

LANDSCAPE RESEARCH IN THE NORTH WEST: VATNSFJÖRÐUR PENNISULA



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SUMMARY

The landscape of the north west is special. The dynamic of landscape is embedded in cultural activity and natural features. Culture is extended onto a natural landscape, the products from which are numerous. The landscape project is focused on identifying archaeological features through three programmes of work: Field survey, Earthwork survey and Landscape observation. Aerial survey was an additional and was carried out as part of the research programme. In light of this work, an assessment of the approaches used and potential for future work are discussed. The research programme is explored in relation to the concept of place and its relationship to landscape. Another theme is movement, which connects and therefore contextualises place. By giving meaning to landscape through these themes a clearer understanding and perceptions of it are attained. A recurring inherent theme are the topographies that contain particular landscapes, all of which are associated with distinct activities and cultural features. Landscape, seascape, methods and practice are all explored within this report that summarizes the work carried out in 2005.



Figure 1. Looking north from Vatnsfjarðarháls into Mjóifjörður

INTRODUCTION

The landscape work carried out in 2005 was one part of the field school at Vatnsfjörður. It is an exploratory project to assess the potential for continuing landscape scale research in the area. This report focuses on the field school element of the work, as well as highlighting the main research results connected with those elements that involved students from the field school. The landscape project was integrated into the field school programme to allow students to gain experience in investigating archaeology at a landscape scale. The landscape programme primarily involved fieldwork, lectures and original research by the students.

Three programmes of the landscape work were carried out: Field survey, Earthwork survey and Landscape observation. Aerial survey was an additional level of work carried out as part of the research programme. In light of this work, an assessment of the approaches used and potential for future work are discussed.



Figure 2. Vatnsfjörður landscape, looking north-east towards Vatnsfjörður farm [2005_run2_013].

RESEARCH THEMES

The north west presents several challenges to the study of landscapes in Iceland. The historical development of the land was slightly different from other regions. Subsistence was based primarily on fishing as opposed to farming. Even though the marked contrast is not vast, it does however necessitate a different approach to understanding the landscape - one that is integral to seascapes and natural environment. Although fishing was for many centuries the dominant form of subsistence, farming has had a large contribution to play in the development of the landscape, particularly in later periods. The study of topography and the environment is another key agent in understanding the landscape. It has similarly had a strong influence on the development of place, and in the north west has been a

INTRODUCTION & RESEARCH THEMES

limiting factor in land use and subsequent farm expansion. The dichotomies between fishing and farming, nature and culture, therefore are important one to study in the north west using landscape as a framework. The development of the cultural landscape therefore is considered within an approach that compares and contrasts the different types of topographies, as well as the types of subsistence and land uses. This approach is used to derive cultural meaning and an archaeological understanding of landscape.

The research carried out in 2005 contained multiple elements. On the one hand a study of an archaeological landscape was made, one that did not draw on historical documents *before* field work. Survey was conducted purely by observation, either on the ground or from aerial sources, and followed an approach based on landscape learning; empathy and perceptive qualities of landscape. By adopting this approach it became increasingly clear that understanding the movement between places and through the landscape, was the key theme. Another was theme was based on determining the meaning of landscape; how it was perceived and understood by the individuals and communities in the study area. This was understood by assessing the role that sites and activities played, particularly those associated with folklore, through character of the natural landscape; different topographies that might highlight significant associations. Connections between movement and meaning were derived from the places people lived and worked.

FIELD SURVEY

Field survey was carried out around the immediate the area of Vatnsfjörður. It was decided to align the objectives of the survey in conjunction with the research themes movement, place and meaning of landscape. The survey in 2005 recorded two hundred sites which included descriptions on their form, function, preservation and dimensions. In addition each site was located using handheld GPS and photograph taken.

Before fieldwork the vertical aerial photographs were examined, but these proved too large scale to identify individual sites, but instead gave a general overview of the survey areas. As one of the main aims was to survey without prior knowledge of the landscape from documents, using purely observation to identify sites the vertical aerial photographs proved useful. By adopting this approach to survey, the movement across the landscape was used to attain a sense and understanding of how people might have moved in the past and therefore identifying their landmarks in the process. Trails of cairns and likely locations to other sites, such as sheilings or shelters, were followed and consequently surveyed.



Figure 3. Field survey in action.

The field survey took place over several weeks and in different areas. One area, called Vatnsfjarðarháls on the ridge above the Vatnsfjörður was extensively surveyed. Other areas were also surveyed: Vatnsfjarðardalur, Reykjarfjarðardalur, the northern part of Reykjarfjarðarháls Vatnsfjarðarnes and Borgerey. In addition a rapid survey of the coastal sites that lay outside the main farm area took place, along the fjords of Ísafjörður and Mjóifjörður within the Vatnsfjörður penninsular.

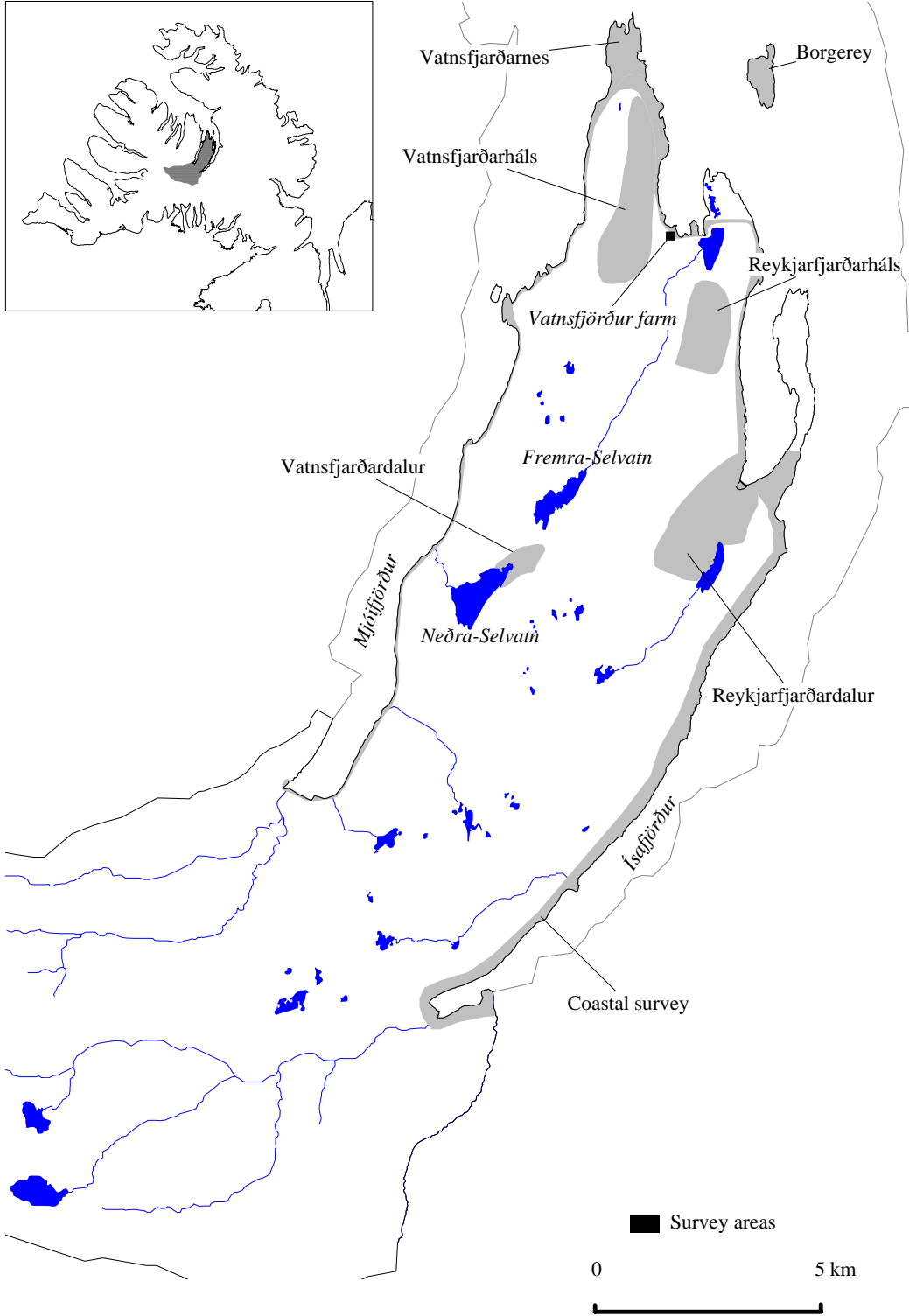


Figure 4. Field survey areas.

Cairns were the most common site type surveyed. These related both to the movement of people and the marking of land for different purposes; the multi-functional aspects of them however is acknowledged and it is difficult to suggest precisely what their functions were as individual monuments. Two sheilings were also surveyed which included a large number of sites. In addition the coastal survey produced sites relating to the sea. Also one or two farms were surveyed. The field survey covered a range of different topographies. These included sea and shore, valley and dale and upland ridges (highland areas were not surveyed on the field but only by air in 2005). The contrasting topographies and the range of sites that were surveyed will allow reflections to be made on space and place with the aim of demonstrating the general character of landscape. Such an approach will create speculation about the broad understanding of cultural processes seen in the adaptation and uses of the natural environment. This aspect of the research the survey work proved of particular value. What follows is a brief summary of the results found in each survey area.

VATNSFJARÐARDALUR

The area that was surveyed in Vatnsfjarðardalur lay towards the south of the valley between the ridges of Starvatnsháls and Reykjarfjarðarháls. Several farms lie either side on the slopes of Vatnsfjarðardalur. In the area between the two lakes, Neðra-Selvatn and Fremra-Selvatn, Vatnsfjörður's sheiling, in Vatnsfjarðardalur, was located; see figure 4. Vatnsfjarðarsel had clearly been occupied and abandoned sometime in the twentieth century, but there was also evidence of earlier occupation. The sites that formed the sheiling consisted of the usual farm type structures: a farm house, sheep houses and a boundary built of stone and turf, with a wire fence on top. In addition a small structure outside the boundary, a small enclosure attached to the boundary, a water house and a vegetable enclosure were also surveyed. Further towards Fremra-Selvatn the remnants of a boundary were seen but which for the most part had been dismantled and was only partially preserved next to the lake.

REYKJARFJARÐARDALUR

An extensive network of cairns, a sheiling site and other shelters and structures were seen in Reykjarfjarðardalur. The cairn network marked routes up the valley, on the west from Reykjarfjörður to the sheiling site at Reykjarfjarðarsel. On the east side the marking was not as clear but indicated perhaps routes from Svansvík to Svansvíkurvatn. At the southern end of Reykjarfjarðardalur a small cluster of slight earthworks were seen. Though they were badly preserved the clustering suggests a small dwelling place. These coincided with a route that moved from Reykjarfjarðardalur into Vatnsfjarðardalur, towards Neðra-Selvatn. The sheiling site at Reykjarfjarðarsel, like Vatnsfjarðardalur, showed evidence of more recent occupation and abandonment. A sheep house with a rectangular room and a semi-rectangular sheep area with a stool was of a type that looked much earlier than the surrounding structures. Another sheep house, with a double stool was also seen in the sheiling, presumably relating to the later phase of activity.

VATNSFJARÐARHÁLS

Vatnsfjarðarháls' topography consists of long ridge west of Vatnsfjörður farm, that runs north to south, lying approximately 200m above sea level. The whole of the ridge was surveyed systematically by following suspected routes and access points using the landscape observation approach. The south-eastern part of the ridge had a good number of sites, mostly connected with movement and landmarking. The western side of the ridge was not surveyed, although no immediately obvious sites were seen from the ridge between it and farm zone along the coastal edge.



Figure 5. Cairn (foreground) and boundary stone (background) on top of Vatnsfjarðarháls [UID 117].

On the top of Vatnsfjarðarháls a large natural stone with a small flattened cairn lying on top of it was surveyed. The stone was different to the surrounding ones, and was positioned to suggest a boundary marker, probably between Vatnsfjörður and Skálavík (figure 5). In addition, a GIS viewshed analysis from the cairn demonstrated that the cairn was not visible from either side of the ridge but only along its top and from the north. The interpretation of this analysis entertains the idea that it may have been a land marker to be seen from the sea for navigation into either Ísafjörður and Mjóifjörður fjords; insert image. The cairn may be part of a network of navigation markers and connected, in particular, with the cairn interpreted as a *dys* (sea navigation marker) on the northern part of Reykjarfjarðarháls, south-east of Vatnsfjörður.

On the south-eastern slopes of the ridge lies a small enclosure, with a semi-rectangular structure and a cairn. These were located next to a track marked by cairns that gave access to a gap between the ridges of Vatnsfjarðarháls and Starvatnsháls and a track that lead to Skálavík and Mjóifjörður. Part of the track lies along a boundary, marking the division between the farms of Vatnsfjörður and Miðhús. Another route marked by cairns lay

further to the north than the boundary track. This was marked with a cairn every 100 to 190 m, and when approached from Vatnsfjörður 3 natural stones in a line with a constructed cairn marking the route directly towards the farm and church at appear; today a gateway lies at the beginning/end of the route next to Vatnsfjörður.

The farms of Sveinhús and Halshús were also surveyed as part of the student tuition. The farms contained farm structure/mound, small enclosures, as well as water features. Sveinhús's farm structure was still upstanding. At Halshús the farm had been abandoned, perhaps sometime in the earlier part of the twentieth century. At Sveinhús an area of plough marks were seen on the ground but more clearly from the air. These are likely to relate to small subsistence cropping, or perhaps in relation to land improvement and drainage. Sveinhús also had a stone homefield boundary. See Landscape observation section for more detail on Sveinhús.

REYKJARFJARÐARHÁLS

Survey was concentrated only on the northern end of Reykjarfjarðarháls, and here another network of cairns, enclosure and other small structures were recorded. The cairns provided several functions, in marking routes over the ridge and boundaries between farms as well as aiding in navigation from the sea. A large *dys* was recorded spanning 5m width and 1.8m in height at the head of one of the lava steps (figure 6).



Figure 6. Boundary and navigation markers on top of Reykjarfjarðarháls [UIDs 148 – 149].

It has been suggested that this was part of a network of sea markers. This was indicated by a viewshed analysis from this point that suggested that it would have been visible in the Vatnsfjörður bay. This was contrasted with another marker on top of Vatnsfjarðarháls which was not visible in the bay but further out into the fjord. It seems likely therefore that

these two sites were part of a navigation network. It is also likely that the *dys* was a boundary marker between Sveinshús and Reykjarfjörður farms; lies today on the farm boundary line. On the western slope of Reykjarfjarðarháls, north of Halshús, two cojoined enclosures were recorded. The enclosures were constructed from stone incorporating the natural features into its walls, which appears to be a typical feature in this region.

VATNSFJARÐARNES

The promontory of Vatnsfjarðarnes contained several features, including several mounds, cairns and fishing booths. The exposed nature of the promontory give the occupation of it little chance. Activity in this landscape was focused on fishing and access to and from the sea. Two booths, close to one another, lay on the northern tip of Vatnsfjarðarnes. They were accompanied by a cairn, presumably part of the navigation network, or as a landward guide from the south to the booths. Another cluster of fishing booths lay on the west side of Vatnsfjarðarnes, in the Mjóifjörður side. A small cairn and boat house also formed part of this small fishing complex.

BORGAREY

The island of Borgarey lies 4 km off the coast north-east from Vatnsfjörður. A number of structures and a boundaries were seen on the west and south sides of the island (figure 7). One or two other features lay on the north and east sides. A farm complex lay beneath a lava ridge and had been abandoned probably sometime in the twentieth century. Farm structures and fishing related features were also surveyed. Of special note was a folklore site called the bible stone, which was a flat stone that hunters would touch and speak to ensuring successful hunting. Today the island is home to a puffin colony, as there was in the eighteenth century, and clearly the island was a valuable resource area (Jarðabók pp215-216).



Figure 7. Borgarey from the air, looking east [2005_run2_007].

EARTHWORK SURVEY

The last farm buildings on the site of the old farm mound were measured/surveyed using tape off-settings and 1:50 scale drawings with hashing (figure 9). The complex consisted of partial remains of four structures; three were recorded (figure 10). Building a) was a concrete structure, with a base surviving on 3 sides, with its western wall standing approximately 2m high. An earlier structure contained it, though this was very badly damaged and survived only on the south side. Building a) was approximately 7.5 by 5 m.



Figure 8. Earthwork survey.

Building b) lay towards the west of a), and was accessed by a small passage between the northern wall of building a) and a ditch. Building b) was approximately 8.5 by 5 m, with three exists on the south, east and west. Within it there was a wooden lean-to structure located in the north west corner. The building was partially constructed from turf and stone, as well as concrete. It stood approximately 2 m high.

Building c) was attached to building b) through a small entrance. It was constructed from turf and stone, and stood approximately 2 m high, and its dimension were approximately 5 by 3 m. In addition to the farm complex, detailed earthwork surveys were carried out on two faint remnants of structures close to the excavation area in 2005. These two structures, 6 by 4 m and 7 by 6 m, were barely visible and only until the vegetation had been flattened was it possible to see them.

In addition, a sketch earthwork survey of the farm complex was made. This entailed approximate sketching with measured pacing on any visible earthworks or possible archaeological features in the area west of the upstanding farm structures. Approximately fifteen structures were surveyed, though several of these were incomplete. Several mounds that might be middens were identified. Drainage ditches, and the homefield boundary were

also surveyed (figure 11). The sketch survey will be useful in formulating a research plan for the excavation of the farm mound in subsequent field seasons.

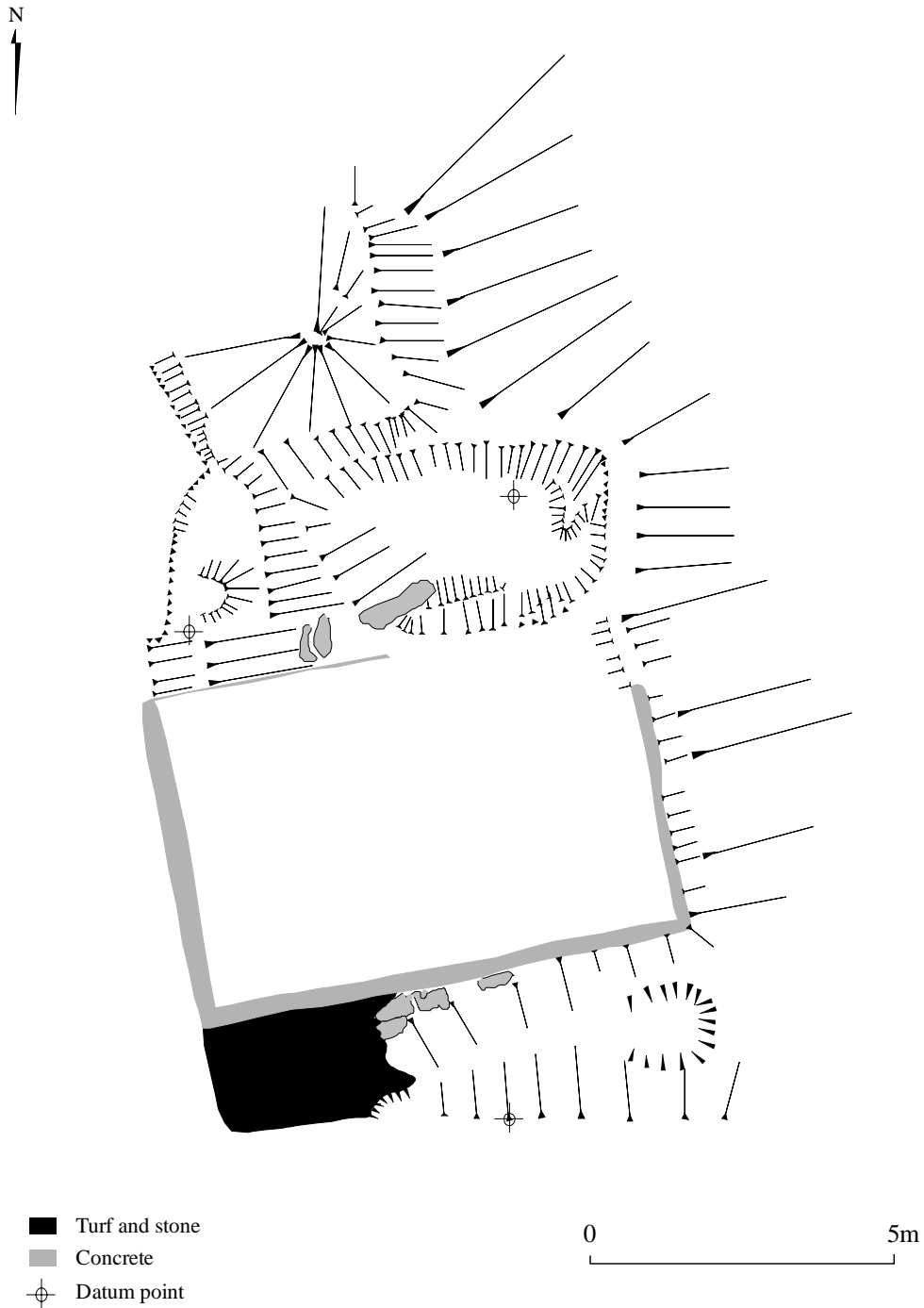


Figure 9. 1:50 earthwork survey of building a.

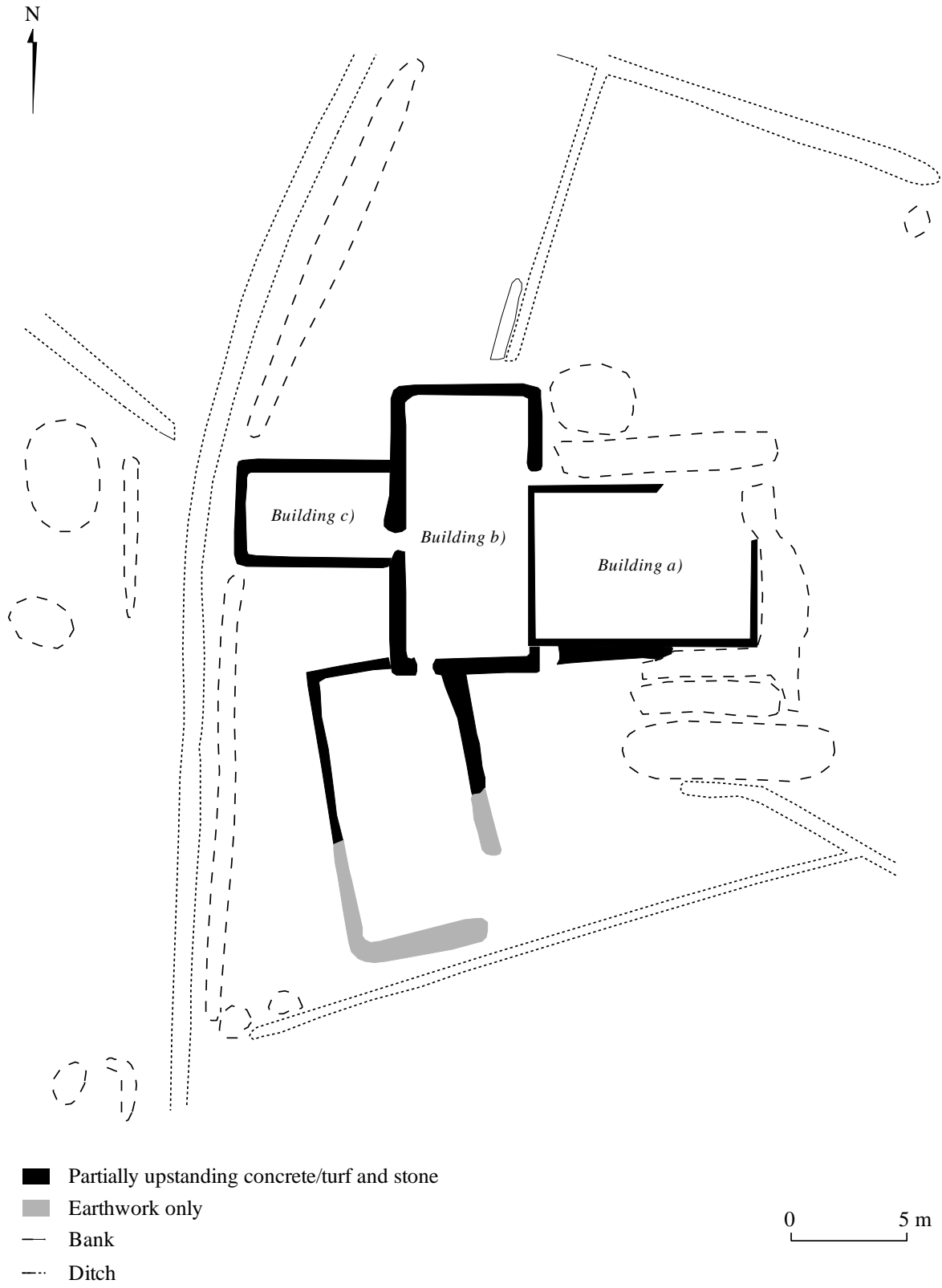


Figure 10. Upstanding farm complex. Buildings a), b) and c).

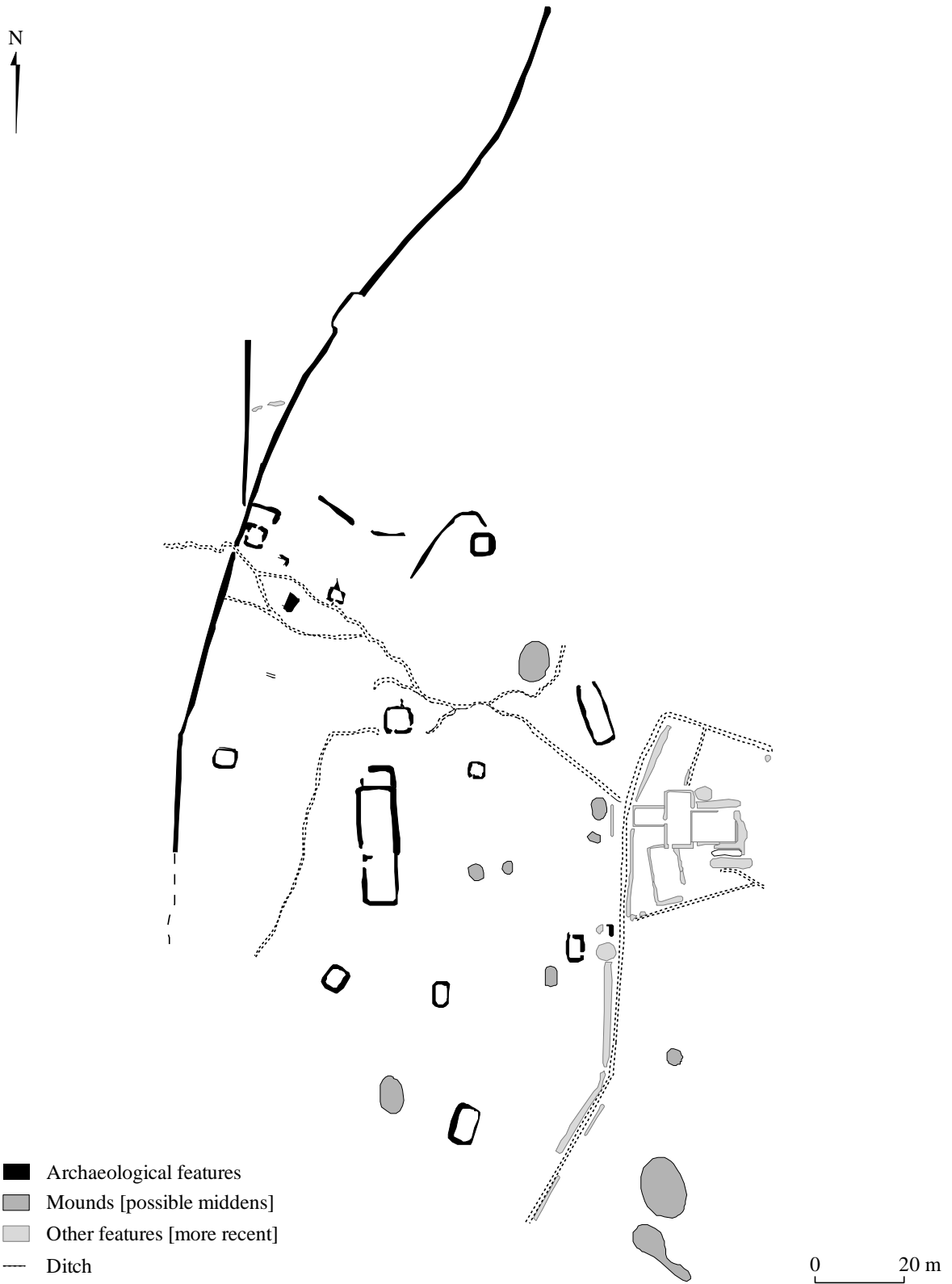


Figure 11. Rapid sketch earthwork survey of Vatnsfjörður farm mound.

LANDSCAPE OBSERVATION

The recognition of undocumented cultural features and archaeological sites through landscape observation is a fundamental part of the field survey process. This occurs on several levels, but the field school programme focused on teaching techniques in how to recognise features and in explaining their possible functions and uses. Landscape observation was centred on the farms of Sveinshús, located east of Vatnsfjörður. Hálshús was also visited.



Figure 12. Sveinshús.

Sveinhús consists of a farm house, and several other outbuildings including a possible sheep house and an enclosure, with an area of plough ridges and homefield boundary (figure 12). Several phases of occupation were apparent at Sveinhús. A farm house was still intact, constructed from wood and corrugated iron but utilising an older turf and stone structure. At least two phases of boundaries were seen. An outer stone built boundary, that enclosed the farm area, was seen. Another boundary on the inside edge of the stone built one was seen from aerial photographs; this was only partially observed from ground surface (figure 13).



Figure 13. Sveinhús from the air [2005_run2_033].

AERIAL SURVEY

A major part of the research programme which in turn assisted the field school elements was aerial photography. Archaeological survey can greatly benefit from the reconnaissance of the archaeology from the air prior to fieldwork. Two approaches were taken in 2005. Firstly, vertical photographs from 1991 were reviewed. This allowed the survey area to be looked at prior to survey, which aided in the selection of targeted areas for fieldwork and identifying the character of the natural environment. Secondly, new photography was taken under good lighting conditions. This identified new sites and created good publicity images. Both approaches were an essential part of identifying archaeological sites for the survey programme and their mapping into GIS.



Figure 14. Vertical aerial photograph. Vatnsfjörður farm area.

The vertical photographs dating from 1991 were taken from 18,000 ft. Four runs were used: 6800 – 6810, 6819 – 6830, 6768 – 6777, and 7546 – 7555. In addition to these, a photograph from 1945 was purchased for the area around Vatnsfjörður, though it was not clear enough to identify more discrete archaeological features. On the whole it was difficult to identify discrete archaeological features without prior information, either from obliques or field survey data. It was good at identifying farm areas, possible routes across the lava benches and indicating areas where the natural topography suggested the likelihood of cultural activity. It therefore served as a useful reconnaissance tool prior to fieldwork.



Figure 15. Oblique aerial photograph. Vatnsfjarðarsel looking north [2005_run2_008].

The capture of new photography from the air was of great value. The survey of the landscape from the air identified features that were difficult to observe on the ground which were or could be targeted during field survey. The photographs were also useful in placing the archaeological sites within a broader setting. This created more speculation of the function and type, as well as achieving a sense of context and spatial patterning between numerous natural and cultural features. Two runs were carried out in 2005, though the quality of the photographs was variable. The obliques were used extensively in mapping earthworks and in the preparation before fieldwork.

DISCUSSION

The landscape project produced a relatively large collection of information from desk-top and fieldwork. The information also came in a variety of different forms – survey gps and description data, as well as detailed earthwork mapping. All of this data being useful to addressing research questions and problems. The discussion is focused on several aspects. Firstly, an evaluation is made about the research approach and the potential for continued study. Secondly, discussion is centred on the themes place, movement, and the meaning of landscape in the north west.

ASSESSMENT OF SURVEY PRACTICE

It is argued that the approach that was used to survey was an archaeological one that was not biased by documentary or prior knowledge of the historical context of settlement or cultural activity in the region. In this it was using the landscape itself as the primary source. Given the results and findings from the survey, the important question to assess is whether the approach to survey can compliment existing practices that are heavily dependent on documentary preparation? Unfortunately, the fieldwork in 2005 did not fully answer this question, and if this to be answered more fully, then a strict sampling procedure would need to be implemented and tested against documentary based survey practices. The survey in 2005 did demonstrate, however, that the areas outside the farm homefield were well suited to the archaeological approach to survey, while it also suggested that the survey of the area within the homefield is better suited to the documentary approach. A systematic approach to survey that relied on landscape observation and learning, complimented existing practices, but it was more successful in discovering way and route finding in the landscape, which it is argued are a fundamental aspect to understand the meaning of landscape. The potential for future work therefore would be dependent on further testing of the approach, as well as using normal survey approach to the farm; the important area to identify would be where an archaeological centred and a documentary focused survey approach overlapped with one another.

RESEARCH THEMES

The spatial structure of the landscape in the north west demonstrates that localised development has been centred around places that have been, in all probability, occupied for very long periods. There are only few areas of land that were able to sustain the farming community, and these places all contain evidence of activity; most places are still occupied though several have been abandoned. Therefore, although the archaeological evidence is derived from the farming and settlement community, this is not the main research theme that is being discussed. Of much more importance, perhaps biased in part by the survey approach used in 2005, is the ways in which past people moved across the landscape, from place to place. In considering this also aspects of activities such as farming and fishing that were dependent on cultural as well as natural landmarks are discussed. Wayfinding, navigation and journeying attest to an archaeological understanding of landscape that is centred on the meaning and dwelling within it, rather than one that is too abstract from the working landscape. It is clear from first impressions that the north west is a harsh natural environment to live in, and that access to resources, movement of people and the dynamic of places have formed a fundamentally important

network for existing in the landscape. Each research theme is discussed in turn, concluding with a landscape overview derived from the 2005 fieldwork.

Place

Place is discussed in relation to settlement, such as farms, but also in relation to areas that can be directly associated with specific activities that relate to farm and fishing places, for example sheilings and fishing complexes (boat house, fishing booth). These places are discussed in relation to their reflections on space and place situated within different topographies.

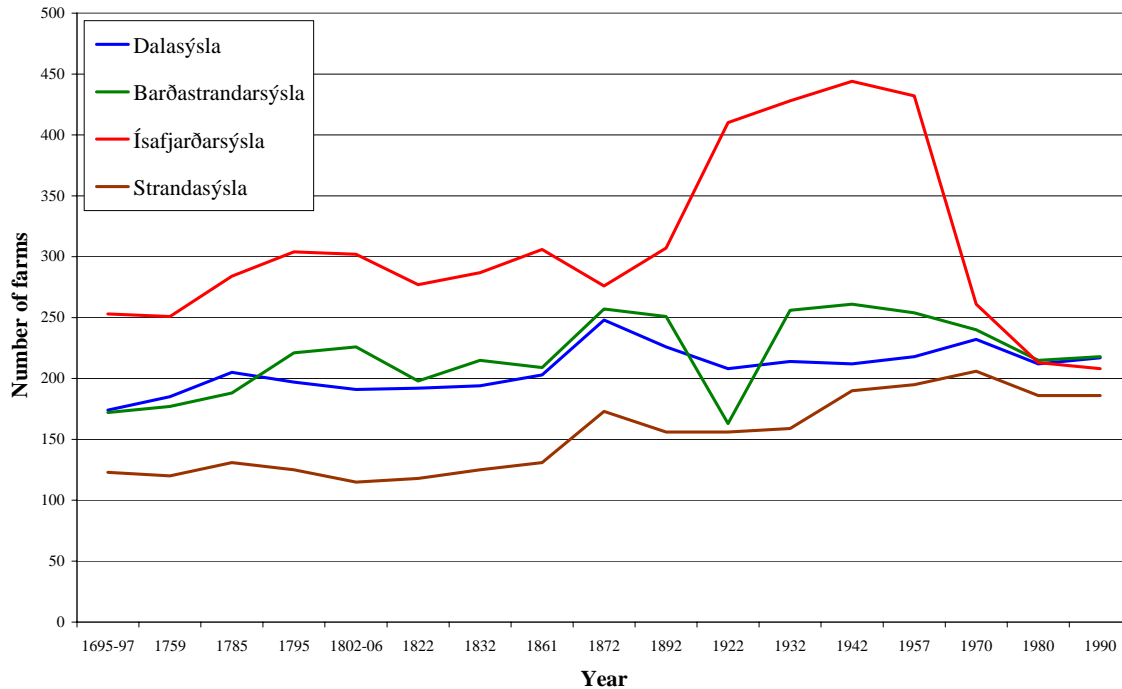


Figure 16. Farm abandonment. Source data derived from *Hagskinna 1997*, 258-261, table 4.1.¹

The dynamic of settlement in the north west suggests that there is a relatively secure acceptance concerning the continuity of place. By comparing survey documents between 1710 and 1847 for Vatnsfjarðarhreppur (later Reykjarfjarðarhreppur and now Súðavíkurbhreppur) Borgarey is not listed though it is probably subsumed into Vatnsfjörður. There is only growth, such as at Vatnsfjarðarsel. The overall pattern of settlement in 200 years remains approximately the same. A similar pattern is apparent in the whole region of Ísafjarðarsýsla, where there are small fluctuations but more or less continuity (figure 16). Ísafjarðarsýsla by contrast to other regions has a marked increase in the number of farms at the end of nineteenth century, only reducing back to late nineteenth century levels in 1970. From thereon, as in the rest of the north west Iceland, the number of farms have continued to fall. Continuity in the numbers of farms suggests that occupation was sustainable for the natural environment and that land available for growth and expansion was limited. Expansion therefore was into land that was not particularly

¹ *Hagskinna 1997 Sögulegar hagtölur um Ísland*. Hagstofa Íslands: Reykjavík.

good for the subsistence basis of the Icelandic farm and that these areas were abandoned before others.

The settlement pattern from the 19th century, and perhaps earlier, in the study area (Vatnsfjörður peninsula) is predominately coastal, with only two farms, which were both sheilings, located well inland. The distribution demonstrates a clustering around the north eastern tip of the peninsular and around Vatnsfjörður and in Vatnsfjarðardalur. There is a relatively good correlation with areas identified from satellite imagery with potentially good grazing land and the areas around Vatnsfjörður and Vatnsfjarðardalur.

The distribution of farm sites correlates well with land that is suitable for small scale farming. The availability of this type of land is limited and therefore growth and expansion can only occur in particular areas. One areas where evidence of expansion took place is the *dalur* – valley – areas of Vatnsfjarðardalur and Reykjarfjarðalur at the sheiling sites relating to Vatnsfjörður and Reykjarfjörður. Topographically these areas contain good grazing areas, but as they lie at a distance from the fishing areas their expansion as dwelling places was probably limited. This fact perhaps suggests why expansion is only limited and appears to have been relatively late in date – the in 18th and 19th centuries only. The farms located close to coastal areas appear to have been successful and, if the excavations at Vatnsfjörður suggest, have early origins. This combination of limited land for small scale farming activities with close proximity to coastal areas is perhaps a prerequisite for successful settlement in the region.

Several farming activity places, particularly those beyond the immediate farm area that included small enclosures as well as structures, were found. The Vatnsfjörður area was the most extensively surveyed so the majority of these types of places were found there. They tend to be sheep structures, sometimes associated with an enclosure. Several of the sites made use of the natural features which were included in the construction of the enclosure or structure. Such sites tended to be located at a distance from the farm but not so far as to be inaccessible in bad conditions. They also tended to make use of the natural environment around them by incorporating natural features into their structures and enclosure walls.

Coastal places lie directly on the coastal edge. Most of these sites relate to fishing, such as fishing booths (10 sites) and boat houses or drying racks (10 sites); see figure 17. Also, there are several cairns that were probably used as navigation markers. A system of cairns for sea navigation has been interpreted for the large monuments on the high inland areas that have clear views across the fjord. Smaller cairns, however, that lay close to the coastal edge may have been used for local navigation, perhaps for fishing sites or for boat landing. During the rapid coastal survey the first indications are that these types of fishing booth sites tend to be located in northern part of the peninsula, around the area of Vatnsfjarðarnes. Many of the farms that located near to the coast tend to have a boat house. Two areas, Vatnsfjarðarnes and immediately east of Vatnsfjörður farm on a small promontory, may have been associated with burial.

Small mounds and clusters of stones that do not look as if they have been formed naturally are indications. Their size, approximately 2m in length, as well as their location suggest this interpretation, though without more conclusive evidence it is difficult to be certain.

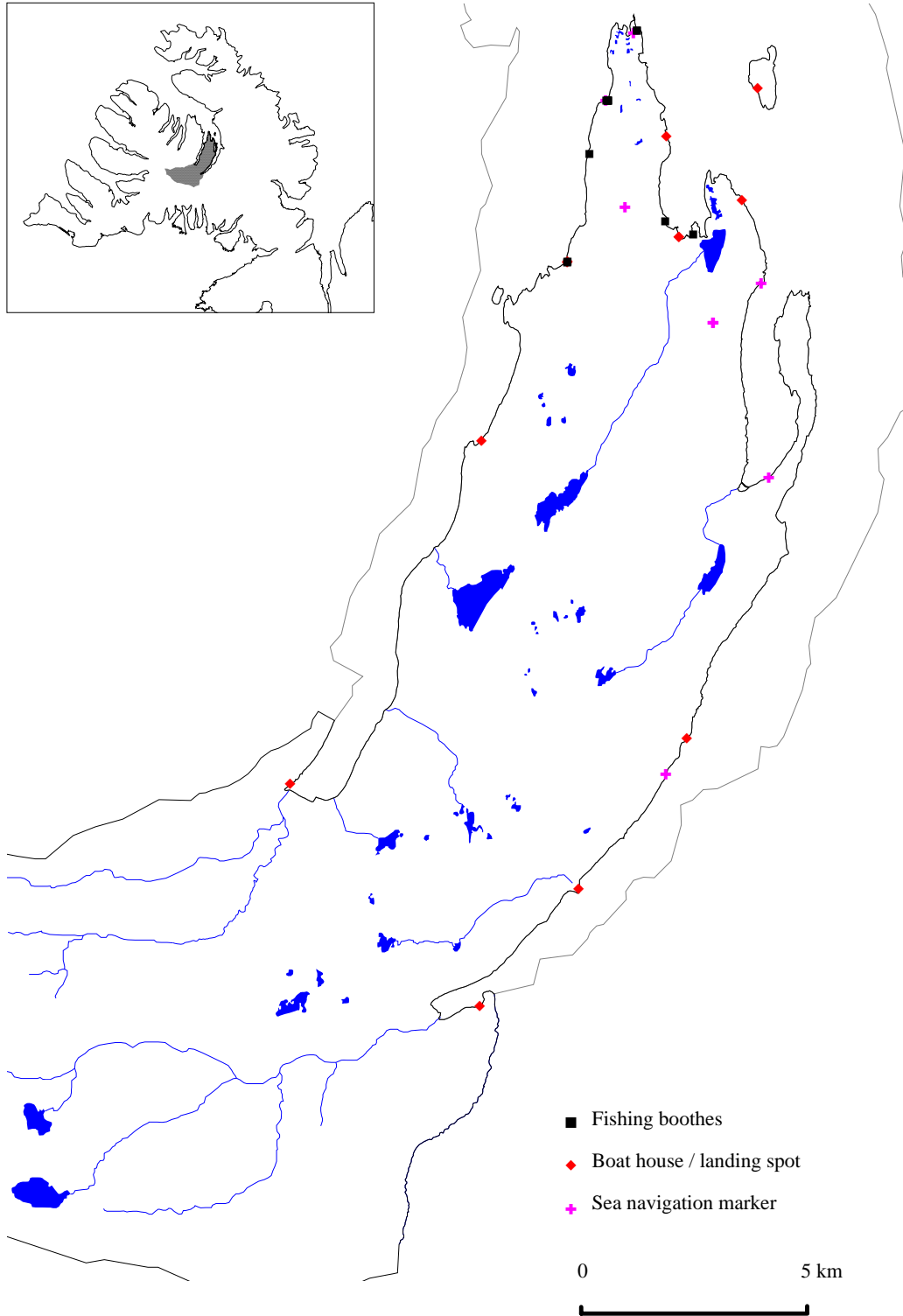


Figure 17. Sites relating to sea and fishing.

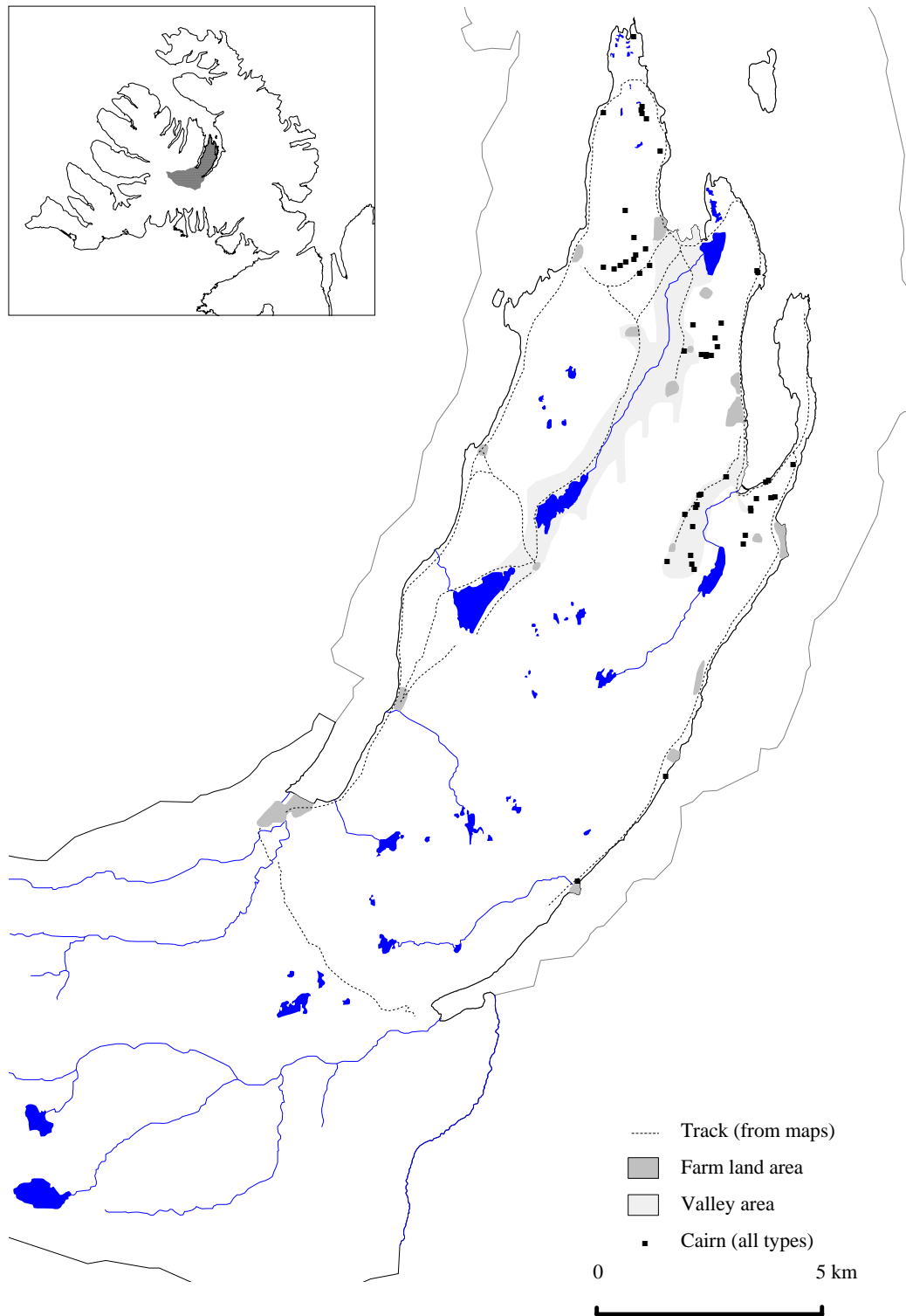


Figure 18. Tracks and cairns (all types), as well as farm places (indicated by improved land areas on 1:100,000 maps).

Movement

The movement across the landscape between places (variety of types and activities) allows speculation on several research problems. Firstly, limitations in the archaeological evidence about movement, seen in cairns and tracks that are physically marked, only gives indications of some of the more well used routes across the landscape. Others that are less obvious are sea navigation, which probably played an important means of transportation between settlement areas or trade places, as well as other routes across the landscape which are unmarked but can be observed. This point introduces routes to places by land that are not marked but are part of a 'landscape logic'. These are generally not recorded through usual survey practice. This is partly a problem of the archaeological record, but it is also conceptually one. The evidence for understanding of how people moved is not always forthcoming in the archaeological so by examining reasons behind movement and its association with other factors may reveal a new understanding. Generally, people moved along known tracks and established routes, but they also journeyed to other places by alternative routes. Understanding these possible routes of movement through a landscape, through observation, allows speculation on the meaning of landscape that goes beyond our usual connotations of it; for example, those aspects associated with folklore or cosmological aspects of the landscape or as part of a navigation system situated within a seascape.

Cairns were the most numerous sites surveyed in 2005. Numerous forms were observed, with some common characteristics. Cairns were stacked, usually 10 courses tall, though this depended on their continued maintenance and their respective age. Three areas with cairn systems were extensively surveyed – Vatnsfjörður and Vatnsfjarðarháls, Vatnsfjarðardalur and Reykjarfjarðarháls (in the vicinity of Hálshús and Sveinshús), and Reykjarfjarðalur. Figure 19 shows the relationship between the cairns, tracks and the farm places.

The cairns in the valley areas are usually associated with marking the route between the farm and the sheiling (for example at Vatnsfjörður and Vatnsfjarðarsel, and Reykjarfjörður and Reykjarfjarsel). There were also cairns that marked alternative routes in these areas. These routes may be related to other grazing areas or perhaps access to water. Extensive routes between the valley areas into the fjords were marked on the upland areas on Vatnsfjarðarháls and Reykjarfjarðarháls. These routes often accessed gaps through the benches that were naturally formed. In Vatnsfjörður and Vatnsfjarðarháls area a system of cairns runs parallel with a track that lies on the boundary between Vatnsfjörður and Miðhús. Individually each cairn is visible from the adjacent one, spaced at approximately 150m apart. The cairns mark a route between Skálavík and Vatnsfjörður which takes it partly over the lava bench, rather than around the outcrop and between a gap.

A cairn system is evident just above Vatnsfjörður on the cusp of Vatnsfjarðarháls. These cairns, which include Grettis's cairn, run along the lava bench lip that lies above Vatnsfjörður. It is possible that they are part of a sea navigation system that extends out into the fjord. Viewshed analysis from a number of cairns that have been interpreted as sea navigation markers suggested that the navigation system comprised of several interlocking systems. The navigation system therefore can not be fully understood from only one location; several sites need to be included. In the following analysis several markers were

used [UIDs 117, 148 (see figures 5 and 6)]. These two markers compliment each other in their views (figures 19 and 20). However, their distance from the sea would have made viewing them from the sea difficult in bad weather. Perhaps in circumstances such as these other markers, closer to the sea would have been used; for example UIDs 120, 169, and 187 (pink crosses on figures 19 and 20). Other cairns that lie in close proximity to the coastal edge were probably used as a local system of sea navigation, such as local harbouring or small fishing grounds.

The meaning of landscape: preliminary thoughts

Attempting to understand how people who lived in this landscape in a pre-industrial past will allow a better grasp of the meaning of landscape through their eyes; though this is extremely difficult to achieve. The theory and practice adopted in this research project fundamentally made use of landscape observation and how natural features were used, and this goes some way to see the landscape through the eyes of these people. There is question of how successful this is and if it is a valid research approach.

The reiteration of place and movement as major themes in the north west landscape underlies the concepts being outlined here: *place* guides and colours subsequent character of landscape and its people; *movement* connects place and brings it within a landscape context. By characterising the north west, in particular the study area, creates a platform for the understanding and meaning of landscape. This meaning is not an abstract one, i.e. that is distant from the people and their landscape, but one that is firmly based *in* the landscape that is studied. Firstly, the north west has much in common with other parts of Iceland. It is a harsh landscape dominant by nature, comprised of dispersed settlement with varying land uses. Secondly, the natural conditions of the environment have dictated activities such as settlement location and how people moved in the landscape. Topography has given structure to the underlying archaeological meaning of landscape by creating a canvas on which these networks and patterns are performed. Therefore to the meaning of landscape from the context of its people who live(d) in it understanding the relationships between man and nature is critical.

The topography of the Vatnsfjörður study area is diverse enough to accommodate several variations, and is demonstrated by the types of movement and places. These topographies can be associated with particular groups of activities and sites: sea and shore, valley and dale, upland ridges, highland. Sea and, shore for example, tend to be associated with sea activities, such as fishing, as well as boat landings and huts, as well as navigation markers. These are the most typical features but others that are more subtle are also apparent. The scant knowledge about Viking age burial in the north west suggests that practice was different than in other regions of Iceland. The close connection between the sea and settlement may also have mirrored itself onto burial practice in the region. Close to Vatnsfjörður farm a small cluster of possible burials were found.

In valley and dale topographies, farming activities dominate, such as grazing areas in the deeper parts of Vatnsfjarðardalur and Reykjarfjarðardalur. These areas contain also subtle features which have a much longer histories; such as unclassified ruins. These areas are associated with farming activities which are dominated by farm places, grazing areas as well as the routes to them that are marked by networks of cairns and tracks.

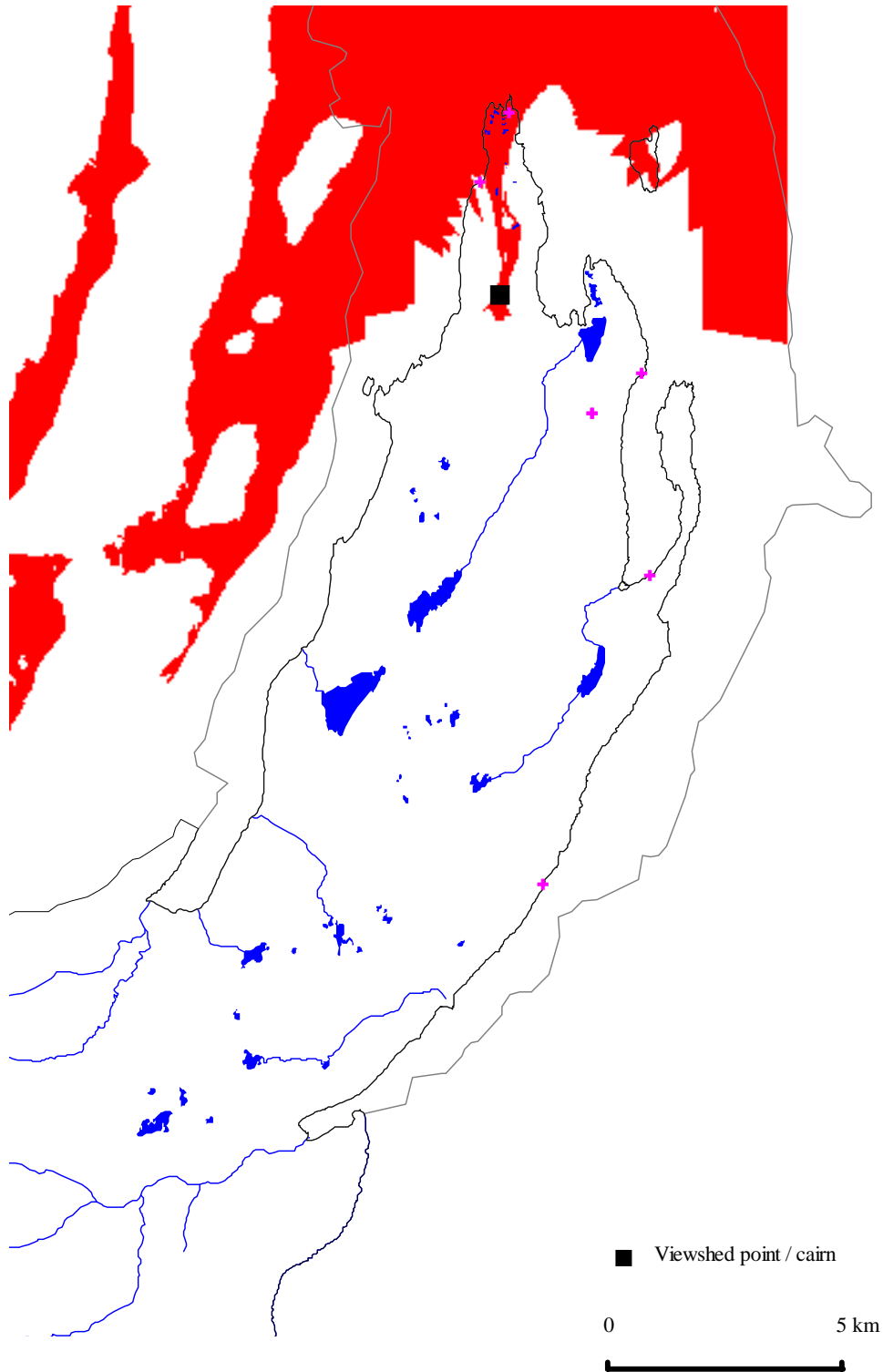


Figure 19. Viewshed analysis from cairn / marker UID 117.

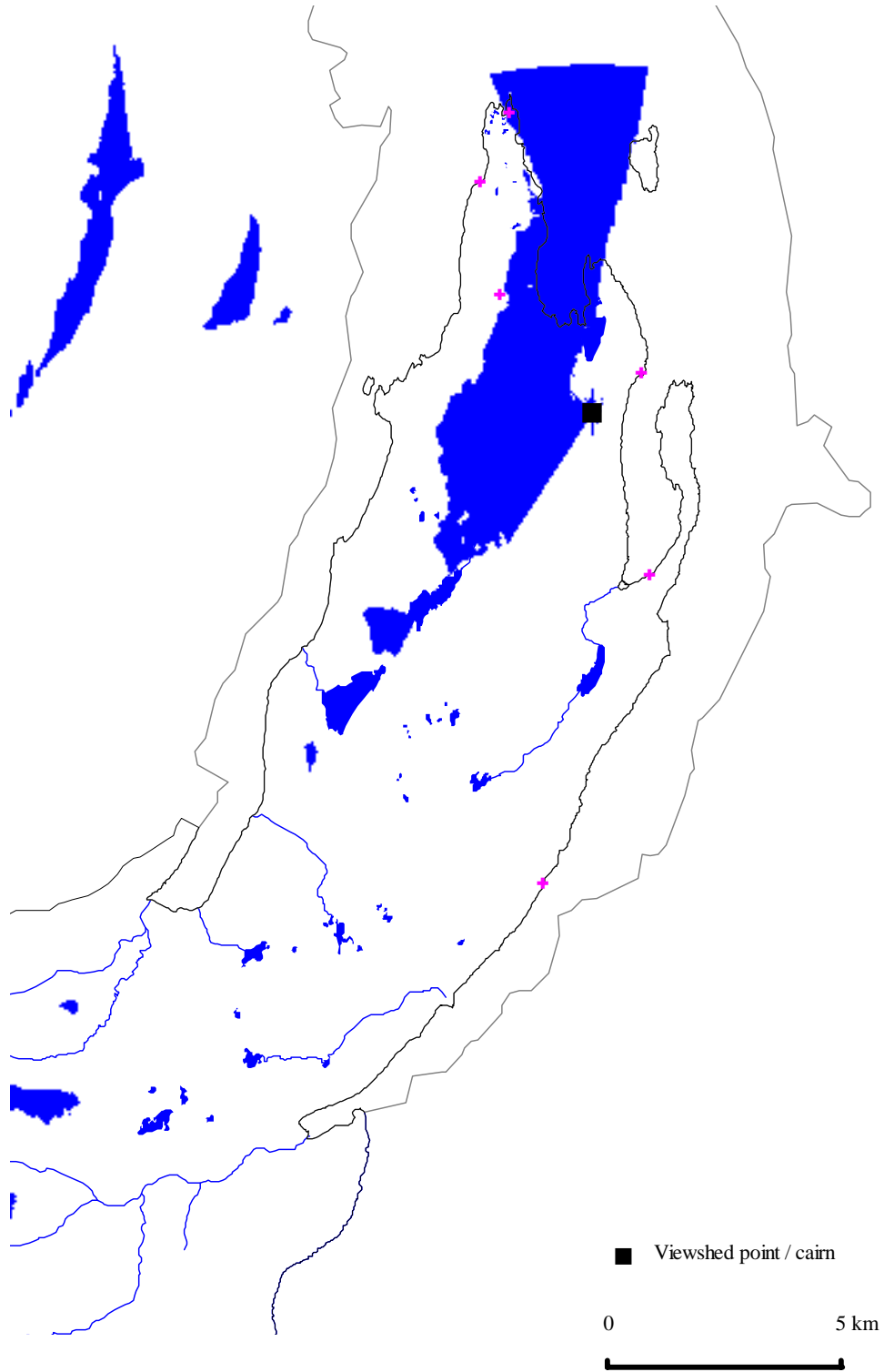


Figure 20. Viewshed analysis from cairn / marker UID 148.

The upland ridges are disconnected from both the farm land areas and the sea, though they contain features that are inherent to both of them. For example, these areas contained route marker cairns that help people move between valley areas to fjord areas. There are also larger monuments such as sea markers which are part of navigation system that extends into the fjord areas. On the fringes of this type of topography and the valley and dale areas are small farm features that were used to confine animals. The highland areas were not surveyed in the field but only from the air. They do not appear to contain any of the types of sites surveyed in 2005, but they may reveal smaller discrete features. Cairns for example were difficult to observe from the air and there may be routes across the highland areas into the interior of the north west as well as shelters. If these features exist then they may connect into a regional route network.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The historic character of the north west landscape is captured well by the Vatnsfjörður study area. There is dominant underlying natural structure that has dictated activity resulting in limited exploitation and expansion. It also suggests a relatively stable settlement that is associated with small scale farming and an emphasis on fishing; the sea is the main natural resource. In other regions of Iceland farming bonds communities together through communal activities such as late summer sheep herding and sorting. In Vatnsfjörður there appears to be few communal based activities. An exception may be the shared use of sheiling and grazing areas which is suggested by a convergence of tracks from several farms focused on Vatnsfjarðarsel. Alternatively, the importance of Vatnsfjörður farm may have bonded the community particularly as it was the church palce for the area. Fishing may have also had a role to play in community activities, but the archaeological evidence for this is not readily apparent.

Future work should focus on several areas. Development of the survey method, tried and tested against the usual Icelandic survey method. Focus should shift away from the farm and settlement landscape and instead focus on the networks of movement in relation to the sea and across the land. This should take palce mostly in the upland areas as well as some exploration of the highland area, particularly towards the south west of the region. Aerial survey should be used as a reconnaissance tool in advance of field work or complimenting it.