Lost Paths

- and the Stock Fish from Skriðuklaustur Monastery, Iceland

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Abstract

Medieval monasteries were without exception located on major routes, as they were open to everyone in need for assistance, such as travellers, pilgrims, the elderly, patients and paupers. Still, an excavation carried out on the ruins of the Skriðuklaustur monastery (AD 1493-1554) revealed such institution located in a remote inland valley of eastern Iceland. However, the fish bones found during the excavation provided an explanation of its location. They were from large cod, ling and haddock that can only be caught off the southern and western coast of Iceland. These results directed the focus towards a forgotten route of transport between the southern and eastern parts of Iceland over the Vatnajökull glacier, placing the monastery in a major route. The route was lost because of climate changes in 1640 but when it was still accessible, Skriðuklaustur monastery was the first or last stopover when passing the highland.

Keywords: Ancient Routes, Medieval Iceland, Monastery, Fish bones, Actor-Network Theory
1. Introduction

The current global warming has revealed many hidden archaeological remains from melting glaciers; whereas past periods with colder climate have buried other in snow and ice. However, climate changes – cooling or warming – has been a subject of investigation since the dawn of modern archaeology. This is though not done in search for ancient secrets but because of the fact that the nature constantly encounters with its social and cultural surrounding in a reciprocal way. Still, in earlier studies culture and nature were often opposed as dualistic features, rather than being considered as active actors in the network of human living. In this article, it is underlined that the nature and culture may not be split apart, as together these features comprises a one whole. The focus will be directed at a forgotten route over the largest glacier of Iceland, Vatnajökull, that came into light again during an excavation on a monastic site, Skríðuklaustur, located nearby. The excavation proved that the monastery served as a dwelling for travellers, pilgrims, the elderly, patients and paupers but, obviously, it would have been impossible for the brethren to fulfil its obligations if it had been run in a remote place as the valley occurs to be today. Still, it was the fish bones found during the excavation that provided an explanation of its location. The fish bones directed the focus towards a lost route between the southern and eastern parts of Iceland over the Vatnajökull glacier, placing the monastery in a beaten track. The route was blocked because of massive changes in the glacier due to cooling climate in the midst seventeenth century, roughly a century after the closing of the monastery.

2. Skríðuklaustur monastery

It was in the year 1493 that a monastery was established at the farm Skríða in Fljótsdalur valley of eastern Iceland. It was named Skríðuklaustur and operated until the Reformation in
Iceland around the middle of the sixteenth century. The monastery was – as elsewhere – an internationally devised institution, formulated by the Catholic Church. From written records the monastery was known to have been active in the business of buying and selling farms, indicating a busy activity of some kind or work of charity. Otherwise, not much was known about the general activities of the institution or its buildings, until the monastic ruins at Skriðuklaustur were excavated during the period from 2000-2011. The excavation revealed the ground form of a monastic complex in an area that measures over 1500 square meters in size. From its cemetery, 269 skeletons were investigated which makes this the largest burial ground excavated in Iceland to date. In addition, the findings represented likewise an occupation with hospital activity in the monastery that was though only run for approximately 60 years. No other monastery or nunnery has been archaeologically examined in Iceland, which makes site at Skriðuklaustur the northernmost excavated so far in W-Europe.¹

The monastic building at Skriðuklaustur appears to have contained most of the elements that are common to other monastic institutions of the Augustinian Order, in spite of being located on the borders of the Medieval Catholic world. While it can be stated that no two monastic buildings look exactly the same, because of the constant process of interaction of their natural and social environment, they apparently all possess common characteristic features that are based on their aims and businesses. Usually, a monastery denotes an especially arranged complex of buildings where rooms are reserved for sleeping and feeding but notably with sacred areas that were separated and kept away from the more secular ones.²

Thus, although the monastery at Skriðuklaustur was built of turf, stones and driftwood – like most other houses in Iceland during in the medieval period – the interior plan of its buildings is typical, forming a cluster of houses with different areas divided accordingly to sacred and secular purposes (Fig 1). The south area of the monastic complex was formed by

¹ Kristjánsdóttir, Sagan af klastrinu á Skriðu.
² See for example Braunfels, Monasteries of Western Europe; Møller-Christensen, Æbelholt kloster; Gilchrist, Gender and Material Culture – the Archaeology of Religious Woman; Kerr, Life in the Medieval Cloister.
the church, the western by the brethren’s living quarters, the northern by the kitchen and refectory area, but the infirmary hall, the guesthouse and the storage rooms are all located in the eastern part of the complex, farthest away from the sacred space of the brethren. The church was enclosed by a thick wall that was attached to the northern wall of the monastic houses. Inside the enclosure, there were burials all around the church and inside it as well. Beside this, in the south-eastern area of the enclosure, there was a fountain with a conduit which directed the runoff out of the monastic complex.³

Identification of vertebrate and insect remains, from samples taken during the excavation, has improved this understanding of the different rooms inside the monastic complex.⁴ Analysis of pollen and seeds furthermore shows that gardening was carried out at the site and that imported plants were cultivated there during the monastic period. The samples processed so far revealed ten species of healing plants, whereof three not native to the Icelandic flora during medieval times. All are notably well-known monastic plants.⁵ These results suggest also that gardening may have been a part of the monastic activities, similar to that practiced in contemporary monastic sites outside Iceland, albeit what was cultivated there were types that could readily grow there.

The artefacts found at the site of Skriðuklaustur are from the household and the more specialised monastic activities. Among the findings from the site there are 18 lancets, scalpels and pins that may have been used for healing purposes. They were used for closing wounds and bloodletting, or possibly for surgical purposes, although no definite evidences of trepanation has been identified so far on skeletons from Skriðuklaustur. Beside this, two

⁵ Harðarson, ‘Klausturgardar á Íslandi’; Shaw, Analysis of soil samples from Skriðuklaustur.
vessels for medication were found, both imported, one a vial and the other a ceramic bottle. Also, the effigy of St. Barbara was discovered in the church’s chancel. St. Barbara was known as one of the Fourteen Holy Helpers, a group of saints that was venerated in Roman Catholicism because their intercession was thought to protect against different diseases. The effigy found at the site was a 15th century production from Utrecht in the Netherlands.

Monasteries, especially those running hospitals, were obliged to bury all those who died in their care as patients or travellers and of course always their own brethren, nuns, benefactors and secular assistants, as lay people. Apparently, this was done at the monastery at Skríðuklaustur as the burials exhumed there contained skeletons of individuals of both sexes and all ages, even new-born babies and foetuses. Moreover, inside the cemetery there were four burial areas that each had different meaning in accordance with the descendants’ placement in regard to the monastic complex itself. These areas are, the cloister-garden together with the area north of the church designated for the patients; secondly, the area south of the church for the lay people; thirdly, the area east of the chancel for the brethren; and finally, inside the church building itself for benefactors.

The division of graves into four areas is based on the examination of the skeletons and the furnishing of the graves themselves but this provides an opportunity to count the approximate number of deceased in each group of people associated with the monastery. According to this, the patients buried in the cloister-garden and the area north of the church were 148. The skeletons found there did exclusively bear the signs of serious pathological alterations caused by diverse traumatic injuries and chronic illnesses. These are symptomatic of syphilis, tuberculosis, hydatid disease, non-specific infection, congenital disorders (eg. cleft

6 Kristjánsdóttir, ‘Icelandic Evidence for a Late Medieval Hospital: Excavations at Skríðuklaustur’: 378.
7 Kristjánsdóttir, ‘Gripir klausturkirkjunnar á Skríðu’: 146-147.
8 Gilchrist and Sloane, Requiem. The Medieval Monastic Cemetery in Britain: 56-57, 63.
9 Kristjánsdóttir, ‘The Tip of the Iceberg – the Material of Skríðuklaustur Monastery and Hospital’.
palate), periodontal disease, metabolic insult and fractures.\textsuperscript{10} On the contrary, the skeletons exhumed in the three other areas of the cemetery, do not show a higher rate of illnesses than is found in parish church cemeteries in Iceland. The monks, who were buried east of the chancel, probably never numbered more than five at any time but those who assisted with their daily work were at least 100 during the 60 years the monastery was open, according to the number of graves exhumed south of the church. Some of them may though have been short-term visitors or pilgrims who died during a stopover in the monastery. There were seven graves inside the church but these were better furnished than any other in the whole cemetery.\textsuperscript{11}

Nevertheless, the diversity in the skeletal material underlines further the activity of Skriðuklaustur monastery severing a large number of people, independently from age, sex and social ranking. What did though seemed odd – right from the beginning of the research at the site – was the location of the monastery in a remote inland valley, Fljótsdalur, of eastern Iceland; as such institutions in other parts of the world were usually located on major routes. Thus serving as an institution with quite many visitors and hospitalised activity, the location was in fact abnormal. The excavation did, however, support earlier suspicions about long gone and forgotten route of transport and travel between the southern and the eastern parts of Iceland through the Fljótsdalur valley and over the Vatnajökull glacier’s eastern end.\textsuperscript{12} The route which lay geographically close to the monastery explains its presently peculiar location, demonstrating at the same time its constant coexistence with the surrounding environment.


\textsuperscript{11} Kristjánsdóttir, ‘The Tip of the Iceberg’: 54-58.

3. A large monastic institution in a remote valley

By looking closer at what has been found during the excavation at Skriðuklaustur, the monastery seems to have been a relatively large institution on the Icelandic medieval scale. By that time it is estimated that the country had at most 40,000 inhabitants, after having dealt with the various disasters caused by natural catastrophes and epidemics.\(^\text{13}\)

The monastery was established only sixteen years after the enormous eruption in 1477, in a crater of Veidivötn, located in the southern part of the Vatnajökull glacier. The volcanic ash from it spread all the way to W-Europe and is commonly thought to have caused crop failure in certain areas there as in Iceland. The ash from the Veidivötn eruption can still be found in the soil in Iceland and up to 10 cm thick layer of it is visible right under the monastic ruins which were built on top of it. The damage must have been considerable, especially for the farmers in the east, even in the centuries after the eruption. Archaeological investigations indicate that Hrafnkelsdalur valley was deserted after this and most likely other maternal valleys in the east. Many of the farms that were abandoned during the eruption were never habited again.\(^\text{14}\)

For example, the year 1479 is remembered for the sea ice that was lying attached to the shoreline of Northern and Eastern Iceland, causing harm for those relying on fishing. This resulted in colder climate, that later caused grass failure in 1492, 1493 and 1494. And just about when the monastery at Skriðuklaustur was founded, in 1495-6, a new wave of plague swept around Europe and Iceland. Earlier the Black Death and other plagues had killed up to 60% of the inhabitants of Europe and the inhabitants of Iceland were certainly not excluded from these disasters.\(^\text{15}\) After the plague in the 15\textsuperscript{th} century, an epidemic of syphilis followed.

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\(^{13}\) Karlsson, Iceland’s 1100 Years. History of a Marginal Society: 44-51, 115.

\(^{14}\) Rafnsson, Byggðaleifar í Hrafnkelsdal og á Brúardölum: 93, 100.

\(^{15}\) Karlsson, Iceland’s 1100 Years: 112-117.
The nineteen cases of syphilis identified so far in the skeletal collection from Skriðuklaustur indicate that it was an epidemic disease in Iceland as in the rest of Europe.\textsuperscript{16}

Although the catastrophes may mostly have been over when the monastery at Skriðuklaustur was established, the consequences were still obvious, appearing in generally bad health conditions because of food shortages and the rising number homeless people. The capacity of the church, state or even the common homes to assist those in need was similarly much smaller than before. Most likely, this may have affected the decision of the bishop in Skálholt, Stefán Jónsson, to establish a monastery in the Eastern quarter of Iceland – notably at the Skriða farm in Fljótsdalur – in the late fifteenth century where the situation was the worst. All the other eight monasteries and nunneries in Iceland were founded long before, during the 12\textsuperscript{th} and 13\textsuperscript{th} century, and were located in the south and the north. Still, as later came into light, the Skriða farm was splendidly located on the major route between east and south where travellers could be provided shelter, food and caring.\textsuperscript{17}

Certainly not all monasteries and nunneries ran hospitals or alms-houses but hospitality for the poor as well as travellers was one of their general obligations. Therefore they were largely located close to well-travelled routes rather than in a remote inland valley. According to the current situation, a more logical location for the monastery at Skriðuklaustur would have been in the fjords along the Eastern coastline, where the most common routes of transport are today, both on sea and land. The other medieval monasteries and nunneries in Iceland were in fact all located around the coastline of the island, where the population density was the most.\textsuperscript{18}

Being the only monastery located east of the Vatnajökull glacier, Skriðuklaustur must even have been meant to serve a relatively large area with guests and travellers coming from the whole Eastern quarter of Iceland. Consequently, to be able to feed and shelter all those

\textsuperscript{17} Kristjánsdóttir, Sagan af klaustrinu á Skriðu: 297-311.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.: 296.
that came to there, the monastery needed a considerable amount of supplies from the surrounding area. This further underlines the importance of the monastery being located on well-travelled cross country routes. Sheep was though raised at the monastic farm, according to the identifications done on the animal bones found there, but most other logistics must have been transported over land to the monastery.\(^\text{19}\)

As indicated before, it was though the identifications on fish bones found at the site that provided an answer to the question about the currently peculiar location of the monastery. The majority of the fish bone analysed so far are were of large cod, ling and haddock that can only be caught off the southern and western coast of Iceland. This discovery pointed to the possibility of forgotten route in the Eastern quarter over Vatnajökull glacier to the inland areas in the east. The shoreline from the south to the eastern fjords and further into the valley in Fljótsdalur is much longer and more tricky, especially for transporting goods, because of the several voluminous glacial rivers that needs even to be crossed. However, today it may seem improbable that people travelled and transported fish over the Vatnajökull glacier but this was done.\(^\text{20}\) The business of the brethren underlines this even further (Fig 2).

4. Business in the south

Monasteries got their incomes in different ways. The buying and selling of farms was an important source of revenue, especially the more valuable ones that had additional resources from the sea and the shore. During medieval times, stock fish was extremely valuable in Iceland, as was the drift wood that could be collected on the shoreline. The wood was mostly used for the inland market, as was the stock fish, but it was also exported to Europe.\(^\text{21}\)

According to the documents preserved about the activities at the Skriðuklaustur monastery, the brethren there obviously strived to buy farms by the sea, probably because of

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\(^{20}\) Björnsson, Jöklar á Íslandi: 243.

\(^{21}\) Þorlákrsson, Frá kirkjuvaldi til ríkisvalds.
the access to valuable recourses that they could provide, notably fish and drift wood. This was most likely both for the running of the monastery, as well as for food, building material and for its on-going business. The monasteries incomes also came from the local community, benefactors, through the sale of books and for their work of healing.

The first prior of the monastery, Narfi Jónsson, immediately starts to secure its economical basis by buying farms after he gains his position. These were all very valuable farms, located on the shoreline of the eastern fjords as Seyðisfjörður, Reyðarfjörður, Loðmundarfjörður and Fáskrúðsfjörður. The prior not only strived to buy valuable farms in the East but also in the South. In 1504 he buys a part in one of the most valuable farms in Iceland at the time, Borgarhöfn in Suðursveit, and pays for it with a coastal farm located on the eastern shoreline and by educating a young boy from Borgarhöfn. Narfi’s successor, Þorvarður Helgason, continues to acquire this valuable farm in Suðursveit and buys larger parts of it, also paying for it with two other coastal farms in the East. In the end the monastery owned ¾ of Borgarhöfn but the bishopric in Skálholt the rest.

The farm, Borgarhöfn in Suðursveit, was more valuable than most other coastal farms, as it gave access to larger fish than could be caught from the other similar farms in the East. Because of meteorological reasons and the geographical landscape under sea outside of the fjord Hornafjörður, the large size fish types can’t wander further East than this. The sea south of it is also much warmer than it is outside the northern and eastern shoreline of Iceland. The smaller fish that stays in the cold sea between Greenland and Iceland can’t become larger than 60-80 cm in length, while the size of the fish outside the southern and western coastline is usually over one meter, as the ones found exclusively at Skriðuklaustur.

Actually, this is a well-known fact among fishers and ichthyologists in Iceland today. Similarly, investigations on fish bones found in archaeological context prove that the situation

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23 Steinsson, Saga munklífis á Skriðu: 108.
24 Sigfús Schopka, personal communication.
has stayed unchanged since the settlement of the island in the 9th century. For example, the fish found during an excavation at the medieval trading centre Gásir in Eyjafjörður, located by the Northern coast of Iceland, only measured up to 80 cm in length. Similar results were gained from an identification made on fish bones from the farm Akurvík in the Northern part of the West-fjords. The bones there were collected from a rubbish heap, dating from the settlement to recent times.

It may therefore now appear to be obvious that the monastery transported fish, most likely as stock fish, from the south coast over the Vatnajökull glacier to the inland valley where Skriðuklaustur monastery was located. Oddly enough, by examining the written documents closer it is more and more obvious that the glacier was crossed, both for transport and general travelling, between the south and through the valley of Fljótsdalur. Place-names attached to the glacier also indicate that fishermen travelled all the way from the northern part of Iceland to the southern coast, most likely through the route along Fljótsdalur valley, merely to get the large, valuable fish.

Only a few routes may have been open there at times but these may have moved occasionally because of the constant changes in the glacier itself, until in the end it became impossible to pass. This most likely happened during the mid-seventeenth century, because of a huge icefall in the eastern part of the Vatnajökull glacier and the route has been closed ever since.

A further result of these dramatic changes, which closed the route between Suðursveit and Skriðuklaustur, were both cultural and governmental adaptations, as the connections between these two parts of the island were disrupted. The Eastern quarter was initially

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28 Magnússon, Chorographia Islandica; Björnsson, Jöklar á Íslandi: 82-83, 228.
geographically the largest one of the four in Iceland, reaching from the Mývatn-area in the North to Vík in the South. Only a century after the pathway closed down, the southern part of the Eastern quarter was cut off, ending at the northern side of the glacier. It has remained as such since then. This interaction underlines the active process and constant reconstructing of the dynamic cohabitation of culture and nature, comprising the networks of each and every sphere of a society.

5. Conclusion

The business of the brethren at Skriðuklaustur in the Southern quarter of Iceland underlines that their monastery was the first and last stopover before crossing the largest glacier in Iceland, Vatnajökull. The activities there indicate furthermore that it was also perfectly located for to serve the whole area of the Eastern quarter in Iceland. The fjords in the east were also easily accessible, as well as the Héraðsflói bay in the north. Furthermore, the discoveries presented here, express how the monastic society in question operated mutually with its environment. Thus the natural catastrophes as well as available building material, plants for healing or fish for selling or feeding were all equal actors in the monastic network, as much as the brethren themselves.

Oddly enough, the priors at Skriðuklaustur monastery completed splendidly the requirements for the operation of the monastery – which was created following international standards of the Catholic Church – by serving over 250 individuals during only a period of 60 years, in spite of it being located on the outskirts of the northern medieval world. This altogether demonstrates how culture and nature, as joint and active actors, forges human life and society. And the lost path that presumably was decisive for the location of the monastic institution at Skriða is now found after being buried in ice for centuries.
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Fig. 1. The ruins of the Skriðuklaustur monastery (© Vala Gunnarsdóttir).
Fig. 2. A map of Iceland showing the major routes to and from Skriðuklaustur (©Steinunn Kristjánsdóttir).