



FROM EXCAVATION TO THE INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVE THE REYKHOLT PROJECT

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A international research project has been developed in connection with the famous historical site, Reykholt, in Western Iceland.¹ The project, called *The Reykholt Project*, is centred on the most well-known and powerful medieval Icelander, the historian, poet and politician, Snorri Sturluson, born 1178 or 1179, died 1241. There are many reliable written sources on Snorri, and now, in recent years, the medieval ruins that possibly represent Snorri's own housing and surroundings in Reykholt have been unearthed. The project, progressive in its methods and scientific approach, has therefore great potential.

Reykholt is one of the most important historic sites in Iceland, both in the eyes of Icelanders and guests from abroad. As many know, the writings of Snorri are the main source of Northern mythology and the history of the Scandinavian peoples. It is thought that all his major works were created in Reykholt, thus firmly linking the history of the site with this chieftain, who came into possession of the farm and church site at Reykholt in the year 1206 and lived there until he was killed by his enemies and rivals on 23rd September 1241. The farm at Reykholt has been important through the centuries, and Snorri's farm was probably situated in the same area as later farms. Snorri was deemed to be the richest chieftain in Iceland and *Sturlunga saga* describes his farm as having been fortified.

Reykholt has always been popular because of the visible monuments connected with Snorri, in particular the hot-water tub 'Snorralaug' and a dug-down passageway leading to it. Traditionally it is thought that Snorri was responsible for the building of the tub, but the oldest description of it dates from the early part of the 18th century (reference). The tub is mentioned in 'Landnáma' (the Book of Settlements) but it is not known when the site was first settled. It has been extensively repaired on two occasions but is now defined by national law as a listed monument. The tub is fed by two channels that lead from a hot spring called Skrifla, located to the northeast of the tub. The remains of two other steam channels leading from Skrifla to the medieval ruins have also been discovered.



There has been a church at Reykholt since at least the early medieval period; and it is possible that the first church was constructed shortly after the nation's conversion to Christianity in the year 999 or 1000. It is thought that churches at Reykholt from before 1887 all stood within the boundaries of the churchyard, maybe on the same spot, north of the farm and south of the church that was built in 1887. In the churchyard at Reykholt the foundation of previous churches can still be seen and archaeologists began investigating the ruins in the summer of 2002. The oldest church ruins, which have not yet been unearthed seem to be very large compared with other Icelandic churches. 'Sturlungareitur' marks the spot where Snorri's grave is thought to be, in front of the entrance to the medieval church. In the eighteenth century, gravediggers discovered a gravestone with the name of Snorri inscribed onto its surface in runic script. With time the inscription is said to have worn away and the stone was later reburied.

The church in Reykholt has through the centuries been of great importance, and therefore often the seat of high-ranking clergymen. A register of the possessions of the church is the so-called *Reykjaholtsmáldagi* (*The Deed of the Church at Reykholt*) and it is the oldest church record from Reykholt. From this document it is possible to glean a great deal of information about the church's real estate holdings, rights in the surrounding land, and furnishings, as well as the names of some of the people associated with the church. The deed also explains how some assets came to be the property of the church. Snorri Sturluson is among those who are mentioned as donors, and it is conceivable (though impossible to prove) that Snorri himself wrote a part of the deed.

The deed is therefore a very important historical and grammatical primary source. It is considered by many to be the oldest written document in Old-Icelandic, which some prefer to call Old-Norse, preserved in the original. Only a small handful of Icelandic manuscript fragments are considered by experts to be as old as, or older than, *Reykjaholtsmáldagi*. The first portion of the document is thought to be from 1150-1208. The deed offers a wealth of information about the history of the Icelandic language, including the evolution of spelling and letter formation from the latter part of the 12th century into the 13th century. In the document, which is one leaf, Snorri is mentioned a few times.



2. ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN REYKHOLT

Literary sources, such as the *Reykjaholtsmáldagi* deed and *Sturlunga*, have of course been of some help in relation to the archaeological excavations in Reykholt at the old farm-site and the medieval church. These excavations were for the first time systematically carried out at Reykholt in the summer of 1987 and came to an end in 1989 due to a lack of funding. A district school was built in Reykholt around 1930, the pride of the locals, and it was finally closed down in 1997. During this period, archaeological remains were discovered as a result of building work in connection with the district school or the digging of trenches for cables and pipelines.

Research was resumed on behalf of the National Museum of Iceland in the summer of 1998, and, under the leadership of dr. Guðrún Sveinbjarnardóttir, archaeologists have been revealing some building features that can be traced to Snorri's time, and hopefully to Snorri himself, even though that will probably never be proved. The archaeological research that is now being carried out is part of the revival of Reykholt as a culturally and historically important centre. The revival triggered a long-term investigation into Reykholt's archaeological heritage.

Farm buildings from various periods make up an extensive succession of cultural deposits at Reykholt. Buildings were rebuilt periodically and materials often recycled, resulting in a complex myriad of remains, which can be challenging to interpret. Prior to the 1998 excavation season at Reykholt, an old and worn-down sports-hall was torn down and the road and a car park north of it, removed. A subterranean passageway (The dug-down passage-way) was discovered in 1934 during the construction of the sports-hall, which was built directly above it. The building stood right above the upper part of the subterranean passageway, into which, concrete supports had partly been set. The northern part of the passageway in this area has been excavated almost fully. It runs in a north–north-westerly direction from ‘Snorralaug’ and seems to veer a little to the north, where, after ten steps, it disappears into a section. The steps have been dated from around the 13th century plus-minus a hundred years. Glass fragments, fire-cracked stone, peat-ash and other cultural deposits from various periods filled and covered the passage-way, which indicates its use as a dumping site after it had fallen into disuse.

The last turf farm at Reykholt, located just west of the present excavation, was a gable-farm, which faced west. The buildings were torn down in the early 1930's after the construction of



the district school just to the south of the farm. A historical record from the 19th century mentions that the previous farm was located further to the east, where the present excavation is now being carried out.

3. A MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH PROJECT

As a product of the archaeological research, a multidisciplinary research project on this historic site emerged and began to develop in 1999. The aim of the project is to gain new information on Reykholt and its surroundings, not least about the 13th century. The area is studied from several angles; the wider context is viewed by combining research at the site in the area of archaeology, cultural landscape analysis, history, philology, literature and the natural sciences in the hope that these different disciplines can together throw new light on the history of the site and its development in a wider context. The history and literature of the 13th century have already been widely studied, but less has been done in the area of archaeology for that time-period. The main value of the project is the application of new methodology and the new knowledge gained by using such methods.

The Reykholt project is divided into three spheres, which are:

1. Archaeological research
2. The Cultural landscape
3. The Reykholt Centre.

The tasks involved in the three spheres are interdisciplinary. The participants tackle the same major questions, but the connections between the spheres are multidisciplinary, and the frame of each sphere is quite broad. The aim is the publication of a book that will contain all the main conclusions, hopefully in an interdisciplinary manner.

The project's central theme is the cultural landscape or human ecology of Reykholt and the surrounding area, with a focus on the relationship between the landscape and human settlements found within it and how it has been affected and shaped by human occupation through land-use and the exploitation of resources. The research is therefore not only directed towards archaeological remains and their excavation but also towards a variety of other investigative techniques and sources of data. Not only is the farm-site at Reykholt being investigated, but also other farm-sites and shielings associated with it. Travel-routes have been



considered, and there is a possibility that harbours, fishing stations, trade-centres and assembly-sites associated with Reykholt and its history will be investigated too.

But the scholars first of all ask why did a major farm emerge at Reykholt, how did the farming community exploit local resources and to what extent did these activities affect the local landscape? The church and its function and last, but not least, Reykholt generally, as a chieftain's seat and a cultural centre, is studied. The period during which Snorri Sturluson resided at Reykholt receives special attention since this is what, on the whole, is of most interest. One of the questions being asked is whether affluence, or the wealth at Reykholt, served as a pre-requisite to the creativity expressed by Snorri. Can such affluence be detected in the architecture and other archaeological remains? Was the affluence at Reykholt an isolated phenomenon created by Snorri Sturluson or was it part of a general economic trend? How is Reykholt's affluence related to events in other parts of Europe at around the same time? These are just some of the questions being tackled by the inter-disciplinary investigation into Reykholt's past. The site of Reykholt is particularly well suited for such analysis. It is well documented throughout most of its history and numerous insights have been gained into the writings of Snorri Sturluson by philologists and historians.

This also fits in well with future plans for Reykholt, with one of the intentions, to bring the Snorrastofa, a medieval institution, to a higher level as a medieval research centre.

This paper ends with the official description of the Reykholt Project, written by Professor Helgi Þorláksson at the Historical Institute at the University of Iceland and Guðrún Sveinbjarnardóttir at the National Museum of Iceland:

The Reykholt project

A project connected to Reykholt in Borgarfjörður

Introduction

The Reykholt project, which was launched in 1999, is divided into the following three components: 1) Archaeological investigations; 2) Cultural landscape and environment; 3) Reykholt as a centre.



Steering committee

Bergur Þorgeirsson, Director of Snorrastofa, Dr. Guðrún Gísladóttir, Science Institute of the University of Iceland, Dr. Guðrún Sveinbjarnardóttir, National Museum of Iceland, Dr. Haukur Jóhannesson, Icelandic Institute of Natural History, Dr. Helgi Þorláksson, Historical Institute of the University of Iceland, Margrét Hallgrímsdóttir, Director of the National Museum of Iceland (chair), Svavar Sigmundsson, Director of the Place Name Institute of Iceland.

Components

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| | | |
| Archaeological investigations | Cultural landscape and environment | Reykholt as a centre |
| Directed by Guðrún Sveinbjarnardóttir | Directed by Guðrún Gísladóttir | Directed by Bergur Þorgeirsson |
| Sub-components a. Farm-mound b. Church-site Co-directed by Orri Vésteinsson | Sub-components a. Mapping of vegetation b. Mapping of cultural landscape | Sub-components a. Ecclesiastical centre Directed by Helgi Þorláksson b. Centre of power c. Centre of textual culture Directed by Karl G. Johansson |

Coordinator: Helgi Þorláksson



Topics covered within each component are interdisciplinary, whereas the connection between the components is multidisciplinary. The participants deal with the same main questions. The general aim of each component is rather broad as follows:

To provide a better understanding of the process of centralisation of power during the Commonwealth period in Iceland, the creation of political and ecclesiastical centres and how this relates to land-use, settlement development and the creation of literature. Reykholt in the time of Snorri Sturluson is at the core of the investigation. Comparison will be sought in Scandinavia and in Western Europe. The aim is to combine research in the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences. The aim is the publication of all the main results in an interdisciplinary fashion.

The project aims to a) bring together Icelandic scholars in different disciplines in the hope that this will maximise results within each discipline; b) encourage international cooperation of scholars of various disciplines in order to stimulate Icelandic research and vice versa; c) encourage young Icelanders and non-Icelanders to do research leading to BA/BS, MA/MS and PhD degrees.

As of the 15th of March 2002, Birna Bjarnadóttir Dr. phil is a part-time employee at Snorrastofa. Half of her time is devoted to administering the Reykholt project.

THE THREE COMPONENTS

1. Archaeological investigations

a. Excavations at the farm-site have been ongoing for the past five years. The farm seems always to have been located in the same general area, between the old church and the school-house that was built in 1929. Below a farm dated to between the 17th and 19th century and other fragmentary building remains, well preserved remains that can be dated to the medieval period were found. These include the dug-down passage-way leading from the warm-pool Snorralaug, thought to refer to what is called *forskáli* in the Sturlunga saga, and through which access could be gained to the farm-houses. This is an impressive construction. A trench was dug down into natural rock/earth, into which dry-stone walls, preserved to a height of 1.8 m, were built, leaving a 70 cm wide passage that swings into the corner of a rectangular building-foundation, where it contains several stone steps. It was probably roofed.

The rectangular building-foundation did not contain any internal features or proper floor-layers. It is dug-down below ground level and so is the access to the entrance, which is a 2 m



long paved passage-way into one corner. The foundation stones around the entrance are enormous, capable of carrying a substantial structure that was possibly made of wood, which has disappeared as a result of later activities at the site.

To the north of this building-foundation another building, probably of a similar age was found. Its dug-down walls are made of dry-stone on the inside, with turf at the back. Its floor is completely laid of flag-stones and in it there is a hole ca 1 m in diameter and 50 cm deep with a stone-laid base. The likeliest interpretation of the function of this building is that it was a bath-house, based on the fact that towards it runs a conduit or channel, which probably carried steam or water into the house from the hot spring, Skrifla, that lies to the east of the site. The conduit has stone-built sides with flat stones on top. Clay was used as insulation at the sides and turf on the top. This is the fourth conduit to be discovered at Reykholt. Two of them carried water from the hot-spring to Snorralaug, two run towards and into the farm-site, and probably carried steam. The described constructions indicate sophisticated use of hot spring resources during the medieval period. These remains could well date from the 13th-century, from the time Snorri Sturluson lived at Reykholt. Older remains have been discovered, including a fire-place whose use has been dated to between the 10th and 12th centuries, and a carved wooden object which has been stylistically dated to the 10th or 11th century.

b. *Excavations at the church-site.* Reykholt had already become an ecclesiastical centre, so-called *staður*, by 1118. A church must have been erected at the site well before that. It became a major church with a resident priest (*sóknarkirkja*). No church of that type has so far been excavated in Iceland. The investigation, which is carried out in co-operation with the Institute of Archaeology in Iceland, began in summer 2002 with a grant from the Kristnihátíðarsjóður fund. A Norwegian specialist in church archaeology, Alf Tore Hommedal from NIKU in Bergen, will participate in the project.

The investigation has already shown that the church-foundation contains several phases and that the remains are well preserved. The old cemetery wall, made exclusively of turf, has also been found, lying further to the south and east than the one visible at present, and below the church still standing today, built in 1886-7. Here an old smithy was also discovered.



The remains discovered at Reykholt give some idea of the layout of the site during the medieval period. It is, however, not possible to gain a complete picture due to disturbances as a result of later building activities at the site.

c. *Connected projects.* Hallgerður Pálsdóttir, a history student, collected descriptions in written sources of the houses at Reykholt. Guðrún Harðardóttir, historian at the National Museum, collected descriptions in written sources of church-buildings at Reykholt. Brynja Birgisdóttir, an archaeology student at Trondheim, carried out a pilot study at the trading centre Hvítárvellir and the surrounding area. Þóra Pétursdóttir, a student of history and geography, carried out an archaeological survey in Reykholtsdalur and the neighbourhood (see bibliography for all the above).

Guðrún Sveinbjarnardóttir is a participant in the project *Landscapes circum Landnám. Viking settlements in the North-Atlantic and its human and ecological consequences*, which was awarded a grant of almost 1,25 million pounds from the Leverhulme Trust in 2001. The project concerns itself with an investigation into the human and ecological consequences of Viking settlement in the North Atlantic region, or more precisely what happens when people colonise 'pristine' landscapes. This project is linked to the Reykholt project in so far that one of the areas to be studied is the Reykholtsdalur-valley.

2. Cultural landscape and environment

This component largely deals with environmental change from before *landnám* (settlement of Iceland) until modern times, in particular with changes in the ecology, but also with changes in the physical appearance of the land caused by man. The topic for investigation is the cultural landscape; that is how man has used his environment and changed it. The aim is to throw light on land-use and agricultural history, and to investigate what effect climatic and environmental change has had on the appearance and quality of the land. This project was launched in 2000. It is divided into two parts:

a. *The mapping of vegetation* from before *landnám* to modern times with the aim of investigating ecological change resulting from *landnám* and how this has developed into modern times. The vegetation in Reykholtsdalur and Hálsasveit and in the shieling areas



belonging to Reykholt will be investigated. Pollen analysis will be applied to throw light on vegetation, and tephrochronology, for dating environmental change. The effect of climate on the vegetation will be studied. Descriptions of the environment, including those of the vegetation, will be extracted from the saga literature and other written sources, as well as from place-names. The effect that changes in power and ownership in the area from the time of *landnám* until modern times have had on the right to land-use and on its nature will be studied. The main causes of vegetation change will be explained, both natural ones and those effected by man. A vegetation model for different periods will be made, based on information from written sources, place-names, pollen analysis and tephrochronological studies. Geographer Björg Gunnarsdóttir will work on this project for her PhD. Her supervisors are Guðrún Gísladóttir, senior lecturer (dósent), Ingibjörg Jónsdóttir, senior lecturer, and Professor Helgi Þorláksson. Also involved will be Svavar Sigmundsson, Stefan Brink, senior lecturer at Uppsala University, Dr. Andrew Dugmore, lecturer at the University of Edinburgh, Professor Kevin Edwards at the University of Aberdeen and Dr. Guðrún Sveinbjarnardóttir. This component is closely linked to the Leverhulme project described above. The investigation will e.g. throw light on the effect farming and other land-use has had on the land following *landnám*.

b. *Mapping of cultural landscape* where an attempt is made to explain the processes that have formed landscapes. Tryggvi Már Ingvason, a student of geography and history, worked on a pilot project and wrote a report. Based on this work he completed the BS dissertation *Leiðir tveggja alda í nágrenni Reykhólts í Borgarfirði* in 2001, supervised by Guðrún Gísladóttir, Svavar Sigmundsson and Helgi Þorláksson.

3. Reykholt as a centre

All three parts to this component, the church, secular power and textual culture were important to Snorri Sturluson, who took over the ecclesiastical centre at Reykholt and made it into a greater centre of power than it had been before. It has to be assumed that he wrote his well-known works here. Among the topics for investigation is, in what way the ecclesiastical centre or '*staður*' at Reykholt was useful to Snorri in his struggle for secular power and why he made Reykholt his centre of power.



a. *Ecclesiastical centre.* Reykholt was one of the main ‘*staðir*’ of Iceland in the ecclesiastical sense of the word. The purpose of the oldest and largest ‘*staðir*’ will be investigated. The hope is that an investigation of the history of the ‘*staðir*’ and comparison with similar establishments abroad will help to answer that question. The important ‘*staður*’ Stafholt, in the same district as Reykholt, offers comparative material. Snorri Sturluson took possession of both ‘*staðir*’. Sigríður Júlíusdóttir completed a BA dissertation in 2001 on the management of the ‘*staður*’ at Stafholt, and a similar BA dissertation on Reykholt is in progress. In 2002 Benedikt Eyþórsson completed a BA dissertation on the largest ‘*staðir*’ and the main farm churches (*bændakirkja*, the farmer was in charge of the church) in the Borgarfjörður district.

An international workshop on ecclesiastical centres was held at Reykholt on the 3rd of October 2002. A grant of 1,3 million Icel. krónur was granted by Kristnihátíðarsjóður for this project, which Helgi Þorláksson directs.

b. *Centre of power.* The concentration of secular power in Iceland in the 12th and 13th centuries is noteworthy. Why did it happen? In his previously mentioned BS dissertation, Tryggvi Már Ingvarsson shows that Reykholt was well situated as regards communication routes and that the location could be important for a man who aimed to form a principality (‘district-state’, *héraðsríki*) and wanted to have widespread influence. One of the research questions is whether Snorri Sturluson was interested in taking possession of Reykholt on account of its location, the income generated from the place, or whether the symbolic importance of the ‘*staður*’ was more important. Did the ‘*staðir*’ offer respect, which in turn secured political following? The importance of social honour for Snorri Sturluson is covered in a recent BA dissertation by Viðar Pálsson. This and other related topics are treated in a new book called *Sæmdarmenn*.

c. *Centre of textual culture.* Social honour was also connected to cultural and educational activities. Writing meant ‘cultural wealth’, to quote Pierre Bourdieu. Snorri Sturluson is a famous writer and the Reykholt-project gives specialists in textual or literary culture (*bókmennning*) of the medieval period an opportunity to meet and discuss his works in the light



of his life and place of residence, his subjects, historical circumstances, his literary world and foreign parallels.

The aim is to put Icelandic textual culture (texts, writing, book-making) into a wide context, e.g. in the light of literacy and writing knowledge, social role and European connections. This component is headed by a Nordic committee including Karl G. Johansson, lecturer at Växjö (chairman), Bergur Þorgeirsson, Simonetta Battista at the Arnamagnaean Institute in Copenhagen and Professor Else Mundal at the University of Bergen. A Nordic interdisciplinary workshop was held on this subject at Reykholt in 2001. Following on from that, Norfa awarded a grant to the project, amounting to 280,000 Norwegian crowns, for the next 3-5 years. An international co-operative network has been established; conferences and research courses are held and works will be published. A conference entitled *Maktens uttrykk* was held at the Snorrastofa medieval institution in Reykholt in October 2002; it covered topics like *monasteries, churches and secular seats of learning, the development of a system of power and of texts and writing in Iceland in the medieval period*. The sub-committee for the conference included Annette Lassen, a PhD student from Denmark, Guðrún Nordal, a senior lecturer (docent) at the University of Iceland, Alf Tore Hommedal, an archaeologist from Norway, and Lena Liepe, an art historian from Sweden. The conference followed on from the workshop on ecclesiastical centres.

NOTES

¹ This paper is mainly based on the reports written by the scholars, that have done most of the work in the project, Guðrún Sveinbjarnardóttir at the National Museum of Iceland, Professor Helgi Þorláksson at the Historical Institute at the University of Iceland and Karl-Gunnar Johannsson at the Institutionen för humaniora, Växjö universitet in Sweden.



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