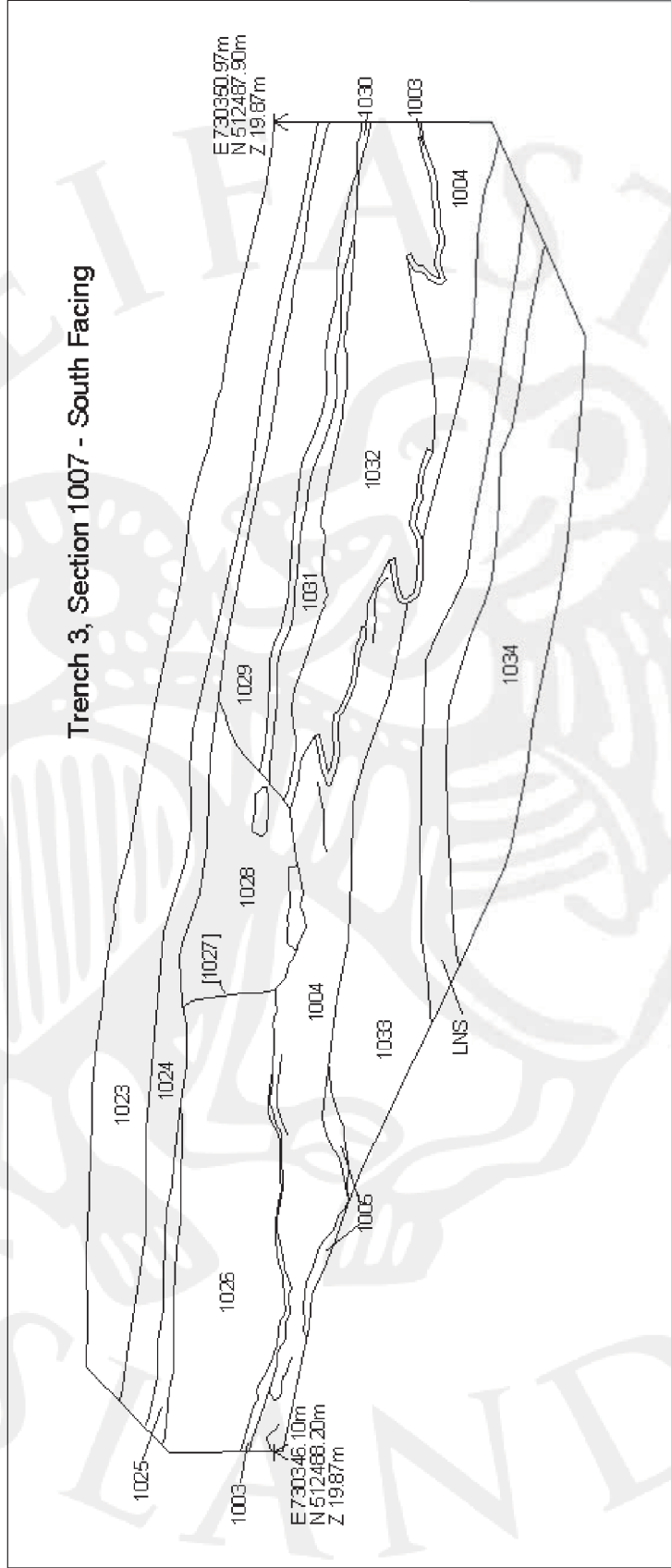


Figure 5 – Section 1007, Trench 3

At the northern limit of Trench 3, part of a sub-surface stone built structure was exposed (Context 1006). The structure measured circa 1.2m wide, up to 0.8m deep, and is of unknown length. It was built into a hollow in the underlying bedrock (likely to have been enlarged by construction), and was formed by up to 4 irregular courses of stone walling.

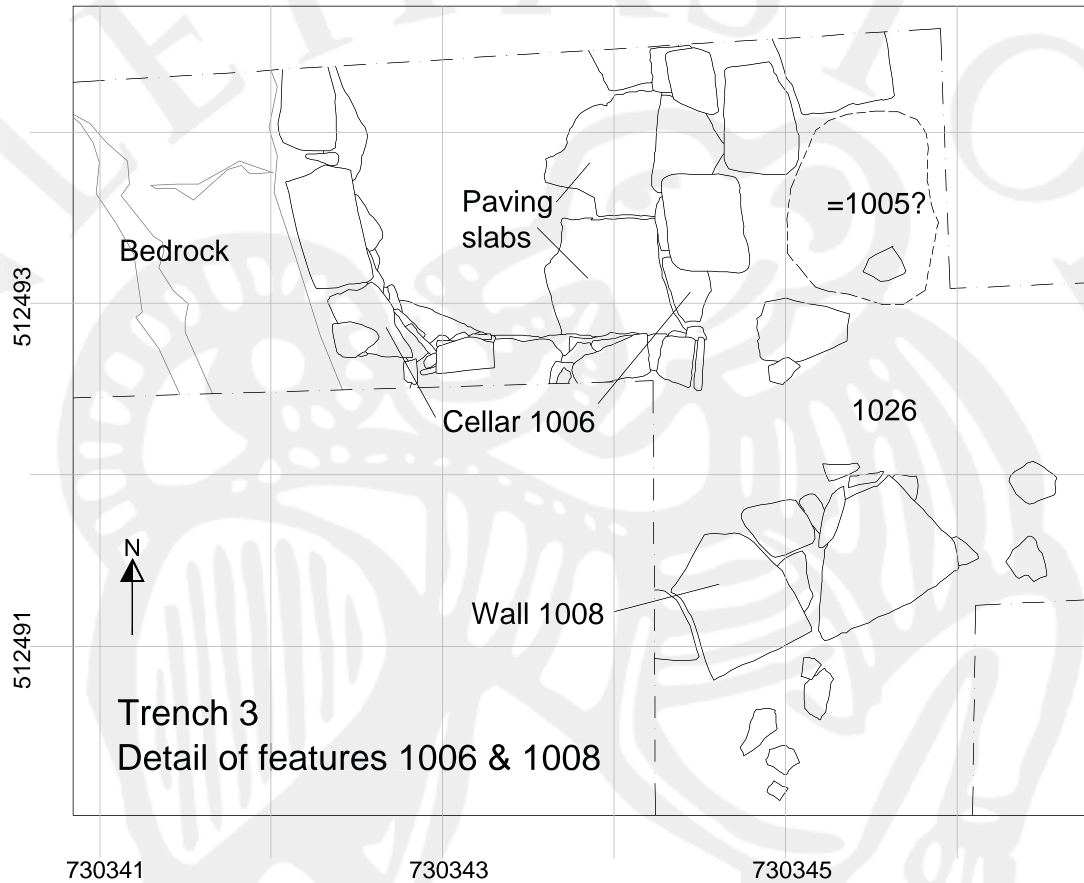


Figure 6 – Detail of Features 1006 and 1008

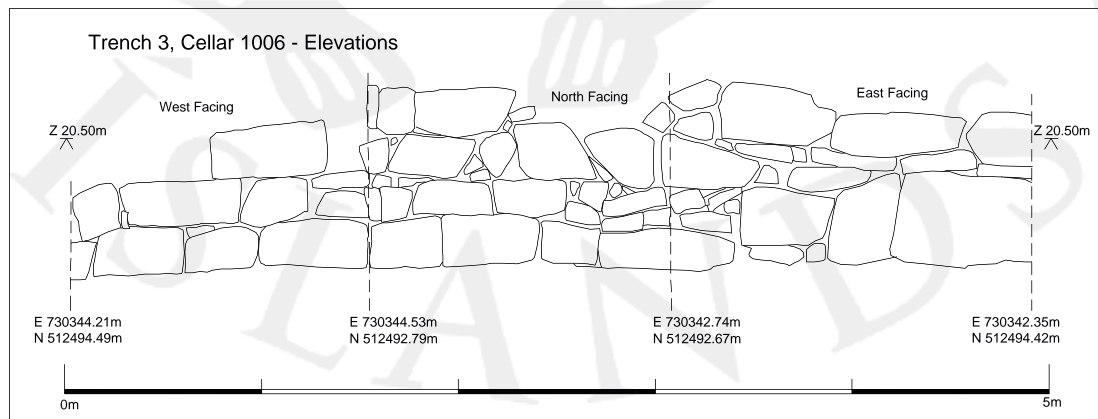


Figure 7 - Elevations of Cellar 1006

The stones utilised in construction exhibited few signs of any deliberate shaping, and no traces of mortar or concrete were observed. This feature (1006) is interpreted as a cellar. The eastern part of the base of Cellar 1006 was paved with 3 large irregular slabs of stone. Cellar (1006) had subsequently been filled to current ground level by a multi-lenticular deposit of ash, gravel, shell and debris (context 1000). This deposit contained substantial quantities of pottery and glass, and a smaller quantity of bone and metal etc (See Lucas below).



Plate 1 – The southern elevation of cellar 1006, seen from the north. The divisions on the scale to the right are at 50cm intervals.

In addition to the cellar (1006), some fragmentary remains of an alignment of large stones was noted to the south (Context 1008). Context 1008 is interpreted as part of a wall footing. Both features are seen to extend beyond the limits of the current evaluation trench.

The later remains discovered at the farm mound of Sómastaðagerði are held to be consistent with the establishment of a farm at the site sometime in the 19th century. The fill of the cellar produced artefacts dated to the early 20th century, and this is interpreted as part of a process of abandonment, when the stone-built farm was replaced by modern concrete buildings sometime in the first half of the 20th century.

Both phases of activity discovered in Trench 3 may extend some distance to the southeast, and possibly a short distance to the north. Trenches 1, 2, 7 and 11 however produced no comparable deposits. Immediately to the west of cellar 1006, outcropping bedrock was observed at a depth of only 10-15cms from the modern surface. To the southwest, areas of archaeological interest are likely to have been compromised by modern construction and demolition as seen in Trench 4. The complete depth of archaeological stratigraphy observed in Trench 3 nowhere totals more than 1m.

The Finds

(Dr Gavin Lucas)

The finds have been catalogued by generic group (e.g. ceramic, glass, animal bone) and a rapid scan conducted to provide a preliminary characterization of the assemblage. A large and useful collection of ceramics and glass came from the excavations, and though some of it was unstratified, there were large parts of vessels present, thus providing a useful series of forms for comparison.

The date of the ceramics and glass is predominantly early 20th century (i.e. c.1900-1940). Nothing distinctly earlier was noted but a more detailed analysis may prove otherwise. The glassware is dominated by bottles while the ceramics chiefly comprise industrial refined whitewares with some stonewares and porcelain.

Further analysis is recommended only after further excavations have been completed and the all finds can be integrated together.

Hraun

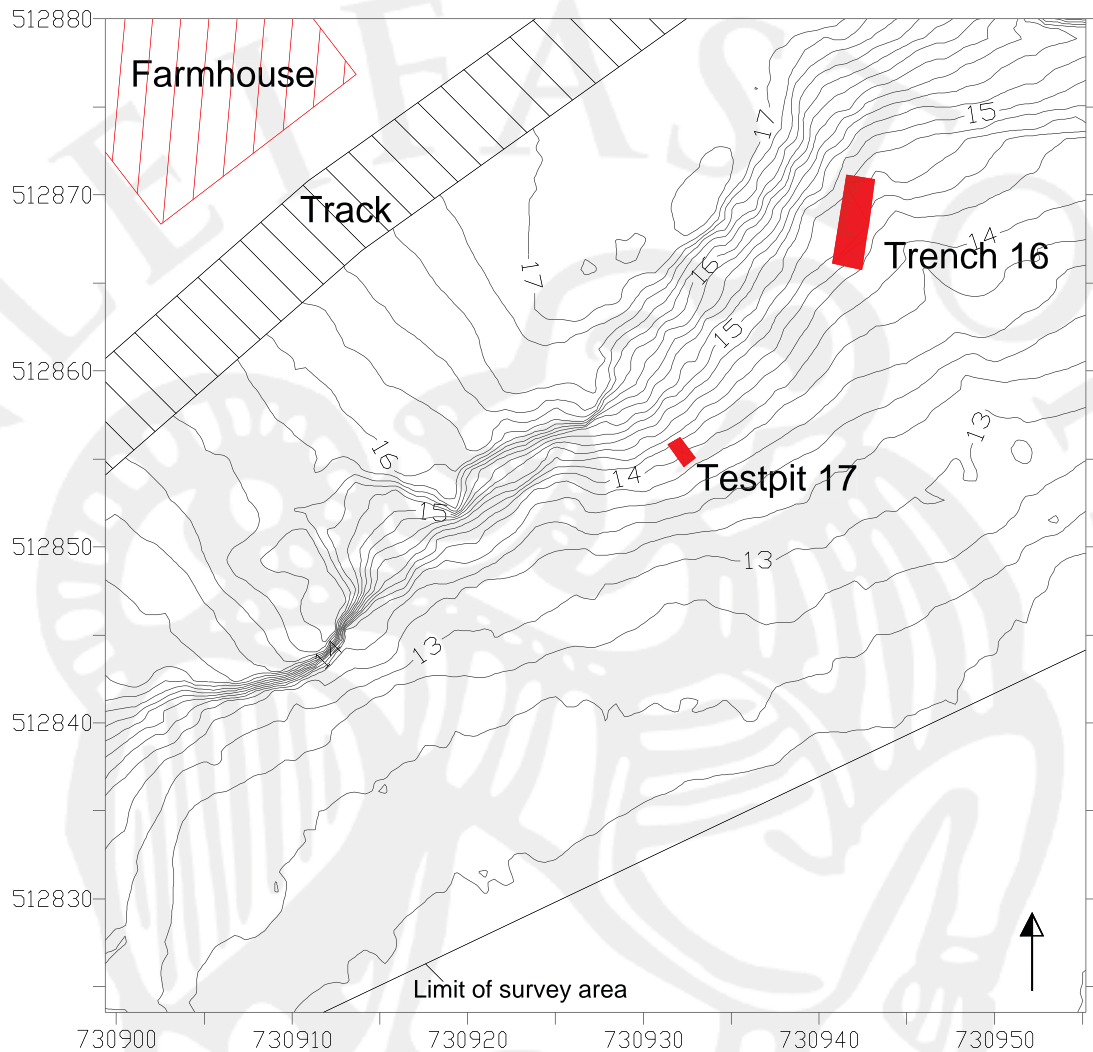


Figure 8 – Hraun. Trench locations

An examination of the area around the modern farm of Hraun revealed the exposed remains of a stone built structure (Context 1018) situated at the base of a short cliff, to the southeast of the modern farmhouse. An area around this feature was hand excavated, revealing further structural remains extending back towards the cliff face. Turf and overburden removed from Feature 1018 was found to include modern plastics, rope, undecayed wood etc.

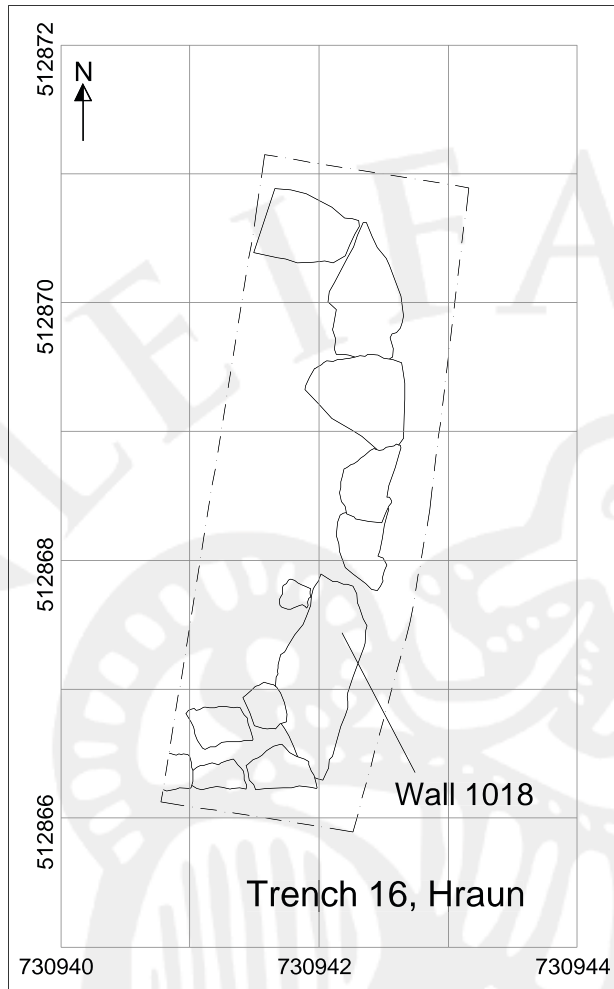


Figure 9 – Detail of Trench 16

Feature 1018 was composed of large unworked stones, set in a matrix of orange/red turf, and is interpreted as the basal layer of a stone and turf wall. This wall was not found to contain any evidence of concrete or mortar, and measures some 4.75m in width, surviving to a height of up to 0.40m. It forms part of a structure of unknown length, but it is thought likely that this structure extends someway westwards towards the cliff face.

Some 15m to the southwest of Trench 16, a further possible anomaly was tested. Test Pit 17 only revealed the extensive truncation of the underlying natural deposits. This truncation had subsequently been filled with hillwash and other debris containing modern artefacts.

These remains are interpreted as being consistent with the establishment of a farm at Hraun in the late 19th century. No evidence of early activity was encountered within the constraints of the trial trenching process. It seems likely that further structural remains may remain buried beneath material that has tumbled from the cliff face. However, the truncation encountered in Test Pit 17 might possibly indicate that putative additional structures have been subject to extensive clearance in recent times.

Some limited further excavation is therefore thought necessary to fully define the extent and nature of Wall (1018), and to demonstrate the absence of further structures potentially inundated by hillwash.

Additional Features of Potential Archaeological Interest

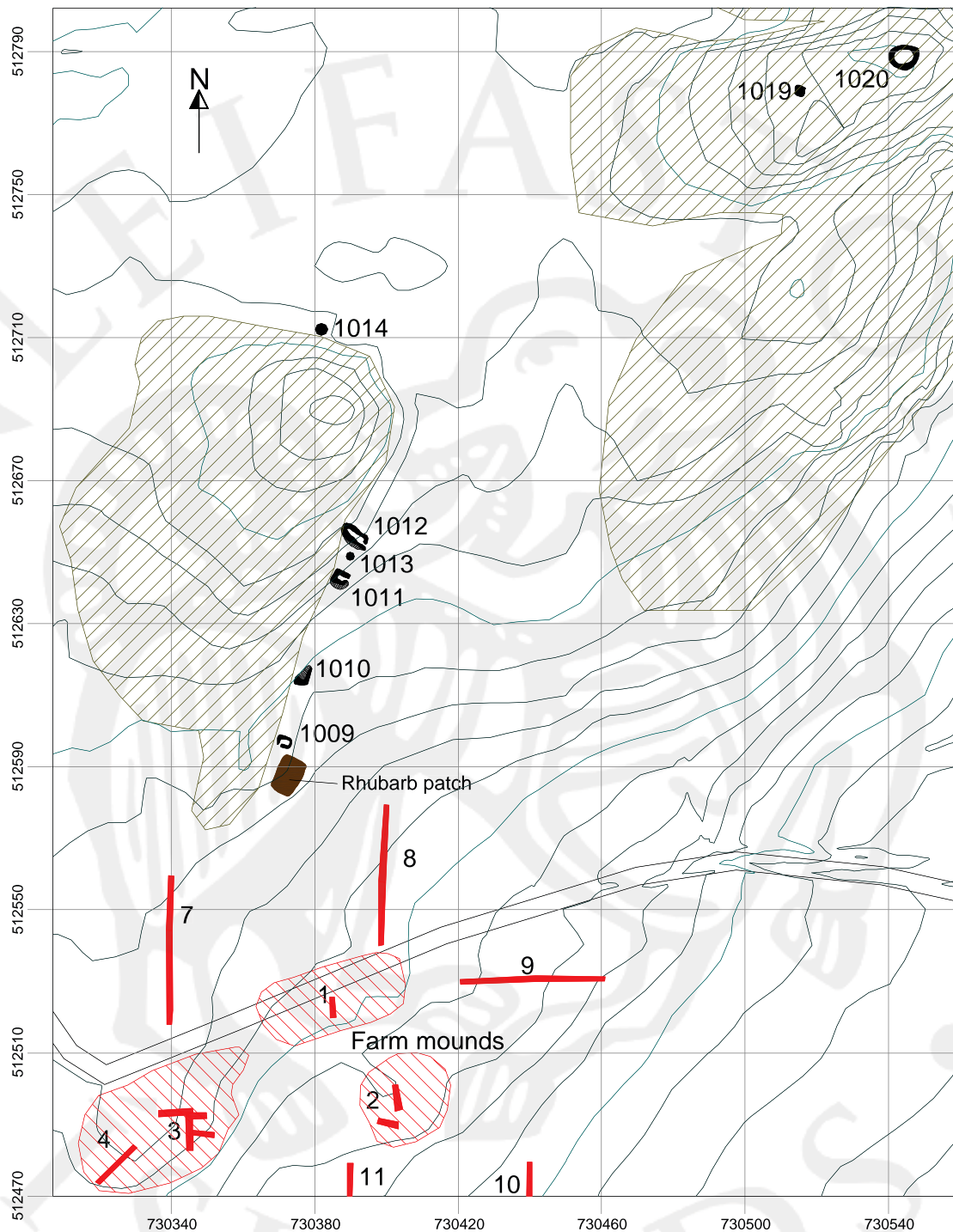


Figure 10 – Location of Additional Archaeological Features

Extensive fieldwalking of the area to the north of the homefield of Sómastaðagerði revealed a number of visible features of potential archaeological interest. These features were mapped, described and photographed. Features 1009, 1010, 1011 and 1012 are thought to be agricultural structures, possibly outhouses, or animal shelters. Features 1013 and 1014 are much less convincing, but present anomalies that may

need some further investigation. Features 1019 and 1020 are noted as anomalies located upon raised bedrock. Both latter features are of unknown function. No dating evidence is currently available for any of the above features.

Features 1009-1012 are all located in a row, immediately beneath an area of exposed bedrock, just to the north of the limits of the homefield of Sómastaðagerði. The rhubarb patch noted at the southern limit of this group has clearly been utilised in recent times. It is bounded by the remains of wooden fence posts, and rhubarb was still growing at the time of this study.

Feature 1009

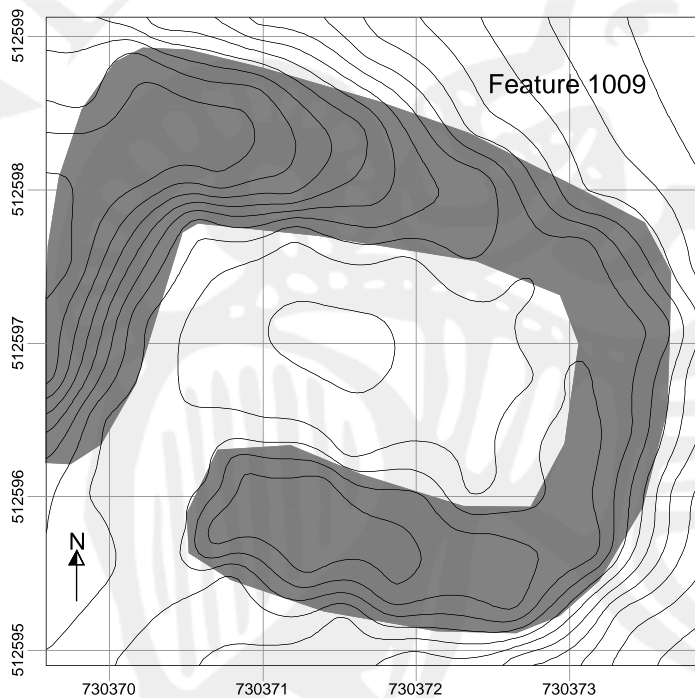


Figure 11 – Feature 1009

Aligned broadly east-west, 4.2m in length x 3.25m in width, surviving to a height of circa 0.70m.

Sub-rectangular in form this structure is built of turf and stone. It has a visible entrance at the western end of the southern wall. Feature 1009 is seen to be abutting the slope of a large rocky outcrop.

Plate 2 –
Feature 1009
seen from the
south east.
The scale is
2m.



Feature 1010

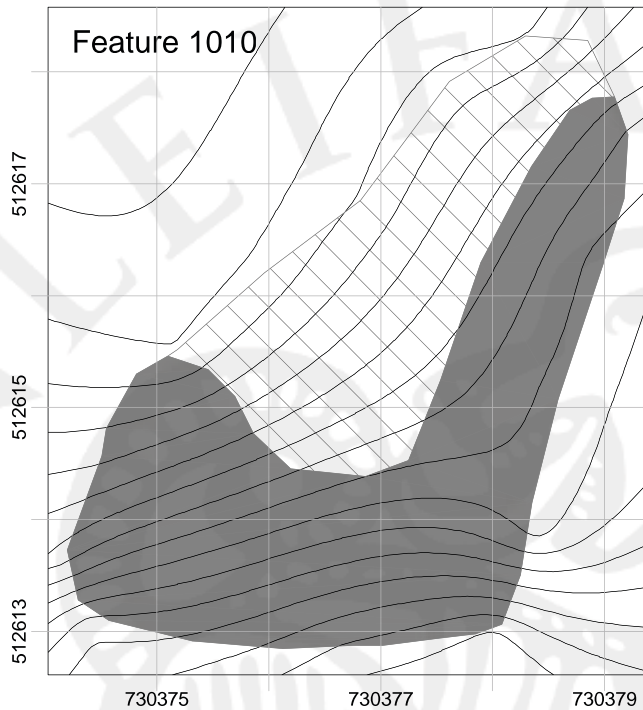


Figure 12 – Feature 1010.

The extent of this feature is somewhat unclear. It forms an irregular L-shaped anomaly, apparently aligned north-south, and measuring 5.7m in length x 3.9m in width and visible to a height of 20-25cms. It is characterised by the differential growth of grass, and forming a raised area.



Plate 3 – Feature 1010 seen from the east. The scale is 2m

Feature 1011

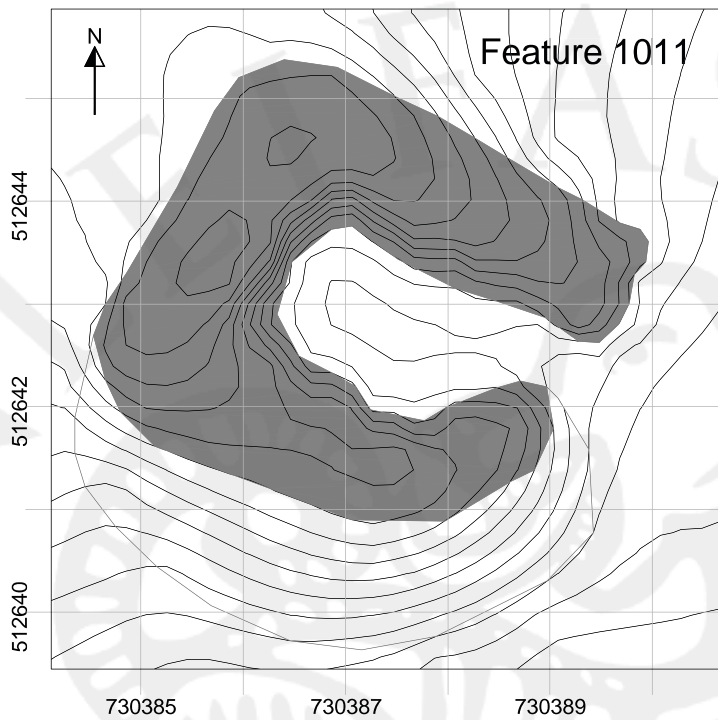


Figure 13 – Feature 1011 - Aligned northwest southeast and measuring up to 4.6m in length x 3.9m in width and some 0.8m in height. There are some indications of possible underlying remains beyond/beneath the southern wall. The structure is sub-rectangular in form and has an entrance in its eastern gable.



Plate 4 – Feature 1011 seen from the south east. The raised area of possible underlying structures is seen to the left of the upstanding walls. The scale is 2m.

Feature 1012

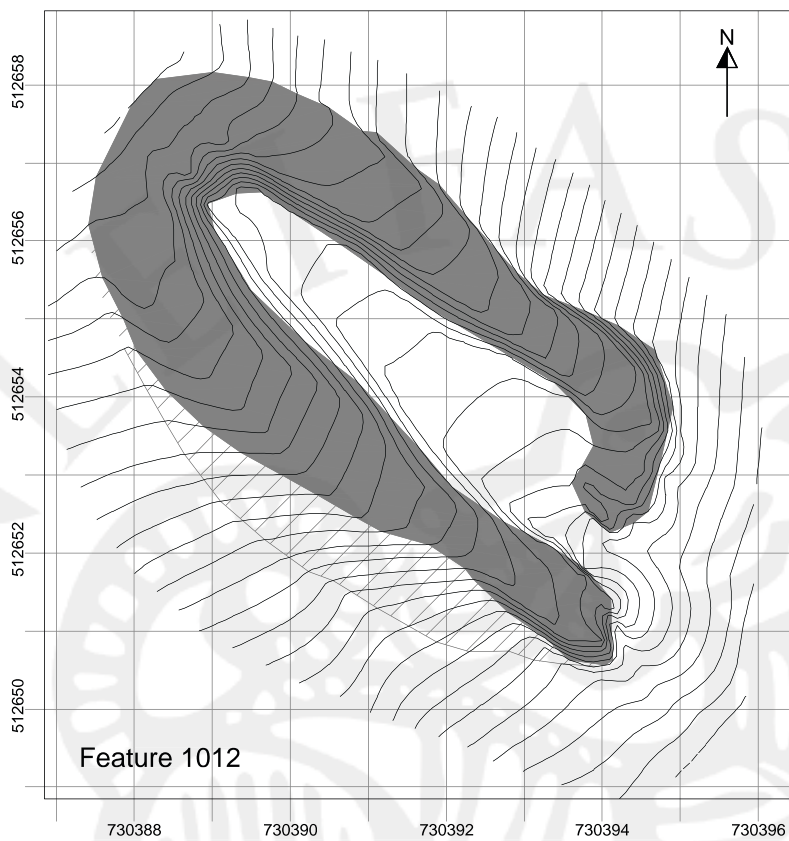


Figure 14 - Feature 1012

Aligned northwest-southeast, and measuring 8.9m in length x 4.2m in width and up to 1.05m in height. Some indications were noted of possible underlying remains at the southern wall. The structure is sub-rectangular in form, although its walls are slightly bowed. An entrance is visible in the eastern gable.



Plate 5 – Feature 1012 seen from the southeast. The scale is 2m

Feature 1013 – Comprises only an area apparently disturbed ground some 5m to the south of Feature 1012. The extent of this anomaly is unclear.



Plate 6 –Feature 1013 seen from the southeast. The scale is 2m

Feature 1014 – Comprises an area of differential vegetation growth to the north of a large rocky outcrop. Appears to measure circa 5 x 3m – possibly natural.



Plate 6 – Feature 1014 seen from the south. The scale is 2m

Feature 1019

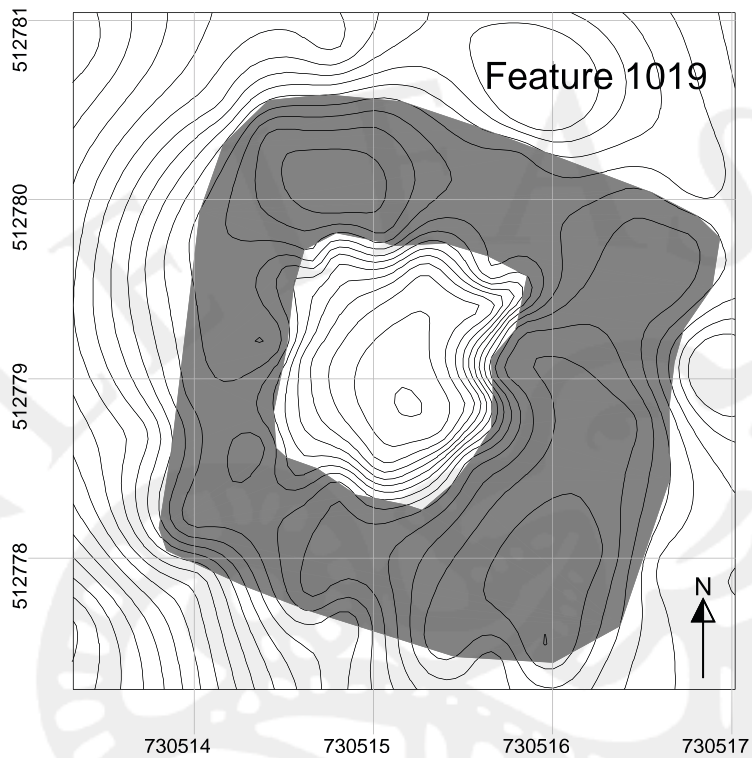


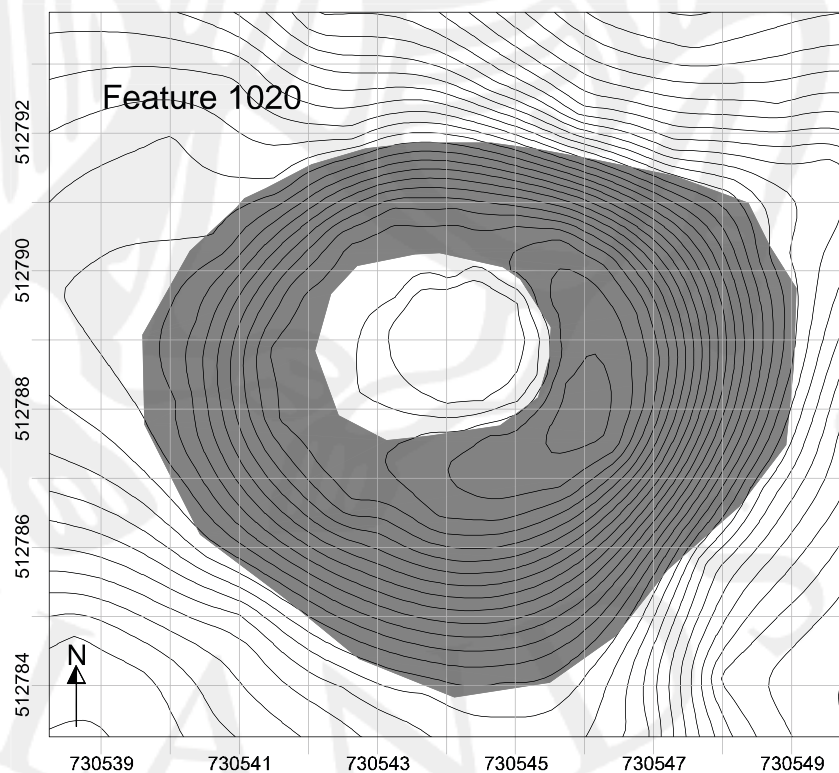
Figure 15 – Feature 1019

This structure is located on top of a stone outcrop to the northeast of the farm mound of Sómastaðagerði. In form it is sub-square and measures 2.9m in length x 2.7m in width and survives to a height of 0.20-25m.

Feature 1020

Figure 16 – Feature 1020

Also located on bedrock to the northeast of Sómastaðagerði. The structure is toroid in form, measuring 9.5m x 8.1m, and standing to a height of up to 0.75m



Features 1021 and 1022,

In addition to the above features, two piles of stone were noted on exposed bedrock rises in the area to the west of the homefield of Sómastaðagerði.

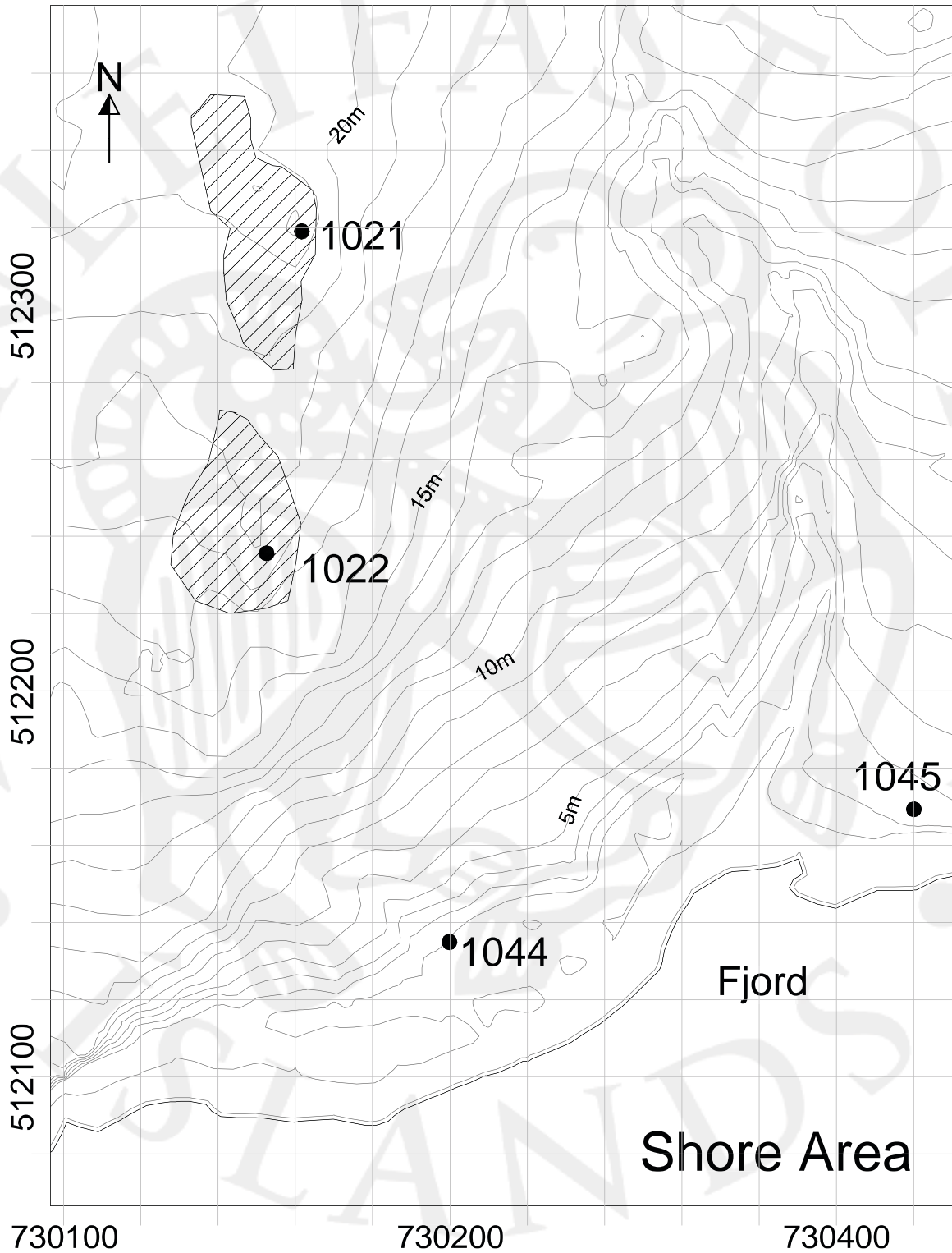


Figure 17 – Features in the shore area

Both features, 1021 and 1022, were formed from irregular piles of unshaped stone, and measured approximately 1m in diameter. Feature 1021 survives to a height of circa 0.60m, whereas feature 1022 has been levelled, standing to a height of no more than 0.20m.

Figure 18 – Feature 1022.

Both features were located and photographed. Feature 1022 was drawn at a scale of 1:20, and test excavated. Neither feature produced any evidence of dating. Both features are interpreted as being markers, possibly to indicate the location of fishing grounds. A line of sight established from these two features points directly to the farmhouse at Sómastaðir.

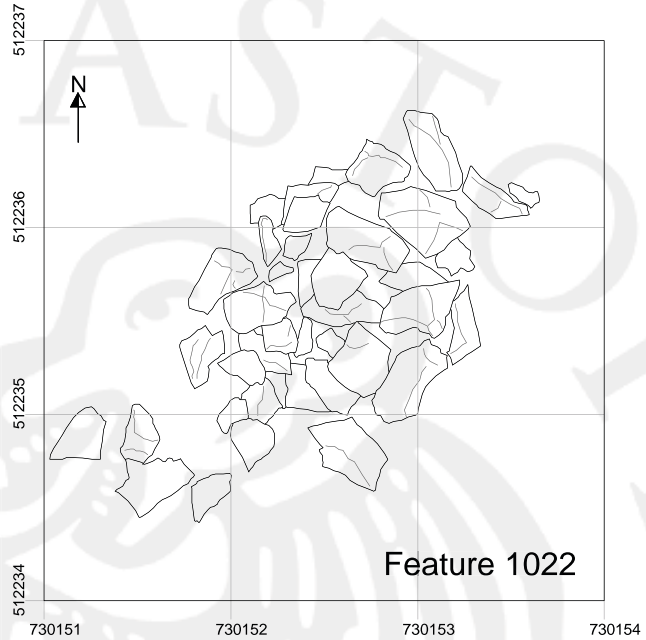


Plate 7 – Feature 1021 seen from the north. The scale is 2m



Plate 8 - Feature 1022 seen from the south. The scale is 2m.

Locations 1044 and 1045

Test pits were excavated at these 2 locations to investigate apparent surface anomalies. Neither pit revealed any deposits of archaeological interest.

Feature-137:004

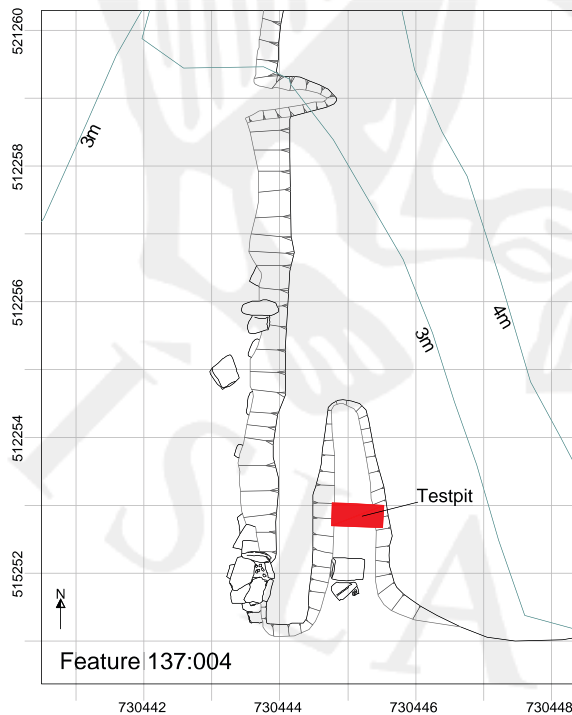


Figure 19 – Feature SM-137:004,

Located at the shoreline to the south of Sómastaðagerði, this feature was cleaned and a graphic record was made. Test excavation adjacent to this feature revealed no further deposits of archaeological interest. This feature is interpreted as a maritime feature, possibly associated with the onshore storage of small fishing vessels and or equipment. No dating evidence was found associated with this feature. It is believed to be consistent with the exploitation of marine resources in relatively modern times, i.e. late 19th / early 20th century.

Research Considerations.

- Pre-landnám charcoal horizon. Requires sampling for micro-morphological and pollen analysis. Soil formation and vegetation studies (c. 2 columns, 1 in 13 and 1 in bog adjacent to the Sómastaðagerði homefield) should aim to throw light on the vegetation at landnám, vegetation changes as a result of the landnám and possible soil improvement associated with the building of the gerði and the possible subsequent use of the site as a hay-field.
- Sómastaðagerði – Viking-age/high medieval structure(s). The clarification of the nature and extent of these structural remains will throw light on the function of “gerði”. This common place name element (meaning “enclosure”) is generally thought to indicate some sort of subsidiary units to medieval farms. It is not known however if they were primarily associated with cultivation (enclosed fields) or herding (byres or sheep houses) or if they were generally occupied by humans or not. If they were occupied by humans it needs to be clarified if such occupation was perennial or seasonal, or consisted of a separate household from the main farm or just individuals from the main household (slaves or servants). Investigations at Sómastaðagerði will be the first chance to examine these important issues in Iceland.
- Hraun and Sómastaðagerði – 19th century structures (dwellings and animal shelters). The reoccupation of Sómastaðagerði in the 1830s and the establishment of a new farm at Hraun in the closing years of the 19th century, reflects social and economic changes Icelandic society was undergoing in that period. The establishment of new farms and cottages with limited access to fields and pasture and a heavy reliance on fishing and the selling of labour services precedes the formation of towns and fishing villages in the late 19th century. At present these developments are poorly understood and archaeological investigations of these sites will provide new material which can be used to reconstruct living conditions, subsistence strategies and the social status of the fisher/farmer occupiers of these sites – ancestors of the working class of modern Reyðarfjörður.
- Artifact collections from these sites will provide important comparative material for ongoing investigations of 19th century archaeological remains at major sites like Skálholt and Aðalstræti in Reykjavík, creating the potential for analysis of both social and regional differences in access to imported goods (ceramics, glass etc.)

Acknowledgements

The evaluation was carried out by the author, assisted by Mjöll Snæsdóttir, Garðar Guðmundsson, Oddgeir Hansson and Rúnar Leifsson. The Finds were processed by Sírý Þorgeirsdóttir and assessed by Dr. Gavin Lucas. DGPS survey was conducted by Garðar Guðmundsson.

The photographs and illustrations are by the author. The research considerations were prepared by Dr. Orri Vésteinsson. Ólöf Þorsteinsdóttir administered the project on behalf of Fornleifastofnun Íslands.

Hönnun in Reyðarfjörður provided digital basemaps and survey control points – we are most grateful for their assistance.

Appendix 1

Könnun á gjóskulögum í Sómastaðagerði í Reyðarfirði þann 14. maí 2003
- bráðabirgðaniðurstöður

Magnús Á. Sigurgeirsson

Þann 14. maí voru mæld þrjú snið vegna könnunar á gjóskulögum í Sómastaðagerði. Sniðin voru mæld í skurðum nr. 3, 6 og 13. Lýst verður stuttlega því helsta sem bar fyrir augu í hverjum skurði:

Skurður 3 (í bæjarhól Sómastaðagerðis): Á milli mannvistarlaga mátti sjá tvö gjóskulög á 54-57 cm dýpi. Ofan laganna er dökkbrún mold blönduð kolasalla og móösku, en neðan þeirra er torflag, sennilega allt að 0,5 m þykkt. Efra gjóskulagið er dökkgrátt og um 1,5 cm þykkt en það neðra er hvítt og um 0,5 cm þykkt, þau eru aðgreind af 1,5 cm þykkum jarðvegi. Efra lagið er vafalítið hið svonefnda "a"-lag, frá árinu 1477, en það neðra Ö-1362, með upptök í Örafajökli. Landnámssyrpuna mátti greina nokkru austar í skurðinum, næst neðan torflagsins.

Skurður 6 (norðan bæjarhóls): Engin mannvistarlög greinanleg. Í skurðbökkunum mátti hins vegar sjá fimm gjóskulög ofan við Landnámssyrpuna. Lögin bíða frekari greiningar, en ljóst er þó að þarna voru gjóskulögin Ö-1362, a-lagið og Vatnajökulsgjóska frá árinu 1717. Einnig eru verulegar líkur á að þarna sé líka gjóskulag frá því um 1160.

Skurður 13 (sunnan bæjarhóls): Í skurðinum voru ekki óyggjandi merki um mannvist. Á um 0,5 m dýpi er kolað lag (með miklu af lífrænu efni) neðan við Landnámssyrpuna. Gjóskulögin A-1875, a-lagið og Ö-1362 sáust öll ofar í sniðinu.

Niðurstaða

Af þeirri lauslegu könnun sem gerð var á afstöðu mannvistarlaga til gjóskulaga í Sómastaðagerði er ljóst að í bæjarhólnum eru mannvistarlög sem bæði hafa safnast upp eftir árið 1477 og fyrir árið 1362. Út frá afstöðu torflagsins (neðan við Ö-1362) í skurði 3 til Landnámssyrpunnar má draga þá ályktun að fyrst hafi verið byggt á núverandi bæjarhól skömmu eftir að hún myndast. Yngsta gjóskulag Landnámssyrpunnar er sennilega frá því um 950 e.Kr. Þannig að frá seinni hluta 10. aldar eða upphafi 11. aldar gæti elsta torfið í Sómastaðagerði verið.

ENGLISH SUMMARY (Translated by Dr. Orri Vésteinsson)

In the farm mound two tephras were seen between the archaeological deposits, Ö-1362 and the "a" tephra from 1477. The turf seen under the Ö-1362 is just above the Landnám sequence and may date to the late 10th or early 11th century.

In trench 6 no archaeological deposits were found, but 5 tephras were seen above the LNS, among them Ö-1362, "a" and possibly V-1717 and a tephra from 1160.

In trench 13 a burning horizon was found under the LNS at a depth of 0,5 m. Higher up Ö-1362, 1477 "a" and A-1875 could be seen.