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Lost Paths

Climate Changes and the Forgotten Route to Skriðuklaustur Monastery, Eastern Iceland

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Abstract. – Medieval monasteries were commonly located on major routes, as they were open to everyone in need for assistance. Still, an excavation carried out on the ruins of the Augustinian Skriðuklaustur monastery (A.D. 1493–1554) revealed suchlike institution situated in a remote inland valley of eastern Iceland. However, the business of the brethren directed the focus towards a forgotten path between the southern and eastern parts of Iceland over the Vatna Glacier or Vatnajökull, placing the monastery in a major route. The path was lost in A.D. 1640 because of climate changes but when it was still accessible, the monastery was the first or last stopover when passing the highlands on the way to the south coast of Iceland. The example from Skriðuklaustur monastery demonstrates how the interplay between culture and nature constantly forges human life and society. *[Medieval Iceland, Skriðuklaustur monastery, ancient routes, hospital, fish bones, Actor-Network Theory]*

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Introduction

The climate change – cooling or warming – has been the subject of investigations since the dawn of modern history. The current global warming has revealed many hidden archaeological remains from melting glaciers, while periods with colder climate have buried others in snow and ice. A forgotten route over the largest glacier of Iceland, Vatnajökull, came into light through an excavation on an inland monastic site, Skriðuklaustur, located in the Fljótsdalur Valley of eastern Iceland. The route was blocked because of massive changes in the glacier due to cooling climate in the mid-17th century, roughly a century after the closing of the monastery. The excavation proved that the monastery served as a dwelling for travellers, pilgrims, the elderly, patients, and paupers but, obviously, it would have been impossible for the brethren to fulfil its obligations if it had been run in a remote place as the valley occurs to be today. It was though not only the monastery's aims that provided an explanation of its location, but the brethren interest in buying costal farms in southern Iceland where it was possible to catch more valuable fish than in the east. Fish bones found during the excavation underlined this emphasis as they were mainly of large sized cod, haddock, and ling. The fish thus must have been transported dried from the southern to the eastern parts of Iceland along the forgotten route over the Vatnajökull. This shows at the same time that the monastery was located in a beaten track during the period it was open, as most other monastic houses that were meant to physically serve the secular community through charity work.

The Excavations at the Skriðuklaustur Monastic Site

The Augustinian monastery at Skriðuklaustur was established in 1493 on the inland farm Skriða in the

Fljótsdalur Valley in eastern Iceland and operated until the Reformation during the mid-16th century. Initially, the monastery was recognised from written records to have been active in the business of buying and selling farms. Otherwise, not much was known about the general activities of the institution or its buildings, until its ruins were excavated in its entirety during the period from 2000–2012. The excavation revealed the ground form of a monastic complex in an area that measures over 1,500 square meters in size (Fig. 1). Although the monastery at Skriðuklaustur was built of domestic materials – turf, stones, and driftwood – the interior plan of its buildings is typical, forming a cluster of houses with different areas divided accordingly to sacred and secular purposes. The south area of the monastic complex was formed by the church, the western by brethren's living quarters, the northern by the kitchen and refectory area, but the infirmary hall, the guesthouse, and the storage rooms are all located in the eastern part of the complex, farthest away from the sacred space of the brethren. The church was enclosed by a wall that was attached to the northern wall of the monastic houses. Inside the

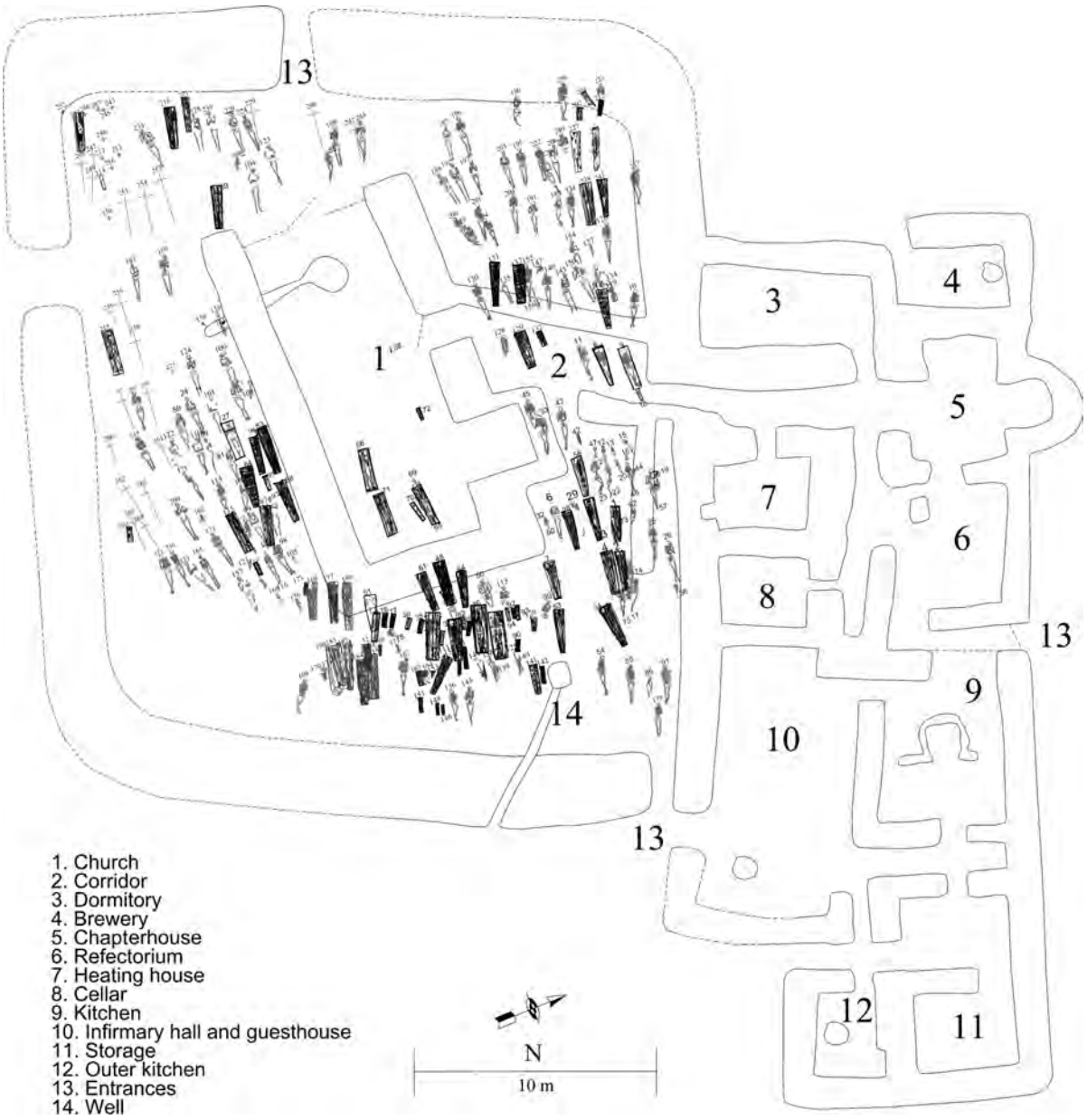

Fig. 1: The Ruins of the Skriðuklaustur Monastery (© Vala Gunnarsdóttir).

enclosure, there was the cloister garth with a fountain. Burials were also found all around the church as well as inside it (Kristjánsdóttir 2012).

The identification of vertebrate and insect remains, from samples taken during the excavation, has improved this understanding of the different rooms inside the monastic complex.[1] Analysis of pollen and seeds furthermore shows that gardening was carried out at the site and that imported plants were cultivated there during the monastic period. The samples processed so far revealed ten species of healing plants, whereof three not native to the Icelandic flora during medieval times (Harðarson 2008; Shaw 2012). Among the findings from the site there are 18 lancets, scalpels, and pins that may have been used for healing purposes. Beside this, two vessels for medication were found, both imported, one a vial and the other a ceramic bottle (Kristjánsdóttir 2010a: 378). Also, the effigy of St. Barbara was discovered in the church's chancel. St. Barbara was known as one of the Fourteen Holy Helpers, a group of saints that is venerated in Roman Catholicism because their intercession was thought to protect against different diseases. The effigy found at the site was a 15th-century production from Utrecht in the Netherlands (Þóra Kristjánsdóttir 2008: 146 f.).

Monasteries were obliged to bury all those who died in their care as patients or travellers and, of course, always their own brethren, nuns, benefactors, and secular assistants, as lay people (Gilchrist and Sloane 2005: 56 f., 63). Apparently, this was done at the monastery at Skriðuklaustur as the 296 burials exhumed from the monastic cemetery were of both secular and sacred act. Approximately 148 of the skeletons found there did also bear the signs of serious pathological alterations caused by diverse traumatic injuries and chronic illnesses, underlining further the hospitalised activities of the monastery. The pathological alterations are symptomatic for syphilis, tuberculosis, hydatid disease, non-specific infection, congenital disorders, periodontal disease, metabolic insult, and fractures.[2]

Moreover, inside the cemetery there were four burial areas that each had different meaning in accordance with the descendants' placement in regard to the monastic complex itself. These areas are the cloister garth together with the area north of the church designated for the patients; secondly, the area south of the church for the lay people; thirdly, the area east of the chancel for the brethren; and, finally, inside the church building itself for benefactors (Kristjánsdóttir 2010b: 54–59). This division of graves into four areas provides an opportunity to count the approximate number of deceased in each group of people associated with the monastery. The patients were the largest group buried in the monastic cemetery during the 60 years the monastery was open, but the brethren, who were buried east of the chancel, probably never numbered more than five at any time. On the contrary, those who assisted with their daily work were over 100, according to the number of graves exhumed south of the church. Some of them may though have been short-term visitors or pilgrims who died during a stopover in the monastery. Finally, seven graves were exhumed inside the church (Kristjánsdóttir 2010b: 54 ff.).

In all, the monastic building at Skriðuklaustur featured most of the elements that are common to many other monastic institutions worldwide.[3] What did thus seemed odd – right from the beginning of the research at the site – was the location of the monastery in the today remote inland valley, because such institutions in other parts of the world were usually located on major routes (Fig. 2). According to the current situation, a more logical location for the monastery at Skriðuklaustur would have been in the fjords along the eastern coastline, where the most common routes of transport are today, both on sea and land. The other eleven medieval monasteries and nunneries in Iceland were in fact all located around the coastline of the island, an area of greater population density (Kristjánsdóttir 2012: 296). The excavation did, however, support earlier suspicions about a long gone and forgotten route of travel and transport between the southern and the eastern parts of Iceland through the Fljótsdalur Valley and further on over the Vatnajökull eastern end (Kristjánsdóttir and Kristjánsson 2010: 104 ff.).

The Cultural and Natural Environment

By looking closer at what was found during the excavation at Skriðuklaustur, the monastery seems to have been a relatively large institution on the Icelandic medieval scale. It is estimated that the country had at most 30,000 inhabitants at that time, after having dealt with the various disasters caused by natural catastrophes and epidemics (Karlsson 2000: 44 ff., 115). Only sixteen years after an enormous eruption in a crater of Veiðivötn, located in the southern part of the Vatnajökull, the monastery was

1 Pálsdóttir (2006); Konráðsdóttir (2008, 2009, 2012); Hamilton-Dyer (2010).

2 Pacciani (2006, 2008, 2009, 2010); Zoëga (2008); Collins (2010, 2011); Ahlin Sundman (2011).

3 Braunfels (1973); Gilchrist (1994); Helms (2002); Kerr (2009).

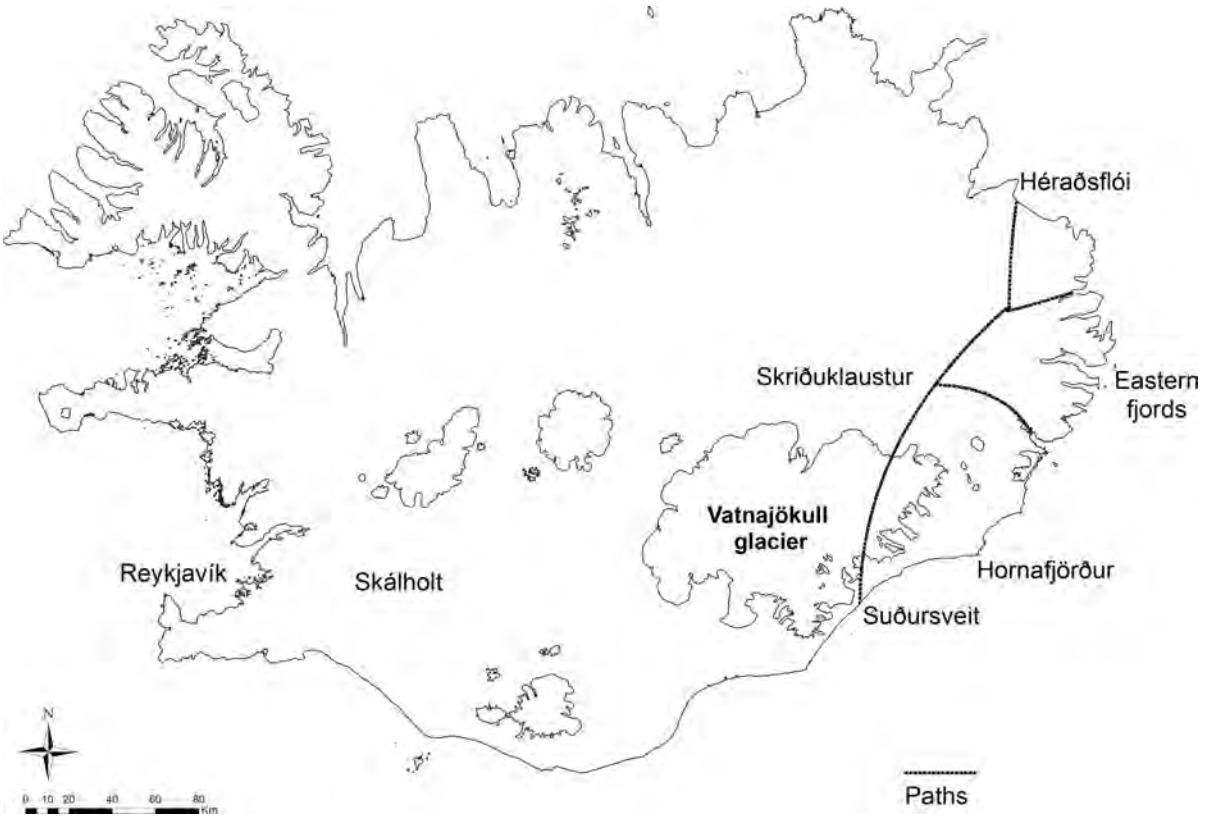

Fig. 2: A Map of Iceland Showing the Major Routes to and from Skriðuklaustur (© Steinunn Kristjánsdóttir and Vala Gunnarsdóttir).

established. The volcanic ash from it spread all the way to Western Europe and is commonly thought to have caused crop failure in certain areas there as in Iceland. The ash from the Veiðivötn eruption can still be found in the soil in Iceland and an up to 10 cm thick layer of it is visible right under the monastic ruins. The damage on the nature must have been considerable, especially for the farmers in the east, even in the centuries after the eruption. Archaeological investigations indicate that the Hrafnkelsdalur Valley was deserted after this and most likely other valleys in the east. Many of the farms that were abandoned during the eruption were never habited again (Rafnsson 1990: 93, 100). Furthermore, the year 1479 is remembered for the sea ice that was lying attached to the shoreline of northern and eastern Iceland, causing harm for those relying on fishing. What followed was a colder climate, that later caused grass failure in 1492, 1493, and 1494. And just at the time the monastery at Skriðuklaustur was founded, in 1495–96, a new wave of plague swept around Europe and Iceland. Earlier the Black Death and other plagues had killed up to 60% of the inhabitants of Europe and the inhabitants of Iceland were certainly not excluded from these disasters (Karlsson 2000: 112–117). After the plague in the 15th century, an epidemic of syphilis followed. The nineteen cases of syphilis identified so far in the skeletal collection from Skriðuklaustur indicate that it was an epidemic disease in Iceland as in the rest of Europe (Kristjánsdóttir 2010: 406 ff.).

Although the catastrophes may mostly have been over when the monastery at Skriðuklaustur was established, the consequences were still obvious, appearing in generally bad health conditions because of food shortages and the rising number of homeless people. The capacity of the church, state, or even the common homes to assist those in needs was similarly much smaller than before. Most likely this may have affected the decision of the bishop in Skálholt, Stefán Jónsson, to establish a monastery in the eastern quarter of Iceland – notably at the Skriða farm in Fljótsdalur – in the late-15th century where the situation was the worst. All the other eleven monasteries and nunneries in Iceland were founded long before, during the 12th and 13th century, and were located in the south and the north (Kristjánsdóttir 2012: 297–311). Being the only monastery located east of the Vatnajökull, Skriðuklaustur even must have been meant to serve a relatively large area with

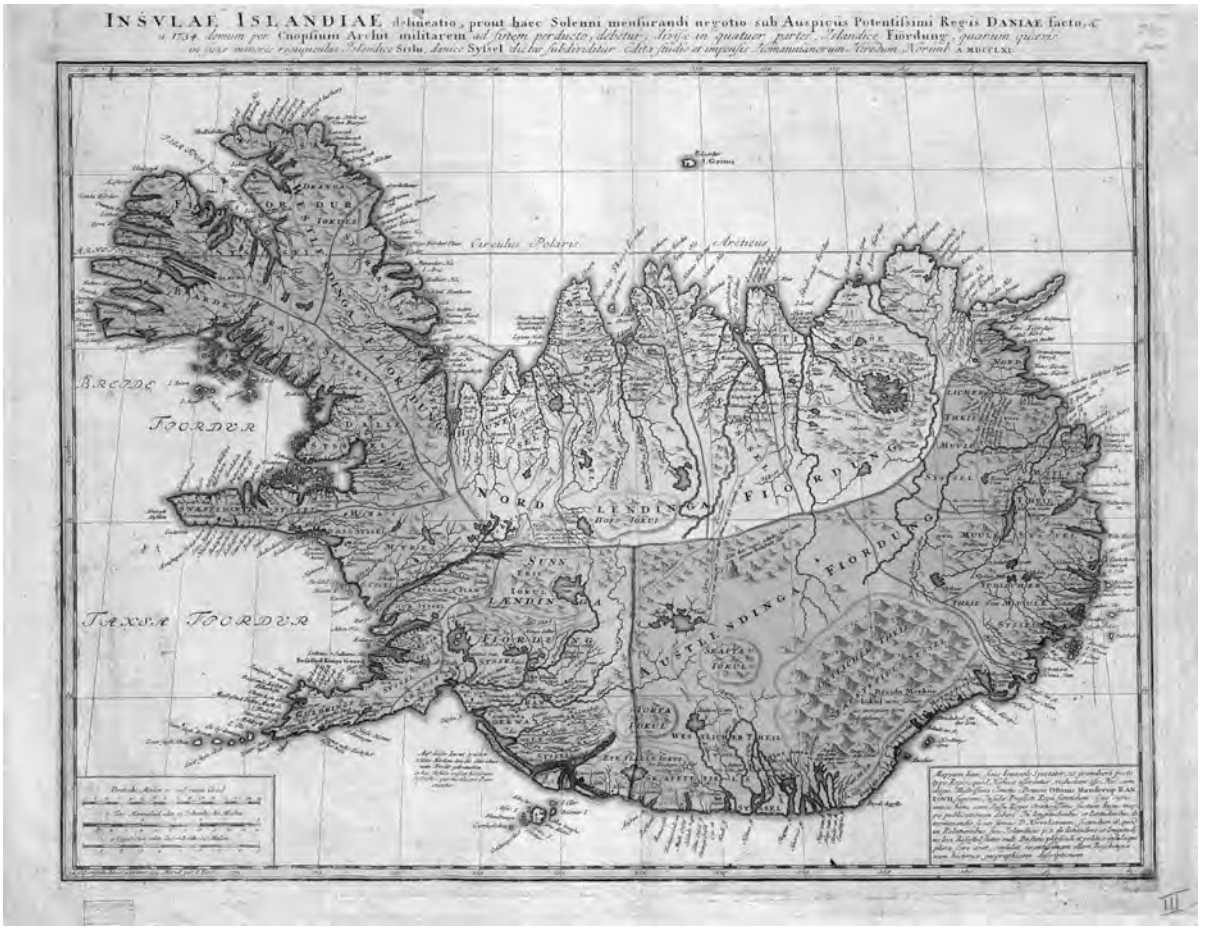

Fig. 3: The Four Governmental Quarters of Iceland until the 17th Century (© National and University Library of Iceland).

guests and travellers coming from the whole eastern quarter of Iceland (Fig. 3). Consequently, to be able to feed and shelter all those who came there, the monastery needed a considerable amount of supplies from the surrounding area. This further underlines the importance of the monastery being located on well-travelled cross-country routes. Sheep was though raised at the monastic farm, according to the identifications done on the animal bones found there, but most other logistics must have been transported over land to the monastery (Hamilton-Dyer 2010: 52).

Still, it was through the identifications on fish bones, found at the site, that provided an answer to the question about the currently peculiar location of the monastery. The majority of the fish bones analysed so far were of large cod, ling, and haddock that only could be caught off the southern and western coast of Iceland. This discovery pointed to the possibility of a forgotten route in the eastern part, over the Vatnajökull glacier to the inland areas in the east. The shoreline from the south to the eastern fjords and further into the valley of Fljótsdalur is much longer and more tricky, especially for transporting goods, because of the several voluminous glacial rivers that even need to be crossed. However, today it may seem improbable that people travelled and transported fish over the Vatnajökull but this was done (Björnsson 2009: 243). The business of the brethren further underlines this.

Business in the South

Monasteries generate revenues in different ways. The buying and selling of farms was an important source of income, especially concerning the more valuable ones that had additional resources from the sea and the shore. During medieval times, stockfish was extremely valuable in Iceland, as was the driftwood that could be collected on the shoreline. The wood was mostly used for the inland market, as well as the stockfish, but it was also exported to other parts of Europe (Þorláksson 2003).

According to the documents preserved about the activities at the Skriðuklaustur monastery, the brethren there obviously strived to buy farms by the sea, probably because of the access to valuable recourses that they could provide; notably dried fish and driftwood (Steinsson 1966: 92–102). This was most likely both for the running of the monastery as well as for food, building material, and for its on-going business. The monasteries' incomes also came from the local community, benefactors, through the sale of books, and for their work of healing and charity. The first prior of the monastery, Narfi Jónsson, immediately starts to secure its economical basis by buying farms after he gained his position. These were all very valuable farms, located on the shoreline of the eastern fjords such as Seyðisfjörður, Reyðarfjörður, Loðmundarfjörður, and Fáskrúðsfjörður. The prior not only strived to buy valuable farms in the east but also in the south. In 1504, he buys a part of one of the most valuable farms in Iceland at the time, Borgarhöfn in Suðursveit, and pays for it with a coastal farm located on the eastern shoreline and by educating a young boy from Borgarhöfn. Narfi's successor, Þorvarður Helgason, continues to acquire this valuable farm in Suðursveit and buys larger parts of it, also paying for it with two coastal farms in the east. In the end, the monastery owned three quarters of Borgarhöfn, but the bishopric in Skálholt the rest (Steinsson 1965: 108).

The farm Borgarhöfn in Suðursveit was more valuable than most other coastal farms, as it gave access to larger fish than could be caught from other similar farms in the east. Because of meteorological reasons and the geographical landscape under sea outside of the fjord Hornafjörður, the large size fish types cannot wander further to the east than this. The sea south of it is also much warmer than it is outside the northern and eastern shorelines of Iceland. The smaller fish, that stay in the cold sea between Greenland and Iceland, cannot become larger than 60–80 cm in length, while the size of the fish outside the southern and western coastlines is usually over one meter, as the ones found exclusively at Skriðuklaustur (Sigfús Schopka 2011: pers. comm.). Actually, this is a well-known fact among fishers and ichthyologists in Iceland today.

Similarly, investigations on fish bones found in archaeological context prove that the situation has stayed unchanged since the settlement of the island in the 9th century. For example, the fish found during an excavation at the medieval trading centre Gásir in Eyjafjörður, located on the northern coast of Iceland, only measured up to 80 cm in length (Harrison 2009: 25). Similar results were gained from an identification made on fish bones from the farm Akurvík in the northern part of the Westfjords. The bones there were collected from a rubbish heap, dating from the settlement to recent times (Perdikaris and McGovern 2008: 80).

It may, therefore, now appear to be obvious that the monastery transported fish, most likely as stockfish, from the south coast over the Vatnajökull to the inland valley where Skriðuklaustur monastery was located. Oddly enough, by examining the written documents closer, it is more and more obvious that the glacier was crossed, both for transport and general travelling, between the south and through the valley of Fljótsdalur. Place-names attached to the glacier also indicate that fishermen travelled all the way from the northern part of Iceland to the southern coast, most likely through the route along the Fljótsdalur Valley, merely to get the large, valuable fish (Guttormsson 1993: 145–147). Only a few routes may have been open there at times, but these may have moved occasionally because of the constant changes in the glacier itself until in the end it became impossible to pass. This most likely happened during the mid-17th century because of a huge icefall in the eastern part of the Vatnajökull and so the route has been closed ever since (Magnússon 1953: 82 f., 228).

A further result of these dramatic changes, which closed the route between Suðursveit and Skriðuklaustur, were both cultural and governmental adaptations, as the connections between these two parts of the island were disrupted. The eastern quarter initially was geographically the largest one of the four in Iceland, reaching from the Mývatn area in the north to Vík in the south with the Vatnajökull included (Fig. 3). Only a century after the pathway closed down, the southern part of the eastern quarter was cut off, ending at the northern side of the glacier. It has remained as such since then.

Conclusion

Presumably the lost and forgotten route, which now is found after being buried in ice for centuries, was decisive for the location of a new monastery east of the Vatnajökull. The activities of the brethren indicate, moreover, that their institution was perfectly situated for serving the whole area of the eastern quarter in Iceland, where the situation also may have been the worst after a long period of disasters. The monastery was thus easily accessible from the fjords in the east as well as from the Héraðsflói Bay in the north and the rest of the eastern quarter south of the glacier (Fig. 2). And according to the results from the excavation, the brethren splendidly com-

pleted the requirements for the operation of their monastery by serving over 250 individuals only during a period of 60 years. Besides this, the diversity in the skeletal material demonstrates very well that Skriðuklaustur monastery was open to everyone in need for assistance, such as travellers, pilgrims, the elderly, patients, and paupers. This would not have been possible if it had not been located on a well-known route in the eastern quarter of Iceland. However, the example from Skriðuklaustur monastery though, first and foremost, demonstrates how culture and nature, as joint and active agents, constantly forges human life and society.

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