

# Early church organization in Skagafjörður, North Iceland. The results of the Skagafjörður Church Project

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The article discusses the results of the Skagafjörður Church project. The aim of the project is to establish the number and nature of the earliest, Christian cemeteries and churches in the county of Skagafjörður, North Iceland. By employing a systematic regional approach to the study of early Christian cemeteries, a more nuanced interpretation of early church development can be generated. The research suggests that at least 130 cemeteries may have been established in Skagafjörður in the 11th century, following the official adoption of Christianity AD 999/1000. The results indicate a swift adoption of Christian burial rites and cemetery architecture and that at first most independent farmsteads had their own Christian household cemetery. The apparent uniformity of burial customs and architecture suggests some form of management or communality from the outset. Many of these cemeteries appear to have gone out of use in the late 11th/ early 12th centuries, an indication of increasing ecclesiastical control.

## Introduction

Although Christianity was known to, and possibly practiced by, a section of the settlement population of Iceland, it is generally considered to have been officially adopted at the national assembly Althing in AD 999/1000. This heralded religious, political and societal changes leading to the establishment of two ecclesiastical power centres, the bishopric of Skálholt in the south and the bishopric at Hólar in the north. The former was established in AD 1056 and the latter in AD 1106. The establishment of the bishoprics gave rise to a more organized ecclesiastical infrastructure which, with the adoption of the tithe in 1096/7, was further facilitated by a steady income (Jón Jóhannesson 1956: 176–187, Sveinn Víkingur 1970: 105–106, Björn Þorsteinsson 1980: 62, 89, 92, Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 1999: 188–190, Orri Vésteinsson 2000a: 17–19, Orri Vésteinsson 2005: 71).

The transition from a predominantly pagan to Christian society was in all likelihood not as linear or clear cut as indicated in the official conversion narrative; however, there appears to have been a relatively sharp change in burial customs and burial location around AD 1000 (Orri Vésteinsson 2005: 73–74). Little, however, is known

about the developments that took place in the first centuries of Christianity: when and how many churches and cemeteries were established and/or abandoned, who owned them, where they were situated and how and when burial practices start to reflect the new religion. In order to address some of these questions, the Skagafjörður Church Project was formed in 2008, organised and run by the Skagafjörður Heritage museum (Guðný Zoëga & Guðmundur St. Sigurðarson 2010:95).

The study deals with the period from the official conversion in AD 999/1000 until AD 1318 when the first surviving church registry for the Hólar diocese was compiled (Dipl. Isl. II 1893: 423–489). The initial step was assessing the scope of the project by conducting an extensive review of documentary sources. This revealed over 130 documented or suspected church/cemetery<sup>1</sup> sites in Skagafjörður (Sigríður Sigurðardóttir 2012: 56) a figure which, assuming that a number of undocumented sites exist, is probably a conservative estimate. The earliest contemporary documentary records date to the 12th century and have, in conjunction with even later sources, been used to cast a light on the realities and development in the formative years of the church in the 11th century, an era which, due to lack of written sources, is essentially prehistoric. Archaeology is, thus, the discipline that offers the most direct evidence for the incidence and nature of early church sites. By adding the archaeological methodology of surface and sub-surface surveying and targeted excavation to the documentary analysis, a fuller picture of the early ecclesiastical landscape emerges.

The most readily identifiable archaeological feature of early Christian church complexes<sup>2</sup> is the cemetery and in this paper the terms church and cemetery are used interchangeably, as burials plots seem to have been associated with the majority, if not all, of the earliest churches. Whether Christian cemeteries without churches existed, has still not been established. The earliest small ecclesiastical buildings have often been called chapels in the literature (see for instance Vésteinnsson 2000) but are here termed churches in order to avoid any confusion with later ecclesiastical terminology.

<sup>1</sup> The graveyards discussed in this paper are termed cemeteries rather than churchyards as the function of the small chapels/churches is as yet unclear. The churches may in some instances have been a later addition to an established cemetery.

<sup>2</sup> Here the term complex is used for church and cemetery walls.

## Previous research

A large number of early Christian churches is mentioned in various medieval church cartularies and other written sources. This, along with frequent unexpected findings of human bones had prompted the supposition that a substantial number of small household churches and cemeteries existed in the early days of Christianity in Iceland. These privately owned proprietary church complexes represent an early stage of Christian practice in Iceland, prior to the development of more formal church institutions. In 1963, the archaeologist Kristján Eldjárn noted that the ubiquity of early churches was becoming increasingly evident (Kristján Eldjárn 1963: 96). In the early 1970's the scholar Sveinn Víkingur put forward the theory that burial churches had been established on most independent farms after the conversion (Sveinn Víkingur 1970:134–136). He also proposed that a large number of these early churches had fallen out of use or gained a lesser, or greater, status after the establishment of the tithe laws in 1097 AD (Sveinn Víkingur 1970: 118). The presence of numerous smaller burial churches from the early days of Christianity has been suggested by other scholars<sup>3</sup> although none have gone as far as Sveinn Víkingur in their estimations.

There are a number of cemetery and church sites that have been wholly or partially excavated in Iceland.<sup>4</sup> All of these sites have been excavated using modern excavation methods, although some were conducted as rescue excavations on fragmentarily preserved material and, as such, are less comprehensive. In addition there are a number of published and unpublished reports on stray and fragmentary skeletal or cemetery finds, many of whom have ambiguous finding circumstances. Early churches and cemeteries have also been included in general surface surveying of archaeological remains (Orri Vésteinsson with references 2012:4). However, apart from a currently ongoing broad scale research project,<sup>5</sup> archaeological research on churches and associated cemeteries has, primarily, been in the form of single site efforts. The Skagafjörður Church Project aims to add a more in depth regional review

<sup>3</sup> See for instance Adolf Friðriksson 2011:60, Orri Vésteinsson 2005: 75.

<sup>4</sup> See Steinunn Kristjánsdóttir 2003, Orri Vésteinsson 2000b, Jón Steffensen 1943, Vilhjálmur Ö. Vilhjálmsson 1996, Mjöll Snæsdóttir 1988, Jesse Byock *et al* 2005, Magnús Þorkelsson 2007, Rúnar Leifsson & Guðrún Alda Gísladóttir 2007, Hildur Gestsdóttir (ed.) 2006 and Guðrún Sveinbjarnardóttir, 2009. Margrét Hallmundsóttir & Guðný Zoëga, 2012.

<sup>5</sup>The project is called Death and Burial in Iceland for 1150 years and aims at looking at the changes in all burial data from the Settlement age to modern times in the whole of Iceland. See Orri Vésteinsson and Adolf Friðriksson 2011.

of early church sites, which allows for a more comprehensive discussion on the chronology and development of churches and burial rites.<sup>6</sup>

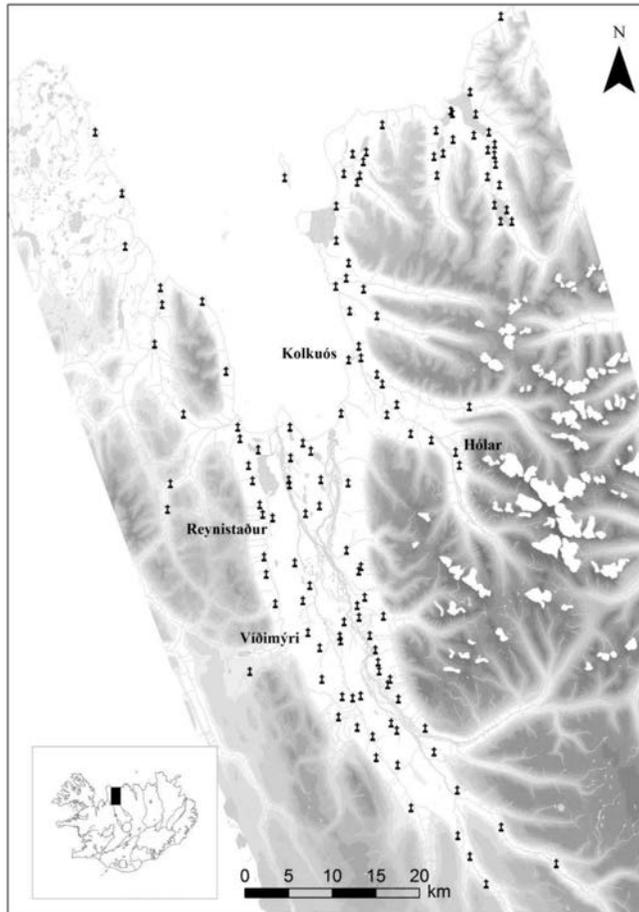


Figure 1. A map showing all known early church/cemetery sites in Skagafjörður.

<sup>6</sup>In addition, a number of early Christian or conversion period cemeteries which might, at least partly, be comparable with the Skagafjörður material have been excavated in the North Atlantic region as well the British Isles. For Norway see Sellevold 1996, For Greenland see: Krogh 1983 and Keller 1989. For the Faroe Islands see Stummann Hansen 2011, for Denmark

## The Skagafjörður Church Project

The Skagafjörður Church Project is a focused, regional investigation of early Christian sites in Skagafjörður, North Iceland. Archaeologically, Skagafjörður offers a great site for studying early church development. It was the home of many of the important political figures in the medieval period and is the home of Hólar in Hjaltadalur which, for seven centuries, was the Episcopal see and the religious, economic and political centre of North Iceland (Jón Þ. Þór 2006: 245). Skagafjörður has, furthermore, in the last decade, been the venue for a number of large scale archaeological projects. The Hólar Project is an interdisciplinary research project which for over a decade was carried out at Hólar and its neighbouring harbour Kolkuós (Ragnheiður Traustadóttir & Guðný Zoëga 2006: 699, Ragnheiður Traustadóttir 2009: 16). The 11th century cemetery and pagan grave sites at Keldudalur (Guðný Zoëga & Ragnheiður Traustadóttir 2007, Guðný Zoëga 2009) and the 11th century cemetery and church at Stóra–Seyla (Guðný Zoëga & Douglas Bolender 2014) have been excavated and so has the 11th century cemetery and 11th–13th century church at Neðri–Ás (Vésteinsson 2000b). A team of specialists from the United States has been developing geophysical methods for sub–surface settlement surveying in the area (Bolender *et al.* 2011) and a district wide survey and excavation project is being undertaken in connection with the documentation of the local history of Skagafjörður (Guðný Zoëga *et al.* 2013: 2). In addition, a number of cemeteries have come to light through construction work in recent years, all of which have been archaeologically examined. The Church project utilizes results from all of these projects as well as conducting primary research on church/cemetery sites.

## A systematic approach to the regional study of early Christian cemeteries

The first step of the project involved piecing together a possible sequence of church sites from written sources. These included saga literature, partially contemporary sources such as the saga of the Sturlungs and various medieval church registries and other ecclesiastical documentation. In addition, information has been gathered on skeletal finds, local folklore and anecdotes relating to burial sites and place names, which might indicate the possible presence of pagan or Christian cemeteries that are otherwise not mentioned in the written documents (Sigríður Sigurðardóttir 2012: 2). Due to their distinct circular form and associated sanctity, some early cemeteries have

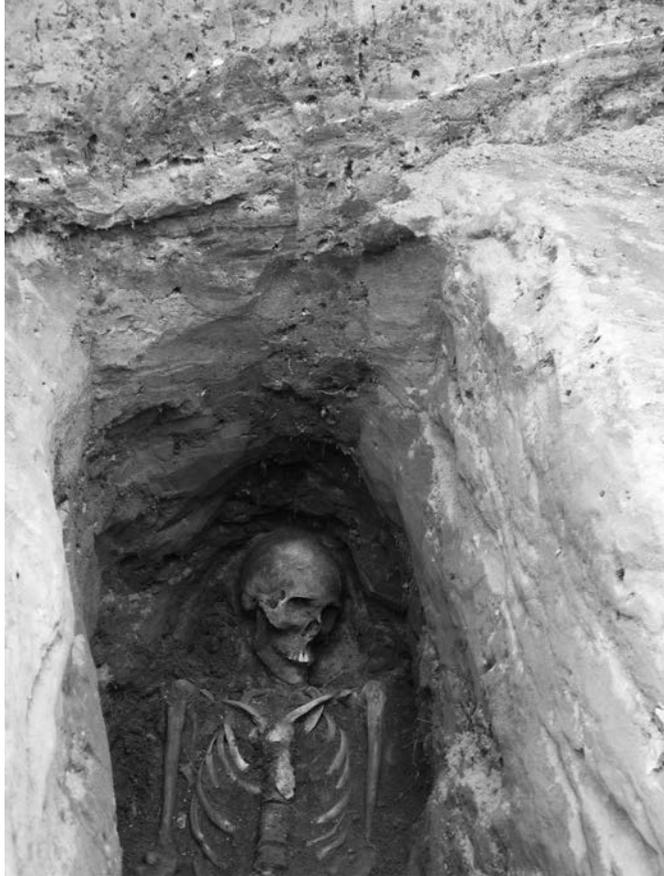
see Kieffer–Olsen 1993. For Sweden see Grundberg *et al* 2000 and Gejvall 1960, for Northern England see Hadley 2000. A good overview of the development in Ireland see Ó Carragáin 2005 and 2010. For Orkney and Shetland see Barrett 2005.

been preserved whereas the associated farmhouse and other remains have been levelled. Nonetheless, many cemeteries have disappeared through construction work or farming activities, especially in the latter half of the 20th century.

The name Church Project is, to some extent, a misnomer, as its main aim is not necessarily locating church buildings, but rather the mapping of the first Christian burial grounds. Early church structures, usually timber buildings, are difficult to identify in the archaeological record, especially where small-scale excavation is the primary means of investigation. Many of the earliest churches may have been constructed solely of wood making the cemetery walls, usually of turf or turf and stone, the most easily recognizable surface feature. Christian-style burials<sup>7</sup> or burials within cemetery enclosure walls are more easily identifiable as religious features than church architecture alone. Commonly the earliest Christian cemeteries are circular or oval enclosures, 15–25m in diameter with, or without, visible church remains in the centre but from an archaeological perspective it is the sub-surface evidence for burials that is the best indicator of a Christian church complex.

The review of the different sources forms the basis for a second stage of research: systematic field survey. During the field survey, known or suspected church/cemetery locations are registered as well as their relationship to other remains, such as the contemporary farmstead, boundary walls, roads, possible pagan burial sites and the location of early subsidiary farmsteads. The remains, when visible, are mapped with high resolution GPS and added to a GIS database. Subsurface survey methods such as ground penetrating radar and coring have also yielded results on sites where nothing was visible on the surface (Damiata *et al.* 2013: 268). At two sites the position of cemeteries have been decided on cores alone. On select sites, those that are thought most likely to yield positive results, test trenches are dug. Where a cemetery boundary wall is visible the trench is dug through the wall and into the cemetery itself. The trenches are oriented north-south in order to intersect the graves which, traditionally, lie east-west. This has in all cases resulted in finding graves. At sites where a more exact position for the cemetery is not known, the excavations have, not surprisingly, been less likely to give positive results. That is especially the case where younger building remains overlie earlier archaeology. At two sites, though, test trenches have confirmed the existence of graveyards in levelled fields where nothing was visible on the surface.

<sup>7</sup> Christian style is here defined as inhumations oriented east-west with the head of the individual placed in the east end of the grave. The body would lie in a supine position and interred without gravegoods.



*Figure 2. The grave of a female in the 11th century cemetery at Mið-Grund. The white line in the section above the head end of the grave is a tephra layer from Mt. Hekla, deposited in AD 1104. It covered all nine graves detected and the cemetery boundary wall.*

Once potential graves have been located one or two graves are fully excavated in order to establish whether there indeed are graves and also to confirm skeletal preservation. If the preservation is poor the skeletons are examined as thoroughly as possible in situ before being covered. Where skeletons are well preserved they are

removed for further osteological analysis. The results of the burial and osteological analysis help us understand more fully the nature of the society at the time the earliest Christian cemeteries were in use.

This simple, but effective, way of locating cemetery structures is greatly aided by the use of tephrochronology for dating purposes. Periodically, airborne ash from volcanic eruptions is distributed on the ground. When these events are large enough they leave distinctive sand or silt like layers of volcanic ash in the ground. These layers vary in thickness and colour and when securely dated can provide accurate before and after dates for stratigraphic sequences. Tephra layers are sometimes also visible in the turf in buildings and boundary walls and may be used to date the structures, even indicating if and when walls were repaired or rebuilt. In Skagafjörður the most distinctive layer is a white tephra from Mt Hekla dated to AD 1104 a date frequently mentioned in this paper. Other notable age determining layers are a greenish/black tephra sequence, the so-called settlement layer, dated to AD 871±2, a dark thin layer from around the time of the adoption of Christianity in AD 1000 and a distinctive grey tephra from Hekla which fell in the year AD 1300 (Magnús Á Sigurgeirsson 2009).

### The material

To date eleven early cemeteries have been located and investigated in Skagafjörður in connection with the Church Project. In addition four 11th–13th century cemeteries had previously been examined, making a total of 15 cemeteries investigated archaeologically in the region. All but three of the excavations have been limited in scope. Of the four cemeteries examined prior to the project, two had been excavated more extensively, Neðri-Ás (Orri Vésteinsson 2000b) and Keldudalur (Guðný Zoëga 2013). Additionally a comprehensive excavation of an 11th century cemetery at Stóra-Seyla was completed in the summer of 2013 (Guðný Zoëga & Douglas Bolender, 2014).

All the cemeteries identified by the project are of a very early date. In the cemeteries at Steinsstaðir, Mið-Grund, Stóra-Seyla (older cemetery), Ysti-Mór and Bjar-nastaðir and Keflavík<sup>8</sup>, the white tephra of 1104 lay *in situ* over the graves (Guðný Zoëga & Guðmundur St. Sigurðarson 2010: 104–109, Guðný Zoëga 2010: 18, 20). The tephra also covered the majority of graves at Neðri Ás (Orri Vésteinsson 2000b: 9–10) and probably Sauðá (Sigurður Bergsteinsson 2000). In Keldudalur the bulk of

<sup>8</sup> The cemetery at Keflavík was discovered during the writing of this article in the fall of 2013. Results from the initial examination are still preliminary.

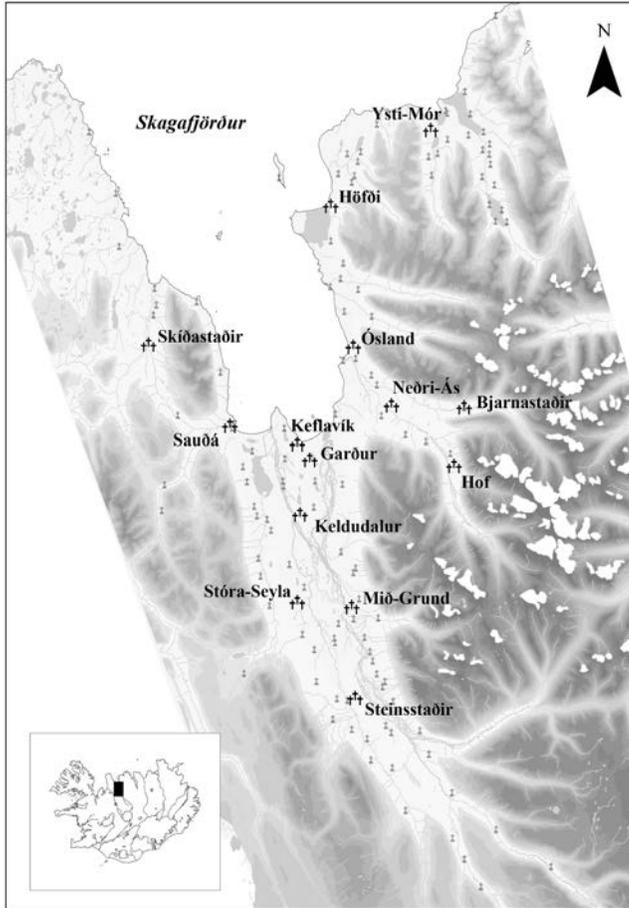


Figure 3. A map showing the church/cemetery sites that have been excavated in Skagafjörður and are mentioned in the article. The light grey crosses represent known but unexcavated sites.

the graves seem to have been covered by the 1104 tephra which was supported by radiocarbon dating. However a few graves may date to the early 12th century (Sveinbjörnsdóttir *et al.* 2010: 687). At Stóra–Seyla (younger cemetery) and Skíðastaðir the tephra was mixed in with the grave fill, indicating that the graves were dug after the

*Table 1. Age of cemeteries excavated in Skagafjörður.*

| Farm                     | 11 <sup>th</sup><br>century | 12 <sup>th</sup><br>century | 13 <sup>th</sup><br>century | 13 <sup>th</sup> ><br>century | Written<br>sources | Status of<br>church        | First mention of<br>church in written<br>sources AD* |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|--|
| Neðri-Ás (Ás)**          | XO                          | x                           |                             |                               | Yes                | <i>Chapel</i>              | 984  |
| Sauðá**                  | X                           |                             |                             |                               | Yes                | <i>Half-church</i>         | 1393   |
| Steinsstaðir             | X                           |                             |                             |                               | No                 | <i>Unknown</i>             |  |
| Keldudalur**†            | XO                          | xO                          |                             |                               | No                 | <i>Unknown</i>             |  |
| Keflavík                 | X                           |                             |                             |                               | Yes                | <i>Chapel</i>              | 1399   |
| Mið-Grund                | XO                          |                             |                             |                               | Yes                | <i>Chapel</i>              | 1713   |
| Garður                   | X                           | XO                          |                             |                               | No                 | <i>Unknown</i>             |  |
| Stóra-Seyla (older)      | XO                          |                             |                             |                               | No                 | <i>Unknown</i>             |  |
| Stóra-Seyla<br>(younger) | x                           | XO                          |                             |                               | Yes                | <i>Full-church?</i>        | 1255   |
| Hof **†                  |                             |                             | X                           |                               | No                 | <i>Unknown</i>             |  |
| Skíðastaðir              |                             | XO                          |                             |                               | Yes                | <i>Quarter-<br/>church</i> | 1388   |
| Ysti-Mór                 | X                           | O                           | O                           | O                             | Yes                | <i>Chapel</i>              | 1388   |
| Bjarnastaðir             | X                           | O                           |                             |                               | No                 | <i>Unknown</i>             |  |
| Höfði                    | X                           | XO                          | XO                          | XO                            | Yes                | <i>Parish church</i>       | 1318   |
| Ósland ***               | X                           | X                           |                             |                               | Yes                | <i>Half-church</i>         | 1591   |

X = established date for the use of cemetery. x = possible use of cemetery. O = cemetery wall present. \*Written sources only mention churches except for Seyla where the written source states that the cemetery was not used for burial at that time. \*\*Sites excavated prior to the Church Project. \*\*\*Cemetery wall was visible in a geophysical survey but not excavated and therefore not dated. †AMS dates available for skeletons as well as tephrochronological dates. All other dating was performed using tephrochronology.

tephra fell. Both cemeteries, however, were probably established in the 11th century (Guðný Zoëga & Guðmundur St. Sigurðarson 2010:104–108). At Hof, radiocarbon dates give a 13th century date for the skeletal material (Sveinbjörnsdóttir *et al.* 2010: 687) but it is not known if the cemetery may date back to 11th century. At Ósland, and Garður (the location of Hegranesþing – the spring assembly site for Skagafjörður county) the graves examined were of 12th century date but other graves visible in the test trenches predated the 1104 tephra (Guðný Zoëga 2012: 16–17, 2009: 11–12). Excavation established burials from both before and after AD 1104 in the 1<sup>st</sup> phase of the cemetery at Höfði. The Höfði cemetery is the only parish cemetery examined, still in use after the Reformation with the last burials taking place in the late 19th century. (Guðný Zoëga 2012: 6–7).

### The geography of a cemetery

The location and internal arrangement of burial grounds are important indicators of religious change. As Hogget has noted: “The contrasting types of site used for pre– and post–conversion cemeteries and the differing relationships between cemeteries and settlements of those periods suggest that the changes which occurred during the conversion period also affected where the dead were placed in the landscape” (Hoggett 2010: 202).

One of the most significant changes seen in the early Christian landscape in Skagafjörður was the incorporation of cemeteries into the farmstead, within the home-field boundary wall. This is a marked change from the pre–Christian burial grounds which were, as a rule, placed outside the farm boundary wall, either a short distance away or at the farm’s boundary.<sup>9</sup>



*Figure 4. The circular cemetery structure at Ysti-Mór. The residual memory of the sanctity of the cemetery meant the enclosure was the only structure on the old farmstead that was spared when the modern day fields were levelled. It now sits in the middle of a hay field.*

<sup>9</sup> For a more detailed description of pagan and Christian burial paradigm see Orri Vésteinsson and Adolf Friðriksson 2011.

To accurately assess the placement of a cemetery within the farmstead, however, the location and layout of the contemporary domestic buildings need to be known. This, is not always possible as earlier settlements tend to be in levelled modern day home fields or situated beneath younger architectural remains. In some instances the cemetery has been spared later damage when all other remains of the farmstead have been obliterated, Ysti–Mór being such an example in the material discussed here. This is an intriguing echo of the former sanctity of the church and burial ground, which has translated through time.<sup>10</sup>

Where the exact position of the cemeteries within the farmstead can be established, they seem to have been situated in the immediate vicinity of the domestic structures with the cemetery most commonly, though not exclusively, to the south or west of the farmhouse. All but two cemeteries lay within the farm boundary walls. The cemetery at Garður which could not be located within a visible farm boundary possibly because later assembly and occupational remains obscure the archaeological features of the associated farmstead. The cemetery at Bjarnastaðir which was situated on the edge of a steep hill close to the farm, built up against or as a part of a boundary wall. Unfortunately repeated landslides have made it difficult to estimate where, or if, there was a boundary wall at the farm (Guðný Zoëga 2010: 15). The cemeteries at Neðri–Ás (Vésteinsson 2000b: 6) and Skíðastaðir (Guðný Zoëga & Guðmundur St. Sigurðarson 2009: 4) were built up against the inside of the boundary wall and thus within the farm boundary although the position of contemporary farmhouse has not been established. In some instances the distance from the farmhouse to the cemetery is only a few metres, the older cemetery at Stóra–Seyla being the most notable example with only five metres between the cemetery wall and the associated dwelling. At three farms, which lie on a flat area above fairly steep hill slopes, the cemeteries are placed on the very edge of the hills. The reason for this can only be speculated upon, but a possible explanation could be that because of the sheer size of the structures they would have been placed where they would be least likely to disturb farming or other every day activities.

Recent research in Skagafjörður suggests a certain fluidity in regards to the positioning of buildings within the earliest farmsteads. Farmhouses sometimes appear to have been moved around, to a varying degree, within the farm boundaries. In some instances this seems to reflect minor restructuring of the farmstead itself but sometimes, if more rarely, the entire farmstead is relocated (Bolender *et al.* 2011: 86–89). Restructuring of farmsteads is reflected in the positioning of some cemeteries on top

<sup>10</sup> Similar histories or legends about churches have been reported from Norway, see Stylegar 2001 and Brendalsmo 2007.

of older building remains. The cemeteries, at Keldudalur, Steinsstaðir and Stóra–Seyla are associated with the reorganization of the farmhouses within the farmsteads. The Keldudalur, and Steinsstaðir cemeteries were situated close to the contemporary dwellings on top of older domestic architecture. The older cemetery at Stóra–Seyla lay five meters to the south of the 10th–11th century domestic structure, its church built on the remains of older buildings, probably an animal barn and a smithy. A more drastic form of settlement relocation is also evident at Stóra–Seyla where the entire farmstead, including the church and cemetery, was moved in the late 11th century to a new location 70 meters uphill (Guðný Zoëga & Douglas Bolender 2014: 7). The new cemetery appears to have been similar in shape and size to the old one and was, similarly, situated just south of the new farmhouse. Graves were found at both cemeteries, the one grave excavated in the younger cemetery dated between AD 1104 and AD 1300 but the graves in the older cemetery were all dated to the 11th century. However, at the time of the farm relocation over half of the graves at the older cemetery had been reopened and the earthly remains of their occupants disinterred, presumably for reburial at the new cemetery. The boundary wall of the younger cemetery was also first built post AD 1104 (Guðný Zoëga & Guðmundur St. Sigurðarson 2010: 102–104).

The transfer of the cemetery at Stóra–Seyla suggests that in the second half of the 11th century, the inhabitants felt that the labour intensive effort of recreating a homestead cemetery was worthwhile. In other cemeteries, building, rebuilding, or enlarging cemetery walls seems to have been common in the 12th century. However, in some instances, the cemeteries no longer seem to have been used for burials when the walls were built or rebuilt. In other cemeteries the number of burials tapers off in the early 12th century indicating that the domestic cemeteries were becoming obsolete. Notable exceptions to this are the cemeteries at Hof in Hjaltadalur and Höfði on Höfðaströnd. The cemetery at Ósland may also have been used longer as graves post-dating 1104 were found; the upper time limit for the cemetery is uncertain. At Höfði the church later gained the status of a parish church and may have become communal<sup>11</sup> early on. At Hof there is no mention of a church in any sources and the skeletons from the cemetery had surprising 13th century dates, a time when the farm has historically been considered to have been unoccupied and under the ownership of its adjacent neighbour, the Hólar bishopric (Hjalti Pálsson 211:125).

<sup>11</sup> Communal is here used for cemeteries that served a number of farms, or a congregation.

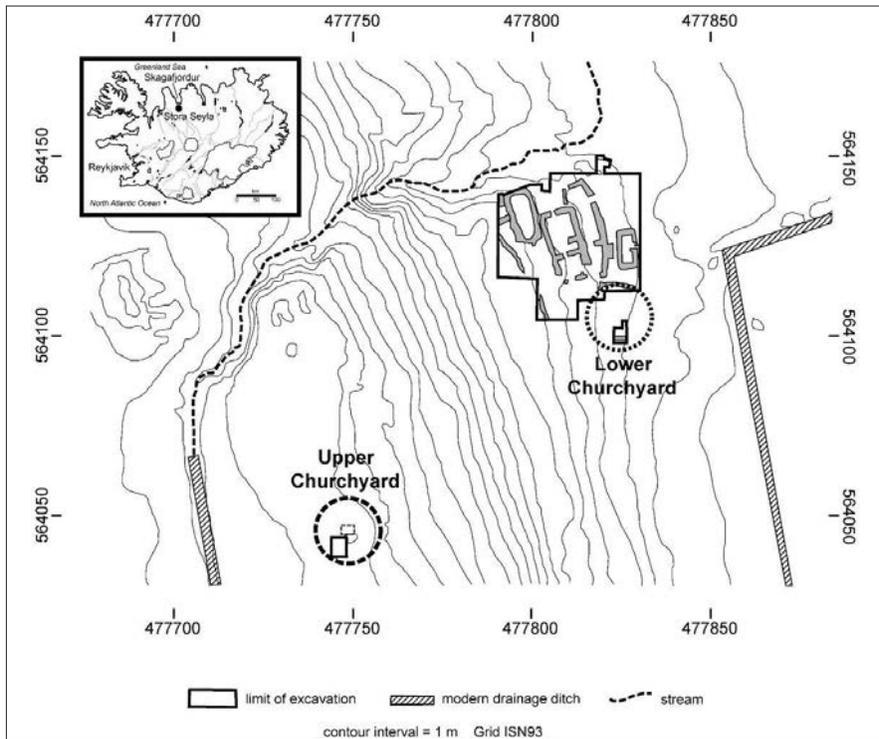


Figure 5. A map showing the geographical positions of the two cemeteries at Stóra-Seyla. The excavated part of the oldest farmstead is visible just north of the lower cemetery. Map: SASS, published by permission.

### Boundaries for the dead

Cemetery walls have been found at ten out of the 15 cemeteries studied. Ancient or modern ground levelling or constructions are probably to blame for the lack of cemetery walls at the five sites where none were found, but of course it has to be considered that some cemeteries may have been too small or short lived to have warranted any major wall construction.

Delineation of the cemeteries, therefore, seems to have been an important factor in their establishment. The most obvious and mundane reason for the delineation of



*Fig. 6. The test trench which revealed the cemetery, and possibly church, at Ósland. A circular cemetery wall was visible until the middle of the 20th century when the fields were levelled. Today nothing is visible on the surface, but a section of the field still retains the place name “Churchyardgrounds”. The cemetery was located with systematic coring, using a 1,2m long and 5cm wide soil core sampler. The cores revealed fine-grained mottled earth with large flecks of yellow prehistoric tephra, a diagnostic feature used to locate graves. A test trench revealed the surface of seven graves and the wall foundation of a church. Subsequent geophysical survey proved the existence of a subsurface circular feature as well as two phases of church buildings.*

a cemetery would be the protection of the burials from unwanted disturbance caused by animals (Gilchrist & Sloane 2005: 34) as well as everyday farming activities, since the cemeteries were situated on the farmsteads. The preservation of an area of sanctity around a church is mentioned in various Nordic law texts (Nilsson 1989: 123–125). The cemetery walls could therefore, conceivably, also have served a defensive purpose (Magnús Már Lárusson 1963: 402). Thirdly, the separation of a consecrated ground from the profane may have been important. To what extent the earliest Icelandic Christian cemeteries were consecrated in the very beginning is uncertain but delineation seems to have been an important aspect of their incorporation into the farmstead.

All the early Norwegian provincial laws mention churchyard walls and their upkeep (Halvorsen and Rindal 2008), although their actual size and shape is not dictated (Nilsson 1989: 83–84). In the 12th century Icelandic law book Grágás, churchyard

walls are not mentioned specifically and the only direct mention of the act of consecration is the description of one of the duties of a bishop which was the consecration of churches (Gunnar Karlsson *et al* 2001: 16). However, the chapter describing baptism of children dictates that a child which had received catechumenate (prímsigning) but not been fully baptised should be buried “out by the churchyard wall, where consecrated earth meets unconsecrated” [my translation] (Gunnar Karlsson *et al* 2001: 5). This supports the notion that the wall of the churchyard delineated a consecrated area, perhaps the consecration of the church extended to the cemetery. Grágás, on the other hand, dates to the 12th century and may not describe the realities of the early 11th century. Other Nordic laws mention the sanctification of churchyards prior to their use for burials (Nilsson 1989: 84) but to what degree they describe the earliest Christian cemeteries is difficult to evaluate. However, it does not seem too far-fetched to suggest that the construction of walls around the cemeteries was connected to some form of sanctification, or at least in anticipation of later, more formal, consecration.

The blessing of individual graves may also have been practiced (see Nilsson 1989: 84). The practice of “pole” burials is first mentioned in the saga of Eric the red (*Íslendingasögur I* 1946: 343) and was still practiced in Iceland into the 20th century, albeit only in remote areas where a priest was not at hand to administer the rite of committal. A pole was placed in the grave and when a priest was available, the pole was removed and the blessing performed. A description of a similar method of grave blessing can be found in the ecclesiastical section of the Norwegian laws of Gulaping (Þór Magnússon 1972: 108). Although this form of grave blessing would also have taken place in consecrated cemeteries, it is tempting to suggest that such a method could have been used in the earliest unconsecrated Christian cemeteries in a time that priests, not to mention bishops, were still thin on the ground (Helgi Skúli Kjartansson 97–104).

According to Bertil Nilsson (1989: 122) the early canonical laws and the medieval Nordic laws did not dictate or describe any particular shape or size of churches or churchyards. Lack of guidance or interest in what form cemeteries or burials took has, similarly, been noted in the case of early Christianity of the British isles and the continent (Petts 2002: 44, Zadora–Rio 2003: 2, Hadley 2001: 34). However, the apparent organisation and uniformity of the early Christian burial architecture in Skagafjörður speaks of a detailed knowledge of Christian traditions. As the early Christian cemeteries were located on the farmstead within the arena of everyday farming activities, the evidence of domestic refuse and constructions might be expected in the cemetery, during its use. This has not been observed in the Skagafjörður material al-

Table 2. Size and layout of cemeteries.

| Site               | Location of cemetery * | Diameter of cemetery** | Location of grave/s*** | Number of graves observed | Sex of skeleton**** |
|--------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|
| Neðri -Ás          | ?                      | -                      | N/W/S/E                | 83                        | -                   |
| Sauðá              | E?                     | -                      | -                      | 4                         | -                   |
| Hof in Hjaltadalur | SW?                    | -                      | -                      | 9                         | -                   |
| Steinsstaðir       | W?                     | -                      | ?                      | 2                         | Male                |
| Keldudalur         | W                      | 15m                    | N/S/W/E                | 54                        | -                   |
| Keflavík           | E?                     | -                      | N?                     | 3                         | ?                   |
| Mið-Grund          | SW                     | 22m                    | E                      | 9                         | Female              |
| Garður             | S?                     | 25m                    | N                      | 6                         | Female              |
| Seyla (older)      | S                      | 16m                    | N/E/S                  | 25                        | -                   |
| Seyla (younger)    | S                      | 16m                    | S                      | 1                         | Juvenile            |
| Skíðastaðir        | S?                     | 21m                    | N                      | 1                         | Female              |
| Ysti-Mór           | SE                     | 19m                    | N                      | 1                         | ?                   |
| Bjarnastaðir       | SW?                    | 17m                    | N                      | 2                         | Female?             |
| Höfði              | S                      | 18m                    | S                      | 3                         | Female              |
| Ósland             | NE                     | 20m                    | S                      | 9                         | Infant              |

\*Location of cemeteries in relation to the associated farmhouse. \*\*Estimated internal diameter where cemetery wall could be observed. In the case of Bjarnastaðir and Ósland the size was estimated from geophysical survey results. \*\*\*Location of the graves within the cemetery, where the layout of the cemetery and/or position of church are known. \*\*\*\* Sex of skeleton in cemeteries excavated by the Church Project. The cemeteries at Keldudalur and Seyla were more completely excavated and both had segregation of the sexes.

though, as shown above, the cemeteries were often established on top of buildings and other remains. This lack of domestic activities during the use of the cemeteries suggests walled features or some sort of demarcations that separated them from the regular activity space of the farmstead.

The high number of cemetery walls should not come as a surprise as their visibility is the most successful criteria for accurately locating cemeteries; unwalled cemeteries are far less likely to be found by the survey methods. In all instances they are circular or slightly oval in shape, built mostly of turf. In two cases a single row of stones marked the wall foundation. This line of stones does not seem to have had an architectural function, but may have been used to mark the layout of the wall circle.

In two instances the wall foundations were a single layer of stones forming the base of the wall. The internal diameter of these structures ranges from 15–25 metres, the majority being less than 20 metres in diameter. The largest cemetery was at Garður, around 25 metres in diameter with that of Mið-Grund following second with a diameter of 22 metres. Six of the cemetery walls seem to be constructed after AD 1104, i.e. after the tephra layer from the Mt Hekla eruption of that year. Whether that means the walls were first constructed at that time, or perhaps replacing an older wooden palisade, a smaller turf wall or older wall foundations could not be determined.

So far there has been no unequivocal evidence for new cemeteries being established in the 12th century. The only dates from the cemetery at Hof are post AD 1200, but an earlier date cannot be ruled out. At Ysti-Mór and Bjarnastaðir the cemetery walls were first built after AD 1104 but in both instances the graves found predated AD 1104. At Skiðastaðir and Garður the cemetery walls also appear to have been first erected after AD 1104, but at both sites there was evidence suggestive of an earlier establishment. Both cemeteries are comparatively large, the former being 20 metres in diameter, the latter 25m. The only one of the larger cemeteries firmly dated from before AD 1104, was at Mið-Grund. The wall had a diameter of 22 metres and seems to have been erected, as well as abandoned, before AD 1104 and all the visible graves (9 in total) were pre AD 1104 as well.

At Höfði there was most likely already a parish or communal<sup>12</sup> cemetery in the early 14th century. In later centuries, the Höfði church served a small parish, with only three or four farms paying tithes (Sigríður Sigurðardóttir 2012). But even at Höfði the boundary wall of the oldest phase of the cemetery (pre 1300) seems to have been only around 18m across, similar to other single household cemeteries. In Keldudalur the cemetery wall, which was around 15 metres in diameter and originally built in the first few decades of the 11th century, was repaired but not enlarged sometime soon after AD 1104. At Bjarnastaðir, the circular wall was 17 metres in diameter erected after AD 1104 with no clear evidence of an earlier building phase.

In most instances, where tephra lay undisturbed over the graves, it seems to have fallen on relatively even ground, indicating that the surface of the graves had been evened out to make the burial ground level. Another indication for this custom is the depositing of turf layers in the cemetery, apparently in order to make the ground level. Sometimes the outline of the graves can be seen on the surface of these turf layers where they have been cut through them, but turf layers were also deposited

<sup>12</sup> Communal is here used for community operated cemeteries designated for a congregation or at least a larger catchment population than that of a single household.

over the surface of graves. This custom of levelling the surface is different from later cemeteries where individual graves can be identified by substantial mounds of surplus grave material. In some of the cemeteries the original natural surface would only have been a thin layer of soil covering glacial moraine made up of very compact sand and gravel. By adding these turf deposits on top of the natural soil cover, the cemeteries would have been made easier to dig in as well as making both the ground surface and internal furnishing of the graves more attractive. Only in two cemeteries, at Höfði and at Ósland was there evidence of extensive intercutting of graves. At Ósland the younger graves were dug into a fill layer on top of the older graves as described above, but at Höfði the tightly packed graves and the dugout material from graves obliterated any evidence for such layers.

It is difficult to envision that these layers were deposited without there being some kind of demarcation of the area, although it cannot be ruled out entirely. It seems likely that the burial area was enclosed from early on. In the cases where there is only evidence for cemetery walls being erected after AD 1104, earlier and smaller turf walls may have been evened out over the surface of the churchyard when it was enlarged. It is also possible the turfs of an older wall may have been completely removed before rebuilding it. The possibility of an older wooden fence of some sort cannot be ruled out either.

It is obvious that a lot of time, effort and manpower was put into establishing these cemetery structures according to some common law, fashion or tradition. It is still a mystery how the graves themselves were marked as there is a conspicuous absence of grave mounds, marker stones or other identifying features. In the absence of grave mounds, some form of grave markers must have been in place as there is little evidence of intercutting or later interference of graves, suggesting that their location was known. Only one such marker has possibly been found at Steinsstaðir, where a relatively flat stone seems to have been placed on the surface at the head end of a grave. Naturally occurring stones may also have been used to mark a few graves at Neðri-Ás (Orri Vésteinsson 2000b: 15). It may be that wooden markers were used but they have either not left a visible trace or possibly been removed. No wooden markers were found in the extensively excavated cemetery at Keldudalur, which, otherwise, had a very good preservation of wood.

## Churches

Little is known of the classification and status of churches in the 11th century. The first documentary evidence for church functions dates to the middle of the 13th cen-



*Fig. 7. A kitephoto showing the abandoned 11th century cemetery at Stóra-Seyla at the end of the 2013 excavation season. A single layer of stones marked the foundation of the cemetery wall. The four postholes and stone foundations in the centre are the remains of a small wooden church. No graves were found in the western part of the cemetery. Photo. John Schoenfelder/SASS. Published by permission.*

tury. By that time churches were divided into cathedrals (dómkirkja), official churches, (beneficum/alkirkja/höfuðkirkja) and annex churches such as half-churches (hálf kirkja), quarter- and 1/3 churches (fjórðungs- og þriðjungskirkja) and finally household churches or prayer chapels (bænhús). These classifications were based on whether priests were attached to the church, how often it was serviced and masses sung and whether it had burial rights (Sigríður Sigurðardóttir 2012: 17,42).

The prayer chapels or bænhús were thus, by definition, the lowest form of ecclesiastical structure, a household church without burial rights only intended for prayers

and smaller religious services. The term *bænhús* was, on the other hand, often used loosely as description of early churches, even if they had never been officially classified as such. In the early days of Christianity the precursors to the chapels, small household churches with burial rights, were probably the dominant church type which, with the establishment of parishes or tithe areas (see Vésteinsson 1998 for discussion), became auxiliary, serviced by priests from a nearby parish church.

The development of parishes in Iceland and its neighbouring countries has been extensively discussed and debated<sup>13</sup> and it is not the purpose of this article to delve deeply into that discussion. Iceland was the first of the Nordic countries to introduce the tithe in AD 1096/7<sup>14</sup> which was the precursor to the development of a parish system. The abandonment of the household cemeteries and/or churches in Skagafjörður seems to take place shortly after or even before the introduction of the tithe. To what extent the apparent discontinuation of burials can be used to suggest an early development of parishes or tithe areas is uncertain, but they do at least indicate some change in ecclesiastical organization and the introduction of communal cemeteries.

The small "bænhús" type chapels were numerous as old church records mention up to seven chapels associated with a single parish church. In Skagafjörður there were, at least in later centuries, 26 parishes, which gives an idea of how many these churches might have been (Sigríður Sigurðardóttir 2012: 42). That said, many of the original 11th century household churches came out of use early on so, assuming that the recorded prayer chapels represent the continuation of earlier domestic churches, the total number of 11th century churches in Skagafjörður must originally have been higher.

Burials were, as a rule, not allowed at the household chapels, once the parish system was in place, but excavation results and numerous sporadic bone finds at these sites suggest that they are, almost without exception, placed within the perimeter of a burial ground. This supports the notion that the churches represent a continued use of the earliest household churches rather than an emerging subclass of chapels

<sup>13</sup> The historian Jón Jóhannesson claimed that a parish system was formed quickly after the introduction of the tithe (1956:201). A more generally held view is that the parish system developed more slowly and was not firmly established until around AD 1200 (Magnús Stefánsson 1975: 79, Jakob Benediktsson (1971: 381) & Orri Vésteinsson 1998: 147–166). For a discussion on parish formation in other Nordic countries see for instance Brendalsmo & Riisøy 2014, Stefan Brink 1990 and 1996 and Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2003 for a general overview. For England see Pounds 2000.

<sup>14</sup> In Norway it was introduced in part during the time of Sigurður Jórslafari (1103–30) but finalized in Magnús Erlingsson's time 1161–1184 (Brendalsmo & Riisøy 2014: 24) in Denmark around 1135 (Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2003:) but in Sweden in the late 12th century (Nilsson 1998).

within the developing parish system. The bulk of the officially classified “bænhús” churches, however, came out of use during the Reformation (Sigríður Sigurðardóttir 2012: 42). A small number of them, though, had recently been decommissioned or was still in use in the early 18th century when the earliest land registry was compiled (Árni Magnússon & Páll Vídalín 1930). Even if the churches continued to be functional, sometimes hundreds of years after the churchyards themselves were no longer used for burials, the knowledge of their associated graveyards seem, in most instances, to have disappeared.

Whether churches were always a feature of the earliest Christian cemeteries is still uncertain but the evidence seems to suggest that it was most often the case. The remnants of a small wooden church with sunken corner posts were found in the cemetery in Keldudalur. Although the church remains had been damaged during construction work, post holes and partial stone foundations suggested the outline of the church walls. The rectangular outline of the church building was further marked by burials which were tightly packed around the church. So far the only possible evidence for interments within the church was the rather uncertain burial of a neonate in the northern part of the church floor. It appears that the church was present early after the establishment of the cemetery sometime very early in the 11th century (Guðný Zoëga 2013: 37–38).

Two other archaeological sites in Skagafjörður have established evidence for early churches, Neðri-Ás and Stóra-Seyla. At Neðri-Ás the church had three building phases, the oldest probably dating from very early in the 11th century and, like the one at Keldudalur, built of wood with sunken corner posts. Later, the wooden walls were encased in a protective outer turf wall, but in the last phase of the church (13th century) a more solid turf structure was in place (Orri Vésteinnsson 2000b: 22). At Stóra-Seyla, two possible churches were located with ground penetrating radar, one in each cemetery (Bolender, Steinberg et al. 2011). The older church dates from before 1104 and further excavation has established that it was also a small timber church with internal diameter of only 2x2,5 m with sunken corner posts. The younger church (post AD 1104) was probably still in use as a household church in late 17th early 18th centuries (Árni Magnússon & Páll Vídalín 1930: 90) but its remains are obscured by later use of the building as a storage barn and horse pen. At three other cemetery sites in Skagafjörður there is a slightly raised area in the middle of the cemetery, indicating the presence of churches probably with turfclad walls.

If the earliest churches were commonly small buildings made of wood without turf walls, their visibility on the surface is less likely, making their surface detection problematic. Turf structures are, generally, sturdier and easier to identify visually

without excavation, especially when associated with a circular cemetery wall. However, as the Stóra–Seyla excavation has shown, turf walls may also have been removed completely, leaving no evidence for their existence on the surface (Guðný Zoëga & Douglas Bolender 2014: 58). Further research will hopefully determine whether turf covered or purely wooden structures were equally common in the earliest phase of church building or whether turf may, in many cases, be a later addition.

Steinunn Kristjánsdóttir has suggested that there were two types of early Icelandic churches, Scandinavian type timber churches with sunken corner posts and churches built of turf. She has associated these two church types with different branches of Christianity, the former with organized Anglo–Saxon missionary activity and the later with grass root infiltration of Celtic or Irish/Scottish branch of Christianity (Steinunn Kristjánsdóttir 2009: 431). All three 11th century churches excavated in Skagafjörður were originally built of timber, but turf was added to the timber walls of the church at Neðri–Ás late in the 11th century (Orri Vésteinsson 2000b: 23). It is difficult to see how the ubiquitous early churches and cemeteries in Skagafjörður can be seen to support such a division, even if early churches with turf walls were to be found. It seems more plausible that differences in church building techniques are the results of general architectural development or the availability of building materials.

The need for turf covering might also be associated with changes in stave building techniques which saw the disappearance of sunken corner posts making the building foundations less prone to rotting (Jensenius 2010: 155) but the entire building, in turn, more prone to weather damage. Turf and/or stone covered wooden walls were more likely than timber structures to withstand the harsh Icelandic weather. The addition of turf may, thus, be a later protective measurement possibly demonstrated by the building sequence at Neðri–Ás. Whatever their architectural form, it seems apparent that churches were present in most of the cemeteries. However, because the interment and building sequences at most sites cannot be precisely correlated it also has to be considered that some Christian burial grounds may, in the very beginning, have been without boundary walls or indeed a church building.

## The graves

Little is known about a possible transitional phase between or admixture of pagan and Christian burial rites and how they may be represented in the burial record. Although the subject is not being addressed specifically in the Church Project, some commingling of traditions or developmental changes might be witnessed in the material. Early Christian or conversion period cemeteries in Scandinavia, England and

France display a wide variety of burial forms and locations and what constitutes an early Christian burial or burial ground is becoming increasingly ambiguous (Gräslund 2002:44–55, Hadley 2002:226–227, Hadley & Buckberry 2012:13, Zadora–Rio 2003:2).

So far there has been nothing to suggest overtly pre-Christian elements in the burial material examined. Grave construction and cemetery location has in fact, on the whole, been remarkably similar. The construction of the graves has been similar in all the cemeteries, simple inhumations with east–west orientation without any evidence of grave goods. The skeletons have lain in a supine position with the skull at the west end of the grave.



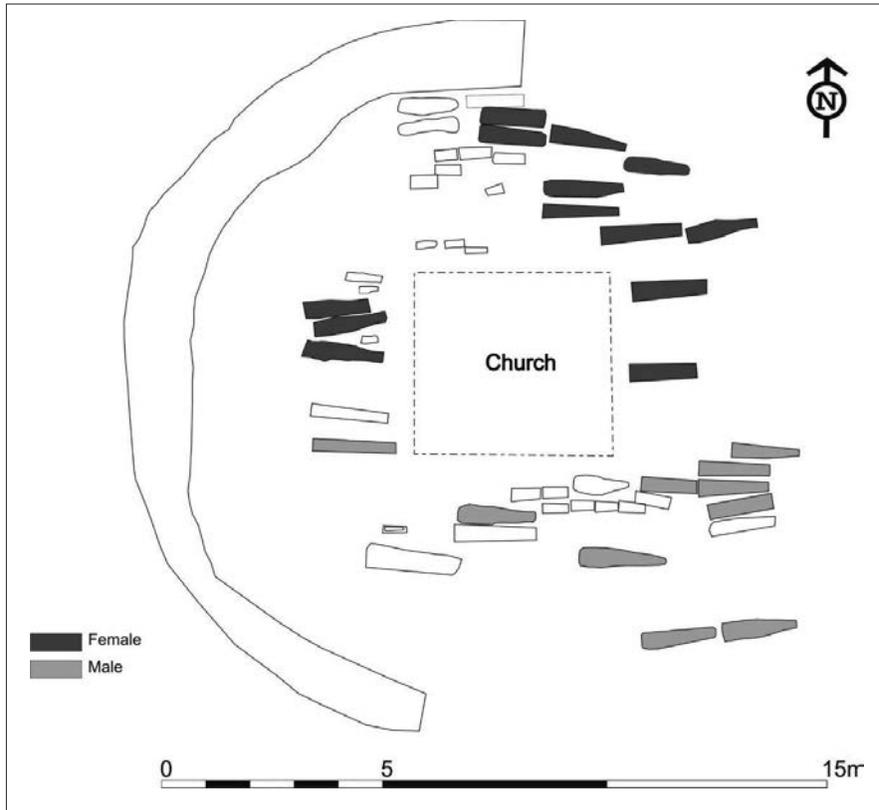
*Fig. 8. Three coffin graves from the Keldudalur cemetery. The graves contained the skeletons of two adult females and a neonate.*

At Keldudalur and Neðri-Ás a substantial number of the graves contained the remains of wooden coffins, and at Stóra-Seyla there was also possible evidence for wooden coffins in graves close to the church. Other graves excavated in connection with the project have all been without coffins. This lack of coffins may not give an accurate picture of the number of coffin graves as the test trenches were generally placed at the outer boundaries of the cemeteries and, at least in the case of Keldudalur and Stóra-Seyla, coffins were absent close to the cemetery wall. A possible explanation for this is some form of social segregation of the burial space. Anders Andrén has described a similar lack of coffins on the outskirts of contemporary cemeteries in Lund, Sweden which he associates with social zoning of the cemeteries (Andrén 2000: 16). Wooden coffins have, however, not always proven to be particularly useful indicators of social differentiation (Jonsson 2009: 95), but their different uses may, of course, be subject to regional differences.

The location of graves in medieval cemeteries was supposed to reflect the social status of their inhabitants in real life (Gilchrist & Sloane 2005: 56, Jonsson 2009: 195). Social segregation in cemeteries is not mentioned in the Christianity law section of the 12th century Icelandic lawbook Grágás (Gunnar Karlsson *et al.* 2001). However, in the older version of the Norwegian provincial laws of Borgarthing, possibly dating to the early 11th century, the cemetery is divided into social sections with those of the lowest social standing being buried in the outskirts of the cemetery, next to the cemetery wall. In the provincial laws of Eidsivathing there is a similar decree concerning social sectioning in the cemetery (Halvorsen & Rindal 2008: 136). If these early Christian cemeteries only contain a single family or household, differential burial would not give a correct picture of the social segmentation of the entire population but rather the hierarchies of individual households. At the larger estates, this would most likely also include tenants and occupants of subsidiary farmsteads.

To what extent social hierarchy is reflected in the simple grave forms of the early Christian household cemeteries is difficult to ascertain. The evidence for the lack of coffins and on the outskirts of a cemetery could suggest some form of social differentiation. The fact that less emphasis seems to have been placed on the removal of skeletons on the periphery of the Seyla cemetery may also support this. However, the full analysis of burial and osteological data from the sites has not yet been concluded which means that further nuances and trends may be detected.

Within the Keldudalur cemetery there was a distinct segregation of the sexes; women were buried in the northern half of the cemetery, men in the southern half. Infants and children were buried on all sides, most notably up against the church walls. This division of the sexes in a cemetery is known from the early Norwegian



*Fig. 9. The diagram shows the sex segregation of the Keldudalur cemetery. Only the graves where the sex of the skeleton could be determined are shaded.*

provincial laws of Eidsivathing (Halvorsen & Rindal 2008: 136) but, like the social division mentioned above, is not present in the Icelandic lawbook *Grágás*. Sex segregation has been registered at various archaeological cemetery sites in Iceland and Scandinavia (Steffensen 1943:229–234 Kieffer–Olsen 1993: 99, Jonsson 2009: 34–36). Sex segregation does not appear to have been a common occurrence in early Christian cemeteries in Britain (Hadley 2001: 47) although a few cases have been reported. Women seem to have been buried in the northern part of the churchyard at the church of St. Brigit in Kildare, Ireland (as cited in Mytum 1992:88) and women

seem to have been more frequently buried in the western half of the graveyard at Raunds, Northampshire England (Boddington 1987: 412). Most sex segregated cemeteries show some sign of intermixing, but in Keldudalur there was no visible intermixing of the sexes on either side of the church. This may be due to the fact that the cemetery was a short lived single phase household cemetery with little need to segregate its population further into different social or family groups.

The excavations of the other cemeteries in this study, where the side of the cemetery and the sex of the skeleton could be determined, have shown similar sex segregation. An exception is the cemetery at Höfði where a female skeleton had been placed in the southern part of the cemetery, disturbing two older graves containing probable male skeletons. The burial took place sometime close to AD 1300, which might suggest that by that time this form of segregation was not being upheld anymore.



*Figure 10. Redeposited bones in a coffin grave in the Keldudalur cemetery. The remains of a coffin lid were found covering the bones. An AMS date for the skeleton indicates that this might be one of the oldest skeletons in the cemetery.*

One grave in Keldudalur showed signs of possible relocation of bones to the cemetery, conceivably from the nearby pagan grave field. Interestingly three further graves were all but empty. All contained a coffin but the bones seem to have been removed from them in the early 12th century (Guðný Zoëga 2013: 20). The fact that all three coffins had small bones and/or teeth left in them suggests that they had originally contained a body. Similar 12th century grave emptying had previously been reported in the medieval cemetery at Stöng in Þjórsárdalur, south Iceland (Vilhjálmur Ö. Vilhjálmsson 1995: 128). At the 11th century cemetery of Stóra–Seyla 15 out of 25 graves had been fully or partially emptied. This seems to have taken place around the time of the relocation of the farmstead sometime between AD 1050–1104. The 12th century law book Grágás (Gunnar Karlsson *et al.* 2001: 11) states that all bones shall be removed from a cemetery when the associated church is decommissioned and relocated to a burial church assigned by the bishop. This custom is not mentioned in other Nordic lawtexts. In Skagafjörður, apart from the Keldudalur and Stóra–Seyla cemeteries there is, however, little evidence for adherence to this law, which of course may partly be due to the more limited excavations at those sites and that most of the cemeteries were no longer in use when Grágás was written. Why this custom is only partially upheld is a mystery, but the *en masse* emptying of graves at Stóra–Seyla in the 11th century seems to indicate that the practice of relocating bones was known and practiced decades before the law code was written down in the 12th century.

## Discussion

The number of suspected church sites as well as the number of known churches and cemeteries at adjacent farms, indicates that the majority of private landowners in Skagafjörður established a Christian family graveyard and built a church on their farm around the time of or soon after the official acceptance of Christianity. This also held true for medium sized farms such as Keldudalur and Keflavík, but smaller satellite or subsidiary farms are likely to have shared a cemetery with the main farm. Orri Vésteinsson and Adolf Friðriksson (2011: 57) have suggested that medium sized medieval farms did, as a rule, not have cemeteries, but this does not appear to be the case in Skagafjörður (Sigríður Sigurðardóttir 2012: 56). The results seem to support Sveinn Víkingur's notion that most independent farms had their own cemetery but it has to be stressed that this might indeed be a localised regional phenomena.

All but one, possibly two, of the 15 cemeteries examined to date seem to have been short lived household cemeteries but that may, to some extent, be a bias created by the research criteria. As the earliest 11th century single phase cemeteries are the

primary object of research, the possible evidence for cemeteries that were communal from the beginning might be missed. Many of the cemeteries that became parish churchyards are still in use today and their long period of use makes examining their earliest phases difficult. However, given how numerous the early domestic church complexes seem to have been, it is difficult to envision that they coexisted with a large number of communal cemeteries. The majority of later communal or parish cemeteries might, therefore, have developed from earlier household ones.

So far there has been very limited evidence for an obvious transitional or intermediary phase of burial customs in the early cemeteries. The cemeteries excavated have been exclusively Christian in nature and identifiably Christian cemeteries have, so far, not been found outside home fields in the traditional setting of pagan burials. This lack of evidence does, however, not exclude the possibility that some of the first Christian burials might have taken place in the older pagan grave fields, or even in pre-conversion Christian grave plots without the erection of identifiable cemetery walls or churches.

This apparent lack of evidence for contemporary or overlapping burial rites supports Orri Vésteinsson's suggestion that the transitional period may have been fairly short (Orri Vésteinsson 2005: 76). The adoption of Christian burial rites seems to have come about very quickly and the apparent general uniformity of burials and associated architecture suggests that the basic tenets of Christian burial practice were well known early in the Christianisation process, even in the absence of centralised ecclesiastical institutions. This could, possibly, be accredited to a more successful missionary activity than indicated in the written sources. Alternatively, it could, reflect a section of society that was already Christian or, at least, familiar with Christian burial customs and regulations. Even if we assume that the definition of what constitutes a Christian burial may be over simplified (Hadley 2002: 227), i.e. east–west direction of grave with a body in a prone position, lack of grave goods etc., one might assume that there would be a little more variation of burial forms in the conversion time cemeteries. This has not been the case in Skagafjörður, burial forms are conspicuously uniform and the same can be said of the religious architecture.

As the purpose of the project has been locating and examining early cemetery structures, as opposed to church buildings, the most obvious way of attempting to estimate the status of a church is by assessing the size and nature of the cemeteries. It is not an unreasonable assumption that the churches and cemeteries would have been larger at the larger and more influential farms not least if they were meant to serve as communal graveyards with a larger catchment area. But so far results of the project have not borne this out.

The data suggests that the earliest cemeteries seem to have been fairly similar in shape and size in the 11th century, circular or oval around 15–20 m in diameter. Two cemeteries were notably larger, at Mið-Grund and at Garður, the former 22 m and the latter 25 m in diameter. At Mið-Grund, the size of the enclosure might indicate it was intended for a larger population. There is, however, evidence for contemporary churches and, presumably, cemeteries at all the neighbouring farms so the size of the cemetery may rather reflect the size of the farm itself rather than a different function of the cemetery. The boundary wall at Garður, on the other hand, was constructed after 1104, with no obvious evidence of an older building phase. One must therefore also consider that remains visible on the surface may not be representative of the earliest phase and status of a church or cemetery, even if they are still of a medieval date.

The Skagafjörður data indicates that some cemeteries had ceased being used as burial grounds before 1104 and most seem to be abandoned by the middle of the 12th century. This most likely reflects the changing ecclesiastical landscape of the late 11th early 12th centuries with the establishment of the bishoprics, the advent of the tithe laws and other ecclesiastical laws, and increasingly organized church institutions. This may also suggest emerging central churches or at least cemeteries of a more communal nature. It is obvious, in some instances at least, that people started burying their dead at a designated community cemetery, even when there was continued use (or maintenance) of their family church. This was a departure from the firm association of churches and burial grounds in the early years of Christianity and is a further reflection of the apparent changes at the turn of the 11th century.

In some instances, cemetery walls seem to be built or rebuilt after the cemetery was no longer used for burials, probably indicating that the associated churches continued to be functional. At Ysti-Mór there is written evidence to support this as the church is mentioned in a late 15th century church registry (Dipl. Isl. V 1902: 355). The archaeological evidence points to the burials in the cemetery predating 1104 whereas the cemetery wall seems first constructed post 1104, and repaired post 1300. This indicates that a demarcation of the sacred space around the church was considered equally important as that of the burial ground. Increased ecclesiastical involvement in the matters of privately owned churches in the wake of the tithe law around the turn of the 12th century may also have meant that a tighter control was enforced regarding the appropriate upkeep of churches and cemetery walls.

So far all the early cemeteries examined in Skagafjörður have been circular or oval in shape. Their size and construction have been remarkably similar, the only discernable difference being slight variations in size, use of building material and position of the gate into the cemetery which seems to have been placed facing the farmhouse

as opposed to the west as later became the norm. Although there might be some regional variations<sup>15</sup>, the circular form seems to have been the norm for the earliest known cemeteries in Iceland (Jón Viðar Sigurðsson 2000:53). The rectangular form was a later development (Magnús Már Lárusson 1963: 402), possibly dating to a time when communal or parish cemeteries were enlarged or constructed.<sup>16</sup> In some cases the circular or oval shape survived through the centuries with the most notable example being the oval cemetery wall around Hólar cathedral. The circular form, however, was not peculiar to Icelandic cemeteries although their ubiquity and uniformity may be most marked in the Icelandic material. A number of the earliest Christian cemeteries in Greenland were circular (Keller 1988: 188), and circular or sub-circular form was the norm for the early small church sites in Faroe Islands (Stumman-Hansen 2011: 70.) Many of the earliest cemeteries of Christian character in Ireland and Northern Britain are, similarly circular in form, although they often represent a reuse of older architecture of funerary and/or defensive nature (Thomas 1971: 53–90, Petts 2002: 35–39, Ó Carragáin 2010: 217). Circular or sub-circular cemeteries have also been noted at various sites in Northern Europe and Scandinavia as well (Brendalsmo & Stylegar 2003, Thomas 1971, Stumman Hansen 2011: 66–67) although the rectangular form was most common (Jakobsson 2001: 116).

The reason as to why cemeteries were circular is not known but may, apart from the aforementioned reuse of older pre-historic architecture, have some symbolic connotation or simply be due to individual taste or prevailing fashion. Some scholars have suggested that the circular cemetery form may be evidence of Celtic Christianity or Irish missionary influence in the North-Atlantic region (Thomas 1971: 51–53, Keller 1988: 194–195, Stummann Hansen 2011: 70) whereas others have dismissed the notion (Brendalsmo & Stylegar 2003). It is not the purpose here to delve deeply into the possible origin of circular or sub-circular cemetery structures. It is difficult to see how the architecture of the 11th century church complexes can be attributed to a particular tradition of Christianity as the churches and burial customs seem to derive from Scandinavian traditions, even if situated within circular walls.

<sup>15</sup> For instance the cemetery at Kirkjuból in Skutulsfjörður (Magnús Þorkelsson 2007) and Hrafnseyri in Arnarfjörður (Margrét Hallmundsdóttir & Guðny Zoëga 2012), both in the Westfjords. However the actual age of the cemetery walls have not been determined but an AMS date for a skeleton in the Hrafnseyri cemetery gave an 11th century date.

<sup>16</sup> In a number of rectangular cemeteries the remains of an earlier circular cemetery can still be detected. Examples from Skagafjörður are the cemeteries at Viðvík and Goðdalir. At Höfði there is the evidence of a larger oval cemetery partly overlying a smaller earlier circular cemetery.

In the earliest Christian cemeteries, great emphasis seems to have been put on graves not overlapping. The cemeteries at Höfði and Ósland are the only ones, so far, where increased grave density with extensive intercutting of graves has been detected, possibly as early as the 12th century. All of the other cemeteries seem to have consisted mostly of a single phase, or layer, of burials, with little or no evidence of disturbance by later additions. Intercutting and layering of graves are features which indicate crowding in a cemetery which, in turn, indicates an extended period of use. Most of the cemeteries seem to go out of use before intercutting becomes prominent. The cemeteries that do display intercutting could therefore, possibly, be associated with churches that had held, or gained, a more prominent or communal function. The internal layout of graves in a cemetery may, thus, reveal more about its status, function and development than its apparent external size would.

Adding a large structure, such as an enclosed cemetery, to the farmstead seems to have resulted, at least in some cases, in the restructuring of the farm layout. This is reflected on the sites where occupational debris, even building remains, are found underneath the cemetery. There is also possible evidence for the importance of a cemetery's placement within the farmstead. At Stóra–Seyla two medieval cemeteries, roughly equal in size, were found 70 m apart, one dated to the 11th century, the other to the 12th – 13th centuries. This apparent re-establishment of the church and cemetery coincides with the relocation of the farmstead itself in the 11th century. After the excavation at Stóra–Seyla in 2012–13 it became evident that it was not only the farm, the church and cemetery walls that were moved in the 11th century, but the cemetery inhabitants as well. It seems likely that the bones and bodies were reinterred in the new cemetery up the hill. Whether individual graves were re-established or a mass grave constructed for the remains is not yet known. The reason for the complete discontinuation of a cemetery that seems not to have been used to its capacity can only be speculated on. Environmental changes may have caused the cemetery location at the bottom of the hill to become, for some reason, less suitable or attractive. It also has to be considered that after the relocation of the farmstead to a higher position in the landscape the church would have been in a geographically unfavourable position, or perhaps a specific association with the residence was considered necessary. Such association of farmstead and church has also been observed in Norse Greenland (Krogh 1983: 242).

## **Conclusion**

It has long been known that small household churches or prayer churches were numerous in the first centuries of Christianity in Iceland, just how many was not fully

realized. The Skagafjörður Church Project has added to the picture by firmly establishing the connection between these structures and the earliest Christian burial grounds. The first churches seem to have served as burial chapels and the associated cemeteries were the final resting place for individual families, extended households or occupants of associated tenant farms. So far, all of the suspected cemetery sites associated with enclosures have contained graves when excavated. The later, officially termed church or *bænhús* class of churches seems to have been a continuation, possibly with a decrease in status, of an earlier family church and cemetery, as opposed to representing the emergence of a new subclass of churches.

Apart from their assumed burial functions, the extent to which the churches were used for religious ceremonies is difficult to establish archaeologically. We have little knowledge of how well versed the general public was in the teachings of Christianity in the period following the conversion and availability of priests would have been severely limited. When communal or central churches took over the major religious functions, including burial, is uncertain, but the late 11th early 12th century seems probably based on the widespread discontinuation of burials in the family plots at that time.

The sheer number of cemeteries/churches from the early 11th century in Skagafjörður suggest a swift and individualistic adoption of Christian burial customs. Independent farmers, even at average sized farms, established and built privately owned cemeteries and churches. There is evidence of a change in burial customs in the late 11th early 12th centuries, when the control of the individual households to bury their own dead seems to have been curbed. This indicates a more marked effort in ecclesiastical organization and a political change involving the upkeep and ownership of private churches.

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