

**EXCAVATION REPORT:
MOSFELL AND HRÍSBRÚ,
MOSFELLSSVEIT**

September 1995

prepared by

**Timothy Earle, Professor and Chair, Department of Anthropology,
Northwestern University
and**

**Jesse Byock, Professor, Department of Germanic Languages and Institute
of Archaeology, UCLA**

in collaboration with

**Phillip Walker, Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of
California, Santa Barbara
and**

Sigurður Bergsteinsson, National Museum of Iceland

Table of Contents

Overview	page 105
Location	105
Project participants	106
Methodology	106
Results at Mosfell	106
Summary interpretation and recommendation	109
Results at Hrisbrú	109
Summary interpretation and recommendation	110
Results at Tjaldanes	110
Summary interpretation and recommendation	110
Overall Summary	110
Appendix I: Photographs taken during 1995 Excavation at Mosfell	
Appendix II: Interview with Guðmundur Skarpheðinsson	112
Appendix III: Figures & Maps	
Map of the 1995 Test Excavations, Mosfell Church	
Fig. 1, Mosfell Unit 1	
Fig. 2, Mosfell Unit 2	
Fig. 3, Hrisbrú, Trench 1, West Face	
Póstur og Sími, Mosfell I (diagram of telephone lines, Mosfell I)	
Rafmagnsveita Reykjavíkur (diagram of electrical lines)	

When Christianity was adopted by law in Iceland, Grímr of Mosfell was baptized and built a church there. People say that Thórdís had Egill's bones moved to the church, and this is the evidence. When a church was built at Mosfell, the one that Grímr had built at Hrísrú was demolished and a new graveyard was laid out. Under the altar some human bones were found, much bigger than ordinary human bones, and people are confident that these were Egill's because of stories told by old men.

Egils saga, chapter 86¹

Overview

Following the permit application submitted by Timothy Earle and Jesse Byock to the Archaeological Committee of Iceland and the permit issued to them by that Committee, a team of American and Icelandic archaeologists conducted a test excavation at the sites of Mosfell and Hrísrú, 4-6 September 1995. The goal of these excavations was to evaluate the state of preservation of cultural deposits at these sites and the feasibility of future larger-scale excavations. The results of our excavation are detailed in this report and our future intentions are discussed in the Overall Summary.

We are greatly in the debt of many organizations and individuals for making this preliminary excavation possible. Funding for travel was provided by Northwestern University and the University of California, Los Angeles. The Icelandic Ministry of Culture provided essential logistical support. The Governing Board of the Vicarage Fund and the parish committee of the Mosfell Church, and Ólafur Ingimundarson of Hrísrú farm welcomed us warmly to their beautiful valley. All the owners of the properties at Mosfell, Hrísrú, and Tjaldanes kindly gave us permission to excavate on their properties. Personal support and encouragement were selflessly offered by Helgi Þorláksson (Professor, University of Iceland), Dr. Guðmundur Ólafsson (liaison with the National Museum), and Erlendur Kristjánsson (Assistant to the Minister of Culture).

Location

Excavations were conducted at the church of Mosfell and the farm of Hrísrú Mosfellssveit.

¹Scholars have been in some disagreement as to precisely what the saga passage tells us about the early placement of the church at Mosfell. Was it at Hrísrú or at Mosfell? The two sites are within 500 meters of each other. P. E. Kristian Kálund, *Bidrag til en historisk-topografisk Beskrivelse of Island*, vol. I, *Syd og Vest-Fjærdingerne* (Copenhagen: Kommissionen for det Arnamagnæanske Legat, 1877) and Magnús Grímsson, "Athugasendur við Egils sögu Skallagrímssonar," in *Safn til sögu Íslands og íslenskra bókmenta að forna og nýju*, II (Copenhagen: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1886) have argued that the description of the move meant that the farm Mosfell was originally at Hrísrú and later was moved to the present location of the Mosfell church. Then, or sometime later, the farm that remained at the original location was renamed Hrísrú and became a rental property. Sometime thereafter, in the middle of the 12th century, the church was moved. The other view, advanced by Sigurður Nordal, is that the chief farm was always at Mosfell. Following what he understood to have been the tradition of pagan temples, Sigurður noted that the first churches after conversion were erected at some distance from the farm building, in this instance at Hrísrú. Later, as a matter of convenience, a new church was built at the farm of Mosfell, and the earlier church site was converted into a tenant property with the name Hrísrú (*Íslensk Fornrit* 2, p. 298).

At Mosfell, excavations were located in the gravel roadway and path directly north and below the modern church yard; at Hrisbrú, on the earthen mound 15-30 m north and above of the westerly paired barns. The area excavated at Mosfell had been identified in the mid-19th century by Séra Magnús Grímsson as the location of the old church yard of Mosfell, which according to the saga is the final burial location of Egill Skallagrímsson; the mound at Hrisbrú, identified as an archaeological site, is believed to be the original location of the Mosfell church where Egill's remains were first moved to Christian ground; and the mound at Tjaldanes was identified by Magnús Grímsson as the likely original burial mound of Egill. Specific locations are indicated on the aerial photograph provided in the first permit application.

Project participants

Timothy Earle (Director for Archaeology, Mosfell Project; Chair and Professor, Anthropology, Northwestern University; Professor, Anthropology, UCLA [on leave]), Jesse Byock (Director of the Mosfell Project; Professor, Germanic Languages; Director, Old Norse Studies Program, UCLA; and Professor, UCLA Institute of Archaeology), Philip Walker (Professor, Anthropology, UCSB), Sigurður Bergsteinnsson (archaeologist, National Museum), and Einar A. E. Sæmundsen (National Park Service, Iceland). Helgi Þorláksson (Professor, University of Iceland) provided valuable historical research.

Methodology

Procedures included the machine clearing (with Bobcat) of overburden and hand excavation of exposed cultural layers to determine the nature of the preserved deposit and possible existence of intact features. We also excavated several trenches by machine to glacial gravels, to expose and document the site's stratigraphy. Further, hand coring was conducted opportunistically to determine the presence of possible cultural deposits. The archaeological deposits were recorded with photographs and in scale drawings of plan and section. Artifacts were recorded, bagged, and submitted to the National Museum, Reykjavik. Excavations and test corings were backfilled after spreading a layer of chalk to mark the base of excavations in Unit 2.

Results at Mosfell

Excavation units were placed in the road area directly to the north of the existing church; Photos 1, 2, and 3 were taken from the raised graveyard, just east from the modern church; they pan easterly from the modern farm of Mosfell westerly towards the turn around for cars. The specific excavation units shown in each photograph are described in the photo captions. The locations of the excavation units are shown on "Map of the 1995 Test Excavations at the Mosfell Church." The datum was marked with a metal pipe driven into soil near the wire fence, below the grass-covered slope of the church yard.

UNIT 1 (FIG. 1). In what we expected to be the center of the old church yard, we cleared a unit roughly 8.0 m by 2.0 m directly under the paved walk way that bordered the modern church yard on the north. The machine removed the overburden that consisted of square concrete pavers, the road border, and modern construction fill. This excavation exposed a thin cultural layer along

the northern edge of the unit (Fig. 1). No evidence of burials, other features, or artifacts were recovered. Throughout most of the unit, modern fill lay directly on the sterile layer of reddish clay with gravel. In the northeastern section, we excavated a trench down 1.5 m to establish the site's profile: 1) 40-60 cm, road gravel; 2) modern sand fill for hot-water pipes intruding into 3) 10 cm mixed cultural layer; 4) 70 cm, sterile grayish brown clay with iron spots; 5) ice-age gravels with clay matrix.

UNIT 2 (FIG. 2). In what we expected to be the easterly end and northerly edge of the old church yard, we cleared a unit roughly 3.0 by 3.0 m directly under the existing road. The machine removed the gravel overburden and modern fill. Associated with the fill were two pieces of 19th-century bottle glass and one piece of pottery (not saved). Clearing exposed a cultural layer approximately 20 cm thick and the possible corner of a wall that could have been the wall base of an old church or other turf building.

Within the cultural layer, large stones (many lying flat) extended across the unit except for a cleared area in the southeast corner (Fig. 2; Photos 4-6). The stratigraphy as shown in Figure 2 was quite simple. 1) 35 cm, modern gravel fill; 2) cultural layer of brownish gray clay with charcoal flakes that overlay; 3) 15-20 cm, cultural layer with grayish brown clay with fewer charcoal flakes; and 4) underlying sterile fine yellowish clay with brownish patches.

In plan (Fig. 2), the apparent corner of an old structure was evident. The possible stone base of a turf wall line ran east/west across much of the unit; it was approximately 2 m wide. The stone base consisted of a single course of river cobbles that lay directly on the sterile layer; stones varied in size from 10 to 70 cm in maximal dimension, and they were laid roughly flat creating the base for a turf wall (or an irregular paved walk way). On top and among the stones was Layer 4 (in plan), a mixture of brown pieces of turf with fragments of tefra that we interpret as the remains of a turf wall. A poorly preserved fragment of sheep bone was noted in this layer, but its poor state of preservation did not permit recovery. Angling perpendicularly to the south (from the east-west wall line) was a possible north-south wall line consisting of smaller stones (30 cm maximum dimension). Layer 2 in plan and profile was directly associated with both wall lines. In profile, Layer 2 shows a sunken surface along the north-south wall line that may have been a narrow trench for an inner timber wall. It seems possible that this was a westerly plank-faced wall of an old church. To the south and east of the two possible walls was a shallow cultural layer without stones or turf (Layer 3 in profile). A round anomaly indicated in plan is identical to Layer 2, and it may be a post-hole of the structure. Layer 3 in plan, with its peat-ash and charcoal, suggests a cultural deposit on an old land surface as might exist at the entrance. Layer 3 in profile (excavated away in plan) was a cultural layer as seen by the charcoal fragments present. The dating of this level is difficult to determine, except that it underlies Layer 2 which was contemporaneous with the structure's use. We suggest that this area, in the southeastern corner of Unit 2, was within an old structure perhaps with a wooden floor that limited the inclusions of artifactual material. Layer 3 in profile lay on top of a thin tefra layer and the sterile Layer 1 in plan and Layer 4 in profile. No evidence of burial pits was noted.

Dating of the construction just described can be roughly bracketed. Inside the structure, and apparently predating it, is the thin tefra layer that Sigurður identified as 'Landnáms tefra' from the late 9th-century eruption. On top of and among the stones of the east-west wall were turf fragments with tefra bits that Sigurður believes are like K-1500 (Katla volcano eruption of AD 1500). The wall

base (and thus the original construction) was probably built between AD 900 and sometime before AD 1500, bracketing broadly the suggested 12th-century date of the second Mosfell church.

Was the structure identified in Unit 2 the Mosfell church in whose cemetery Egill's bones were reportedly finally reburied? At present the evidence is certainly not conclusive. The east-west orientation of the structure and the construction details of the westerly end are suggestive that we have identified a church, the location of which was described by Magnús Grímsson. However, the lack of any graves and the underlying gravels described in Unit 1 would tend to argue against this interpretation. The soil at this site would have been difficult for burials, except perhaps under the modern church mound where fill might have created a better graveyard. Guðmundur Skarpheðinsson, the farmer at Minni-Mosfell, told Jesse (see the interview with Guðmundur, appended) that in the western part of the excavation area, in what would be directly west of the excavated building portion, there were numerous hummocks with an east-west orientation. He believes that these were very old graves. These hummocks were bulldozed with the construction of the road in the late 1960s. Further work might resolve this question.

UNITS 3 AND 4. The small Unit 3 and its southerly extension as Unit 4 were excavated to the east of Unit 2 and outside the extent of the old church yard as described by Magnús Grímsson. Sterile subsoil was encountered at the base of modern road construction fill. No burial pits, other features, or artifacts were encountered.

UNIT 5. This small unit (2.5 by 2.5 m) was excavated to the west of Unit 2 along what we thought to be the northern edge of the old church yard. Several large stream cobbles were encountered, perhaps another wall fragment. We immediately discontinued operations of this possible structural feature as time did not permit its careful excavation. A partially intact cultural layer may exist under this portion of the road.

UNIT 6. This excavation consisted of a narrow trench (40 cm), about 3.0 m long. It was excavated well to the east of the proposed church yard and was done to determine whether any cultural layer or other features were located further to the east. None were noted. The gravel fill of the modern road lay directly on sterile subsoil.

UNIT 7. This small trench was excavated in the field immediately to the north of the modern gravel road, outside the proposed old church yard. The unit was 1.2 by 0.5 m in extent. The section (Photo 7) showed, at the top, a humic A horizon associated with the existing pasture grass-root system; this layer was 10 cm deep and had probably been plowed in the past. Below were several noncultural layers, most dramatic of which was a 5-10 cm thick irregular tefra layer identified as probably associated with K-1500. This eruption is known to have produced a thick layer of tefra in the Mosfell region, and the geologist Magnús Sigurgeirsson believes that our assessment is likely, although he would have to inspect a sample to be sure. A sample of the tefra was collected for identification. The irregular surface of the tefra layer, as shown in Photo 7 of the profile, may have been caused by animal activity in the area at the time of the eruption; it seems likely that the tefra filled in the irregular surface broken by animal treading. No evidence of a cultural layer or other features was encountered, and we believe that this supports the contention that Unit 7 lay outside of the old church yard.

To evaluate the utility of the method, some test corings were conducted within the field area to the north of the road. Deep organic layers (greater than 50 cm in places), probably associated with ongoing pasturage and farming, were noted; no other cultural material was described. Where excavation is planned for a new parish house, surface inspection and coring did not document evidence of human settlement.

Summary interpretation and recommendation

Construction of the gravel road north of the church apparently truncated at least one major historic site, perhaps of the old Mosfell church. The cultural layer removed in the bulldozing was apparently used as fill to enlarge (by heightening) the church yard on top of the hillock, where the present church stands. We identify three areas of potential historical significance and recommend that future construction around Mosfell avoid these areas. First, just north of the modern church yard and below the gravel road is a thin cultural layer with intact cultural features (walls and foundations of buildings) at the base of the road fill. This area should eventually be fully excavated to document the features identified in the test excavations. No work should be allowed that will do further damage to this potentially important cultural layer (identified in Units 1, 2, and 5) with structural remains in Unit 2 and perhaps 5. Second, to the south of the modern road and east of the modern church, the fill used to extend the existing church yard may well have sealed and protected a historic land surface that could include large, undisturbed parts of the old graveyard as described by Magnús Grímsson. With permission of the church, a small excavation here could test for preserved cultural deposits, perhaps including burial remains. Since Egill was said to have been buried farthest out in the church yard, it is possible that his remains still lie in the undisturbed earth under the fill. Third, to the east of the modern church yard where the present parish house building stands, is logically the location of the original Mosfell farm. Although no test excavations were conducted here, we caution that preserved features may well exist. Construction should avoid this location especially to the east of the 1960s parish house, except with careful consultation with archaeologists. Finally, the location chosen for the new house, well to the east and north of the present church, seems not to be archaeologically sensitive. We, however, recommend that, because of the significance of the Mosfell church area generally, an archaeologist should inspect the machine operations during construction to minimize the possibility of further losses of archaeology.

Results at Hrísrú

UNIT 1. This small trench was excavated in the field immediately to the north of the westerly concrete barn at Hrísrú. The southeastern corner of the trench was 21.2 m to NW corner of building and 21.1 m to its NE corner. The unit was 3.2 by 0.4 m in extent, laid out north-south cutting into the old mound perpendicularly to its east-west ridge line. Photo 8 shows the Hrísrú mound prior to excavation. The section (Fig. 3) shows three layers:

- a) at the top is a 50 cm layer of fine-grained clay loam, reddish-brown in color. It was almost without stones or other materials except for occasional charcoal flecking. Humic content is high within the top 20 cm due to root penetration from pasture grass. We interpret this layer as resulting from decomposed and

redeposited turf used in earlier structures.

b) At the base of (a) and grading into it is a 20 cm layer of fine-grained clay loam, mottled reddish-brown in color. It contained more stones than (a), including some large (30 cm) river cobbles probably used in construction. Charcoal flecking and small animal bone fragments were common, especially in the southern part of the layer near to the stone shown on the profile. A sample of the bone, thought to be non-human, was collected. We interpret this deposit as an intact cultural layer probably outside of any structure. No tefra layer was noted.

c) Below (b) and easily distinguished is a fine reddish clay loam, lighter in color than both (a) and (b). This level is not mottled and contains no cultural material. Natural undisturbed layering is noted in the profile. Below the excavated section, gravels appear to increase in number. We interpret this deposit as sterile and undisturbed glacial till.

Summary interpretation and recommendation

The Hrisbrú mound has every indication of being the product of the long-term occupation with turf constructions. It shows no evidence of disturbance and is an excellent candidate for excavation. Whether this mound was the first Mosfell church cannot be determined. Its east/west orientation is, however, suggestive.

Results at Tjaldanes

No excavations were attempted at Tjaldanes. Coring at the mound documented 50 cm of organic deposit that might be the result of turf construction.

Summary interpretation and recommendation

The Tjaldanes mound is probably an artificial mound and could well be a pre-Christian burial site. It deserves careful management and protection as the possible original burial site of Egill.

Overall Summary

As noted in our permit application to the Fornleifanefð (Archaeological Committee of Iceland), dated April 27, 1995, the preparatory research behind this preliminary excavation had been underway for three years, including many visits to Mosfellssveit. Before the actual movement of soil, our team spent two full days examining the specifics of each site and the overall nature of the valley locality. After the excavation was completed, and with its results in mind, we spent an additional three days again examining the social, economic, and ecological nature of the Mosfell valley. The years of preparatory research and the thorough hands-on site examination have given us an extensive appreciation of the coming larger excavation.

Because of the wealth of medieval and later documentation, Mosfell is an unusually important Viking Age site, and we look upon the preliminary excavation at Mosfell and the surrounding sites as highly successful. Our initial goal in carrying out the reconnaissance was to determine whether we could locate the important sites mentioned in the medieval texts. To a significant degree, we believe we have done this. We hasten to add, however, that more work remains, with many unanswered questions. While it is tragic that just three decades ago at least one major historic aspect of the Mosfell site was bulldozed (leaving nevertheless, clear foundations etc.), we are also encouraged that significant historic remains at Mosfell and the surrounding site appear undisturbed. Further, it is now apparent to us that there may be other important, undisturbed sites not mentioned in the medieval texts.

Part of our plan was to begin piecing together the human and ecological environment and here, too, the results are highly encouraging. From the outcome of our initial excavation, we now have a far better picture of the medieval settlement pattern of the region, and have begun to relate this to the local socio-economic and ecological systems. A basic fact is that Mosfell and the surrounding farms were not isolated habitations or farms that had to be abandoned a few centuries after the initial settlement. To the contrary, they are part of a frequently prosperous and long-lived valley system of human habitation. Given the interdisciplinary and complimentary archaeological skills of our team in social history, anthropology, and forensic analysis, Mosfell and its valley, as it evolved over the centuries, is an extremely fruitful site for continued archaeological examination. This we look forward to doing.

Respectfully submitted,

Professor Timothy Earle
Professor Jesse Byock

Interview with Guðmundur Skarpheðinsson¹

Taken by Jesse Byock, September, 1995
Tape of the English translation, transcribed by Philip Walker

Guðmundur Skarpheðinsson, a farmer who has lived for many years at Minni Mosfell, (the farm immediately west of the Mosfell Church) provided us with much useful information concerning the history of the Mosfell site. Guðmundur, a man in his mid 70s, came to Mosfell in 1937 when he was about 16 years old. He has farmed in the area since then and knows much about the history of land use at Mosfell.

According to Guðmundur, the nineteenth-century church at the site had a circular wall. He pointed out remnants of that wall that are still visible in the contour of the mound at the southwestern side of the modern church. He also pointed out the graves of his parents, on the northeastern side of the modern church, and remarked that a remnant of another church wall, perhaps nineteenth-century but possibly much older, was discovered when the graves of his parents were dug in the 1970s. Together, Professor Byock and Mr. Skarpheðinsson carefully scrutinized this site and estimated the size and location of the different features.

Mr. Skarpheðinsson remembered the lay of the land very well before the late 60's (he thought it was 1967 or 1968) when land to the north of the modern church was leveled and the current gravel road constructed as part of the preparation for building the church. He clearly remembers the ruin north of the present church and describes it in much the same way as did Magnús Grimsson in the mid-nineteenth century. He said that, towards the western part of the area that we excavated, there were hummocks with an east-west orientation. He believes these were graves that pre-date the nineteenth-century cemetery with the circular wall. This earlier grave yard covered the area of the current gravel road and part of the parking area to the east extending to the eastern end of the modern church. The medieval cemetery that Magnús Grimsson saw apparently extended to the south as far as, or possibly past, the later circular wall that was present in the nineteenth century. When, in the late 1960s, the scrapings from the road were piled onto the hill, the roadway was not widened into the swampy area in the field to the north of the modern gravel road. Concerning the surface of the road, itself, there was no building up of this road with rocks.

In Mr. Skarpheðinsson's estimation, the grave yard has always been hard to dig into. For this reason, the earlier graves are shallow by modern standards. At the top of the mound near the modern church, the earth is not very deep and one rapidly comes to bedrock.

Before construction of the modern church mound, an old road ran down the middle of the pre-nineteenth century church yard. This road ran between the modern church and the ruins of the

¹This interview was extensive. It was taken orally in Icelandic and subsequently summarized by Professor Byock in English.

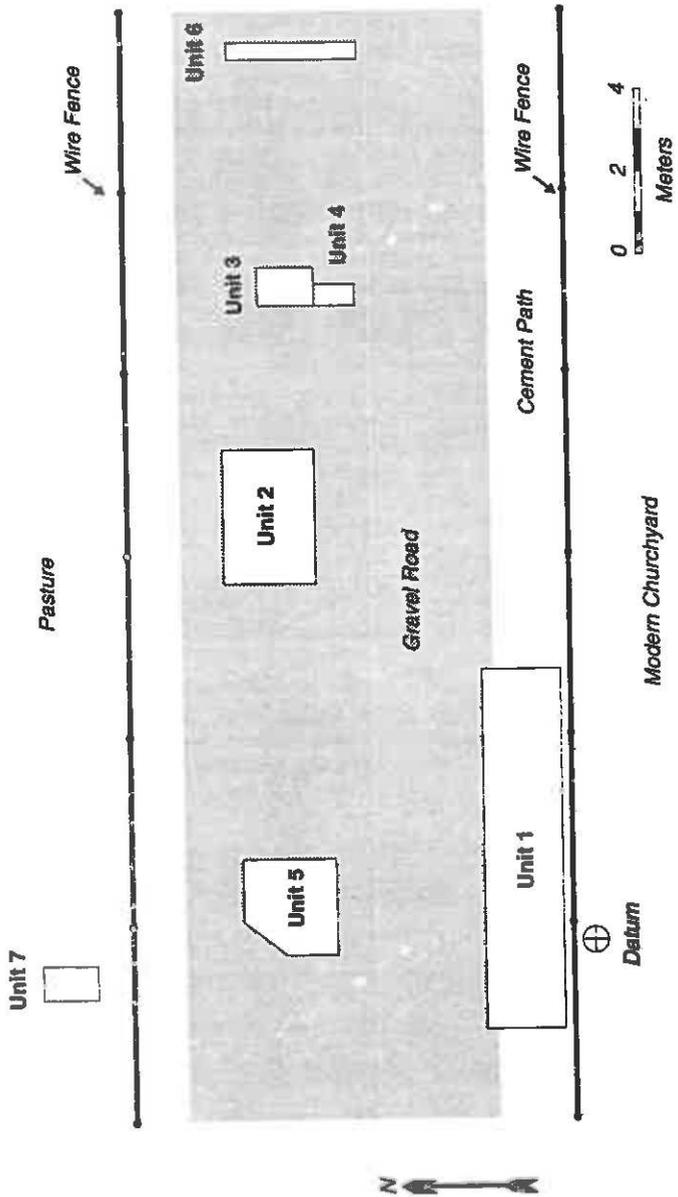
pre-nineteenth-century church and coincided, more or less, with the modern cement walkway (at the base of the church mound). This was the walkway, portions of which we removed during the excavation of our Unit 1. The remains of the old road can still be seen at the western end of the gravel road near the current small, westerly parking area. At this point, the old road veers down southerly into the ravine and emerges quite clearly on the other side.

Mr. Skarphedínsson believes that material from the grave mounds and the remains of the old church were bulldozed into the modern church mound, being used to build up the northern side of the mound upon which the current church sits. The grave yard on the south side of the mound has been, in the past century or so, the modern cemetery. Guðmundur thinks that the area of the pre-nineteenth-century cemetery (located between the modern cement walkway and the circular wall of the nineteenth-century church yard) is probably undisturbed, covered by fill taken from scraping to build the current gravel road.

Modern graves are still dug in the area of the nineteenth-century grave yard. Every time a grave is excavated "lots of bones" are discovered, including skeletons one on top of another. When the current church was built, the hill upon which it is located was extended towards the west. Under the foundation was part of the older circular graveyard. They found masses of bones in this area. This suggests that to the north and the south of the modern church the earlier burial area remains undisturbed. It also suggests that bones preserve reasonably well in this area.

Mr. Skarphedínsson also thinks that it is possible that the structure we discovered in Unit 2 is the remains of the first farm at Mosfell. Concerning the whereabouts of farm buildings, he noted that, when he was a boy there were still many remnants of farm buildings at Mosfell. The nineteenth-century farm was in the area of the current 1960s parsonage (scheduled for demolition) and its parking lot. The area to the east of the current parsonage also had clearly visible remains of much older farm buildings.

If one goes up the ravine to the west of the modern church several hundred meters, there is a cut in the ravine. This is where a crofter's cottage was located. There was a second crofter's cottage in the area where the parish is planning to build the new cemetery. These were recent ruins when Guðmundur Skarphedínsson arrived at Minni Mosfell. He mentioned that a man named Sigurður Narði had worked at these farms and knew a great deal about their history.



Map of the 1995 Test Excavations at the Mosfell Church

Figure 2
Mosfell Unit 2

Mosfell testhole Unit 2
Corner of a building (church?)
1:20 5 Sept. 1995 S. Bergsteinnsson



-  = Fully excavated stone
-  = Partially excavated stone
-  = clear deposit limit
-  = unclear deposit limit
-  = limit of test hole
- .4 = elevation in cm below datum
-  = Deposit mark
-  = Ceramic

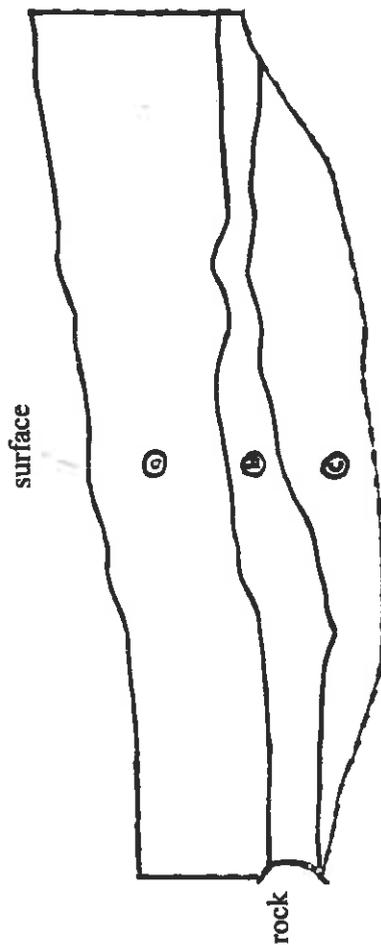
Description of deposits:

- ① Sterile. Yellowish fine-grained homogene, with patches of brown.
- ② Compact brown/gray clay with bits of charcoal.
- ③ Turf bits mixed with peat-ash and a few charcoal bits.
- ④ Mixture of brown humus turf bits and spots of tephra (K-1500?)
- ⑤ Modern

Figure 3

Unit I, Hrishrú
trench 1, west face

scale 1:10



unexcavated gravels

- a. fine-grained clay loam, reddish brown. Almost without stones or other materials, except for occasional charcoal flecking. Origin: probably redeposited turf.
- b. fine-grained clay loam, reddish color like (a), but more mottled. Has more stones, some large stream cobbles (as used in buildings), and some smaller pebbles. Contains charcoal flecking and small bone fragments (probably *not* human). Origin: intact cultural layer.
- c. fine reddish clay loam. Lighter than (a) and (b). Without cultural material. Shows undisturbed natural layering. Origin: glacial till underlain by gravels.

6/9/95
TE

