

Smárit Byggðasafns Skagfirðinga IX

Building with Turf

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/ Sigríður Sigurðardóttir 2008

The cover photo shows Glaumbær in Langholt, which has been the primary site of the Skagafjörður Historical Museum since the farmhouse first opened for tours in 1952.

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Introduction

The Skagafjörður Historical Museum is active in preserving knowledge about turf structures for a simple reason: Skagafjörður is still rich in turf ruins. Perhaps it is due to our favorable climate that the people of Skagafjörður continued to use turf to build their houses longer than their neighbours did. The museum began to seriously research the Skagafjörður turf structures around the turn of the millennium. At that time, several local residents still knew how to build with turf, but very few were putting their knowledge to use. We studied the turf ruins from one end of the district to the other, comparing them to each other in order to keep alive the knowledge of how they were built and the variations in technique that define the different building styles. Several turf-built houses in Skagafjörður (for example, the church at Víðimýri, the church at Gröf in Höfðaströnd, the farmhouse Nýibær in Hjaltadalur, the farmhouse doorway at Reynistaður, and the meeting room, part of the hallway, and the doorway of the farmhouse at Stóru-Akrar) are all historic sites overseen by the National Museum of Iceland. The same is true of Glaumbær in Langholt, which the Skagafjörður Historical Museum has been in charge of and has kept in good repair ever since it fell under the museum's purview in 1947. In addition to these buildings and parts of buildings, many turf outbuildings, barns, and house parts can still be found standing in Skagafjörður.

Cutting turf, preparing turf, and building with turf are disappearing techniques or art. It is urgent that we preserve them, or else the knowledge will be lost - and taking care of these historic turf houses will become impossible. What follows here is an attempt to introduce the most important characteristics of turf structures and the methods used to build them in Skagafjörður.

Please note that the *italicized* Icelandic words can be found in the glossary, after the main text on page 23.

Turf Structures

Turf is a good building material for cool northern climates. It is rather easy to get and easy to build with, and it provides very good insulation from the cold. In the old days, an unfailing source of turf was considered a valuable resource for a farm to have.

The tough, coarse, root system of bog plants creates a tangle of root matter that can be dug up with a shovel and cut or sliced with a turf scythe. The best turf contains no layers of clay or sand. It was used for bed mattresses or as padding under horses' packsaddles, from which it draws its name: *reiðingstorf*, or "pack-saddle turf." When dry, this kind of turf makes very good insulation, and it was placed behind the wainscoting in wooden houses well into the 20th century.

Turf has many different names, depending on how it is taken from the bog and how it is shaped. *Torfur* ("turfs") or *strengir* ("strips") are cut with a turf scythe. *Hnausar* ("blocks") or *kekkir* ("blocks") - which come in various types, such as *klömbruhnaus* or *klambra* ("clamped block"), *hornhnaus* ("corner block"), *kvíahnaus* ("milk-pen block"), *Glaumbæjarhnaus* ("Glaumbær block"), *snidda* (strip- or diamond-shaped block), *kantsnidda* ("curb block"), and *þaksnidda* ("roof block") - are dug up with a shovel. The names are different in various parts of the country.



In the old days, the pack-saddle was one of the most important ways to transport goods long distances. The packsaddle was made of a curved piece of wood with wooden spikes or pegs, onto which the goods were tied. The packsaddle was set on top of a saddle pad made from turf and fastened onto the horse with

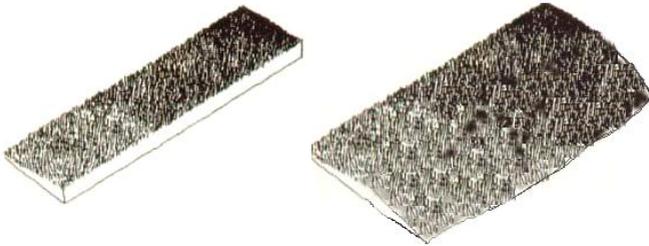
three girths. Care was taken to make sure the pad fit the horse well before the packsaddle was cinched on. Photo. HSk.



Scattered about Skagafjörður are many turf ruins in which you can see the various techniques used to build and repair them. This picture, taken in 2000, is of the storage shed and smokehouse at Nautabú

in Hjaltadalur. When the whole farmhouse was standing, the smokehouse was the open-hearth kitchen.

Strips and Turfs



The difference between a *strengur* (“strip”) and a *torfa* (“turf”) is that the *strip* is thicker on one long side and slopes down to a thinner edge on the other. *Turfs* are nearly twice as broad as *strips*, and are thickest in the middle, as the drawing shows. This happens because the *turf*, which is twice as wide as the short-bladed turf scythe called a *tvískeri* (“two-cutter”), is cut first as if it were to be a *strip*, and then cut again from the opposite side to create the other half. The *strip* is on the left and the *turf* is on the right. (Illus. Sigr. Sig.)

The north gable of the main living area at Glaumbær was built of *strips*, which were cut from the turf bog in thin layers with a turf scythe. The roof was covered with *turfs*.



Strips and *turfs* are laid longwise or crosswise between the layers, or courses, of turf blocks in order to hold a structure together. You could say that *strips* and *turfs* play the role of binding agents in turf walls. In Skagafjörður individual walls and complete structures were sometimes solely built of *strips* and *turfs*.



The mark left after the first turf was taken out of the bog was called the *flagmeri* ("flag mare") or the *flagmóðir* ("flag mother").



The handle of a *turf scythe* is called a *skammorf* ("short stock") and is short, as the name says. The best handles were made out of tree roots, with the whole arm of the handle fashioned from one root so that it was less likely to break under force, as was possible with a two-part handle. This is a *tvískeri*.



Turfs and *strips* are cut with a *turf scythe*, and one speaks of a *turf cut* or a *turf ditch* when the work is finished.



Turfs are of different widths and thicknesses depending on what job they are intended for.

Turf scythes are of different sizes according to whether an *einskeri* ("one-cutter") or a *tvískeri* ("two-cutter") is called for.

With the two-cutter, which is shorter than the one-cutter, the width of the scythe determines the width of the *strips*. If a *turf* was cut with a two-cutter, it was cut in two steps, one from either side. The one-cutter is a longer scythe that is a little



bowed. With this scythe it is possible to cut a *turf* in one step, with the *turf* being as wide as the scythe. It takes considerably more effort to cut with a one-cutter than with a two-cutter, and is usually a task for two men.

Heytorf ("hay turf"), used to cover a haystack, was cut longer than the *turf* to be used in wall-building, and it was transported from the "turf cut" on a horse. Photo. HSk.

A curved hallway from Mið-Grund in Blönduhlíð that was rebuilt on top of the old wall. Sometime in the 20th century, the wall was taken down and then built up again using strips on top of the remains of the wall dating from the 19th century, which had been built of *klambra* or clamped blocks. The *klambra* had been taken from an unusually clay-rich bog, as you can see by the color. Turf that is rich in clay can make an excellent building material if the wall is able to dry well.





With some effort, extremely old turf structures deep in the earth can often be brought to light, making it possible to see the different kinds of building methods people chose, ages ago, for their houses and other structures. Here you can see a wall

dating to the year 900-1000 that was built out of *strips*. It was found in a pit at Langhúshóll in Reynistaður, under the tephra layer from the eruption of the volcano Hekla in 1104, which means that it had been built before that eruption.



Roofs can be made in different ways, either out of *turfs* or *snidda* (“blocks”). Here you can see how *strips* overlap each other on a roof. They are laid longwise across the roof, with the next layer half over the top of the previous one. This type of overlapped roof can hold up well to the weather, because the tough root system of the bog plants does not allow it to come loose in the way that the soil underlying *snidda* blocks can do when the roof begins to get old. A *snidda* roof, on the other hand, is good because a great deal of soil underlies the blocks, allowing them to grow more quickly into a roof made of unbroken turf. This means that the change of vegetation - when the bog plants die and disappear and the “dry-land species“ take over - happens right in the first year. See the illustration on page 15.

Blocks

In the old days, blocks of turf were dug from the turf bog with a spade, and in later times with a sharp-bladed shovel. Several of the most common varieties of blocks are described here, all of which are laid up in different ways. The blocks are taken out of the turf cut, just like other turfs, carried to the drying area, and let dry before being put to use. Turf that is too wet can be dangerous, since as it dries it will shrink, and the wall can shift, becoming skewed and even breaking apart. In addition, it can heat up and rot instead of drying.

For properly dried turf, you need to wait at least two weeks before beginning to build with it, but this also makes it much easier to shape. If the turf is too dry, on the other hand, it is very hard to work with. It doesn't sit well in the wall unless it is perfectly shaped, which can take a great deal of work and dulls the turf scythe. Grass scythes come into good use to cut the turf as it goes into the wall, and also to trim the wall after the laying up is done.

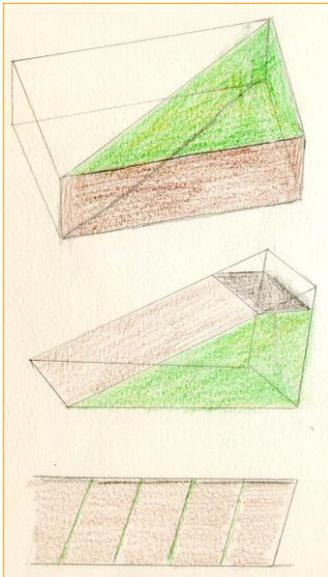


A digging spade, above, with an undercutting spade, below. A sharp-bladed shovel replaced the digging spade in the 20th century. The undercutting spade was used to cut strips of grass sod and *kringlutorf* ("circular shaped sod turf"). It was also used to dig peat and to smooth off the hayfield by slicing off the tops of *púfur* ("tussocks") caused by frost-heaving.

***Klömbruhnaus* or *Klambra* ("clamped block")** is cut first in a triangular shape, as you can see in the drawing. The degree of incline or slantedness is up to the wall builder.



A *clamped block* is cut as a triangle or wedge. The blocks are of unequal lengths, depending on who cut them and where they are to be used. The block in the middle is just as it would have come from the bog. The angle is determined by the position of the shovel blade as the block is dug. The other two blocks are sloped in the opposite direction. *Clamped blocks* are laid up alternately in the wall so that they form a diagonal or herringbone pattern, which can stand up to movement from either direction as the blocks compress and the wall settles.



In this illustration, you can see what *clamped blocks* look like as they are cut in the turf bog (on top) and turned over, out of the bog (in the middle). The narrow end is called the tail and lies inside the wall. The thicker end is the neck. In the middle picture, you can see how the shape of the block is changed by cutting it across the neck, to create the shelf on which a strip will sit to bind the wall together. On the bottom, you can see how *clamped blocks* look when they lie side by side in the wall and only their necks are visible (Illus. Sigr. Sig.).



When a *clamped block* is laid up in a wall, the neck is turned out and the tail in. The block is turned on its side, so that the grass growing along one of the long sides of the block is pressed into the back of the previous block and so smothered.



When the *clamped block* is well seated, it is cleaned up. All the cut-off bits are tossed into the middle of the wall, along with broken turfs and other rubble, to fill it in; all this is trodden down well. It is very important to compress the wall materials carefully, so that the tails of the blocks are pressed tightly together and interlock.



The shelf for the strips, which are used to bind the wall together, is cut off the neck. The thicker edge of the strip faces out and the thinner side is turned inward.



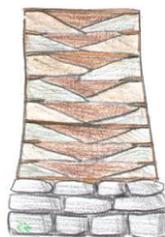
The longer the tails are, the better the wall will hold together; but the thicker the blocks, the more difficult it is to deal with in cutting and transporting. It's best to cut this kind of turf from places where there is very little moss or grass, and it is very important to keep the grass in the walls from growing, since the grass makes the turf rather moist and in time will cause it to rot.

The gable wall of the kitchen at Nýibær in Hjalteadalur and the storehouses and larders at

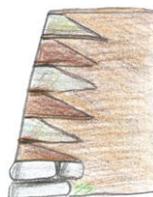


Glaumbær are made of *clamped blocks* with *strips* between the layers. The gable end at Nyibær (page 10) is recently built, while these walls of Glaumbær are a few decades old and much weathered. The gable-walls are double-faced. You see different colors in the turf depending on whether the turf bog was rich in bog-iron or clay. As the structure ages and weathers, the outer edges of the strips disappear, and the *clamped blocks* seem to protrude.

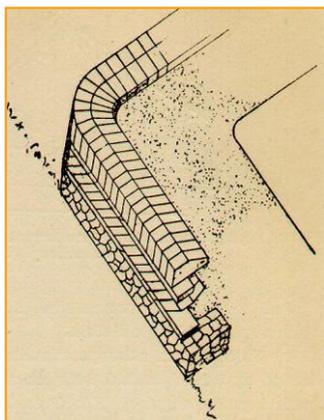
When a wall is double-faced, the tails of the *clamped blocks* form a kind of void or empty space that needs to be filled in with earth, either soil or broken turfs, and compressed well, layer by layer, as the wall is being laid up. Now and then (every second or third row), it is necessary to bind the structure together with strips or turfs laid crosswise between the inner and outer walls.



When a wall is single-faced, there is earth up against the structure, and it is necessary to be careful that the soil or other material packed in between the structure and the untouched earth is well-compressed. Strips are laid longwise in between the layers of clamped blocks to bind the wall together and, on every second or fourth row, turfs are laid crosswise (Illus. Sigr. Sig.).



At minimum, one or two rows of stones are set under the wall to keep the moisture in the soil from seeping up into it. Damp walls soon become green and the turf rots, settles, and is ruined sooner than in a wall that is protected from moisture in this way. It is also bad if the wall freezes, because the movement that occurs when it first expands with the frost and then contracts with the thaw is unhealthy for the wall and roof-timbers. The more moisture in the wall, the more freezing and thawing and the more movement.



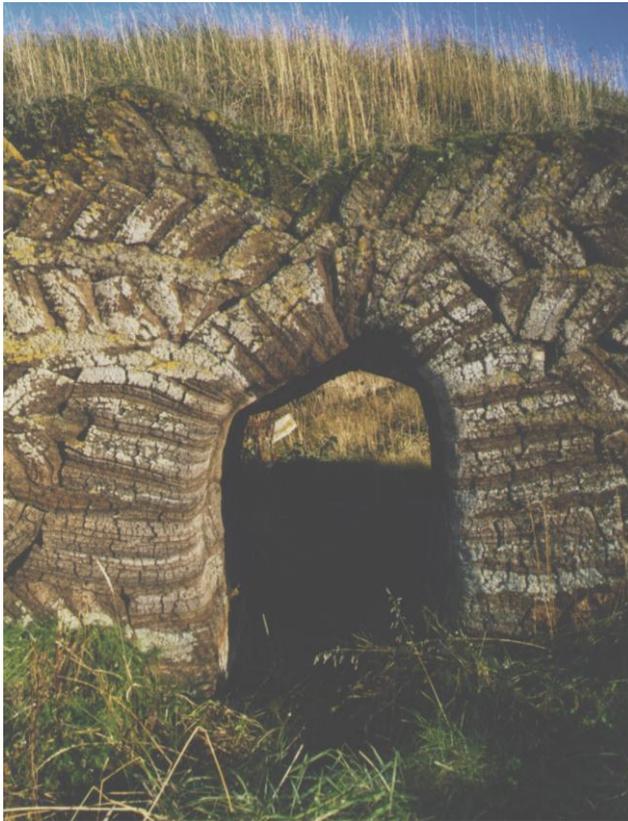
It is easy to build a corner with *clamped blocks*, but corners were more often built using *hornhnaus* “corner blocks,” which were very large, square blocks, shaped on all sides to an angle of 90 degrees (Illus. Guðmundur Hannesson).

The upper photo is from the hallway at Glaumbær, and the lower is of newly cut *corner blocks*, which are three shovel cuts on a side.



Turf is of uneven quality. In general, you can say, the more roots, the better the turf, at least for packsaddles and mattresses. As was said earlier, it can also be an advantage if

the turf is rich in clay, because if it dries hard, the wall will last a long time. Sand in the turf is not generally a bad thing, but it can be risky, and you should beware of taking turf from any part of the bog that is covered with water during flood time and where a lot of sand has washed up. As it settles, the sand makes layers in the turf, and the blocks are more likely to break apart.



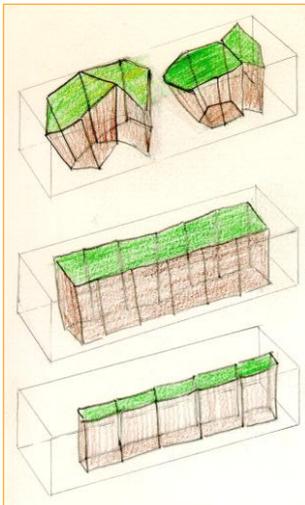
An arched doorway to an animal shed at Krossanes in Vallhólmur. It was laid up out of *corner blocks*, while the walls are of *clamped blocks* with *strips* in between.



Here you see an ancient wall made of *clamped blocks*, found at a depth of one meter at Fagrahlíð in Austurdalur. In the blocks is a greenish tephra layer which fell at the

time of the settlement of Iceland, showing that this turf was cut shortly after the settlement (c. 871).

Snidda ("strip- or diamond-shaped block") can be many different sizes and shapes, depending on the job. The size of a block is counted in shovel cuts. The four-cut diamond-shaped *kantsnidda* ("curb block") is small compared to six- or seven-cut blocks or even larger ones, which can be of many shapes depending on where they are intended to go. Turf blocks are cut with a number of angles - by means of considerable twisting of the shovel blade - depending on how many angles there will be on the roof or the curb. When building with curb blocks, the neck (the grass side) is turned out and the wall is usually quick to grow together and become beautifully green. For this reason, the underlying structure can hardly be seen, if at all.



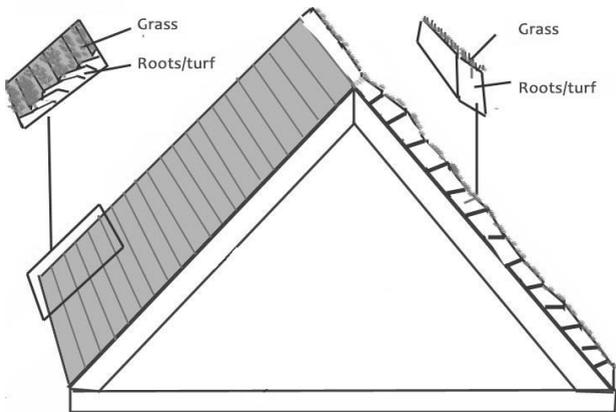
In the illustration you can see the difference between a *kantsnidda* ("curb block"; top row) and a *paksnidda* ("roof block"; middle row). Below is the kind of block used in walls; it is called a *Glaumbæjarhnaus* ("Glaumbær block"), and although it looks most like a *roof block*, it is very convenient for making walls. This type of turf is the prevailing kind used in the walls of the old farmhouse at Glaumbær. These blocks are laid crosswise in the wall so that the grass dies and the block looks from the outside like a *klömbruhnaus* ("clamped block"). Illus. Sigr. Sig.

A **kantsnidda** (“curb block”) is four or more shovel cuts long, according to its type and purpose. The shovel blade determines the size of the block, while the angle of the slice depends on how steep the curb is going to be and whether the turf is wet or dry.

A **paksnidda** (“roof block”) is cut the same way, except dug deeper. When a roof block is laid on the roof, it is beveled so that it will fit snugly against the next strip. Roof blocks grow together quickly and make extremely good roofing.

A turf-roof made of single-cut turf stringers

A turf-roof out of roof strips



A picture of two styles of turf on the same roof. **On the left** is a turf roof made out of single-cut turf strips (see the photo on page 7). The turfs are laid up overlapping each other. The grass side is turned up, and the roof quickly grows together. The turf layer is two or three layers above the subroof, which is made variously of dry turf, birch *hrís* (“brush”), or some other kind of material that can protect the wooden parts of the roof itself, the laths and *árefti* (“on the laths”). First there is the dry turf (strip) layer, then a layer of soil and manure, and over that one or two layers of turf (strips). **On the right** is a roof made out of roof blocks, which can be laid directly onto the subroof, since their depth (the length of the shovel blade) is about a foot thick, and the root matter of the plants is nearly undisturbed, with plenty of surrounding soil. This kind of roof is quick to grow together and turns out well if it doesn’t become sunburnt or too dry in the process. If it does, it is quick to weather and can be blown off (Illus. Sigr. Sig.).

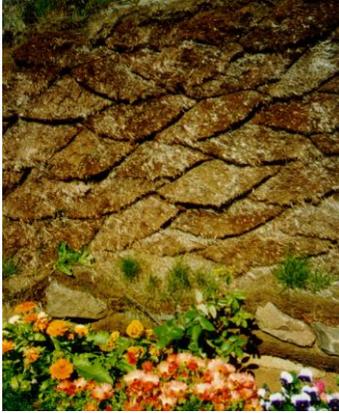
Glaumbæjarhnaus (“***Glaumbær block*”**) is laid on its side in the structure, crosswise to the wall; each block is as long as the entire width of the wall. Longwise between the courses of blocks are laid strips. The ends of the blocks make the same herringbone pattern as clamped blocks.



At Glaumbær, there is a wall made of these blocks surrounding the farm's houses and homefield. Under the structure is one row of stones to keep the dampness from seeping up into the wall.

To the left is the south wall of the hallway, which is made out of *Glaumbær blocks* with strips between the courses. Farthest away in the picture, you can see *clamped blocks* with strips laid in between. It is possible to see many different

kinds of turf building techniques at Glaumbær. The farmhouse, which covers about 730 square meters of ground, is rich in turf. That is, it contains by far the greatest quantity of turf of all the turf houses in the country and an unusually small amount of stone in its walls. Stones are used only as foundations for the walls, to keep moisture from seeping up from the ground.



To the left is a curb built with *kantsnidda* (“curb blocks”). Here you can see four-cut- to six-cut blocks.

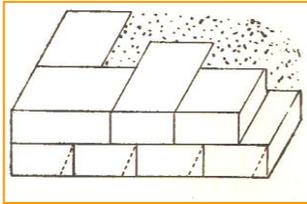


The next photo shows the old sheep-barn wall at Krithóll in Neðribyggð. The remains of a very old clay-rich *clamped-block* structure can be seen above the stone foundation of the wall. Above the *clamped blocks* is a structure built of broken turfs, which could have been taken from the old roof. The wall had been taken almost all the way down and then built up again out of strips and broken turfs. Walls of broken turf are generally unstable, because old and re-used turf settles worse than new turf does.

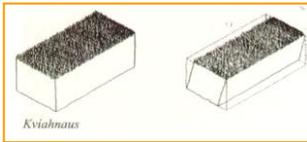


The bottom photo is of the wall of the hay barn at Svana vatn in Hegranes. At the bottom of the wall is a foundation of stones bound with strips, above that is a structure built of so-called *kvíahnaus* (“milk-pen blocks”), and at top are two rows built with *klömbruhnaus* (“clamped blocks”). To find in the same wall both *milk-pen blocks* and *clamped blocks* - which obviously are not taken from the same place at the same time - shows that the wall has been rebuilt at least two times.

***Kvíahnaus* (“milk-pen block”)** is quite convenient. It is an easy material to get, being dug up with a shovel like the other blocks. The water is allowed to drain out of the block for several days, and then it is ready to use in the wall. *Milk-pen blocks* have no “grip” on the wall, like the tails of *clamped blocks* provide.



Here you can see how *milk-pen blocks* are arranged, alternately lengthwise and crosswise in the wall. A usual *corner block* is used for the corner. It is necessary to be careful that the blocks lie across the joints below, and that the fill in the middle of the structure is trodden so hard that you could walk on it without leaving a footprint (Illus. Guðmundur Hannesson).



Milk-pen blocks are cut with less angle to the shovel blade than other turf blocks (Illus. Hörður Ágústsson).

Milk-pen blocks commonly appear in sheep barns, corrals, and milking pens, as the name implies. Building out of *milk-pen blocks* was not considered as difficult as the other techniques, and if care was taken that the blocks were well placed, one over two, and the fill was well trodden, and all was well compressed, then the structure could stand for a long time.

Fence walls were often made out of *milk-pen blocks* and topped with slices of *kringluturf* (“circular shaped sod turf”), small circular pieces of sod which were taken from a dry, well-grown hay-meadow or flat field where the root matter was thick.



This wall is built entirely out of *milk-pen blocks*, which are laid up one over two and are also used to bind the wall together, instead of strips.



In the gable of the sheep barn at Hof in Hjaltadalur you can see *milk-pen blocks* that are lying flat, at the top, and set overlapping each other below. At the bottom of the wall are stones. The barn is roofed over with grass sod turf.



The sheep barns at Skatastaðir in Austurdalur, with two-faced walls built of stone and turf strips. These are primarily stone buildings, but the method of building was to use stone and turf strips alternately, that is, to set each row of stones on top of turf strips all the way up the wall, both inside and outside.

Stone and turf structures

The walls of barns for livestock were most often built out of turf and stones, at least halfway up. Cow barns or horse stables were built out of turf and stones to their full height. The stones protected the walls from the animals, which would rub against them and break them apart if they were built of soft turf down to the ground. Horses could be expected to gnaw at the turf and try to eat it, as they readily did wooden posts when they could reach them, and cows and sheep could quickly rub a turf wall to pieces while scratching themselves. Corrals were most often made of stone, but corrals built of turf and stones together were well known in the north, and turf-rich sheep corrals, such as the one at Kleifarétt in Skagi, can still be seen standing.



The passageway of a barn at Ingveldarstaðir in Hjaltadalur. Both the walls and the doorway are built from stones with turf *strips* in between the courses. The top is built from *clamped blocks* with *strips* between the layers. In Skagafjörður, barns were generally built with many more stones than were human dwellings.

In some places you can see a barn in which the long walls are not the same on both sides, that is, one wall contains more turf than the other. This can be explained by the fact that, if it was a detached building, it must have been a horse stable or cow barn with stalls opposite the turf-rich long wall.



A cow-barn wall at Halldórsstaðir made out of *clamped blocks and strips*. The stalls were opposite this wall, and protected it. The far wall, to more than halfway up, was made of stone with *strips* between the courses.



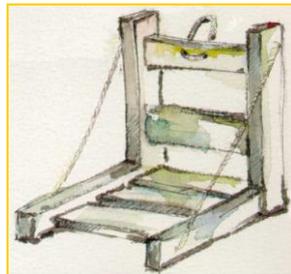
This old sheep corral at Bjarnastaðahlíð in Vesturdalur, called Hlíðar-rétt, is completely made of stones from the river-bank around it. This sheep corral is still in use, every fall. Structures made of stone, without turf can be seen in many places around the country.



Here you see turf building materials, specifically *clamped blocks* that have finished drying and are stacked on pallets for transport.



In the old days, turf was carried to and from the drying field and to wherever it was to be used on a so-called *barkrókur* (“carry-crook”). A *barkrókur* was an L-shaped wooden frame hung onto the pegs of a packsaddle, which was strapped over a turf pad onto a horse. The horse above carries a crate for hay (Illus. Bryndís Björgvinsdóttir).



Glossary of Icelandic Terms

árefti ("on the laths") - wood was laid over the laths to fill in between the laths and the rafters, which held up the roof. All kinds of wood scraps were used: staves and cudgels, old floorboards, and bits of wainscoting. Wood that had already served to good purpose either inside or outside of the house often ended up as *árefti*, and from there it became firewood when the roof needed to be replaced.

einskeri ("one-cutter") - A long turf scythe that is a little bowed. With this scythe it is possible to cut a turf or strips in one step, with the turf being as wide as the scythe. It takes considerably more effort to cut with a one-cutter than with a two-cutter, and is usually a task for two men. See *strengur*, *torfur*, *tvískeri*.

Glaumbæjarhnaus ("Glaumbær block") - A kind of turf block used for making walls. The block is laid on its side in the structure, crosswise to the wall; each block is as long as the entire width of the wall. Longways between the courses of block are laid strips. The ends of the blocks make the same herringbone pattern as clamped blocks, and it is easy to confuse the two types from their appearance in a wall, although *Glaumbæjarhnaus* are always more finely made. This type of block is the prevailing kind used in the walls of the old farmhouse at Glaumbær in Langholt, from which it gets its name, and has not been seen elsewhere. It is not known how common this building method was in the past, but it must have been more popular than it seems.

heytorf ("hay turf") - When haying was finished in the fall, the hay was piled up into haystacks which were covered over with extremely large *turfs*, as large as men could take out of the turf cut. The *turfs* had to be large enough that they stayed put on top of the hay. Each *turf* was laid over a horse to be carried to the stack. Often young horses about to start their training were allowed to tire themselves out carrying *turf* first, in order to take the jitters out of them, as it was called.

hnaus, hnausar, kekkir (“block, blocks”) - Turf blocks come in various types, such as *klömbruhnaus* or *klambra* (“clamped block”), *hornhnaus* (“corner block”), *kviáhnaus* (“milk-pen block”), *Glaumbæjarhnaus* (“Glaumbær block”), *snidda* (“diamond- or strip-shaped block”), *kantsnidda* (“curb block”), and *þaksnidda* (“roof block”). The names are different in various parts of the country.

hornhnaus (“corner block”) - A very large, square block, shaped on all sides to an angle of 90 degrees.

hrís (“brush”) - The low-growing bushes and undergrowth found throughout the country was used mainly as firewood in the old days. But brush, particularly twigs from small birch trees, was also used to protect roof timbers from the subroof. In other countries, layers of tree bark were widely used under a turf roof to protect the house timbers; this was doubtless also done in Iceland in the old days.

kantsnidda (“curb block”) - A diamond-shaped block of turf four or more shovel cuts long, according to its type and purpose. The shovel blade determines the size of the block, while the angle of the slice depends on how steep the curb is going to be and whether the turf is wet or dry.

kekkir (“blocks”) - See *hnaus*.

klömbruhnaus or *klambra* (“clamped block”) - A clamped block is cut as a triangle. The blocks are of unequal lengths, depending on who cut them and where they are to be used. The narrow end is called the tail and lies inside the wall. The thicker end is the neck; a shelf is cut across the neck on which a stringer sits to bind the wall together. Clamped blocks are laid up alternately in the wall so that they form a diagonal or herringbone pattern, which can stand up to movement from either direction as the blocks compress and the wall settles. The name comes from *klambra*, a kind of vise or pair of tongs used to hold things fast or clench them together.

kringlutorf (“circular shaped sod turf”) - Small circular pieces of sod which were taken from a dry, well-grown hay-meadow

or flat field where the root matter was thick. Also called *grundartorf* ("ground turf") when cut to a different shape. Nowadays this turf is simply called *þökur* ("sod").

kvíahnaus ("milk-pen block") - Convenient, easy-to-cut rectangular turf blocks commonly used in sheep barns, corrals, and milking pens. Milk-pen blocks have no "grip" on the wall. The blocks are arranged alternately lengthwise and crosswise in the wall so that each block lies across the joints below.

reiðingstorf ("packsaddle turf") - The "best" turf, it contains no layers of clay or sand. This turf was used for bed mattresses or as padding under horses' packsaddles. When dry, it makes very good insulation, and was placed behind the wainscoting in wooden houses well into the 20th century.

skammorf ("short stock") - the handle of a *tvískeri*.

snidda ("diamond- or strip-shaped block") - Turf blocks can be many different sizes and shapes, depending on the job. The size of a strip is counted in shovel cuts. In the old days, the word was often written *sniðða*. Possibly the name comes from the fact that a *snidda* is *sniðin* ("cut, patterned, shaped") according to how it is going to be used in the structure. See *kantsnidda*, *þaksnidda*; also *Glaumbæjarhnaus*.

strengir ("strips") - A flag of turf. The strip is thicker on one long side and slopes down to a thinner edge on the other. Strips and turfs play the role of binding agents in turf walls. They are laid longwise or crosswise between the courses of turf blocks in order to hold a structure together. See also *torfur*.

torfur ("turfs") - A flag of turf. Turfs are nearly twice as broad as strips, and are thickest in the middle. This happens because the turf, which is twice as wide as a *tvískeri* scythe, is cut first as if it were to be a strip, and then cut again from the opposite side to create the other half. When turfs are used for roofing, they are laid up overlapping each other. See *strengur*, *tvískeri*.

tvískeri ("two-cutter") - A turf scythe, with a shorter handle

than the one-cutter, used to cut turfs and strips. The width of the scythe determines the width of the strip or the turf. If a turf was cut with a two-cutter, it was cut in two steps, one from either side.

paksnidda (“roof block”) - A strip-shaped turf block used for roofing, and beveled to fit snugly against the next block. Roof blocks can be laid directly onto the subroof, since their depth (the length of the shovel blade) is about a foot thick, and the root matter of the plants is nearly undisturbed, with plenty of soil. This kind of roof is quick to grow together and turns out well if it doesn't become sunburnt or too dry in the process. If it does, it is quick to weather and can be blown off.

púfur (“tussocks”) - The common result of frost-heaving in fields and pastures.

Selected Sources on Turf and Turfcutting

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In the *Þjóðháttasafn* ("Folkways Database") of the National Museum of Iceland are 171 individual responses to questions in two subject categories: number 16, on turf building and peat working; and number 17, on house building and wall building. The questions cover, among other subjects, turf building, protective clothing, tools, transport, drying, turf for various uses, various ways to cut turf blocks, rules and customs, how the ground for a house was prepared, wall building, repairing of turf walls, quarrying stone, and building with stone.