
BLOODY SLAUGHTER: RITUAL DECAPITATION AND DISPLAY AT THE VIKING SETTLEMENT OF HOFSTAÐIR, ICELAND

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Abstract: This article attempts an interpretation of an unusual assemblage of cattle skulls recovered from recent excavations at the Viking Age monumental hall of Hofstaðir in Iceland. Osteological analysis of the skulls indicates ritual decapitation and display of cattle heads, and this article seeks to explore the meanings of this practice in relation to the context of the site and the wider historical and ethnographic literature. It is argued that the beheading of cattle and display of their heads was a part of sacrificial acts conducted on a seasonal basis at the site, and primarily in the context of feasting and socio-political gatherings. The gatherings acted simultaneously as a means of both dissipating social tension and enhancing political status.

Keywords: Iceland, ritual, sacrifice, Vikings

INTRODUCTION

Recent excavations at the tenth-century Viking settlement of Hofstaðir in north-eastern Iceland have recovered a minimum of 23 individual cattle skulls which display a range of unusual contextual, taphonomic and butchery characteristics. The site itself is also highly unusual because of the size of its main hall and the place name, which together might indicate it was a pagan cult-site (Vésteinsson 2007). The conjunction of these features forms the subject of this article, which considers the problem of how to interpret the site and, in particular, the assemblage of skulls associated with it. It will be argued that seasonal acts of ritual slaughter occurred which were entwined with social gatherings in the context of feasting; moreover, the highly bloody nature of the slaughter will be emphasized as a key element to understanding the specific link to the socio-political nature of the gathering, underlining its broader importance rather than a narrowly religious interpretation.

The site of Hofstaðir is famous in the literature of Viking pagan beliefs for being one of the most enduring examples of a pagan temple. It was first excavated by Daniel Bruun in 1908, whereupon the temple interpretation was put forward (Bruun 1928; Bruun and Jonsson 1909, 1910, 1911) and for most of the early twentieth century this interpretation remained (e.g. see Shetelig and Falk 1937:285, 422). The basis for this interpretation as a temple site was both the place name (*hof* meaning temple) and the size of the hall (38 m long, more than twice the size of most ordinary long halls). In addition, a separate room at the north end of the hall was interpreted as a shrine or inner sanctuary. From the mid-twentieth century, however, doubts were expressed about this interpretation because, although large, the site was little different in form to other farmsteads (e.g. see Rousell 1943:220–221). Nonetheless, its size was significant, as was a supposed huge cooking-pit located south of the hall, which was re-excavated by Olaf Olsen in 1965. In Olsen's major work on Viking pagan sites, *Hørg, hov og kirke* he redefines Hofstaðir as a temple-farm, that is a farm of a chieftain who also acted as a priest, presiding over religious ceremonies (Olsen 1965).

In 1992, a re-excavation of the site commenced which was completed in 2002, resulting in the discovery of new satellite structures as well as full excavation of the interior of the long hall (Figs 1 and 2). After the initial seasons of excavation, it was argued that Hofstaðir was primarily a chieftain's settlement and that, although it may have hosted religious ceremonies, this was of secondary importance to its political status (Friðriksson and Vésteinsson 1997; Friðriksson et al. 2004). The site becomes comparable to several other monumental halls from Nordic countries such as Borg, Lejre and Uppsala which have been interpreted as feasting halls – the residences of chieftains or kings where pagan rituals also took place (Brink 1999; Christensen 1993; Larsson and Hårdh 1998; Lundqvist 1997; Munch et al. 2003; Näsman and Roesdahl 2003). Now that the project is complete and final publication is in preparation, it seems that a reconsideration of the ritual element cannot be ignored, especially given the finds of cattle skulls (see Vésteinsson 2001 for an early statement). Indeed, it can be argued that this ritual was integral to the political nature of the site – avoiding the dichotomy of ritual/functional (e.g. see Brück 1999), and similarly not conflating ritual with religion (e.g. see Insoll 2004). We will begin by discussing the specific details of the skulls and their context of deposition and then, to help contextualize their interpretation, we will look at cases of ritual deposition in the archaeological record of tenth-century north-western Europe. Thereafter we explore the historical references to Viking ritual involving animal sacrifice, placing this within broader anthropological theories; finally, we will return to the Hofstaðir material and attempt to provide a rich interpretation of the meaning of these skulls in the social context of the site and tenth-century Iceland.

THE SKULLS

Osteology and taphonomy

While the great majority of the bone fragments recovered from the excavations at Hofstaðir in 1992–2001 appears to represent the normal refuse generated by a Viking

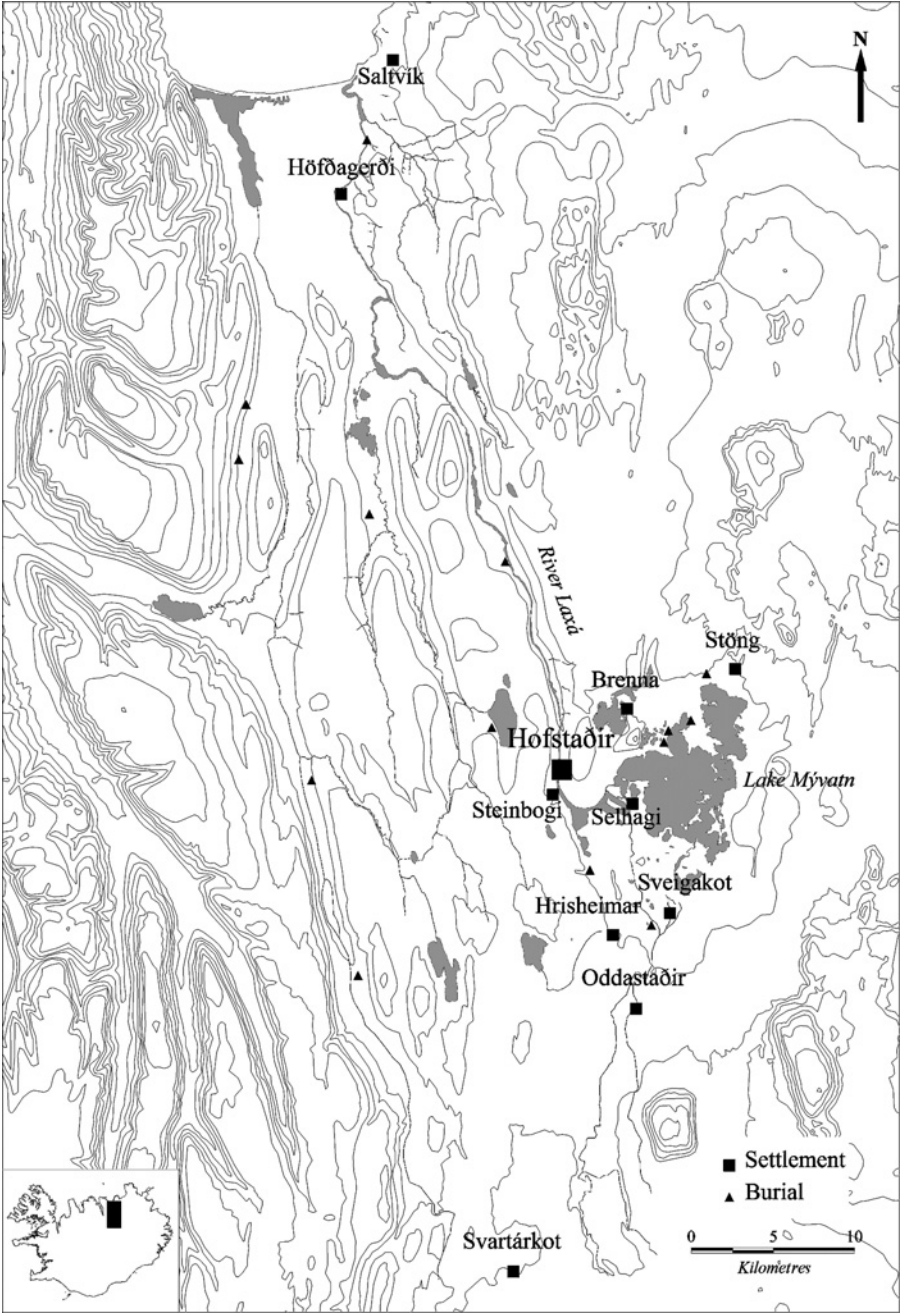


Figure 1. Location of Hofstaðir in relation to known Viking Age settlements and burials around Lake Mývatn. Illustration by Oscar Aldred.

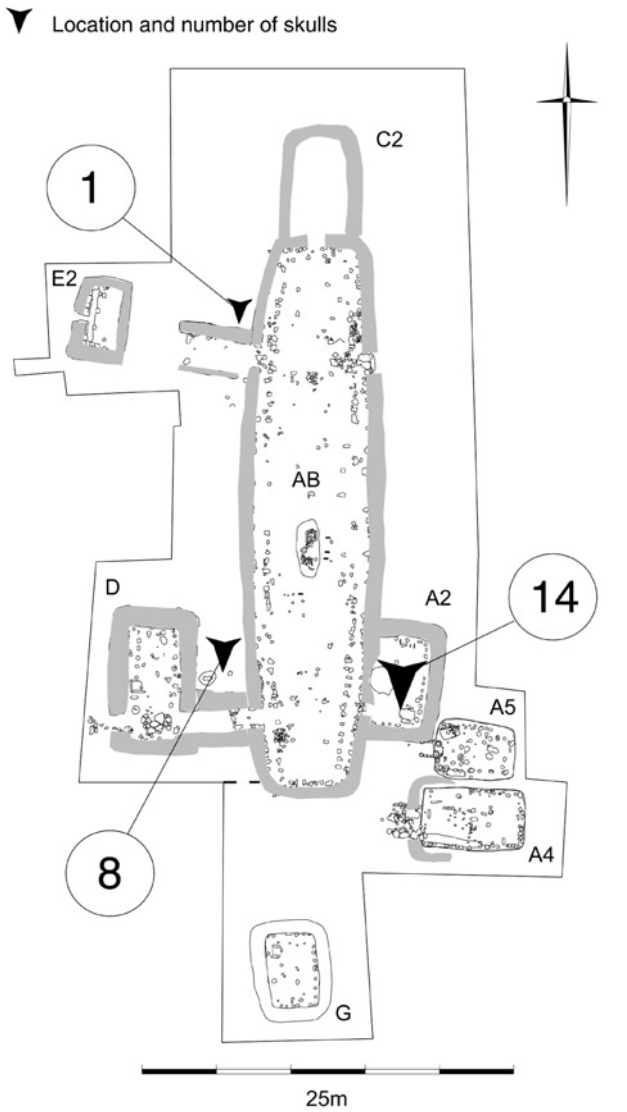


Figure 2. Plan of the settlement at Hofstaðir, showing the location of skulls.

Age working farm, some cattle skull fragments discovered in and around the great hall appear very different from those found elsewhere on site or in other Icelandic archaeofauna. A minimum of 23 individual cattle skulls recovered outside the great hall (Fig. 2: AB) show evidence of specialized butchery and prolonged display on the outside of a structure. Butchery marks include depressed fracture of the frontals caused by a heavy and immediately fatal crushing blow between the eyes, and (where

Table 1. Summary data on the cattle skulls.

ID #	Location	Horn Core Diameter (cm)	Notes	Type	C14 (calibrated to 1 sigma)
1	D		naturally polled, beheading cut	full face	
2	D	R 6.16, L 6.14	bull	horn rack	
3	A2		naturally polled	full face	
4	A2	R 6.14, L 6.10	bull	horn rack	
5	A2			full face?	
6	A2			full face	GU-12955: 1110+/-35 BP; AD 935-977
7	A2			horn rack	GU-12956: 1035+/-35 BP; AD 981-1025
8	A2			full face	GU-12957: 1015+/-35 BP; AD 985-1035
9	A2			full face	
10	D			full face	GU-12953: 1065+/-35 BP; AD 968-1018
11	D			full face	GU-12954: 1120+/-35 BP; AD 892-972
12	D	5.84	bull	horn rack	
13	E			full face	
14	A2			?	
15	D			full face	
16	A2		paired halves of maxilla	full face	
17	D		beheading cut	full face	
18	D			full face	
19	A2			full face	
20	A2	6.47	bull, beheading cut	horn rack	
21	A2	4.17	cow?	horn rack	
22	A2	6.31	bull	horn rack	
23	A2	4.37	cow?	horn rack	

the base of the skull is preserved) a powerful shearing blow, which would have beheaded the animal. Horn cores were left attached, and not removed for horn craft-working (an otherwise universal use of horn and horn cores). Marked surface weathering is present on the upper (external) surfaces of skull bones, with lower, interior surfaces remaining unweathered, suggesting differential exposure to wind and weather. At least two different styles of presentation are represented by these specimens; one comprising the 'full face' of a skull with only the lower jaw removed, the other comprising a 'horn rack' with only the frontal bones and attached horn cores present, and the lower face cut away prior to mounting. Differential weathering indicates that the specimens were displayed face outwards, and that they remained exposed to weathering for months or years after the soft tissue had decayed.

Table 2. Cattle skull maxillary tooth wear. Wear patterns of maxillary teeth are less studied than mandibular teeth (Grant 1982) and a simple three state classification was employed: LW = light wear (approximately Grant stages a–e), MW = medium wear (Grant f–g), and HW = heavy wear (Grant h–p). Teeth in ‘crypt’ are in the process of erupting, visible within the bone but have not yet broken the gum line.

Specimen	dp4	P3	P4	M1	M2	M3
1	mw			lw	crypt	
3		mw	mw	mw	mw	lw
6			mw	mw	lw	lw
8					mw	
9		missing	missing	lw	lw	missing
11				mw	mw	lw
13			erupting	mw	mw	lw
15			missing	missing	mw	lw
16			mw	hw	mw	mw
19			crypt	mw	lw	erupting

Table 1 presents the 23 cattle skull specimens, which exhibit most or all of the key characteristics (differential weathering, frontal depressed fracture, uncut horn cores), with location horn-core basal minimum diameter (cranial metric 45 following Von den Dreisch 1976), notes, and the available AMS dates as uncalibrated radiocarbon years BP. All of the fragments were tested for inter-connection, and all refits have been combined under a single specimen number. At least 23 different individual animals are represented in this collection, and other fragments, not included in this table, may in fact represent pieces of additional skulls too fragmented to identify positively. Table 1 thus probably presents a minimum rather than a maximum listing of prepared skulls present at Hofstaðir.

Where tooth rows are attached, the age of death ranges from just fully grown to middle-aged adult; a pattern very different from the ‘dairy economy’ profile of many newborn and a few very old animals normally observed on Icelandic farm sites. Table 2 presents the tooth eruption and wear for the seven skulls with maxillary bones and upper tooth rows present. The maxillary tooth wear stages have not been so heavily studied by zooarchaeologists as the mandibular tooth rows (Grant 1982), but they can be broadly grouped into light wear (lw; approximately Grant stages A–E), medium wear (mw; approximately Grant stages F–H), and heavy wear (hw; approximately Grant stages >H). These eruption and wear patterns indicate that two of the eight cattle (specimens 1 and 20) were not yet fully mature, with some adult dentition still erupting. These young cattle would have been near their full adult size, and would have provided approximately the same dressed meat weight as a full adult. The other cattle show only lightly worn second and third adult molars (M2 and M3), indicating that these were adult but still fairly young animals. These cattle are thus not simply elderly dairy cows at the end of their productive lifespan (the off-take of the normal dairy economy) but animals in their prime, with many potentially productive years ahead of them. In conventional zooarchaeological terms, these animals would better fit a ‘meat production’ rather than a ‘dairy production’ harvest profile.

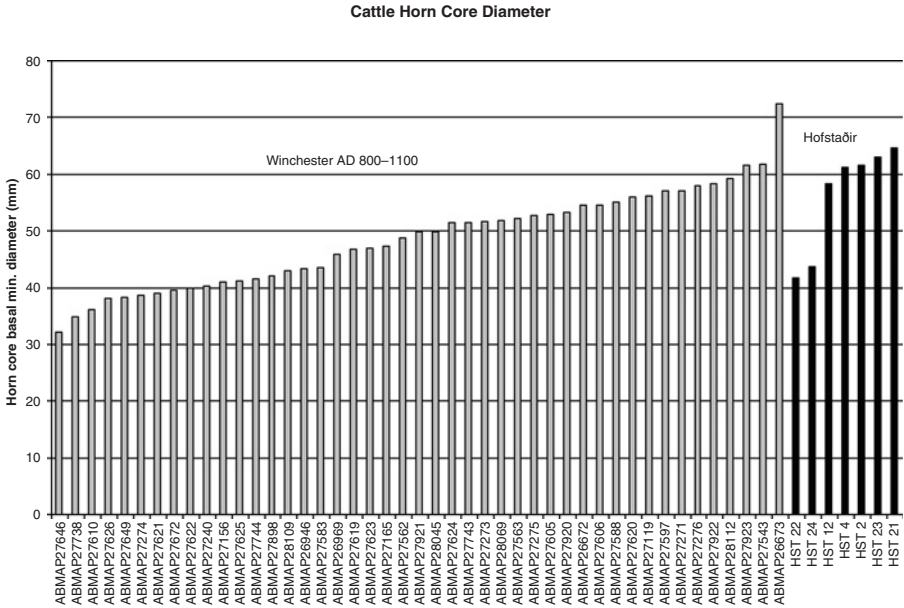


Figure 3. Graph comparing the horn-core sizes of cattle from Winchester, England, and Hofstaðir, Iceland.

Finally, the skulls include both two naturally polled (hornless) cattle and seven individuals with measurable horn-core bases. The measurable horn-cores produce basal minimal diameters indicating that the majority of the cattle (five of seven) were bulls. Sexing animal bones in zooarchaeology depends largely on the morphology of pelvis and horns (where available), combined with overall stature reconstruction. As many workers have noted, modern animals often provide a poor analogue to ancient breeds, and size and morphological differences between both modern and ancient cattle populations can be extreme (Thomas 2005). Norse North Atlantic cattle from Iceland, the Hebrides, and Greenland known from zooarchaeology tend to be small (usually reconstructed as being below 1.25 m at the shoulder), with sexual dimorphism much reduced from their wild ancestors (see review in Enghoff 2003). Overall, the Hofstaðir cattle resemble other Icelandic and North Atlantic cattle in reconstructed size and overall skeletal conformation (short, stocky, large-headed, with small, slightly curved horns). Five of the seven skulls carrying measurable horn cores are relatively robust, with broad frontals and comparatively wide horn-core bases. A broader perspective may be provided by a comparison with Viking Age to Early Medieval Anglo-Saxon cattle from Winchester in southern England (see the Animal Bone Metrical Archive, ABMAP 2003). These Anglo-Saxon cattle are also a comparatively small-bodied early medieval type, but come from a far richer farming environment, so the placement of the larger Hofstaðir horn cores near the upper end of the Winchester distribution may be particularly telling (Fig. 3). These Hofstaðir skulls are almost certainly mature bulls,

and appear to be large bulls by the standards of both the Norse North Atlantic and contemporary Wessex.

This concentration of bull skulls is particularly surprising in the light of the dairy economy profile of the other Viking Age Icelandic sites and in most other Norse North Atlantic archaeofauna, as dairy bulls were expensive and rare animals in most pre-modern agricultural settings, particularly after they had reached a certain age.¹ The land survey of the *Jarðabók* lists cattle by age group and sex, and the 1712 entry for Mývatn and Reykjadalur indicates a ratio of 'young bulls' to milking cows as 1:33 for Mývatn and about 1:10 for the larger and then much more prosperous Reykjadalur (JAM 1943). Moreover, the 'young bulls' listed in *Jarðabók* were not adults like the tenth-century Hofstaðir animals but late adolescents raised just to puberty, bred widely, and then slaughtered before they reached their full growth weight (and maximum fodder consumption level). The Viking Age bulls represented by the Hofstaðir skulls were thus far more expensive than their eighteenth-century younger counterparts – though expense here is in terms of investment rather than necessarily exchange value.

Deposition and dating

The skulls are located primarily in two clusters; one group at the south-western exterior side of the hall in an enclosed space between structure D and the hall; the other set within the ancillary room A2 on the south-eastern side of the hall (see Fig. 2). Besides these, one skull was found to the north of the projecting porch at the north-western entrance. The association of those on the western side to the two major entrances is possibly significant, but equally the fact that the majority occurred at the southern end of the hall may be more important – especially as this end of the hall generally appeared to have more artefacts, suggesting a greater focus of activity. All the skulls were found in turf collapse from the walls and/or roof of the associated buildings suggesting they had been suspended, perhaps from rafters inside A2 (see Fig. 2) or from the eaves between the hall and D; this is certainly possible in the case of those found inside structure A2. Along with the cattle skulls in the turf collapse in this room, a naturally polled female sheep was also found, unbutchered and still articulated; it had been killed by a blow between the eyes (unlike normal caprine butchery but identical to the damage to the cattle skulls). The depositional context of the skulls, however, contrasts strikingly with their taphonomy, the one suggesting protection for the elements, the other exposure; this paradox is further explored later in the article.

AMS radiocarbon age determinations on five skulls (three from context A2 [159] and two from context D [62]) suggest that the skulls came from animals who died up to 50–100 radiocarbon years apart from each other, and that the latest deaths occurred near the year AD 1000 (Table 1). This radiocarbon evidence is supported by the condition of the specimens themselves; some showing extreme weathering on the external surface, others showing less heavy or prolonged exposure. The current evidence would thus better support a model of recurring ritual activity resulting in an accumulating cattle-head display over a period of years rather than a single mass killing event.

Understanding the skulls in a wider context

Comparative information on animal representation or even specialized treatment of animals from other monumental Viking halls is hard to find; there is not even a zooarchaeology report in the recent Borg publication (Munch et al. 2003; but see Hultgård 1997). However, at a tenth-century open-air cult site at Frösö ('island of Freyr') in Jämtland, present-day Sweden, large numbers of sacrificial animals were excavated, both wild and domesticate, and interestingly skulls were over-represented in the assemblage. The deposits encircled a tree stump beneath a later medieval church on the property of a farm called Hov, whilst the island itself is known as an assembly place in the tenth century and includes a rune stone describing the introduction of Christianity (Hildebrandt 1989; Näsström 1996; Price 2002:61). Another open-air cult site has also recently been excavated at Lunda, though seemingly much older and with fewer well-preserved bones (Andersson 2006). For the purposes of expanding this discussion and providing another context of interpretation, it is worth looking at the evidence of special deposits more generally on archaeological settlements in north-western Europe from the tenth century.

Whilst notices of ritual deposits for this period are common in the archaeological literature, they are usually scattered throughout individual site reports; however, two recent articles provide an extremely useful summary – Carlie's survey of south Scandinavian practices and Hamerow's of Anglo-Saxon England (Carlie 2006; Hamerow 2006). Carlie looked at long-term patterns of ritual deposition associated with houses from Denmark and southern Sweden from the Neolithic to the early Middle Ages, and found a clear floruit of such practices in the early Iron Age and Migration Periods (c.200 BC–AD 500). Drawing on Norse literature and nineteenth-century folklore, she linked such deposits to the life cycle of houses, seeing most ritual deposits as foundation or inauguration acts to honour ancestors and/or obtain their protection for the household (Carlie 2006). Most of the deposits, which consisted predominantly of ceramic vessels – often specifically made for the purpose – or quernstones, were buried in corner postholes or hearths in the main hall. During the Iron Age, other objects start to become more common, especially sharp objects and animal skulls or jaws, which are interpreted as having magical properties to ward off evil. Carlie identified a major change in practices around the sixth to the seventh centuries AD when all such objects declined and were replaced by deposits of craft tools or religious and legal artefacts, which were also often not buried but left at abandonment (Carlie 2006:209).

In a recent article on special deposits from Anglo-Saxon settlements, Hamerow provides another extremely useful survey of the evidence of ritual deposits from sites of the early medieval period (Hamerow 2006). As she remarks, it is a phenomenon much better explored on later prehistoric settlements, though it has long been recognized for the late Iron Age and Migration periods (e.g. Van Giffen 1963). Importantly, she distinguishes between foundation deposits and termination deposits: that is, on the one hand, ritual acts associated with the construction of buildings where objects and bodies are, for example, interred in postholes; and on the other, ritual acts associated with the abandonment of buildings (Hamerow

2006:26–27). She suggests that foundation deposits are more common in continental Europe than in Britain, where it is termination deposits that typify ritual activity associated with buildings. In particular, she finds such activity associated with pit-houses or sunken featured buildings, which commonly includes the sacrifice and burial of infants, dogs and horses. Hamerow explains this variation in terms of the different relationships between settlements and agricultural practices in Britain and the Continent as well as the ancestral role of the farmstead on the Continent (Hamerow 2006:29).

Both Hamerow and Carlie's articles raise a number of important themes – especially the distinction between foundation and termination deposits, but the situation at Hofstaðir reveals even more complexity. There are several possible foundation deposits associated with the hall at Hofstaðir, including a probable set of gaming pieces and a cattle mandible in postholes, while the articulated sheep carcass in the abandonment layers of A2 may represent a termination deposit. However, the status of the skulls is somewhat more difficult to interpret, especially as the skulls are not really deliberately buried – they all occur within wall- and roof-collapse deposits suggesting they had been placed on the walls or roof. The anomaly, however, is that apart from the one skull at the north-western entrance, most were concentrated together in two locales which were fairly inconspicuous if not concealed, the one inside (A2), the other within an enclosed niche between two buildings (D). Yet the weathering on the skulls suggests that the skulls had originally been mounted on more exposed and visible locations outside the building, so their abandonment context has to be interpreted as deliberate collection or storage. It is difficult to see any other significance to the clustering; the fact that there are two locations is certainly curious, and both are clearly at the southern end of the hall, but there appears to be no distinction to the two assemblages in themselves. The question is, was this collection something performed specifically in relation to abandonment or was it a recurrent practice to collect and store the skulls, for example over the winter? There is no easy answer to this question but help may come by looking at the wider context and potential meaning of the skulls while they were on display in order to understand the possible significance of their removal and storage. For this, we need to turn to the nature of animal sacrifice in the Viking period and, in particular, to decapitation for the two key aspects of these skulls; manner of decapitation and display should be seen as related.

ANIMAL SACRIFICE IN THE VIKING PERIOD

Historical sources about animal sacrifice in Viking Europe vary in their detail, but there are three famous examples that are worth citing. The first is Ibn Fadlan's description of a Rus funeral on the Volga in the early tenth century, which included the slaughter of dogs, horses, cattle, and fowl, although the cultural affinities of the Rus are hotly debated (Jones 1984:427). Nonetheless, the presence of articulated animals in Viking Age burials suggests that this may have been a recurrent if not common practice. Interestingly in this context, the famous ship burial of Oseberg, Norway, contained 13 decapitated horses (Brøgger et al. 1917:64, 215), and there are

other examples such as the Gokstad grave, also in Norway, as well as several examples of headless horses accompanying Viking Age burials in Iceland, such as at Brimnes, Dalvík, and Hrifunes (Eldjárn and Friðriksson 2000:309). What is also interesting about the horse burials in Iceland – which are unusually common compared to other Nordic countries – is that of those which have been sexed, all were identified as male (Eldjárn and Friðriksson 2000:311; Nobis 1962). Cattle bones have been found in Viking Age burials in various parts of Scandinavia, but they tend to be much rarer than horses and dogs (e.g. Svanberg 2003:81, 133); all identified animals from burial contexts in Iceland have been either horse or dog, not cattle (also see Loumand 2006).

In contrast to the funeral rite, there are two other well-known accounts of animal sacrifice relating to more general festivals. Adam of Bremen (eleventh century) describes the offering of nine heads of male animals to the gods in a mass festival at Uppsala in Sweden which lasted nine days and took place every ninth year (Tschan 2002:208/Book four, xxvii [27]). Here, horses and dogs are mentioned among the animals as well as human victims. His description, however, is open to various criticisms, not least that much of his information actually derives from Classical sources such as Tacitus's *Germania* rather than first-hand observation. Moreover, his reference to a pagan temple may largely be a translation error for a banqueting hall (Dillmann 1997; Steinsland 2005:297–298). The third and final account dates from around the year 1015, when Thietmar of Merseburg describes a similar ceremony at Lejre in Denmark where every ninth year, 99 people and an equal number of horses, dogs and cocks were offered as sacrifice (Roesdahl 1982:163).

It has been argued that accounts such as these are inevitably biased by the fact that their authors are either Muslim or Christian and moreover, in the cases of Adam of Bremen and Thietmar of Merseburg, were largely drawing on other sources rather than first-hand observation. Other historical sources include the later medieval Icelandic sagas, but, although referring to this period, they were written much later and are as much, if not more, biased. One of the most commonly cited sources on Viking religion and ritual is the writings of Snorri Sturluson (early thirteenth century), especially his *Heimskringla*, which mentions the sacrifice of animals, often occurring in the context of feasting (Monsen 2004). A similar reference to feasting and sacrifice occurs in the Saga of Gotlanders, which describes human and cattle sacrifices at regional assemblies for major divisions of Iceland (Peel 1999:5). In a detailed study of textual sources on sacrifice in Icelandic medieval literature, Aðalsteinsson provides a useful review of the various Icelandic sources. Of particular interest here is his discussion of *Landnamabok* or the *Book of Settlements*, where sacrifice appears as a regular and natural part of assemblies or meetings (Aðalsteinsson 1997, ch.2).

Based on these fragmentary and ambiguous textual sources, one can take such interpretations only so far, but still there are some striking similarities and contrasts with Hofstaðir that seem to emerge. First, it is quite clear that animal sacrifice occurred at any mass gatherings, such as funerals and assemblies, not just religious festivals; these mass gatherings may have been religious but certainly also political as in the references in the *Book of Guta* and *Book of Settlements*. Second,

in Adam of Bremen's description of the Uppsala festival, it is the male animals that are sacrificed, which is echoed in the Hofstaðir assemblage and by other sacrificial animals occurring archaeologically in burials. Third, the species that were sacrificed appear to have been domesticates, though differentiation seems to have clearly existed. For example, at the Uppsala and Lejre ceremonies the animals mentioned – dogs and horses – are also those most common in burials, though Adam's text does mention males of every kind of animal. A diversity of species – domestic and wild – is well attested at Frösö, in contrast to Hofstaðir where there are only prime domesticates, principally cattle but also one sheep. Fourth and finally, in Adam of Bremen's description, whilst the heads are offered to the gods, it is the bodies that are mentioned as hung for display not the heads, and moreover on trees in a sacred grove – not on the walls of the hall.²

To try to make sense of these similarities and contrasts, it helps to situate the rites at Hofstaðir within a larger question: what was their purpose? It is generally suggested that such sacrifices were to the gods to ensure fertility or generally to perpetuate the well-being of the community. Anthropological theories of sacrifice have varied in their approach and, in particular, on the emphasis they place on different aspects of sacrificial acts (for a useful summary see Miller 1998:73–83; also Berggren 2006). Sacrifices are traditionally seen as an offering or gift, as Tylor (1871) first suggested, but the most famous study is that by Hubert and Mauss (1964) who endorse an earlier theory of Robertson Smith (1894), which argues for the importance of sacrifice as more generally a form of communion with the sacred. Hubert and Mauss present a much more detailed and general theory of sacrifice than Robertson Smith, emphasizing the significance of identification between the different parties – sacrificer, sacrificer (i.e. recipient), and victim. The main reason, they argue, for sacrifice is as a form of expiation, that is, the removal of 'sin' or 'sickness' from the community, so the sacrificial object or victim acts in effect as a vehicle for removing the sickness (like Christ taking on the sins of mankind). This idea is developed in a different way in Girard's theory of sacrifice as a form of scapegoating, which we discuss more later in the article (Girard 1979).

However, in two recent studies of sacrifice, a rather different perspective is presented which focuses even more on the relational nature of sacrifice and, in particular, emphasizes sacrifice as a form of consumption. Bloch (1992) examines sacrifice in terms of the typical, ritual tripartite structure, after Van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1969), arguing that there are usually two moments in a sacrifice: the first where the sacrificer is giving up a part of him/herself (self-sacrifice) so that part enters a transcendent or other world; the second where that part returns to the sacrificer from this other world with new and greater power or vitality. It is usually this second moment that is marked by the actual act of violent killing and it is this second moment for Bloch which is most important – hence his theory of 'rebounding violence'. Thus, for example, the sacrifice of cattle among the Dinka involves prior identification with the cattle (at the very least as property) in order for it to become self-sacrifice. But once sacrificed, the animal is then consumed and the power or vitality that accrues to the animal through the act of sacrifice passes back to the sacrificer (Bloch 1992:26–27). Bloch's theory thus emphasizes the third or

final stage of the ritual process, sacrifice as consumption, unlike traditional theories which focus on the first – sacrifice as an offering.

As originally noted by Roberston Smith, the importance of feasting or consumption as a component of sacrificial acts cannot be ignored in any theory that attempts to understand sacrifice. A similar focus on consumption occurs in the work of Miller (1998), though in a more unusual form – as part of a theory of shopping in modern society. Inspired by, but also in reaction to, the work of Bataille, Miller interprets sacrifice as a form of legitimating consumption by subsuming it under an ideology of devotion (Miller 1998:83). That is, by linking consumption to a sacrificial act of giving (to the gods), the purely utilitarian nature of consumption is contested and becomes secondary to a more relational act of devotion. Miller argues that an important element of sacrifice is the timing – acts of sacrifice tend to occur at the juncture between production and consumption, which in agricultural societies means harvest or slaughtering times. Such ‘first fruits’ sacrifice mediates the transition from the labour of production to the enjoyment of consumption by making the first acts of consumption also acts of giving.

Other anthropologists have tended to argue against any general theory of sacrifice, emphasizing its cultural and historical variability (e.g. De Heusch 1985). Nonetheless, what is particularly interesting in the works of both Miller and Bloch is the way in which sacrifice is interpreted not so much through the lens of religion, but in connection to other practices which may have no immediately obvious link. In doing so, they have both brought out new aspects of the rite which have previously been overlooked. Regardless of whether one accepts the general nature of such approaches, useful insight can still be gained from them. The importance of feasting in Viking ceremonies is well documented – as it is for ancient Greek rites, for example, where sacrifice has been interpreted in terms of its communal and political aspect rather than a religious one (Detienne 1989). Following this recent scholarship, we would contend that it is the role of sacrifice as a form of relationship or communion – binding people together – that is of central importance to understanding the Hofstaðir cattle sacrifices; these may have been offerings to gods, but they were equally critical to ensuring the solidarity of the community. This explains why feasting and mass gathering were also such important components of these sacrificial rites; the oblativ nature of sacrifice takes its meaning from this, rather than vice versa. But we need to try to understand the cultural and historically specific meanings of sacrifice at Hofstaðir; the abstract importance of communion provides just a broad framework.

HOFSTAÐIR AND THE POLITICAL NATURE OF ANIMAL SACRIFICE IN VIKING AGE ICELAND

To understand the nature of these sacrifices at Hofstaðir, it is critical to situate them in the context of the site. As mentioned at the start of this article, Hofstaðir can be grouped within a class of monumental halls from Viking/Norse northern Europe, which are generally seen as royal or chiefly residences. One of the obvious interpretations of Hofstaðir would therefore be its ascription as a chiefly farm-

stead. The general archaeofauna pattern from the site is somewhat different to several other contemporary sites in the region, which have also been excavated recently (McGovern et al. 2007). Whilst it is clear that the cattle and caprine husbandry at Hofstaðir was largely geared towards secondary products (dairy and wool), there is also a clear 'meat profile' superimposed upon this (McGovern et al., in prep.). This pattern supports the idea that feasting was not so much an occasional but an integral part of the life of the settlement. One explanation for this, and one that correlates well with the size of the hall, is that it was an incredibly wealthy, high-status settlement which could draw on tribute from neighbouring farms to provision these feasts, and this remains a possibility. However, there is an unusual characteristic of the site that casts some doubt over this; the size of the central hearth in proportion to the size of the hall is remarkably diminutive. Comparison with other, normal halls excavated in Iceland, brings out this anomaly only too clearly (Fig. 4); the consequences of such a small hearth has implications for winter occupation and suggests, at the least, that during the winter months only a small portion of the hall was occupied – if at all, as most of the ancillary structures also have hearths. There is no doubt that there was year-round occupation at the settlement, for the faunal remains indicate a normal subsistence economy operating; but it also seems likely that the population fluctuated seasonally. This suggests that the size of the hall may reflect seasonal/summer use rather than year-round occupation and, consequently, this immediately alters our perception of it as a particularly elite residence.³

Two other factors also strengthen the idea that this was not necessarily a wealthy settlement: an unusual pattern of material culture compared to other contemporary settlements; and an unusual location. What is curious about Hofstaðir, if it is interpreted as a high-status settlement, is that this does not seem to be well reflected in the material culture (see Batey, in prep.). For example, comparing it to Borg in Norway, it lacks distinctive luxury or high-value items such as glass or ceramic table vessels, and there are few precious metals other than two silver items (Munch et al. 2003:138). However, comparison to a site like Borg is perhaps unreasonable; although Iceland was not isolated from Nordic trade networks, neither was it part of the core. A general absence of top-end goods has been noted from pagan burials in Iceland (Friðriksson, pers. comm.) and the same no doubt applies to settlements. A more useful comparison is between Hofstaðir and other broadly contemporary settlements in Iceland; Table 3 and Figure 5 show the numbers of more common finds categories (excluding structural ironwork) found on a number of more recently excavated sites.⁴ What is clear, besides the much higher quantities of artefacts in general from Hofstaðir, is the anomalous dominance of dress items, whereas on other ordinary settlements, craft-related artefacts tend to dominate. Of course this can be interpreted either in terms of status or population, but given the generally ordinary nature of these dress items, status seems less likely. If this was a locale for mass gatherings, higher numbers of personal dress items might be more likely to occur. Significantly perhaps, no weaponry of any sort was identified, unlike at Borg.

The location of Hofstaðir is a final feature that warrants comment. The site lies high up on the present day homefield, at the base of a slope and in a location that

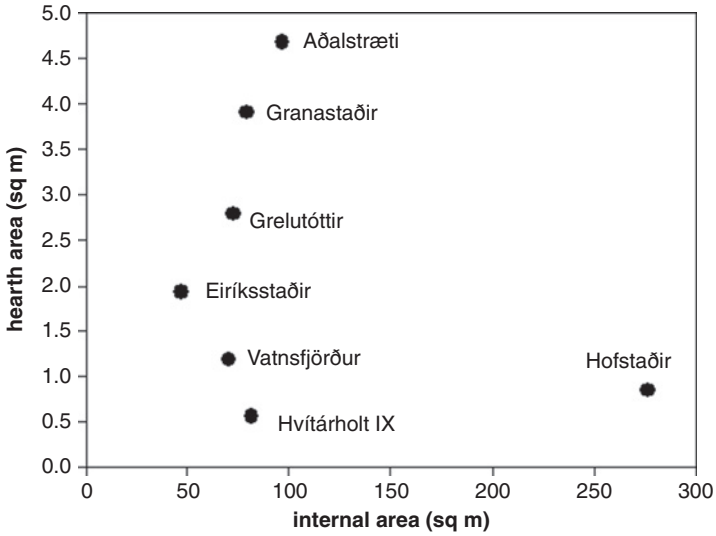


Figure 4. Scatter plot comparing the ratio of hearth size to internal area of several contemporary Viking Age halls in Iceland, including Hofstaðir.

Table 3. Comparison of main finds' categories from Hofstaðir with three other contemporary Icelandic settlements.

	Aðalstræti	Granastaðir	Suðurgata	Hofstaðir
Dress	3	6	4	45
silver dress items	–	–	–	1
copper alloy dress items	–	–	–	8
beads	3	4	4	20
bone pins	–	–	–	9
combs	–	2	–	7
Craft	17	24	45	32
tools	–	–	4	3
whetstones	6	4	10	9
loomweights	6	3	22	12
spindlewhorls	5	16	8	8
crucible	–	1	1	–
Other	3	8	13	23
weapons	–	–	1	–
knives	2	8	8	23
soapstone vessel	1	–	4	–

might be considered highly impractical. Spring melt-water and snowfall must have both been potential problems, as witnessed by paved areas and even a stone 'dam' on the one entrance facing upslope. The medieval and modern farms are both situated more sensibly lower down the homefield some 150–200 m away. Roesdahl has discussed the location of high-status settlements in Scandinavia as sited for

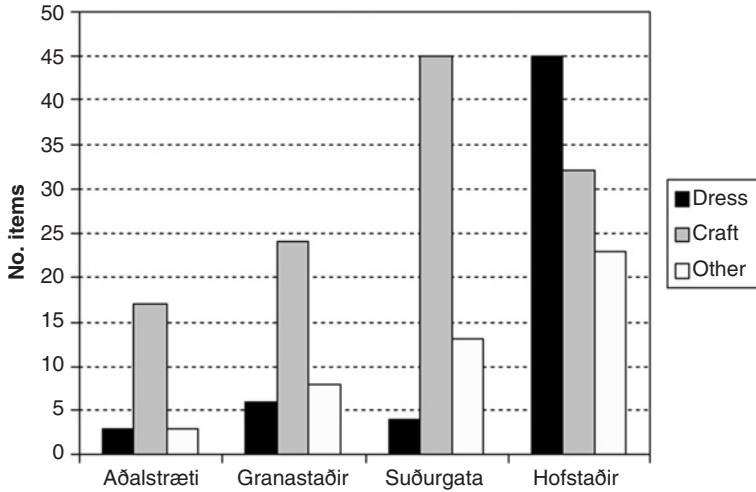


Figure 5. Graph comparing major artefact categories from four Viking Age halls in Iceland, including Hofstaðir.

maximum visibility and the location of Borg, for example, was equally impractical (Näsman and Roesdahl 2003:284; Roesdahl 1989). Taking an even broader perspective, the land on which Hofstaðir was sited was also not particularly the most economically valuable in the region; though by no means marginal, the more wealthy farms tend to be sited closer to Lake Myvatn to exploit its rich lacustrine resources (Friðriksson et al. 2004). On the other hand, Hofstaðir does seem to be well suited as a central place in terms of routes between the coast and inland. Sitting high on the homefield in Laxadalur, it occupies a very practical locale as a nodal point for regional gatherings, and may even have played a critical economic role in the distribution of marine resources inland (McGovern et al. 2007:42–44).

All these lines of evidence suggest that we cannot simply ‘read off’ high status from the hall’s monumental size, or that the feasting and sacrifice of cattle are simply symbols of power. Hofstaðir may indeed have been a settlement of some status, but the reality appears much more complex – and interesting. What can be argued is that Hofstaðir was a place for repetitive, mass gatherings involving feasting and sacrifice, most likely in the spring and summer months with smaller-scale occupation over the winter. One can debate whether this makes it similar to the traditional assemblies recorded in the texts, but this is not something that will be pursued here (see Lucas 2007 and Vésteinsson 2006 for further discussion). More pertinent to this article is that the context of the sacrifice at Hofstaðir does not appear, for example, to be simply part of the agricultural cycle of a rich farm (and thus a ‘first fruits’ sacrifice), but something rather different. There is, however, one further aspect to the sacrifice which we have not discussed and which may hold the key: the violent decapitation and display of bull’s heads.

The ‘beheading cuts’ noted in both the Hofstaðir skull fragments deposited around the hall and in neck vertebrae recovered from the main middens of the

settlement make sense only if there was intent to cut through the intact neck of an animal still in a standing position. The most likely reconstruction from the forensics of the skulls requires at least a two-person team, one of whom struck the animal between the eyes (effectively killing it and certainly stunning it into momentary immobility) while the second swung a fairly broad-bladed axe at the neck or base of the skull for a beheading stroke. There is a definite concentration of beheading blows from the right side towards the left of the animals' skulls. If the axe-wielder was right handed, this means this person was probably standing to the right of the sacrificial animal. If the team got their timing right, the beheading stroke would produce a blood fountain as the animal's heart would still be beating. The shearing beheading cut must have been delivered with full force (probably making use of a two-handed axe) and put the cutting instrument to some risk of damage, but would produce the maximum drama and an opportunity to display weapon-handling prowess. This is unnecessarily dramatic butchery, as freeing the head from the neck during normal disarticulation of a carcass can be carried out with a few knife cuts once the neck muscles have been filleted away, and this is in fact the sort of marking found on most cattle bones recovered from other sites in Iceland. It is also a method less likely to damage cutting instruments, get bone splinters in the meat, or complicate the removal of the tongue and brains. In short, the cattle at Hofstaðir were butchered in a manner for maximum blood and drama, which is reinforced by the conspicuous display of the heads. How do we interpret this sacrifice?

Cattle were undoubtedly the most highly prized livestock in the Viking economy, and the slaughter in particular of young adult bulls would have seemed a completely wasteful act of consumption from a utilitarian perspective. Miller's idea of sacrifice as a form of subverting the non-utilitarian nature of consumption through a devotional act would seem to explain this partially, but there are still problems. In particular, one can question whether Miller's understanding of consumption is too culturally specific to modern capitalist society; moreover, Miller does not really account for the violence often accompanying sacrifice, as is the case at Hofstaðir. Indeed, he tends to be wary of over-emphasizing the role of violence in sacrifice and, as a general rule, he is no doubt right, since most sacrifice is non-violent (Miller 1998:88–89). However, we cannot overlook the bloody nature of the rituals performed at Hofstaðir, especially since our task is not a general theory of sacrifice but an interpretation of a culturally and historically specific act.

The critical study of the relation between violence and sacrifice is Girard's *Violence and the Sacred*, which puts forward a theory of sacrifice as a metaphorical form of scapegoating (Girard 1979; also see Buckert 1983; Hamerton-Kelly 1987). Girard's thesis is founded on rather outdated, essentialist notions of cultural development which we need not discuss here, but the idea of sacrifice as a form of scapegoating in order to dissipate tension and conflict within a community retains a powerful appeal. Because sacrifice channels violence away from any internal conflicts and on to a common victim, this victim is perceived as both the cause and resolution of tension, and therefore acquires a sacred status. An obvious implication of the theory is that sacrifice might increase or become more common in periods of social stress. Bloch's thesis also emphasizes the violence accompanying sacrifice

but, unlike Girard, he does not see this as an innate quality of human nature, but rather as a consequence of the social production of a concept of a transcendent realm or 'other world' (Bloch 1992:6–7). For humans to effectively partake of the vitality of power of this 'other world', the consumption of this vitality needs to be demonstrated, and violent sacrifice is one important way in which this is achieved.

Both Girard and Bloch provide a path to understanding the specific nature of the rites at Hofstaðir, but we also have to take it further; the point is not to corroborate anthropological theories but to offer an historically specific account based on the archaeological evidence. Given that this site seems to have been host, during certain times of the year, to large numbers of people who otherwise lived in much smaller groups, the potential for conflict and tension during these mass gatherings must have been high. One does not need reminding of the rich saga literature referencing the role of feuds in early Icelandic society and, even though these stories might exaggerate social conflict or even refer more to the time they were written (thirteenth and fourteenth centuries) than the time to which they refer, it is not unlikely that political instability was an ever present phenomenon in the first centuries of settlement (Byock 1982; Miller 1990). Recent research on palaeopathologies of Viking Age burials in Iceland has identified a number of individuals who had been involved in violent conflict, suggesting that, even if not common, it did occur (Gestsdóttir 2005). In this context, an act of violent and bloody sacrifice during these temporary gatherings may have served to draw attention away from interpersonal conflict and channel it in other ways. In this context, perhaps the emphasis on selecting *male* cattle may have had extra cultural significance, especially since it was males who were exclusively enfranchised in Icelandic juridico-political assemblies. In relation to Bloch's thesis, it may have been particularly the male vitality from the bulls that was sought in the feasting following the sacrifice.

But what of the form of the sacrifice – beheading – and the subsequent display of heads? Historically in Iceland, as well as over north-western Europe, decapitation was a form of execution especially reserved for political prisoners and the worst criminals in the post-medieval period. However, at the time we are discussing, it tends to occur in the context of personal feuding rather than as judicial punishment, at least in Iceland (which allowed only fines and outlawry as penalties). Moreover, beheading appears to have been regarded as a particularly honourable form of death or killing, and the retrieval of the head was often necessary as a form of proof of the deed (e.g. see Nordal 1989). The beheading of cattle at Hofstaðir could have been perceived in similar terms – as a particularly honourable way to kill an animal, especially one which would perhaps not normally have been slaughtered. The same meaning might have played a part in the beheading of some of the horses, which occurs in pagan burials in Iceland and elsewhere; in killing the horse to accompany its owner to the afterlife, such a potentially dangerous act of animal slaughter for non-food purposes required a more honourable death than normal.

Finally, to return to the display of the cattle heads at Hofstaðir, as with retrieving the head of a human victim, they served as proof of the act and their display was an integral part of the sacrifice. The repetition of this slaughter and display of a new head each season or cycle of the gatherings would have created a long-term

memory and established a lineage for the site, each new skull adding to its status as a place with an important history for the community. The question remains, as was posed earlier in this article: were these heads on constant display and only collected together as an abandonment rite; or were they regularly collected and stored each winter and only brought out again in the following spring and summer? Given what we have suggested about the seasonal use of the site, the latter might seem more plausible. The occurrence of the skulls in two major clusters might therefore be indicative of their seasonal storage than of any final closing act upon abandonment. However, it is important to recognize that when the site was abandoned in the middle of the eleventh century, at the same time a church had been built just 140 m away; beside it is the main farm mound, which dates back at least to before AD 1300, although, as it is unexcavated as yet, it cannot be known if its foundation is contemporary with the abandonment of the hall, is later, or even has earlier origins. Any of these possibilities would have significant implications for the interpretation of the hall.⁵

It is possible that the removal and storage of the skulls was linked to the adoption of Christianity and the need to conceal evidence of pagan beliefs (such as these skulls most certainly would have indicated). The fact that the whole settlement was abandoned and possibly relocated might suggest a need by the occupants to distance themselves from the old ways, though it is interesting that although abandoned, neither the site nor the skulls were destroyed. Indeed, the possible termination ritual of the sacrifice of a female sheep, complete with head, indicates that the abandonment of the site was performed with a very clear sense of non-Christian ritual. Nonetheless, the very ambiguity of such an act may have been in itself significant in the context of conversion, so such a scenario cannot be ruled out. Christianization was hardly an overnight matter and issues of syncretism and cult continuity make it difficult to argue one way or the other and thus whether the clustering represents a seasonal or terminal collection of skulls. Certainly, however, there seem to be political factors at work here, especially in as much as the scale and nature of the site seems to have served a largely political function. Its abandonment is probably just as much linked to larger-scale changes in the organization of the political landscape; Hofstaðir might be counted as a central place in the tenth century, but by the twelfth century its status had changed dramatically. It possessed a chapel which it retained no later than the fifteenth century, suggesting it was still a settlement of some standing, but clearly it could not have accommodated the large gatherings it once did. These may have relocated to a more specialized assembly site (Friðriksson 1994), a type of site which occurs all over Iceland, but as yet, has had little intensive archaeological research.

In trying to interpret Hofstaðir, we have perhaps thrown up many more questions than we have answered. Nonetheless, what this study has shown is the importance of trying to understand ritual acts through a detailed analysis of various sources of data and interweaving them to produce a historically specific account of activities on a tenth-century settlement in north-east Iceland. The specific nature of the archaeological record at Hofstaðir needs to be integrated with broader historical and theoretical frameworks that do justice to both elements, and we hope that has been achieved here.

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NOTES

1. In Iceland this was four years, according to sources such as the lawbooks Grágás, Jónsbók, and a 1775 price list.

2. Of course the skulls may not have hung on the walls at Hofstaðir either, especially since the depositional context is not the context of display and exposure.

3. Although the micromorphology of the floors of the hall has been studied, there is no indication from this, or indeed macroscopic stratification, for seasonal occupation (K. Milek, pers. comm.); nonetheless, regular cleaning and maintenance may have easily removed such traces, especially if summer occupation was intensive.

4. Only recently excavated sites were chosen to control for bias in finds recovery; these include Granastaðir (Einarsson 1994), Suðurgata (Nordhal 1988), and Aðalstræti (Roberts 2001).

5. Plans to excavate the medieval and later farm mound are only wishful at present, though the excavations of the chapel and churchyard have nearly been completed.

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ABSTRACTS

Abattage sanglant: décapitation rituelle et étalage au village viking de Hofstaðir, Islande

Gavin Lucas et Thomas McGovern

Cet article essaie d'interpréter un ensemble insolite de crânes de bétail découverts durant les fouilles récentes de la salle monumentale datant de l'Âge des Vikings de Hofstaðir en Islande. Les analyses ostéologiques des crânes indiquent une décapitation rituelle ainsi que l'étalage des têtes, et nous cherchons à comprendre la signification de ces pratiques par rapport au contexte du site et à la littérature historique et ethnographique plus générale. Apparemment, la décapitation et l'exposition des têtes faisaient partie d'actes de sacrifice effectués saisonnièrement en cet endroit, notamment lors de festins et de rassemblements sociopolitiques. Ces rassemblements servaient aussi bien à dissiper des tensions sociales qu'à renforcer le statut politique.

Mots clés: Islande, rituel, sacrifice, Vikings

Blutiges FGemetzel: Rituelle Enthauptungen und Zurschaustellungen in der Wikingersiedlung von Hofstaðir, Island

Gavin Lucas and Thomas McGovern

Dieser Beitrag unternimmt einen Interpretationsversuch eines ungewöhnlichen Fundkomplexes von Rinderschädeln, der unlängst bei Ausgrabungen der monumentalen wikingerzeitlichen Halle von Hofstaðir auf Island entdeckt wurde. Die osteologische Untersuchung der Schädel spricht für eine rituelle Enthauptung und Zurschaustellung, und diese Studie widmet sich der Untersuchung der Bedeutung dieser Praxis unter Berücksichtigung des Fundplatzkontextes sowie der weiteren historischen und ethnografischen Literatur. Es wird angenommen, dass die Enthauptung von Rindern und die Zurschaustellung ihrer Köpfe Teil von rituellen Handlungen auf einer saisonalen Basis des Fundplatzes im Kontext von Festen und soziopolitischen Zusammenkünften war. Diese Zusammenkünfte waren gleichermaßen Ausdruck der Überwindung von sozialen Spannungen und der Vergrößerung des sozialen Status.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Island, Ritual, Opfer, Wikinger