

# LANDSCAPE RESEARCH AT VATNSFJÖRÐUR IN 2006



Oscar Aldred

Fornleifastofnun Íslands  
FS343-03096  
Reykjavík 2007.



Front cover image: The ‘welcoming position’ into Vatnsfjörður farm from the sea and land (from the south and east) – natural stone (centre), burials (east) and boat house (west).

© Fornleifastofnun Íslands  
Bárugötu 3  
101 Reykjavík

Sími: 551 1033  
Fax: 551 1047  
Netfang: fsi@instarch.is

## *Table of contents*

Summary .....	1
Introduction.....	3
Research themes.....	4
Farm survey .....	6
Landscape survey.....	7
Vatnsfjarðardalur and Vatnsfjarðarháls .....	10
Reykjarfjarðarháls.....	12
Discussion.....	15
Farm survey .....	15
Landscape survey and Movement.....	15
Survey in 2005 and 2006 .....	16
Concluding remarks .....	18

## *List of Figures*

Figure 1 Monuments and the people who study them: reflections on the past through material things in Vatnsfjörður (2005). .....	1
Figure 2 Maureen, Véronique, Sandra and Inge surveying a cairn on Reykjarfjardáls..	3
Figure 3 The Vatnsfjörður environs with farm locations (black dots) and main study areas. ....	5
Figure 4 Sveinshús looking south east towards latest farm building (right); plan of Sveinshús (Christian Keller) (left). ....	6
Figure 5 Field survey in action; following a route over Reykjarfjarðarháls.....	7
Figure 6 Survey areas in 2006. ....	8
Figure 7 Extent of field survey up to 2006. ....	9
Figure 8 Survey in 2006 in Vatnsfjarðardalur and on Vatnsfjarðarháls. ....	11
Figure 9 Cairn (background) and boundary stone (foreground) on top of Vatnsfjarðarháls. ....	12
Figure 10 Survey in 2006 on Reykjarfjarðarháls and its vicinity. ....	13
Figure 11 Cairn cluster indicating a nexus of routes on Reykjarfjarðarháls.....	14



## Summary

The landscape research in Vatnsfjörður during 2006 focused on 2 unsurveyed areas following on from the work in 2005. The survey was carried out in conjunction with the Field school in North Atlantic archaeology, and recorded an additional 65 sites on top of the 196 sites. This report outlines the research themes, building on those from 2005, and describes the farm and landscape survey work, including some details on a few interesting sites. It also elaborates further on the main research questions connected to survey methods and practices in Iceland, on movement and the meaning of landscapes. It outlines a few goals for future work in the area re-emphasising the point that successful landscape research should maintain a focus on people and local communities and their engagement with the world around them and our role in understanding this.



**Figure 1** Monuments and the people who study them: reflections on the past through material things in Vatnsfjörður (2005).



## Introduction

The landscape work carried out in 2006 was one part of the field school at Vatnsfjörður. It is a continuing exploratory project to assess the problems in and potential for landscape scale research in the area. This report focuses on the field work element in particular what was found, what was learnt and how the future will be (hopefully). The landscape project was also integrated into the field school programme to allow students to gain experience in landscape archaeology. The landscape programme primarily involved fieldwork, lectures and original research by the students lead by Oscar Aldred (Institute of Archaeology, Iceland) and Christian Keller (University of Oslo).

The landscape programme comprises 3 elements: Lectures on elements of landscape archaeology and analysis; Aerial survey was carried out in 2005 as part of the research programme but not in 2006; it will be continued in 2007; Farm survey and Landscape survey. The main emphasis in this report is on the Farm and Landscape surveys, but following on from landscape research in 2005 it was decided to minimise the work in 2006 (only 1 week) to prepare a more comprehensive programme of research in 2007. This report is relatively brief therefore.



**Figure 2** Maureen, Véronique, Sandra and Inge surveying a cairn on Reykjafjardáls.

## Research themes

The north west presents several challenges to the study of landscapes in Iceland, as discussed in 2005<sup>1</sup>. In summary the historical development of the land was different in the north west from other regions in Iceland. Subsistence was based primarily on fishing as opposed to farming, though in the post medieval period a transition towards sheep farming took place, though fishing remained important along with a variety of different resource utilisations (for example collecting drift wood); these changes were enforced from outside the Westfjords (Ragnar Evardsson pers com). Any visitor to the north west of Iceland will soon discover that there was an important symbiotic relationship between nature and culture. The landscape is relatively unpopulated and large areas of land are open and seemingly devoid of cultural activity but an inquisitive investigation reveals a landscape 'pregnant with the past' waiting to be discovered<sup>2</sup>. Therefore understanding the environmental structures such as the geology or its vegetation one can begin to understand the landscape that is closer to human experience. Of interest is the nature:culture dichotomy which is part of a dialectic process that needs to be understood before deriving meaning from the landscape; therefore some emphasis will be placed on assessing this before advancing substantial interpretations on the landscape archaeology. For this report landscapes are distinct from environments: as they are created out people's understanding and engagement with the world around them rather than being quantified and explained in a formal way<sup>3</sup>. This is a theme that underlies much of the landscape research in the Vatnsfjörður project. This is articulated in various ways: analysis through material culture (monuments); through phenomenology and our engagements with monuments (in bodily actions); and through the representations of these encounters in photographs and texts for example. These 3 elements are combined in this report.

The research carried out in 2006 was on the one hand was a study of an archaeological landscape, 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 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 production of space and social reproduction through practices and forms of engagement with sites: for example practices connected with folklore, movement and navigation and establishing locales. Not all of these were investigated in 2006 only movement. The connections between movement and meaning supports a discourse on the relationships between places and people within a lived and living landscape.

---

<sup>1</sup> Aldred, O 2005 *Landscape research in the north west: Vatnsfjörður peninsula*. Reykjavík: Forneifastofnun Íslands FS298-03094. Pp. 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> Ingold, T 2000 *The temporality of the landscape in The perception of the environment. Essays in livelihood, dwelling and skill*. London: Routledge. Pp. 189-208.

<sup>3</sup> Bender, B 2002 *Time and landscape*, in *Current Anthropology* 43, S103-S112; Ingold, T 2000.



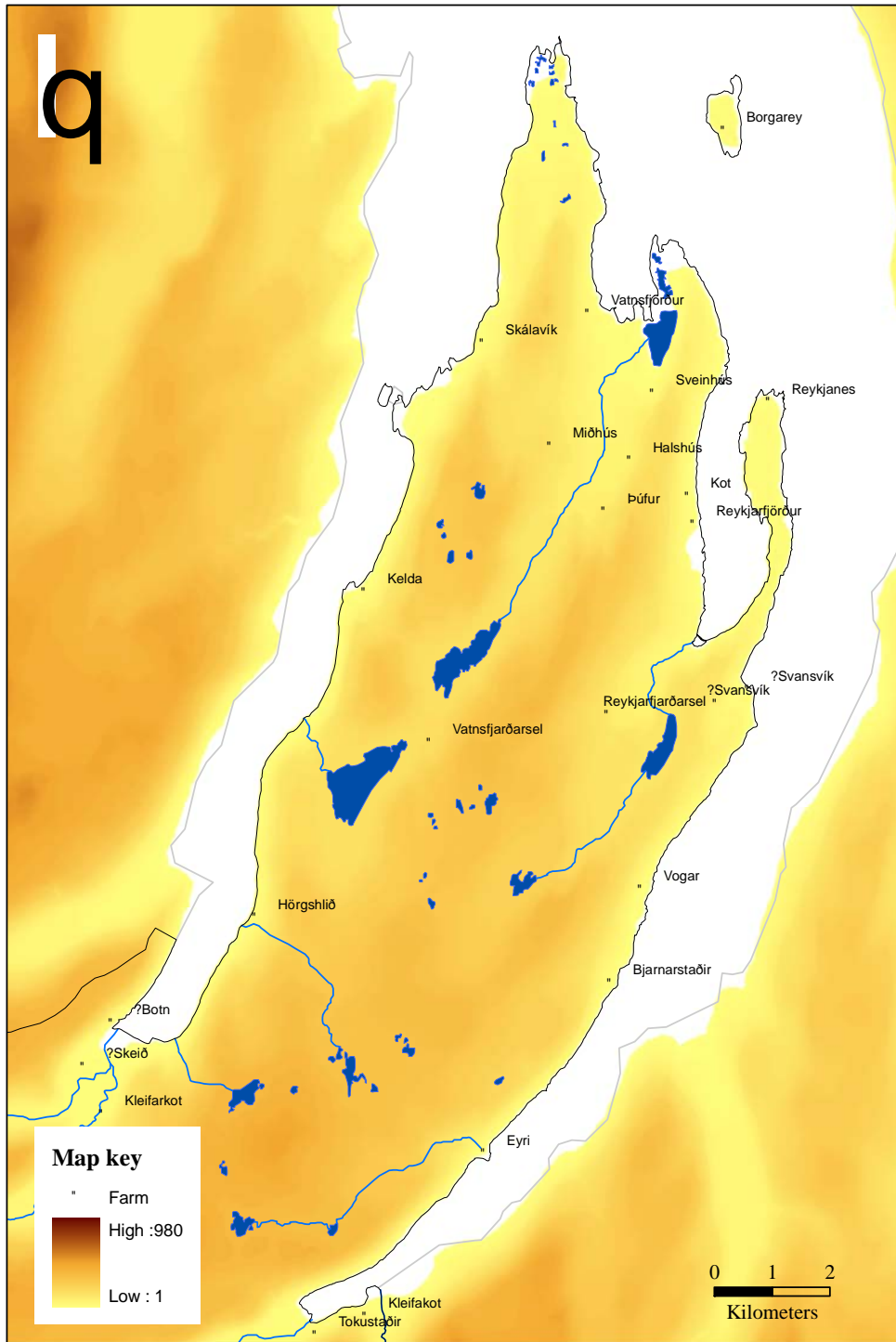
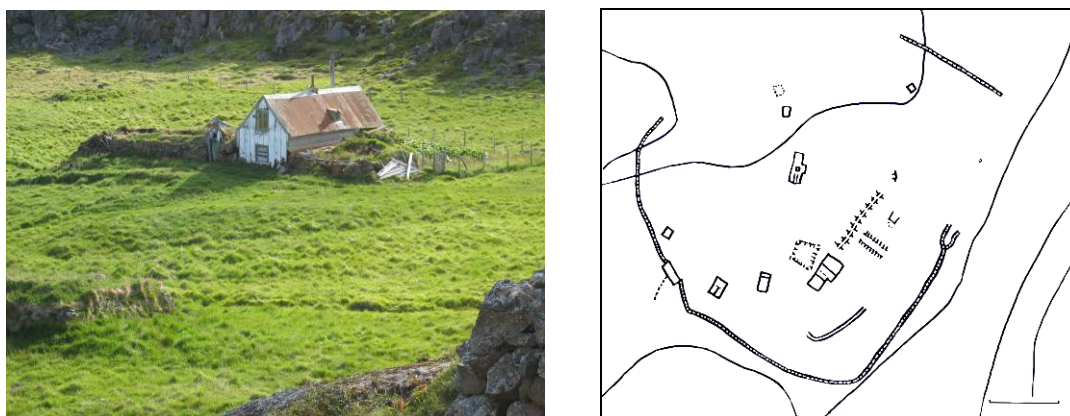


Figure 3 The Vatnsfjörður environs with farm locations (black dots) and main study areas.

## Farm survey

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 on how to recognise features and in explaining their possible functions and uses. Landscape observation was centred on the farm of Sveinshús, located south east of Vatnsfjörður. Sveinshús consists of a farm house, and several other outbuildings including a sheep house and an enclosure, an area of plough ridges and a homefield boundary as well as several other structures and possible sites.

Several phases of occupation were apparent at Sveinshús. 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 evident; this was only partially observed from on the ground surface level but clearer on aerial photographs.



**Figure 4 Sveinshús looking south east towards latest farm building (right); plan of Sveinshús (Christian Keller) (left).**

## Landscape survey

Field survey was carried out around the immediate area of Vatnsfjörður (Figure 7). It was decided that the field work would primarily survey individual monuments as they were encountered and simultaneously research the practice of movement. The survey in 2006 recorded 65 sites which included descriptions on their form, function, preservation and dimensions. In addition each site was located using handheld GPS and photograph taken.

In connection with research into survey practices in Iceland one of the main aims was to test prior knowledge of archaeological sites from documents against observations in the field through a combination of landscape logic, familiarity and phenomenology. By adopting this approach in survey, the movement across the landscape provided a direct point of contact with the landscape and its materiality; this was used to understanding how people might have moved in the past and therefore in establishing a theoretical framework for identifying their landmarks and the experience of encountering them in the process. Trails of cairns and likely locations to other sites, such as farms, sheilings or shelters, were followed and consequently surveyed.



**Figure 5 Field survey in action; following a route over Reykjarfjarðarháls.**

The field survey took place over 1 week and in 2 areas within the study area (more detailed descriptions of the areas can be found in the 2005 report): 1. Vatnsfjarðarháls on the ridge above the Vatnsfjörður and the northern end of Vatnsfjarðardalur; and 2. Reykjarfjarðarháls (Figure 6).

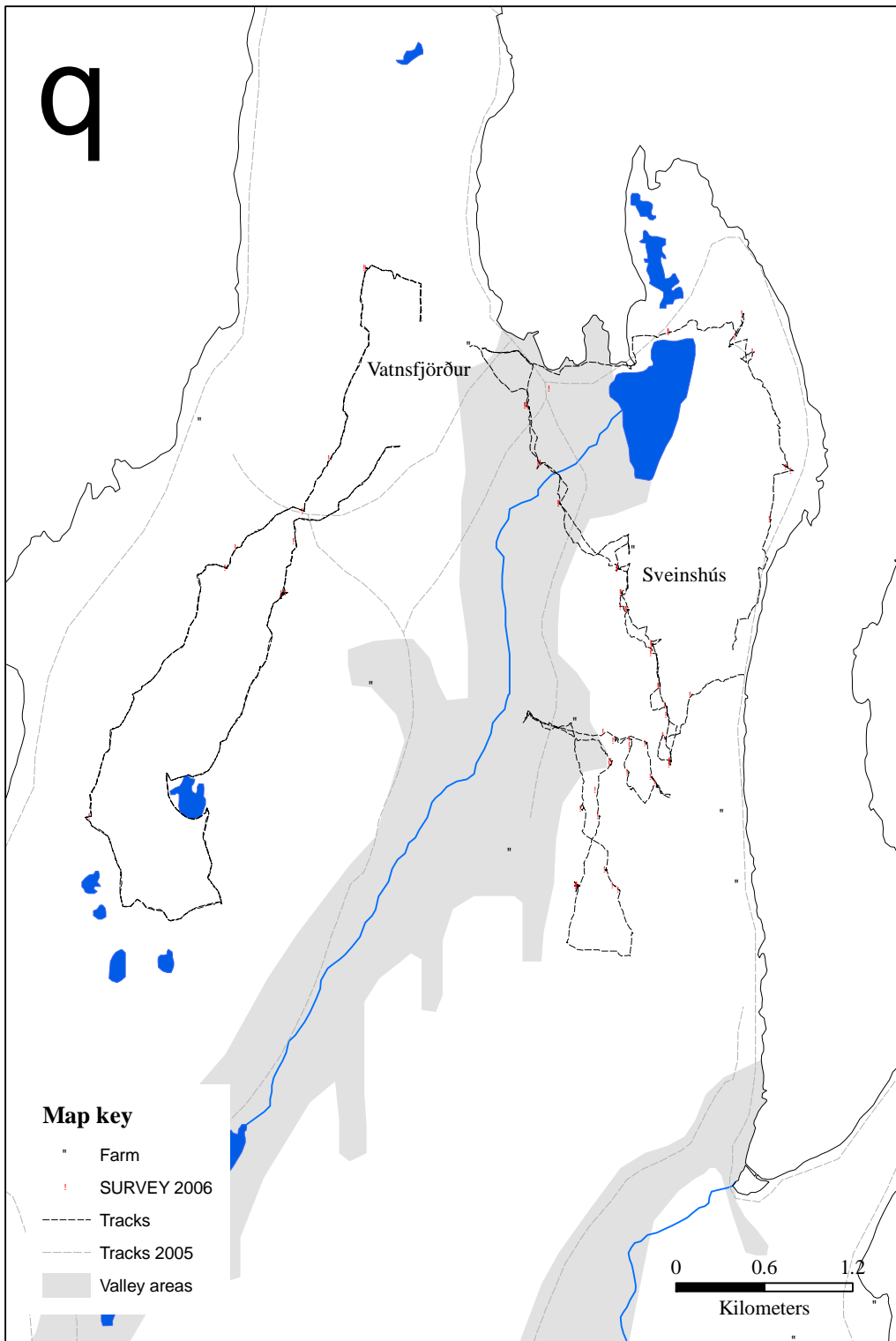
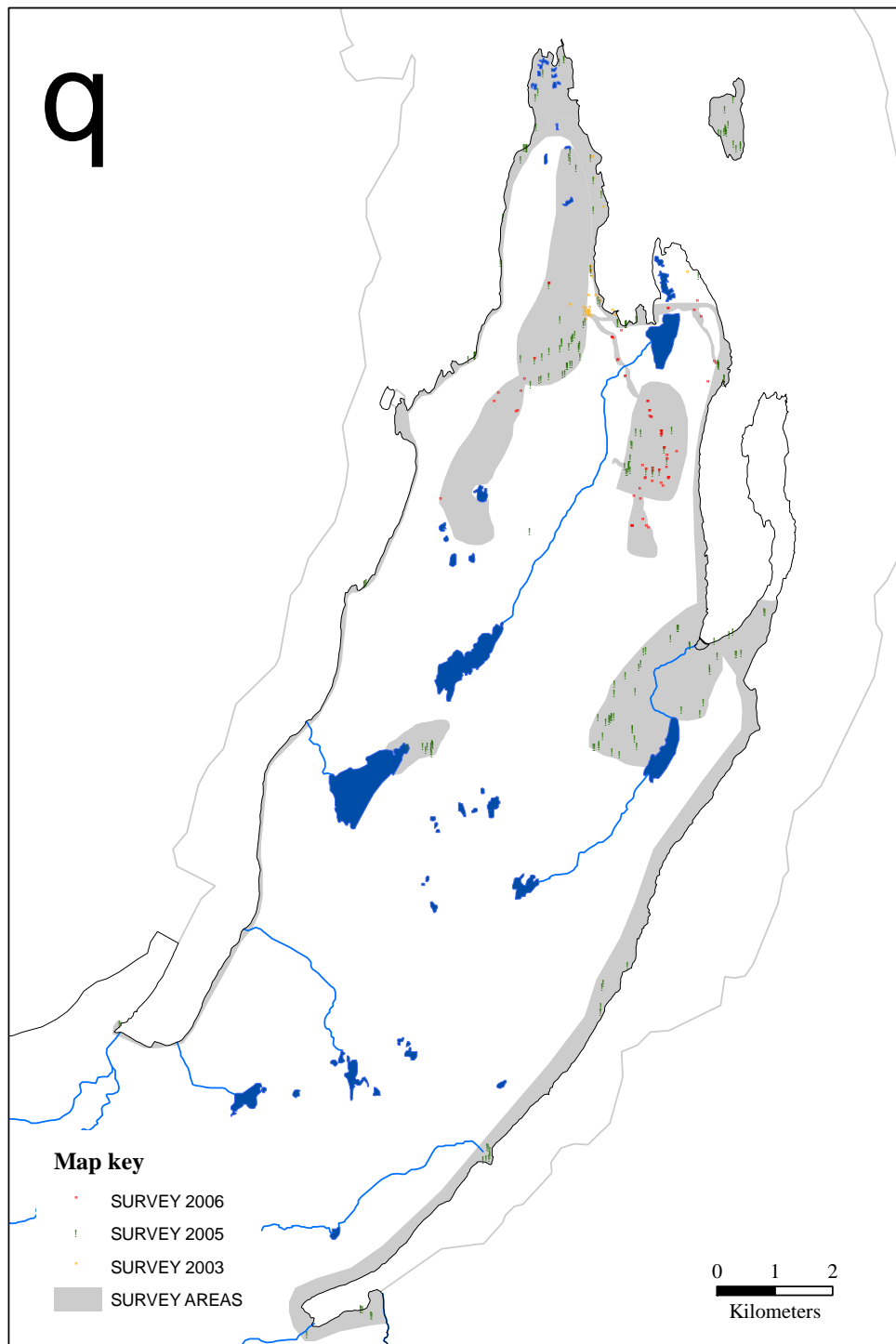


Figure 6 Survey areas in 2006.



**Figure 7** Extent of field survey up to 2006.

Cairns were the most common site type surveyed. Out of the 65 sites surveyed in 2006, 56 were cairns: stone built cairns as well as natural stones with stones placed on them (Table 1). These monuments related both to the movement of people and the marking of land for different purposes. Although the multi-functional character is acknowledged and important, it is difficult to separate specific functions as individual monuments. One method to decipher these monuments is to investigate their location

context against a classification of different topographies: valley, coastal, highland. Specific topographies will give a clearer understanding of the role the monument serves in the cultural landscape, for example cairns close to the coastal edge are likely to have used as navigation markers. These reflections on monuments as proxies for particular characters of space and place will be important in developing specific research themes derived from the landscape survey work. For example, this type of approach creates speculation about the broad understanding of cultural processes seen in the adaptation and uses of the natural environment and in the dynamic or reflexive processes between nature and culture. What follows is a brief description of the results found in each survey area.

<b>Site type</b>	<b>Count</b>
Waymarker cairn	45
Sea marker/Waymarker cairn	4
Natural stone/Waymarker cairn/Sea marker	1
Natural stone/Waymarker cairn	4
Natural stone	2
Peat cutting	2
Structure	2
Spring	1
Track	1
Feature	1
Spot find	1
Burial	2

**Table 1 Sites surveyed in 2006.**

### *Vatnsfjarðardalur and Vatnsfjarðarháls*

The Vatnsfjarðardalur area that was surveyed in 2006 lay towards the north of the valley close to the farm of Sveinshús and Hálshús. This was complimented also by Vatnsfjarðarháls area whose topography consists of long ridge west of Vatnsfjörður farm that runs north to south, lying approximately 200m above sea level (Figure 8).

In 2006, 17 sites were surveyed primarily on Vatnsfjarðarháls but also in the northern part of Vatnsfjarðardalur. These comprised of cairns (14) as well as a peat cutting place, a track and a small structure. Several of the cairns were large natural stones on which stones has been placed (Figure 9). The cairn in this figure is on the top of Vatnsfjarðarháls and the stone was distinguishable and quite different to the surrounding ones. It was positioned to suggest a boundary marker, probably between Vatnsfjörður and Skálavík. A GIS viewshed analysis from the cairn performed in 2005 suggested 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 landmark as a boundary stone which was also used for sea navigation into either Ísafjörður or Mjóifjörður fjords. The cairn may be part of a network of navigation markers and connected, in particular, with the cairn interpreted as a sea navigation marker on the northern part of Reykjarfjarðarháls, south-east of Vatnsfjörður.

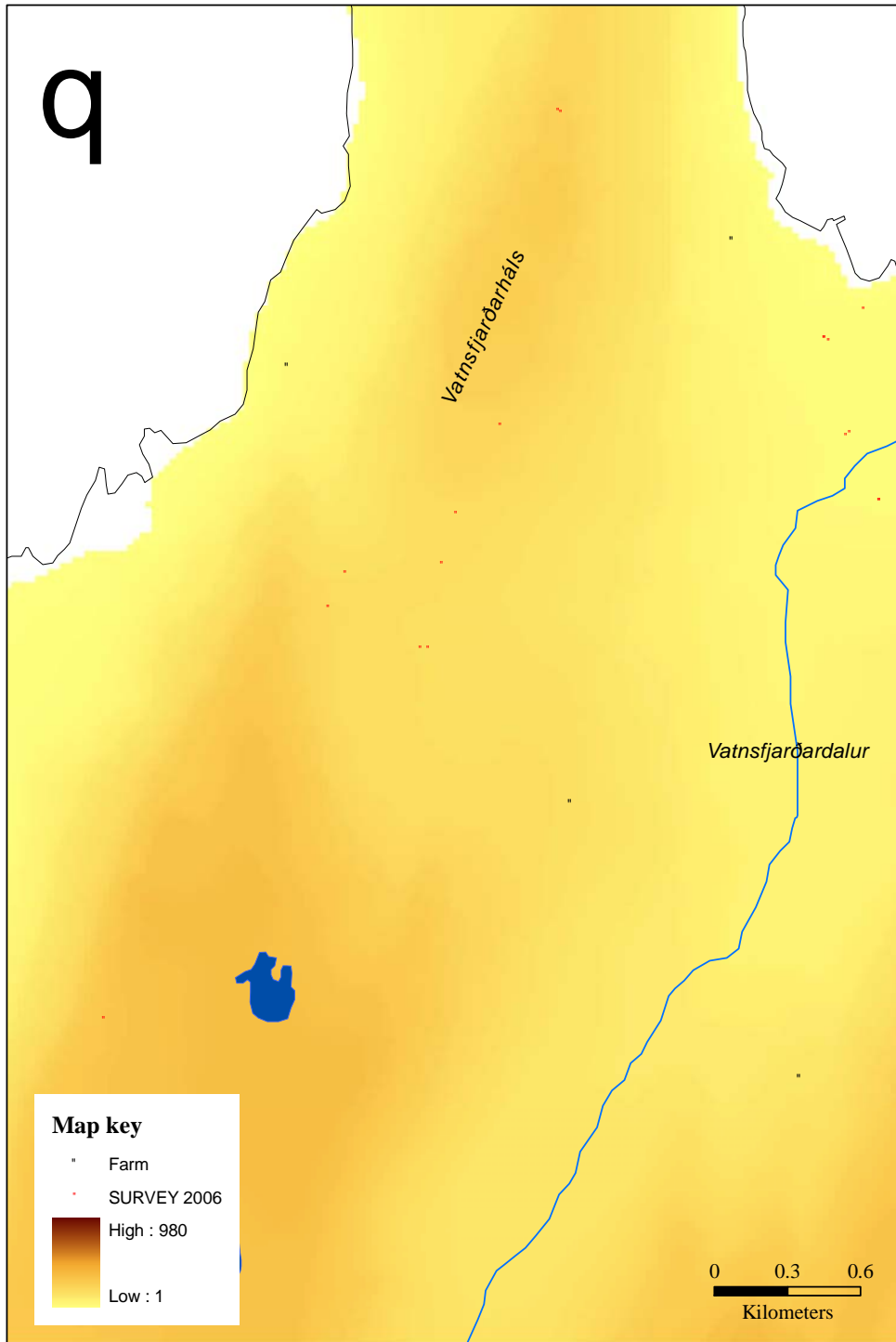


Figure 8 Survey in 2006 in Vatnsfjarðardalur and on Vatnsfjarðarháls.



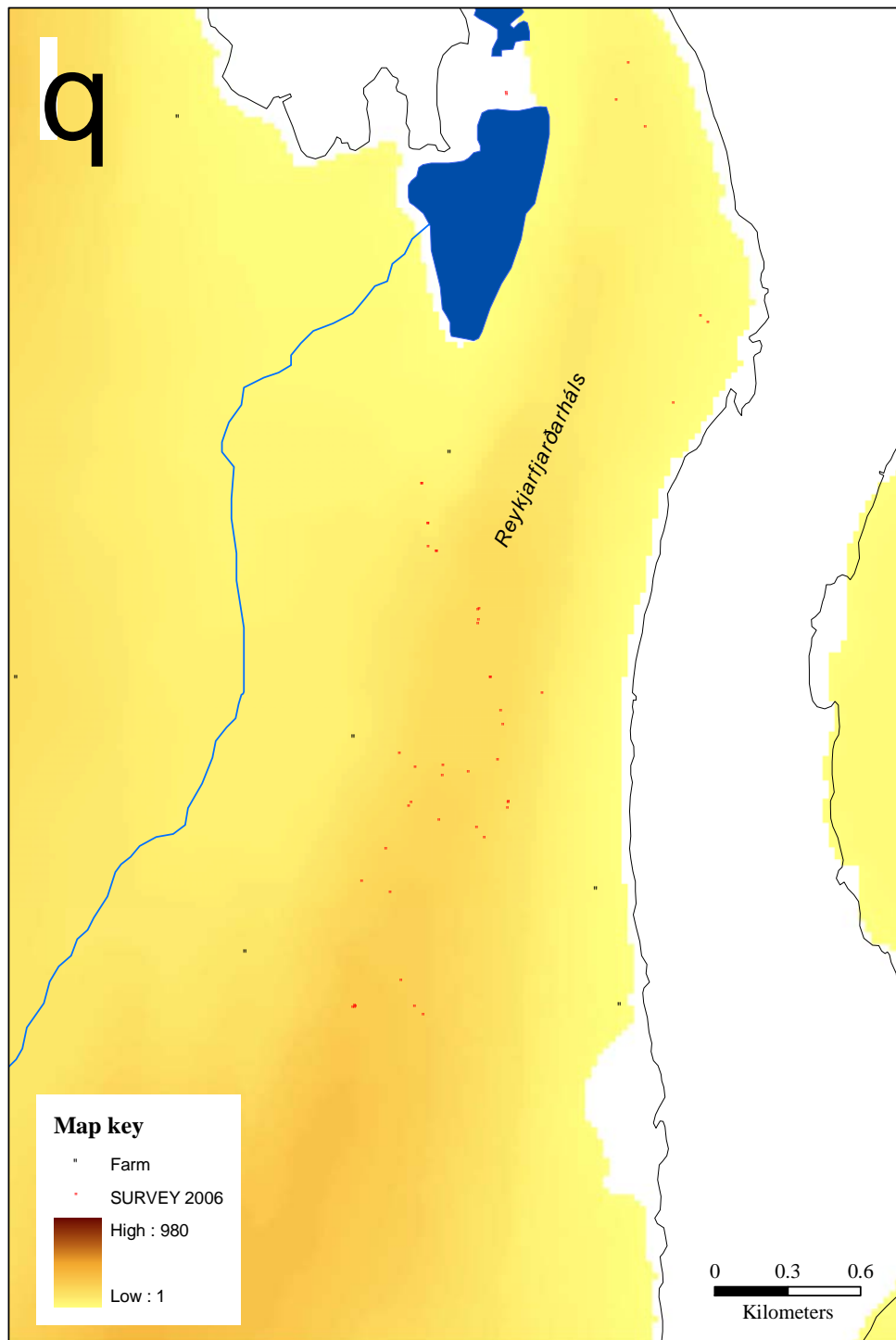
**Figure 9 Cairn (background) and boundary stone (foreground) on top of Vatnsfjarðarháls.**

Another natural stone (on the front cover of this report) may have part of the wider navigation system. It may however also been used as part of the ideological landscape: as a statement of power in connection with other types of monuments: the burials (further north and east) and the boat house (north and west). Christian Keller has suggested through his visibility analysis the possible relationship between this stone with a network of features which dominate the bay area; forming a 'welcoming position' into Vatnsfjörður. This natural stones as well as other like the one on Vatnsfjarðarháls form a landscape in which natural monuments become part of the cultural landscape, and this is an area of research which will be continued in 2007.

### ***Reykjarfjarðarháls***

The survey in Reykjarfjarðarháls comprised 48 sites. The majority of these were cairns or similar monuments, as well as peat cutting place, spring, structure, an unknown feature, spot find and burials (2). The survey took place in the southern end of Reykjarfjarðarháls to compliment the 2005 survey which concentrated further in areas further north and in the lower reaches around the farm of Hálshús.





**Figure 10 Survey in 2006 on Reykjarfjarðarháls and its vicinity.**

Of special interest was a clustering of cairns from which it was possible to discern 2-3 different routes or phases of routes (Figure 11). The cluster represents a nexus, like a modern day intersection, from which it was possible to follow several different route options. The relationships between the routes was assessed primarily on the visibility between the cairns but also in less obvious ways in terms of their architecture (though this needs to be reassessed in 2007 with the creation of a specific typology series).

Also, explored was the possible relationships that pairs of cairns (within close proximity) had with one another, perhaps similar to the welcoming position near Vatnsfjörður. These may indicate another's land as well as showing safe directions; there were only certain access points up and down slope for example. The cluster and others like need further systematic and detailed study.



**Figure 11** Cairn cluster indicating a nexus of routes on Reykjarfjarðarháls.

## Discussion

The farm and landscape survey in 2006, although small, made important progress in determining methodologies and the usefulness of the data in contributing towards the wider landscape concerns for the farm at Vatnsfjörður. The discussion that follows outlines the potential for further research amongst the results from 2005 and 2006.

### *Farm survey*

The aims of the landscape work were to primarily investigate the landscape without prior knowledge of its history and using observation and an inquisitive approach based on landscape learning and wayfinding. One assumption used in this research is that when the landscape is experienced primarily from its natural features such as topography, water and stone, and when one is immersed in the landscape with the specific aim to locate and to find meanings in the monuments and other archaeological sites, then what occurs is a much closer representation of the past. This phenomenological approach gives particular emphasis to the *moment* of encounter and what has been learnt from previously from encountering the landscape and other sites. The approach is grounded within a theoretical framework is used in field survey and archaeological practice which is a reflective empiricism (i.e. as observed entities) without being empiricist (i.e. not all based on the application of experimentation). In contrast to this approach a documentary based archaeological survey of farms retains value when connected to in-the-field observations as has occurred at Vatnsfjörður, and has particular value for comparing methodologies used in landscape archaeology. So far no documentary survey work has been carried out around the farms of Vatnsfjörður; Sveinshús and Hálshús for example.

### *Landscape survey and Movement<sup>4</sup>*

Movement as a study of cultural practice is interesting from a number of perspectives. Firstly, it has several related dualisms: it is a routine practice, but each journey is different; it is a bodily practice in action and embodies a human scale perspective, but it is part of a larger scale network. Secondly, movement is a unifying concept in studying the material and ideology of people: routes lie at the convergence or milieu between the physical and mental. Thirdly, the temporal sequences of movement are often situated within a systemic context but one that is not dependant on time: routes are continually reworked and retained within a living landscape context both in terms of their physical changes, as well as (importantly) in terms of the production of memory and the transmission of knowledge. There are strategies for looking at movement in the landscape: in terms of the negotiation of landscape; in terms of the political relations between groups for example in maintaining access to places and promoting these in the landscape; and in the production of space and the creation of identities which reflect social practices.

The landscape survey so far has concentrated on surveying monuments and sites as they are encountered; recording them and mapping. Very little research has gone into

---

<sup>4</sup> Based on a paper given at the NABO conference in Quebec 2006: Aldred forthcoming

understanding the experiences of these encounters who how experiencing them now – through phenomenological approaches to landscape – creates a dialogue with the past. However, in 2007 it is intended to build on the survey work and initial research for a paper on movement to establish an approach that aims to gain a perspective on these strategies, encounters and experiences in the landscape. The main aim is to understand *effective knowledge* about people in the past through their inscription and incorporation practices – for example in cairn and route constructions. Traditional studies for example rely on the insubstantial explanation on the past through an analytical objectification – top-down - perspectives in reconstructing past environments where, most often, people are reduced to insignificant participants. In order to substantiate and add to our knowledge of the past in Vatnsfjörður we need to view the world in which the people lived and gain a reflection into how they experienced it. Doing so perhaps involves an approach that combines traditional approaches, such as that derived from historical ecology with interpretative approaches to encountering monuments; the two research approaches will allow landscape to be represented and experienced in effective ways to increase our understanding of the past.

### *Survey in 2005 and 2006*

One of the principal aims of the survey is to compare methodologies; between documentary based survey and archaeological without *a priori* knowledge. Preliminary findings suggest that sites that are located outside the home farm boundary (beyond the *túngarður*) can effectively and have confidence in a survey practice that uses landscape observation without *a priori* knowledge from historical sources; in fact this method of survey encounters all types of sites, usually those that are not recorded using the historical based approach, which misses ordinary sites such as cairns. Inside the *túngarður* sites are well recorded and known by the people who inhabit the present-day farms and therefore the combined documentary (including oral histories) and archaeological surveys compliment each other. The survey aims to mediate between these two approaches to attain ‘total’ survey; though this is unattainable it may be relatively close in this environment – barring sites that have been destroyed in the past or those which are buried. By using a combination of documentary based survey and landscape observation all visible and known sites will be identified. The next phase of research on survey methodologies will compare systematic approaches to field walking against the biasing of movement either within an observation practice or because of the influence of *a priori* knowledge.

Given the limited extent of the survey work so far only preliminary answers are given to the question what have we learnt about the landscape and how people inhabited it? There seems to be a distinction between different land areas: coastal; highland; valley. These land areas can also be thought about in terms of lowland:highland, sea:land, domestic:wild or as internal:external worlds. Archaeological practice also draws these distinctions through its use of documentary based archaeological survey focused around a specific place – the farm – against landscape observation in areas beyond the farm the land: mediates an infield::known:unknown::outfield evaluation. The complimentary character of these 2 approaches creates an archaeological survey practice that maximises its recording of individual sites in the landscape.

In terms of the inhabitation of the landscape the distinctions between different topographic and ideological areas provides an insight into the character of space, place and landscape and the types of land marking associated with each. This understanding is helping to create landscape identities that draws distinctions between different types of landscape understandings; for example between nature:culture or in the landscape taskscape construction in labour::land:landscape::time<sup>5</sup>. The dichotomy nature:culture has already been partially examined in this report (see Research themes), but the idea lays at the foundation for the landscape work in the Vatnsfjörður environs. Diffusing the nature:culture dichotomy is important perspective as has been argued by Tilly, Thomas and Ingold that the idea of culture as distinct from nature is an intellectual construct that inhibits our understanding of human experience and effective knowledge about people in the past<sup>6</sup>. Traditional studies for example rely on an insubstantial explanation of the past through a reconstruction of the past environments by lenses that does not see the individual or the local community levels of interaction only nominally. People's responses to the world around them, including their social interactions with others and the environments took place through various levels of engagement (between individuals, groups and communities) in special and particular ways that can not simply be reduced into dichotomies as such as nature:culture. The reflexive character of adaptations and interactions are complex constructions. Therefore knowing the past is not simply to reify and objectify data into meaningless parcels of knowledge; it is to know how people experienced the world around them. By diffusing the boundaries between nature:culture more *effective knowledge* about the past is produced – one that is closely related to an actual past and a knowledge that gives account to common *experience* instead of being separated from it. People and things (such as the environment) are in constant motion, always fluid and therefore researching the past as a complex set of dynamics allows a much greater comprehension of it.

By acknowledging these types of incorporations, rather than inscriptions, on the landscape over time a sense of the past is understood. In the Vatnsfjörður environs for example the practices of movement are part of these incorporation practices which are specifically seen in the building and maintenance of routes through the landscape. These monuments individually are seen in traditional archaeological practices as insignificant, but collectively they form an important part of how people have engaged with the world around them: these monuments are woven into it through specific practices of negotiation and tasking; the people in the past, as Ingold says, left a part of themselves in the landscape<sup>7</sup>. Not only are the monuments the remaining parts of people lives but they carry meanings for our own contingent archaeological understanding, for example in time and how the landscape as we experience was made. Temporalising the landscape accounts for the working and reworking of landscape features through time on a continuous but ad hoc basis (not all parts are always in motion all the time); routes are a good example of this type of process – though only a small part of the landscape is encountered today as the cairns are often located in inaccessible places and it is only in our archaeological forms of dwelling

---

<sup>5</sup> Ingold, T 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Tilley, C 1994 *A phenomenology of landscape*. Oxford: Berg; Tilley, C 2004 *The materiality of stone. Explorations in landscape phenomenology: 1*. Oxford: Berg; Thomas, J 2004 *Archaeology and Modernity*. London: Routledge; Ingold, T 2000 *The perception of the environment. Essays in livelihood, dwelling and skill*. London: Routledge.

<sup>7</sup> Ingold 2000, p.189.

that they are part of the reworking of today's landscape. Routes are part of systemic process of encountering the landscape which is in motion.

There are several products of thinking about the landscape in the ways described above. The most important is perhaps that the landscape in the past was perceived differently than it is today. This in itself is not unsurprising or novel but our archaeological encounters with the past create a much greater relevancy for insignificant features in the areas outside the *túngardur* and clearly these played a greater part in the lives of people than they do today. Activities in a taskscape sense occurred here, such as boundary markers between owned land, landmarks indicating routes, and perhaps practical or cosmological meanings in patterned relationships between several individual monuments; for example sea navigation systems or the referencing of large natural stones. The scope for understanding the landscape in terms of human experience is an important and relevant aspect of our archaeological research, but only one aspect that has research potential in the Vatnsfjörður project.

## Concluding remarks

The research around Vatnsfjörður has established over the last 2 years a good foundation for the future. A comprehensive research programme with specific goals situated in relation to a field school environment will mean that the following years will be of great importance to landscape archaeology in Iceland. Landscape survey will have a much larger profile, with particular emphasis on more systematic survey to substantiate the current coverage of sites. This will include targeting of specific areas through landscape observation techniques as well as through traditional documentary and archaeological surveys. Also a wider environmental research will begin: land management modelling through soil surveys; sea-level research; climate and vegetation research. The data will be incorporated into GIS to allow comparative analyses to be modelled and run against the survey programme and other archaeological and historical data. The science based and environmental research into past environments in Vatnsfjörður environs will underpin the discussion concerning the nature:culture dynamics in the Westfjords (a grant application).

Amongst this it will be important to maintain the focus and dialogue with respect to the adaptation and dynamic processes of engagement by people and local communities' on/in/within these environments. This will be achieved through a discourse between different research approaches and techniques. The first will be experiencing landscapes first-hand from our present-day perspective through materiality (seen as a diffused nature and culture) and from a temporal landscape glance where the activities or tasks form a substantial part of the how people experienced the world around them. A second will be to view the past as a series of time-slices and externalised perspectives of the past from historical sources and environmental data with the aim to reconstruct past environments. The meeting and discord between these approaches will produce a dialogue that is intended to address the question of why the socio-economic and cultural history of the Westfjords differed from the rest of Iceland<sup>8</sup>.

---

<sup>8</sup> *The text concerning the second research technique is referencing a Rannís application written by Karen Milek and Torfi Tulinius.*