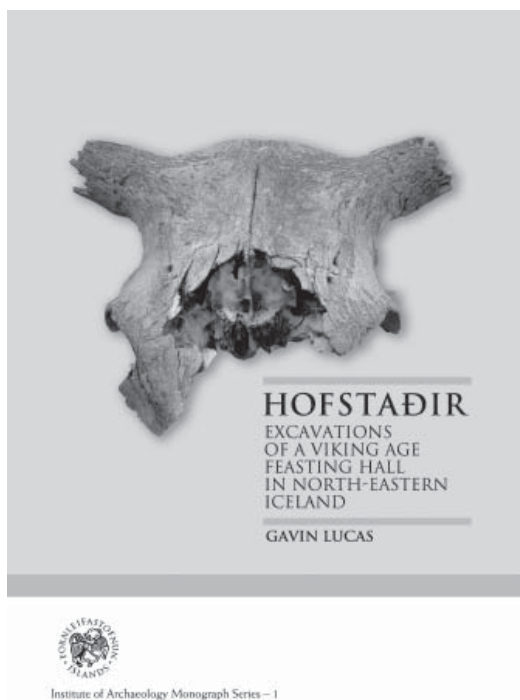


Gavin Lucas (ed.): Hofstaðir – Excavations of a Viking Age Feasting Hall in North-Eastern Iceland. Institute of Archaeology, Iceland 2009



The book describes and interprets the results of a large-scale excavation project, running from 1992 to 2002. The archaeological investigations have centered on a Viking Age aisled hall, Hofstaðir, and its surroundings. The site is located in North-Eastern Iceland near the Lake Mývatn. The international team of archaeologists has unearthed the remains of a relatively large aisled hall and a number of associated features.

The book describes and preliminarily interprets the results of the recent excavation project. The book relies heavily on bio- and geoarchaeological data and a considerable number of pages are devoted to description of the environmental dynamics around the site. The majority of the chapters deal with separate find groups, such as animal bones, plant remains, and the like. These chapters are accompanied by an introductory chapter and

discussion, which reflect upon the preliminary interpretation of the site as a whole and its position in the tradition of Icelandic archaeology. The aims of the book are loosely tied together in the end chapters.

The research history of the site, as Lucas et al. suggest, mirrors closely the development of archaeology in Iceland. The early interest and interpretations concentrated on finding evidence of Viking pagan beliefs, and the relationship of the archaeological finds to the sagas was reflected upon. The interpretation of the site was heavily influenced by the sagas, and Hofstaðir was interpreted as a pagan temple. From the mid-20th century on, archaeologists shifted their attention to the signs of economic activities found at the site, and the previous interpretations of Hofstaðir as a pagan temple were contested. The ritual character of the site was re-evaluated and the new interpretations of the site focused on the political power manifested by the large-scale (in comparison with other similar structures in Iceland) aisled hall.

The present excavation project has taken an environmental approach to the site, engaging an impressive team on specialists of different branches of environmental archaeology. There has been, for instance, specialist of zooarchaeology, palaeobotany and geomorphology in the team. The strong emphasis on environmental techniques mirrors the 1990s interest in environmental archaeology. One of the main aims of the book, and the excavation project, has been to critically assess the function and period of use of the site. Another aim of the excavation project and the book has been to examine the way in which people adapted to their environment and changed their environment. The excavation project has also aimed at critically re-evaluating the research frameworks previously used in Icelandic archaeology and finding new possibilities of interpretation. Against this background, it is understandable that the book concentrates on the environmental data and seeks to use it to take new approaches to site like Hofstaðir. However, in my opinion, the emphasis on presentation of environmental data reduces the complex interaction of people and their environment to list of

find groups and environmental processes. More socially, politically or religiously oriented approaches, as unfashionable as they may seem in relation to the research history of Hofstaðir, would have been necessary in gaining a more comprehensive picture of the site.

One of the central themes in the book is the ceremonial or ritual nature of the site. The long hall in Hofstaðir is impressive in size in comparison with other Viking Age long halls in Iceland, ca. 38 m long, which is one of the reasons it was interpreted as a pagan temple in the early 20th century. Other features at the site are related to everyday activities at the farm. These features have led archaeologists to the conclusion that the site is not merely a pagan temple, but that it has been a Viking chieftain's settlement with major ritual and political significance. As such, it is comparable with Scandinavian monumental halls such as those in Borg, Lejre and Uppsala. However, the lack of clear 'luxury' items, and the fact that the great hall may not have been inhabited during the winter season, led Lucas et al. to dispute the interpretation of the site as a chieftain's settlement. Instead, they suggest that although the subsistence economy was operating year round and the site was thus permanently inhabited, it may not have been a chieftain's settlement and the great hall may have been used for ritual purposes only.

Many indicators, for example the sheer size of the site and some of the finds, clearly indicate that the farm was used for ceremonial purposes. Feasting is mentioned as the function of the site, but feasting as a term is not discussed and its political and social consequences are not critically evaluated. There are some finds, of which I especially have to mention the cattle skull finds, which clearly deserve a ritual-related explanation. A number of cattle crania were discovered from the site, with clear marks of killing with a heavy blow on the forehead and forceful decapitation.

The crania had been subjected to outdoor conditions for long periods of time, perhaps years or months. This suggests that they were put on show in Hofstaðir. The zooarchaeological specialist of the project, Thomas McGovern, also suggests that the ceremonial butchering with dramatic blood shedding took place on the site. A separate research article of the interpretation of the cattle skull finds has been published in the *European Journal of Archaeology* (Thomas & McGovern 2007).

On the other hand, numerous finds, such as spindle whorls, pottery and metal slag evidence of everyday activities such as textile work, cooking, farming and metal working taking place at the site. The archaeological finds thus clearly evidence that the site was both a ritual site and a place of everyday chores and activities. This is fully acknowledged by the authors, but the interesting theoretical implications could be used for a more detailed analysis on the relationship between ritual and everyday life. Nevertheless, as a preliminary analysis of an extensive excavation material, the book is interesting and promising. The team of researchers involved with the excavation project will surely utilize the Hofstaðir material to produce more socially oriented research papers such as that of Lucas & McGovern (2007) in the future.

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